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### **Russia as a Configuration of Practices**

My claim in this paper is rather simple. The Russian Idea can hardly be formulated now, not because there are many conflicting versions of it, but because as an abstract representational idea it does not have anything to do with the multiplicity of practices that together constitute contemporary Russia. In other words, Russia is a configuration of practices that no single abstract Idea might capture, hence the usual inferral, say, in the form of the famous Tyutchev's dictum – *umom Rossiiu ne poniat'*. In my opinion, however, this rather hackneyed observation should by no means imply that practices of Russian culture cannot be rationally studied and analyzed. In fact, this analysis may point out the roots of widespread emotional allegiance to a set of shared practices of Russian culture, on the basis of which one might articulate the sense of renewed national appeal and a remaining deep feeling of commonality among the citizens of the Russian Federation.

Imagining Russia, then, promises to be a more productive approach than engaging in yet another search for elusive concepts such as the «national idea.» As the word itself implies, the task of imagining Russia is best interpreted as giving Russia an image, in Russian – *obraz*, which is a term linked to *voobrazhenie*, meaning imagination, and *preobrazhenie*, meaning transfiguration (a term which Timothy Ware has identified as the key concept of Orthodox theology). Also, *obraz* