

# Revolution, Culture, and Cultural Policy from Late Tsarism to the Early Soviet Years

Christopher Read

Speaking at the International Cultural Summit held during the Edinburgh Festival in August 2012, Haris Pasovic, artistic director of the Sarajevo East West Center made a large claim. “Culture,” he said, “is a primary need as much as food and sex.”<sup>1</sup> Even though almost all children like to draw and most people like to tell a story, the claim was met with much scepticism. It was perhaps appropriate that the claimant was from an East West Center because, in many ways, he had pointed to an issue which divides Europe and beyond. In the artistic sense, as opposed to the anthropological one, culture in Western “bourgeois” society is often considered to be a pleasant but unnecessary embellishment of life. It is often worn as a bright jewel signifying taste, breeding, and class. In Russia, and other parts of Eastern Europe, Pasovic’s claim would be met as a familiar one. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn asserted that values, in his example religious faith, were more precious to the believer than the bread she or he put in their stomach.<sup>2</sup> While these might be extreme forms of attachment to culture, there can be no doubt that, in a broad sense, late tsarist and early Bolshevik Russia considered culture to be almost the essence of political and social life, its meaning and purpose. Though each interpreted this dimension of life in different ways, both before and after 1917 culture was an essential component of the governing systems.

## Cultural Policy and Revolution in Russia

The term “cultural policy” can have almost as many meanings and nuances as its chief component, the word “culture” itself. Conventionally, today the term most frequently refers to government policies aimed at enhancing the artistic and intellectual life of a country. It also has echoes in educational policy, an area into which Western industrializing states were beginning to advance in

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Richard Brooks, “Biteback,” *The Sunday Times: Culture*, 19 August 2012, 14.

<sup>2</sup> “For the believer, faith is *supremely* precious, more precious than the food he puts in his stomach.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, trans. Hilary Sternberg (London: Collins, 1974), 44.

the mid- and late 19th century. In many cases this meant replacing traditional ecclesiastical involvement in the upbringing of children and young people. However, in 19th- and early 20th-century Russia we are presented with a fundamentally different situation. Here the separation of religion, state, and political culture had taken a very different course from that of Western Europe, where a degree of secularization had been the consequence of great processes such as the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and a series of democratic, or at least anti-monarchical, revolutions. Russia, on the other hand, had seen the mobilization of national religious culture in the cause of the autocracy. The adoption of Official Nationality and the triad of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality" in the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–55) confirmed the close linking of autocracy and religion at the same time as religion was receding, though not disappearing, from the political culture of Western nation-states. Education, such as it was, also bore a strong religious imprint at school level. In these senses, under tsarism, religion was an integral part of imperial legitimacy and of the political system. Not only that, it remained there until the very end and provides us with one of the most important components of tsarism's own peculiar form of cultural policy. By comparison, the Provisional Government in 1917 had little time to develop a cultural, or even an educational, policy and we will have only brief suggestions and fleeting glimpses of its approach which has not attracted very much attention.<sup>3</sup> However, it is with respect to the Soviet regime that cultural policy has been most widely seen as an important, though sometimes peripheral, component of its portfolio of policies. While many will easily accept that Bolshevism had a cultural aspect in its earliest years, testified to by the great experimental artists of the time—Kandinskii, Malevich, Goncharova, Tatlin, Chagall, and so on—far fewer will recognize that Bolshevism, in the eyes of its leaders in general and Lenin in particular, was, ultimately, a cultural project. Its aim was to change human nature. Not only that, a key mechanism for reaching that goal, raising class consciousness, was also, primarily, cultural.

These considerations also remind us that, by undertaking the infrequently attempted task of examining cultural policy through the three regimes of the revolutionary period<sup>4</sup> we will encounter not only the differences one would largely expect but, more surprisingly, certain continuities and similarities, not the least of which is that cultural policy was much more significant to the leaders of all three regimes than was the case elsewhere in the developed industrial world. For Bolsheviks as much as tsarists, despite their deeply ingrained philosophical differences, culture was not the icing on the cake, it was the cake itself.

---

<sup>3</sup> The chief exception to this is the work of Boris Kolonitskii. See, for example, Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> An interesting exception is Peter J. S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Holy Revolution, Communism and After* (London: Routledge, 2000).

## The Cultural Strategy of Late Tsarism

In his path-breaking work on Nicholas I, written more than 50 years ago, Nicholas Riasanovsky made a number of brilliant judgments which have not only stood the test of time but are as relevant to the era of Nicholas II as they were to that of his great-grandfather. Riasanovsky stated that

the steadfast monarch governed his vast empire and participated in the destinies of the world on the basis of a few simple principles which he held with passionate conviction. The ideology of the reign ... deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. Far from being mere propaganda or empty talk, it represented the conscious orientation of the Russian government.<sup>5</sup>

In analyzing Nicholas I, many historians have tried to attribute “realistic” motives to his policies rather than accept the importance of “the emperor’s stubborn loyalty to his convictions” which produced his “extremely rigid and doctrinaire policies.” As with Nicholas II, the resulting “extreme regimentation and repression of Nicholas I’s reign have to be considered in the light of the emperor’s convictions and of the aims which he attempted to achieve.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Riasanovsky implicitly links the two by contending that Nicholas I’s legacy was to make adaptation to change so difficult that “it was still largely the old order of Nicholas I, the antiquated *ancien regime*, that went down in the conflagration of 1917.”<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, Riasanovsky’s final judgment applies equally to both Nicholases:

The system of Emperor Nicholas I demonstrated a remarkable coordination between thought and action, a dedication to a set ideal, a determination to mould reality according to an ideological blueprint.... But, in the last analysis, the student of Nicholas I ... in Russia leaves his subject with a sense of the power, not the weakness, of ideas in history, of the importance, not the insignificance, of man’s purpose in the shaping of human destiny.<sup>8</sup>

Riasanovsky’s comments support the conclusion that tsarism, like its Soviet successor, was at heart a cultural project and saw its cultural policies as shapers of its “material” and “realistic” policies rather than the other way round. In

---

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia 1825–1855* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 266–67.

<sup>6</sup> The comments apply to Stalin, too, in many respects.

<sup>7</sup> Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I*, 269.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 271–72.

addition, an examination of the cultural policies, institutions and framework of late tsarism shows that the components of Nicholas I's cultural policy—Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality—remained at the heart of Nicholas II's policies though the detail was very different.

The turning point in late-imperial policies toward reform and revolution came, as is widely agreed, in the wake of the assassination crisis of March 1881. The violent death of the "reforming tsar," Alexander II, confirmed the antireformists even more firmly in their ideas. Two major initiatives emerged from the crisis. In 1882 a set of "Temporary Regulations" retracted limited pre-1881 political concessions. The second was a drive to unify the empire against its enemies by developing a policy of "russification." Both of these were dragon's teeth from which greater revolutionary problems grew. Both also had profound cultural consequences. The unqualified choice of reaction over reform increasingly limited the legitimate space not only for political discussion and political action but for freedom of expression in general. The main practical means for enforcement included law, censorship, political imprisonment and a comparatively small but effective political police service, the Okhrana. The reactionary policies of the early 1880s, which were enthusiastically endorsed at the time of his coronation by Nicholas II, who dismissed reformist ideas as "senseless dreams," were a major cause of revolutionary activity by making it impossible to engage in legal protest or even free speech. "Russification" also rebounded. The central notion of russification was not so much about citizenship, since there was no such thing in any real sense, but about religious affiliation. A certificate of baptism in the Orthodox Church was sufficient for a person to be accepted as a fully-fledged Russian, reminding us that official Russian discrimination at this time was more cultural than racist. However, relatively aggressive policies of russification in the last decades of the 19th century meant that deep antagonisms were stirred up by, for example, building large Orthodox cathedrals in prominent sites in capital cities of minority nationalities. Anyone who has visited Helsinki or Tallinn will have seen the results.<sup>9</sup> One of the most resented was the Aleksandr Nevskii Cathedral opened in the center of Warsaw in 1912, a structure which gave a new meaning to the term imposing. So much so that, once it was independent, the Polish authorities soon demolished it because of its negative connotations (1924–26). Even the imperial capital itself saw assertive cathedral construction in the form of the Cathedral on the Spilt Blood, built between 1883 and 1907 on the actual site where Alexander II had been fatally injured. These were imposing, if frequently ugly, assertions of the supremacy of Russia in the empire. However, it was another associated cultural policy which had more immediate effect in creating greater unrest among ethnic minorities. National languages were

---

<sup>9</sup> The Uspenski Cathedral in Helsinki was built between 1862 and 1868. The Aleksandr Nevskii Cathedral in Tallinn was constructed between 1894 and 1900. Its dedication to a great Russian conqueror of the region was not accidental.

systematically downgraded and the Russian language was imposed to an ever greater extent. The fact that it seems to have been protests against this that brought the young Stalin into the revolutionary movement is enough, in itself, to cause regret for the ill-thought-out and counterproductive policy. Taken together, retreat into authoritarianism and aggressive russification of minorities meant a changing and modernizing Russian society and economy were being forced into narrower and narrower political confines.

The peculiar blend of politics, religion, and repression was not lost on contemporary observers. Writing in 1907, when the failure of the 1905 Revolution had become apparent and reasons were being sought to explain the outcome, a group of intellectuals led by the poets Dmitrii Merezhkovskii and Zinaida Gippius produced a book of essays entitled *Le Tsar et la Révolution*, published in Paris in response to the worsening intellectual environment in their home city of St. Petersburg.<sup>10</sup> One of Merezhkovskii's key ideas was that the revolutionary movement had failed because it had been outside the religious envelope which surrounded the autocracy and fed into mass culture. Tsarism, he argued, was not just a secular autocracy but a kind of theocracy. Its claim to power extended even beyond divine right and into the deepest realms of the religious consciousness. It claimed the plenitude not only of political power, but also spiritual power. The tsar was monarch and pope. It matters less to our current concern to note that Merezhkovskii concluded that, to be successful, revolutionaries had to challenge tsarism as a spiritual entity as well as a secular one, than to note his identification of religious and secular power. Slavophile defenders of tsarism acknowledged the same thing. For them, the tsar was not only the political arbiter of the Russian Empire, he was its moral guardian and its patriarch (in two senses—the father of the Russian family and, effectively, the head of its church since the actual office of patriarch had been in abeyance since 1721). He was the *batiushka* (little father) of his people. A particularly oily expression of monarchist belief was captured in the memoirs of a sycophantic courtier, A. A. Mosolov, at the turn of the century:

The Tsar can do no wrong; he stands above classes, party politics and personal rivalries.... He seeks nothing for himself; he has a profound love for all those whom God has confided to his supreme care. There is no reason why he should not be the benefactor of each and all.... [The Tsar is] beneficence personified.<sup>11</sup>

Without doubt, the mystique of tsarism was still tied up with carefully constructed cultural policies. In the forefront were the public rituals and

---

<sup>10</sup> D. S. Merezhkovsky, Z. N. Gippius, and D. V. Filosofov, *Le Tsar et la Révolution* (Paris, 1907).

<sup>11</sup> A. A. Mossolov [Mosolov], *At the Court of the Last Tsar* (London: Methuen, 1935), 128.

ceremonies of state. Mosolov himself was a functionary within the sprawling Ministry of the Imperial Court, which was responsible for conducting many aspects of the monarch's business. Tasks ranged from overseeing the royal domains to supervising the Imperial Theaters and arranging official ceremonies. This last implied what today would be called promoting the monarch's "image." Clearly, Mosolov had what it took to be successful in the not-yet-invented sphere of public relations and his department, the Court Chancellery, was, effectively, fulfilling that function for the tsar. In anachronistic language, Mosolov and his associates were promoting the cult of personality of the tsar.<sup>12</sup>

This was done through a variety of "scenarios of power."<sup>13</sup> In the winter season lavish balls which reflected the "greatness" of the monarch's predecessors were held in the Winter Palace. Perhaps the most expensive and elaborate were held between 7 and 11 February 1903. Courtiers were instructed to appear in 17th-century costume. The result was a brilliant spectacle, though perhaps more reminiscent of a Mariinskii or Bolshoi Theater opera production than a court festivity. Life and art seemed to be imitating each other, not least since Fedor Shaliapin sang excerpts from *Boris Godunov*.<sup>14</sup> Semiotically, the event appeared to invoke a return to a pre-Petrine, Muscovite, "traditional" Russia, and, perhaps coincidentally, this reflected Nicholas's distaste for Peter the Great. This became more explicit in May of the same year when the bicentenary of the city of St. Petersburg was celebrated. The outcome was less overwhelming than Mosolov had hoped for, not least because the tsar himself "indicated that he liked Peter less than his other forebears because of his 'infatuation with western culture and destruction of all purely Russian customs.'"<sup>15</sup>

Although the influence of events like the court balls spread beyond the immediate circle of participants—through, in this case, the publication of a luxurious three-volume album of photographs of the occasion and the invitation to the city's diplomatic corps to attend and wonder at one of the

---

<sup>12</sup> The phrase, of course, is normally associated with Lenin and, even more so, Stalin. However, although it falls outside our immediate chronological remit, it is tempting to speculate that the cult of the Soviet leaders fitted comfortably into the leadership niche created around the cult, myth, and mystique of monarchy. See, for example, Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983; enlarged paperback edition, 1997); Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); and Maureen Perrie, *The Cult of Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in the Russian Monarchy, 2: From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> For an excellent description, see Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 377–78.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

“performances”—it did not penetrate much beyond the social elite. That was why mass occasions, like the anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg, were organized in order to pass the message on to the wider population. Nicholas’s waning enthusiasm for mass ceremonies was also partly attributable to the disaster of his coronation in May 1896. It had rebounded by turning into a tragedy when some 1400 or so people were crushed in the crowds. Two other special ceremonies of his reign also illustrated key aspects of the monarchy’s fortunes, one of which was much more to the tsar’s liking. In 1903 one of Russian Orthodoxy’s most holy elders of the 19th century, Starets Serafim of Sarov (1754–1833), was canonized. “Although one canonization had already been held during Nicholas’s reign and others would come later, none were so laden with symbolic intensity and a self-conscious fusion of politics and piety. It was high politico-religious theatre, similar to that staged in 19th-century Europe, but with a cast that included the emperor, who personally participated at every stage of its planning and performance.”<sup>16</sup> As a popular holy man and monastery elder to whom many had turned for spiritual advice, Serafim’s cause had long been put forward by many cult followers. However, the decisive impulse came from above, from the tsarina herself. In July 1902 she insisted that he be canonized in six days. Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the procurator of the Holy Synod (secular supervisor of the Orthodox Church), was aghast, as were the church authorities, suspicious of any religious impulse that did not originate with them. They also pointed out that Serafim did not meet the first criterion of Orthodox sainthood—incorruptibility of his corpse.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the tsarina insisted and the metropolitan of Moscow lent his support. Her timescale was unrealistic, but the following year the canonization took place at Sarov, in the deepest provinces.

A great pilgrimage to Serafim’s shrine in Sarov was organized. Hundreds of thousands of peasants and workers, as well as members of the elite, joined their tsar in venerating the new saint. Here was an event which warmed the tsar’s heart and created the impression that all was well in the Russian world. The occasion became a symbol of apparent unity between tsar and people. “The ceremony of canonisation represented a spiritual and symbolic union of three elements—the ‘people,’ symbolized by the pilgrims; the church, represented by the participating clergy and the volunteer gonfalon-bearers; and the monarch, with his family and entourage.”<sup>18</sup> The event was widely publicized, including photos, in the monarchist press and there is little doubt it had a profound effect on the tsar himself, who began to believe he was brought closer to his people through his developing simple piety. Together with the birth of his son and heir around the same time, Sarov “confirmed his

---

<sup>16</sup> Gregory L. Freeze, “Subversive Piety: Religion and Political Crisis in Late Imperial Russia,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, 2 (June 1996): 314.

<sup>17</sup> Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 385.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

sense of divine communion shared by tsar and people.<sup>19</sup> Consoling it may have been for the tsar, but nothing better illustrates the illusory nature of this “communion” than the fact that Sarov is in the province (*guberniia*) of Tambov, one of the most rebellious regions for peasant unrest in both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions.<sup>20</sup>

For the moment, however, in the eyes of the tsar, he and his peasants stood as one in their communion with God and the saints. Problems, it followed, could only come from “outsiders” who did not share that faith—secular, westernizing intellectuals; Catholic Poles; the national minorities in general and, specially singled out, Jews. Their collective enmity would be battered to pieces against the rock of true Russian tsarist theocracy. Gangs of “patriotic,” “true Russians” emerged as the revolution welled up to physically attack and intimidate the outsider groups. However, even monarchist thugs could not prevent the precipitous decline in affection for the Romanovs through the 1905 Revolution. A conscious, post-1905 attempt to reverse the trend was implemented in 1913 in the form of celebration of the tercentenary of the dynasty. The lukewarm response from the masses and tales of ill omen, such as that of the blackening of the face of Our Lady of St. Theodore, the patron icon of the family, told their own story.

Much of the Slavophile mystique had been carefully nurtured by culturally oriented policies since 1881. Most important, the tutor of Nicholas II, Pobedonostsev, had turned his position and influence towards establishing what he thought was a survival strategy for the idea, mystique, and legitimacy of autocracy through a series of nationalist and religious policies. In addition to the direct imposition of Russian-oriented policies, “russification” fed into and expanded a rising tendency to glorify and mythologize the Russian past which had already become evident, by the mid-century, in music and art. The magnificent series of operas on Russia’s past, such as *Boris Godunov* (Musorgskii 1869 and 1872), *Khovanshchina* (Musorgskii 1886), *Prince Igor* (Borodin 1890), *A Bride for the Tsar*, and *Sadko* (Rimskii-Korsakov 1899 and 1901) are the best known and enduring examples. While a full account of this is beyond our scope, we should note certain features. First, there was a “conservative” wing creating a new national “tradition” as well as a more radical breakaway wing intent on promoting reform and even revolution. The clearest break here occurred in the split between “official” academy art and dissident groups, of whom the most well known are the *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers), who emerged in the 1870s. As far as cultural policy is concerned, our interest is in the former group. While much of this was “spontaneous,” personal tsarist and state sponsorship pushed elements of it into the realm of cultural policy. In

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, Freeze argues that, despite the best efforts of their impresarios, such ceremonies undermined rather than reinforced the mystique of monarchy. See Freeze, “Subversive Piety.”

particular, in our period, the rise of the Mariinskii Theater in St. Petersburg and the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow would have been inconceivable without such support.<sup>21</sup> Equally significant, the Imperial Theaters projected nationalist and russifying themes and have been appropriately described as “schools for citizens,” a title applied to them with respect to tsarist, Provisional Government, and Soviet periods.<sup>22</sup>

Not all high cultural initiatives concerned the performing arts. One of the most significant aspects of cultural policy in the classic sense is provided by the establishment, in April 1895, of the Russian Museum. It opened on 7 March 1898, in the immense Mikhailovskii Palace in St. Petersburg, as a testament to Russian painting, sculpture, and other fine arts since the early icon painters. While the items on exhibition have changed with the regimes, the Russian Museum has remained a steadfast representative of Russian artistic genius. In 1902, an ethnographic section was added which extended the veneration to the wider empire, in particular, by focusing on the multitude of diverse cultures within the confines of the imperial boundary.<sup>23</sup> Its political significance is underlined by the fact that it was originally set up to house gifts to the tsar from the peoples of the empire. The tsar also purchased items for the exhibition from his personal funds since state funding was insufficient for the purpose. In its prerevolutionary years, the museum linked up with the remarkable outburst of exploration undertaken by Russians. While the very foundation of the Russian Empire had arisen from exploration and expansion into the vast, uncharted territories of Siberia as well as Central Asia and the Caucasus, in the mid- and late 19th century, innumerable scientific expeditions, often sponsored by the Academy of Sciences,<sup>24</sup> set out to the four corners of the empire and beyond into Mongolia and China. The Arctic was also a source of interest, and one of the last major global discoveries—of Severnaia Zemlia and its associated archipelago by Boris A. Vilkitskii—resulted from an expedition

---

<sup>21</sup> Their full names were the Imperial Mariinskii Theater and the Imperial Bolshoi Theater, reflecting their official status.

<sup>22</sup> See Murray Frame, *The St. Petersburg Imperial Theaters: Stage and State in Revolutionary Russia, 1900–20* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2000); and Murray Frame, *School for Citizens: Theatre and Civil Society in Imperial Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> In 1934, the Soviets split it off into an equally impressive and immense separate collection eventually renamed as the State Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR.

<sup>24</sup> Again, the full title in these years, the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, reveals its official links. Its continuity down to the present as one of Russia’s most prestigious institutions also testifies to the enduring significance of culture in the successive regimes.

in 1913.<sup>25</sup> The host of expeditions studied flora, fauna, geology, natural geography, and anthropology. They returned with artifacts of all kinds, from whale-bone carving to geological samples. Oddly, the most sensational event in the natural world at that time, the Tunguska meteorite, source of the most powerful earth impact event of modern times (17 [30] June 1908), evoked little scientific interest until the 1920s, probably because its immense significance was not appreciated, as it had occurred in a remote and barely inhabited area of eastern Siberia, north of Lake Baikal. Nonetheless, the activities of Petr P. Semenov (1827–1914)—leading geographer, explorer, statistician, and radical who earned the nickname Semenov-Tian-Shanskii from his pioneering exploration and study of the Tian-Shan mountain range—and others like him made a profound impact on Russian culture and, often inadvertently, nurtured its sense of imperial superiority.<sup>26</sup>

However, both tsarist and Soviet cultural policy shared another characteristic. They both failed to win over the population. Tsarist cultural aims, notably russification, brought it into conflict with minority nationalities and with the intelligentsia, including the majority Russian component. As we will see, Soviet cultural construction fared little better, and it has been argued that cultural failure—the failure to win over the population to its values—was a primary cause of the Soviet system’s final collapse.<sup>27</sup> With respect to tsarism, it was more or less despite the ruling regime and its ideology that Russia produced a multitalented and vibrant intelligentsia in areas of mathematics, science, biology, literature, art, and music. Talents as diverse as Mendeleev, Vernadskii, Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, Gor’kii, Vrubel’, Repin, Chagall, Kandinskii, Chaikovskii, and Stravinskii became internationally famous. There were a host of others. The present volume gives many examples. However, one does not have to look very far into their lives and achievements to see that much of what they stood for contradicted official policy. Scientists were almost universally Darwinian and often atheist rather than Christian. Even religiously inclined writers such as Dostoevskii and, to a greater extent, Tolstoi repudiated or, at least, had ambiguous relations with the tsarist state and the official church. Tolstoi, of course, was excommunicated. The brilliance of Russia’s intellectual

---

<sup>25</sup> Like Darwin’s association with the expeditionary force of the Royal Navy, which enabled him to make the studies around the globe on which he based his theory of natural selection, Russian scientific interest in the Arctic and the associated sea passages owed a debt to important military-strategic concerns, which helps to explain the state’s readiness to fund such enterprises.

<sup>26</sup> There is a relatively recent edition of Semenov’s memoirs in English: Petr Petrovitch Semenov, *Travels in the Tian’-Shan’ 1856–1857*, trans. Liudmila Gilmour, Colin Thomas, and Marcus Wheeler; ed. and annotated Colin Thomas (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> For an interpretation of Soviet history focused on this issue, see Christopher Read, *The Making and Breaking of the Soviet System: An Interpretation* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2000).

creativity in these years did not redound to the advantage of either tsarist or Soviet rulers. Indeed, given their own cultural prescriptions, neither could tolerate much diversity and both fell easily into controlling the cultural life of the country. They used the same instruments. Censorship was endemic in both regimes. Only for a brief period around the 1905 Revolution and in 1917 and 1918 was it absent or weak. State patronage was crucial. For the tsars it funded and supported activities and artifacts from cathedrals and monuments to theaters and schools which embodied, reflected, and/or instilled official values. For the Soviet regime, state- and party-controlled patronage of arts, education, newspapers, publishing, music, theater, film, museums, schools, and galleries quickly became practically universal, stifling countercurrents at least as effectively as censorship. In other words, culture became an area of contestation between government and society, with culture-makers of varying talents arrayed on either side. Even in a prewar Europe of the Dreyfus Affair and the postwar Weimar Republic, no other great European power had anything quite comparable to Russia in the importance and consequences of its culture wars, not least because, as has been frequently pointed out, censorship in Russia displaced much political discourse into “Aesopian” cultural forms. Solzhenitsyn famously wrote that a great writer was “like a second government.”<sup>28</sup>

### **The Provisional Government Interlude: February–October 1917**

The brief interlude of the Provisional Government in 1917 stands in stark contrast to tsarist and Soviet cultural objectives and control. The new authorities had no conscious cultural project of their own. Rather, they promised to “normalize” the cultural situation, that is to adopt liberal toleration characteristic of France and Britain, its chief role models. It did not last long enough to have very much effect. Its general approach symbolizes the work of the Provisional Government more widely. By and large, it devoted itself to nurturing and protecting what it considered the healthy tendencies and institutions of autocratic Russian culture, whether it be the art market, schools, museums, or religions. Its mission was to free such tendencies from attachment to the unhealthy elements of the previous system—Russian chauvinism, illiteracy, absence of rights, censorship, and so on—which were holding back Russia’s intellectual and cultural development. It showed little sign of having a revolutionary cultural agenda of its own. It did have some cultural weight, however, embodied in, for example, the Orientalist Sergei Ol’denburg, who became minister of education from July to September in the Second Coalition Government. His eminent career as a scholar and administrator continued long after 1917. As Permanent Secretary of the Academy of Sciences from 1904

---

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans. Michael Guybon (London: Collins, 1970), 436.

until 1929, he resisted Bolshevik encroachments on its independence until the Stalinist cultural revolution of 1929.<sup>29</sup> Among his deputy ministers were Academician Vladimir Vernadskii and the redoubtable “Krupskaia of the Kadet Party,” Countess Sof’ia Panina.

It is possible to grasp the fleeting essence of the Provisional Government approach to culture by looking at Panina’s career around this time.<sup>30</sup> Like her Bolshevik counterpart, before the Revolution Panina engaged in adult and secondary-level education. She was involved especially in opening educational paths for young and adult women. She was best known for the *Narodnyi dom* (People’s House), an institution she founded in 1903 in Ligovskii, a working-class district on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, which she directed and financed on her own. Its effect, as one participant wrote in 1913, was that: “Before entering the classes I lived only my own life without noticing what was going on around me. Now in the classes I encountered and clearly saw the turbulent flow of life, which carried me off as well.”<sup>31</sup> However, the toughening influence of war had wrought changes. In the words of Panina’s biographer,

almost three years of war, hardship, and revolutionary rhetoric had transformed these women. The working-class wives and mothers who filed into the People’s House in 1914 to register for state assistance, Sofia recalled, were “helpless creatures,” like “blind moles emerging for the first time from their burrows.” But by the spring of 1917, she insisted, that helplessness had disappeared. Soldiers’ wives now “were holding mass meetings on the street around the People’s House, amid the piles of dirty melting snow, accusing us of stealing their aid packets, and of building the People’s House itself on money stolen from the people.”

Panina’s description was an ominous warning of the limitations of the liberal project itself in Russia. Her students were becoming Krupskaia’s students. In a sense, Panina was like Krupskaia, but with her aim calibrated at a target one class higher.

In her first ministerial post, for welfare, she tried to get the Smolnyi Institute out of the hands of the Bolsheviks and return it to its earlier use as a school,

---

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, although it fits in with much of our present argument, the Academy of Sciences was the last tsarist-era institution to be Bolshevized, not least because the old Bolsheviks maintained a respect for reason and culture and hoped to win it over.

<sup>30</sup> I am very much indebted to Adele Lindenmeyr, who allowed me to see the draft of her excellent biography of Countess Panina. The following account is based on her upcoming book.

<sup>31</sup> Extracts from Panina’s writings are taken from her memoirs, “My Writings,” in the V. D. Lehovich Collection. Translated and supplied by Adele Lindenmeyr.

though not solely for young ladies but also for the training of daycare and kindergarten teachers. Not surprisingly, she lost the battle with the Petrograd Soviet, which had commandeered the building as its headquarters, and resigned from the government as a consequence but returned as an assistant minister for education in the Second Coalition. She remained in government into the Third and final coalition, but much of the focus of her later activity was through the Petrograd City Council, where she occupied herself with tasks such as setting up clubs for children and buying books for libraries.<sup>32</sup>

Underlying Panina's work was a cultural preoccupation which gave many liberals nightmares. She believed, once again according to her biographer, "that Russia's 'dark,' uneducated working men and women needed guidance and leadership." Curiously, the Provisional Government, like its Soviet successor, identified the army as the key point at which to apply its cultural educational policy, the obvious aim being to bolster the morale of the troops by educating them in national values, civic culture, and the aims of the war. Also like the Soviet government, the Provisional Government was intent upon exerting political-revolutionary control over the army as a whole and began to make moves comparable to the soviet utilization of political commissars. They had a dual purpose—to instill the new values in the peasant soldiers and control the politically hostile officers still needed under both regimes.<sup>33</sup> While Krupskiaia and the Bolsheviks shared such preoccupations they were prepared to work more closely with the masses, to lead them rather than change them first. Fear of the "dark people" was very much part of the liberal (and conservative) psyche, and the consequent lack of confidence in the masses was one of the considerations leading to the constant postponement of national elections. For the liberal mind, only a long period of mass education could offer any hope of turning "backward" peasants into modern, democratic citizens. One thing the Provisional Government certainly did not have was time.

### **Bolshevism and Culture**

The first, tentative steps in evolving a Bolshevik cultural policy began even before the October Revolution. In Petrograd, a small number of party intellectuals set up the first organized branch of the Proletarian Cultural-Educational Association, which soon became known as Proletkul't. Its chief inspiration was Aleksandr Bogdanov, a one-time leading light of the party

---

<sup>32</sup> *Zhurnaly Petrogradskoi Gorodskoi dumy* (Petrograd, 1917), no. 77 (zasedanie 11 sentiabria 1917 goda): 9; no. 90 (zasedanie 20 oktiabria 1917): 2.

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent brief account of Provisional Government work in this respect, see the sub-chapter entitled "Sociopolitical Enlightenment" in Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 211–22. The remainder of this excellent chapter, on the Whites and their cultural-educational-propaganda policy, carries the story into the Civil War.

around 1905 but, thereafter, a bitter critic of Lenin, who, unsurprisingly, returned the favor. Because of this enmity Bogdanov maintained an organizational back seat in Proletkul't, but his ideas reigned supreme. He started out from the unexceptionally Marxist premise that a crucial part of the ability of a class to dominate society arose from imposition of its cultural values on that society. For Marx, and for Bogdanov, the European bourgeoisie had been preparing its cultural path, through, for instance, challenging the medieval papacy and church and promoting the rebirth of reason in the Renaissance, long before it had acquired political and economic power. The end result of the process was the "naturalization" of values favorable to their interests, meaning that they were assumed to be absolute and unchanging rather than relative and self-interested. Their values were transmuted into "common sense" and supposed fixed features of "human nature" such as a propensity to selfishness, competition, conflict, aggression, and violence. It therefore followed that, if it were to establish its hegemony over society, the working class had to assert its own culture. However, this was easier said than done. It created, above all, two sets of problems. First, could one define the values on which proletarian culture should be based? Assuming that could be done there was a second stage, how could one develop and propagate them? A serious complication to both of these processes was the existing dominance of bourgeois culture. Not only did the currently ruling class use every means at its disposal to assert its values, it also did everything it could to disrupt the formation of a rival set of proletarian values. So successful had it been that, even at the moment when (as the Bolsheviks thought) the working class was on the verge of seizing power, its cultural development had barely begun. The tiny group of people who set up the first Proletkul't certainly had a job on their hands if they were going to change this situation.

Of the two sets of tasks the former was much the easier. While agreement among intellectuals is notoriously difficult, it was possible to reach a consensus about what values were associated with socialism. The bourgeois capitalist world revolved around core values such as rationalism, individualism, competition, private property, the market, and endless material growth. Philosophical idealism, which supposedly opened the way to mysticism, and religion, at least to befuddle the masses and interrupt the process of forming proletarian consciousness, also featured. Marxism shared some of these—it was, in its own eyes, rational and it also posited unlimited material growth and an abundance of products. However, it claimed to understand these things very differently from the capitalists for whom, for example, economic "rationality" was built on false values of market production, profit, and ownership rather than the concept of "need" which was fundamental to socialist economic priorities. But shared values were the exception. Rather, according to Bogdanov, the fundamental values were in total conflict. For socialists, collectivism, co-operation, communalism, and community were the key underlying concepts. Science and materialism were the philosophical

underpinnings. The fundamentals were shared across a wide spectrum of socialist intellectuals.

The luminaries of Proletkul't, including Bogdanov's brother-in-law, the future commissar for enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii, the novelist Maksim Gor'kii, and, later and more marginally, Nadezhda Krupskaiia, party specialist on adult education, were well aware that their ideas were, as yet, half-baked at best. Given the existing bourgeois dominance of education and the recently expanded mass press and the paucity of proletarian resources, it was no surprise that the gestation of a sound proletarian culture was in its earliest stages. The working class, given the intensity of its working week and its meager recompense, in most cases, had little time or energy to do anything but struggle to survive. Nonetheless, there is evidence that many Russian workers exhibited a great appetite for learning, reading, and self-improvement. In the words of one observer at the time, there was a great thirst among workers for "facts, facts, facts."<sup>34</sup> Better-off workers in more prosperous trades like printing and tailoring were able to enjoy greater cultural development. But it was nothing compared to the resources and achievements of the ruling class, and spontaneous generation of proletarian culture was in its infancy. This created a problem for the Proletkul't leadership. Where were the workers who would develop this culture? The Proletkul't leaders were unhappy about their own involvement in the process since most of them only had the most tenuous claim to be working class themselves. Would their influence taint the purity of any evolving, truly proletarian culture? They got around it by facing up to the fact that there was no alternative and, to mitigate any potentially negative consequences, they promoted genuine workers to the most important positions that they were capable of holding down, though it has to be said that intellectuals dominated the leadership of the movement throughout the period. However, their priority was to end their own domination and hand over the process to actual workers as soon as possible.

In order to define and promulgate proletarian culture Bogdanov had come up with two projects. One was the production of a proletarian encyclopaedia, the other a proletarian university. By and large, the encyclopaedia project remained theoretical. The concept of the proletarian university was also more theoretical than real, although a small party school was set up in Capri in 1909, using funds mostly provided by Gor'kii. Lenin set up a rival school in Longjumeau near Paris (1910).<sup>35</sup> In 1919, a party school was set up in Moscow which was related in terms of ambitions, curriculum, and class-based recruit-

---

<sup>34</sup> L. M. Kleinbort, *Ocherki rabochei intelligentsii*, 1: 1905–1916 (Petrograd: Nachatki znani, 1923), 10. The pioneering secondary study in this field—Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985)—is still very valuable. There is a 2003 edition (Northwestern University Press).

<sup>35</sup> For an account of the party schools, see Christopher Read, *Culture and Power in Revolutionary Russia: The Intelligentsia and the Transition from Tsarism to Communism*

ment to the two small-scale models. Needless to say, Bogdanovite ideas were still officially banished from the new institution, which became known as the Sverdlov University, though the concept of such an institution was inspired by Bogdanov's precedent.

The Sverdlov University was the peak of a developing network of party educational institutions set up to spread fundamental principles and to win over the population to Bolshevik values. It was one of the most important institutions established to teach basic party principles to party members who would take middle-ranking and provincial posts of responsibility in and beyond the party itself. However, few of them were, in any deep sense, Marxists. Party membership peaked at 350,000 to 400,000 between 1917 and 1919 and even the members were largely neophytes whose knowledge of Marxism and the nuances of Bolshevik ideology often consisted of scraps gleaned from slogans, decrees, and policies. One of the prime objects of persuasion and mobilization was the party itself. In order to facilitate the process of winning over party and society, in 1919 the party not only produced a new programme it also commissioned two leading party intellectuals, Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, to write an explanation of the programme which was entitled *The ABC of Communism*.<sup>36</sup> The programme and the ABC were the focus of reading groups in party cells, especially in factories and military units. The party monopoly on power and its urge to establish a leading position across the economic, political, social, and cultural spectra, put enormous pressure on its manpower. The greatest shortage of all in early Communist Russia was Communists, especially those with much-needed practical skills. Enormous efforts were put into plugging this gap through worker education and a kind of positive discrimination allowing rapidly educated workers to reach university level through so-called workers' faculties (*rabfaki*). It is obvious, of course, that even the process of educating specialists was severely hampered by lack of specialists. Many of the army ideological watchdogs, the political commissars, were not Communists,<sup>37</sup> and as late as the mid-1920s there were teachers of party ideology in provincial *rabfaki* who were not Marxists.<sup>38</sup>

Proletkul't believed it was contributing to this wider process and even had dreams of being in charge of it. However, its actual influence was more

---

(London: Macmillan, 1990), 115–18. There is also an account of Proletkul't as a whole (111–32 and 145–56) and of the Sverdlov University (133–41).

<sup>36</sup> There is an English translation: N. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *ABC of Communism* (London: Penguin, 1969). It is also available at the Marxist Internet Archive ([www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/index.htm)).

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Read, *War and Revolution in Russia 1914–1922* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 185.

<sup>38</sup> Read, *Culture and Power*, 225. For an account of the *rabfaki*, see Read, *Culture and Power*, 220–29.

modest. The enterprise was fraught with many practical and theoretical difficulties. Among the former was Leninist distrust, which came to a head in 1920 when Lenin demanded that Proletkul't abandon its claims to autonomy in the cultural sphere and submit to party discipline. To add spurious weight to his campaign, Lenin also charged them with an iconoclastic attitude to the culture of the past. There was no foundation to Lenin's charge in this respect, since Bogdanov argued for preserving all that was of value in the "treasure-chest of past culture" as he called it, but Lenin was right to see that Proletkul't had ambitions to autonomy. The action against Proletkul't coincided with action to end trade union autonomy and prefigured the final Leninist resolution of cultural policy which accompanied the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

In his last active years, from 1920 to 1922/3 (he died in January 1924), Lenin spent a considerable amount of time pondering cultural issues. While the economic collapse and Civil War dominated the agenda there was little time for him to take up the cultural aspects of revolution. However, as the tide of civil war receded it uncovered a beach covered in curiosities. Like a beachcomber Lenin began to pick through the flotsam and jetsam. Some of it was useful, much was harmful. During the Civil War cultural control had been inconsistent and unsystematic. The nationalization of cultural institutions, such as museums, schools, most of the art market, and publishing, not to mention the education system, censorship, and state control of supplies such as paper, made independent cultural activity difficult, but not impossible. In cracks and crevices, independent thought continued. The philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev (Nicholas Berdyaev) and others ran a small Free Philosophical Academy within the bosom of Moscow University. Small publishers and a few independent publishers eked out a constrained existence. Beyond that, there was an explosion of revolutionary art and artists who colonized whatever state patronage was available. Key sources were the Commissariat of Enlightenment, under the relatively indulgent and tolerant reign of Lunacharskii, and a project to translate classics of world literature into Russian under the control of Maksim Gor'kii. Through these means, and also the provision of a meager special state ration (*paek*) to a number of lucky scientists, writers, artists, and other intellectuals, some basic income, which barely guaranteed survival, was provided. Nonetheless, there was an explosion of experimental art. Its roots went back to the pre-October and pre-1917 period, but its early Soviet-era energy was derived from revolutionary enthusiasm and opportunity. Radical artists of all kinds associated themselves with the revolutionary project, believing, naively as it turned out, that all revolutionary roads led to the same destination. They also, equally naively, fought each other for intellectual domination of the opportunities which existed. The main art school, Vkhutemas (the Higher State Art and Technical Workshop), was taken over by Malevich and Tatlin, and artists they considered insufficiently revolutionary, like Chagall, were banished to the provinces. Many artists in a variety of fields contributed to the new cultural explosion. Tatlin designed

objects appropriate to the new way of life, including furniture for reading clubs, clothing for workers, and a vast revolving skyscraper monument and conference building dedicated to the Communist International (never built). The poet Vladimir Maiakovskii produced graphic morality stories illustrating propaganda themes. The artists El (Lazar') Lisitskii and Dmitrii Moor produced, in vastly different styles, propaganda posters. Brilliant pioneers of film, like Dziga Vertov, began to shape Soviet cinema.<sup>39</sup>

There were also controversies over what to do with remnants of tsarist cultural expression. What was to be done with monuments? Some were simply pulled down, like the statue of Alexander III, memorably captured in Sergei Eisenstein's film *October* (1928), creating a symbolic archetype emulated in recent times with the tearing down of statues of Dzerzhinskii in Moscow and Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. However, an uncontrolled wave of statue-smashing was not what the party wanted. Monuments which had artistic value were to be preserved. New street iconography appropriate to the new regime and new values were to be commissioned. Characteristic of the time, a list of approved figures for whom monuments could be constructed was drawn up.<sup>40</sup> There was also the issue of what to do with the institutions of tsarist and nationalist cultural expression. Some, like the art galleries and museums, such as the ethnography museum, could simply be converted to Marxist-Leninist values by changing the interpretative gloss on the artifacts within, though it was only in the 1920s that this was done systematically. One crucial controversy revolved around the apparent quintessence of tsarist culture, the opera and ballet of the Bolshoi Theater. Radicals like Maiakovskii called for its closure. However, the party, with Lenin in the forefront, agreed to pay large subsidies, even in the straitened times of civil war, to keep it functioning and to open it up to the masses. At the height of the Civil War period, tickets for theaters, concert halls, and cinemas were free. A third set of problems revolved around what to do with church buildings. Again, those with artistic value were preserved. Some were converted, sooner or later, into museums like the Kazanskii and Isaakevskii cathedrals in Petrograd.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless many were either officially or spontaneously closed or demolished.

---

<sup>39</sup> There are many books on the art and artists of the period, including Matthew Cullerne Brown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State 1917–92* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); and Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Christina Lodder, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," in *Art of the Soviets*, 16–32.

<sup>41</sup> They were closed after 1917 and reopened as museums in 1932 and 1931 respectively.

## The Leninist Cultural Settlement 1920–22

We cannot know for sure what Lenin was thinking as he surveyed this complex cultural scene, but we do know that the steps he took in response resounded through the cultural life of the country for the entire Soviet period. One of the ironies of Soviet-era culture was that a regime claiming to be revolutionary excelled at the most bourgeois and conservative forms of artistic and cultural activity. Symphony orchestras in formal dress, the aristocratic arts of opera and ballet, realist forms of painting resembling the aesthetic values of Academy art dominated the scene and, at their best, gained global recognition. One of the least proletarian of games, chess, achieved great prestige, not least because it was one of Lenin's favorites. A well-known photo shows him playing against Bogdanov on Capri during his visit to the "heretical" party school. Even everyday life reverted to "bourgeois" norms of, for example, the nuclear family. The party eventually frowned on libertinism and divorce among Communists almost as strongly as the Vatican did among Catholics. Conservatism of artistic forms remained the norm throughout the Soviet period. Khrushchev famously complained that a painting by Ernst Neizvestnyi looked as though it had been produced by a donkey's tail.<sup>42</sup> Brezhnev ordered the bulldozing of an open-air exhibition of abstract and experimental art. Stalin, of course, had his impact on creating this situation, but its origins go back to Lenin, and not just in the matter of chess.

Between about 1920 and 1922 a series of cultural measures tightened the party's grip. They included making the censorship apparatus permanent and extending it to all forms of art, literature, performance, and publishing. Private publishing was practically eliminated. All cultural institutions and patronage were in state hands, notably under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Enlightenment. University autonomy was brought to an end in 1921.<sup>43</sup> Some 250 non-Marxist intellectuals were summarily exiled in 1922.<sup>44</sup> A new attempt to shackle the church and to split it through encouraging a pro-regime so-called Living Church was undertaken.<sup>45</sup> There were parallel political developments—the attack on diversity within the party at the expense of the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists leading to a ban on factions in the party; the trial of leading Socialist Revolutionaries still left in the country; the confirmation that the party should lead in every sphere; the establishment of

---

<sup>42</sup> Khrushchev and Neizvestnyi were reconciled later to the extent that the artist produced a magnificent tombstone for the politician's grave.

<sup>43</sup> See Read, *Culture and Power*, 156–85.

<sup>44</sup> See Stuart Finkel, *On the Ideological Front: The Russian Intelligentsia and the Making of the Soviet Public Sphere* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: Bolshevik Religious Policy 1917–1929* (Helsinki: SHS, 1994).

the supposedly temporary Cheka on a permanent basis; the establishment of the party Agitation and Propaganda apparatus; the emergence of party Control Commissions. All pointed in the same direction. The socioeconomic defeat inflicted on the party by the peasantry had led to the “retreat” of NEP. NEP was, in some ways, a partial restoration of capitalism. It followed, especially to the Marxist mind, that economic interests inimical to socialism would emerge and try to take advantage of the situation to re-establish capitalist values and politics. Therefore, for Lenin and the party leaders, the tightening of political and ideological control was a necessary preventive measure to ensure there would be no capitalist restoration. It was the corollary to economic “liberalization” which had to be accompanied by intellectual control, not toleration. While control became much more extensive under Stalin, that is no reason for underestimating the degree to which Lenin was establishing a cultural dictatorship.<sup>46</sup> It also linked to the twin cultural foundations of Leninism—winning over the population to socialist values and developing proletarian class consciousness. Where the autocracy had been almost a theocracy, the new Soviet system was becoming a kind of secular equivalent. The status and legitimacy of the new system lay in its ideological rectitude, not the votes of its citizens. Its fundamentalist hold on “truth” gave it the right to marginalize all heresies and use every means of the state to create conditions favorable to the establishment of the new “religion” of socialist ideals and proletarian class consciousness. None the less, the twenties were more tolerant than the thirties for a number of reasons. In the earlier period, more latitude was given to fellow-travelers in the hope they would join the great task of socialist construction and also, perhaps, because the party was led by intellectuals. Although, like Bukharin and Trotskii, for instance, they differed in many ways, they shared a respect for culture and ideas. Such an attitude was much less prevalent among the rapidly educated former workers turned engineers and managers who were the backbone of the party and its apparatus under Stalin.

A glance at Lenin’s writings and speeches confirms the basic principles of the cultural-political settlement of his last years. Like Proletkul’t, Lenin wanted to establish and develop proletarian culture, but his understanding of the content of that culture was more dogmatic and less experimental. As far back as 1910 he had underlined to Gor’kii that “we know now of only one proletarian science and that is Marxism.”<sup>47</sup> He returned to this in the first clause of the draft of his resolution on Proletkul’t: “Not special ideas,

---

<sup>46</sup> There is a collection of 844 pages of documents relating to repression in the early 1920s which underlines its depth and breadth. A. N. Artizov et al., eds., *“Ochistim Rossiю nadolgo...”: Repressii protiv inakomyshlichikh konets 1921–nachalo 1923 g.* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiia”; Materik, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Notes of a Publicist,” in *Lenin on Culture and Cultural Revolution* (Moscow: Progress, 1966), 25.

but Marxism.<sup>48</sup> In many ways, he shared Proletkul't's view that "Proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner and bureaucratic society," but he prefaced that comment with a quite different spirit: "proletarian culture ... is not clutched out of thin air; it is not an invention of those who call themselves experts in proletarian culture. That is all nonsense."<sup>49</sup> Again this was expressed in pithy form in his rough draft resolution on Proletkul't: "Not the invention of a new proletarian culture, but the development of the best models, traditions, and results of the existing culture" from the point of view of Marxism and the experience of the working class.<sup>50</sup> In his last published article Lenin maintained a similar stance, saying, perhaps surprisingly, "We hear people dilating at too great length and too flippantly on 'proletarian' culture. For a start, we should be satisfied with real bourgeois culture."<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, in his article "On Co-operation" he argued that, where NEP had created the conditions for a rolling transfer of resources from the remaining private sector to the public sector, it only needed to be supplemented by a cultural revolution for socialism to be constructed. The emphasis, Lenin argued, was now on educational and cultural work, especially among the peasants. The pamphlet concludes:

In our country the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution that now confronts us. This cultural revolution would now suffice to make our country a completely socialist country; but it presents immense difficulties of a purely cultural (for we are illiterate) and material character (for, to be cultured, we must achieve a certain development of the material means of production, must have a certain material base).<sup>52</sup>

The second, equally emphatic, element in Lenin's views was that the party should control the process. The rough draft decree on Proletkul't once more: "Not apart from the People's Commissariat for Education [i.e., the Commissariat

---

<sup>48</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Rough Draft of a Resolution on Proletarian Culture," in *Lenin on Culture and Cultural Revolution*, 150.

<sup>49</sup> V. I. Lenin, "The Tasks of the Youth Leagues," in *Collected Works*, 2nd English ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 31: 287; also in *Lenin on Culture and Cultural Revolution*, 128.

<sup>50</sup> Lenin, "Rough Draft of a Resolution on Proletarian Culture," 150. Emphases in original.

<sup>51</sup> The quotation can be found in the opening paragraph of V. I. Lenin, "Better Fewer but Better," in *Collected Works* (1965), 33: 487.

<sup>52</sup> V. I. Lenin, "On Co-operation," in *Lenin on Culture and Cultural Revolution*, 210. For Lenin the term culture as used here had a mainly anthropological meaning but did not entirely exclude the intellectual and artistic meaning.

of Enlightenment] but as part of it since RCP<sup>53</sup> + Commissariat for Education = Σ Proletkul't."<sup>54</sup> Even more sharp was the reprimand to Bukharin around the same time when he was dallying with Proletkul't:

1. Proletarian culture = communism
  2. The RCP (Russian Communist Party) takes the lead
  3. The proletarian class = the RCP = Soviet power
- About this we are in complete agreement?<sup>55</sup>

Nothing could be further from the niceties of Proletkul't and its scruples about polluting the proletarian purity of the future culture. For Lenin the class was the party was Soviet power. End of story.

## Conclusion

Comparing tsarist and Soviet culture and cultural policy has shown up the expected differences between a system founded in the depths of medieval, aristocratic, religious characteristics and one derived from reason, science, industry, and modernity. However, it has also shown a continuing difference from Western cultures, notably the high priority given to culture and the fundamental importance of cultural issues to the legitimacy, self-perception, and objectives of the tsarist and Soviet systems. The comparison confirms the view that, while institutions can be subjected to rapid revolutionary change, even large and fundamental ones such as armies, the justice system, banks, finance, property, governance, and so on, the hold of cultural norms and notions can be much more tenacious. The remainder of this volume bears this out. Going beyond its immediate scope, one could also conclude that the ultimate collapse of both systems can be attributed in significant part to cultural failure. Tsarism stuck too rigidly to the inflexibilities of official nationalism, damagingly reinforced by the influence of Pobedonostsev. The Soviet system's failure owed a great deal to its defeat on the cultural front. In the battle between socialist values and the traditional petty-bourgeois mentality, the latter won hands down, albeit in modernized form. In evaluating Russian history, one ignores the cultural dimension at one's peril.

---

<sup>53</sup> Russian Communist Party.

<sup>54</sup> Lenin, "Rough Draft of a Resolution on Proletarian Culture," 150.

<sup>55</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Letter to Bukharin," 11 October 1920, in *V. I. Lenin o kul'ture*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izd-vo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 293. Emphases in original.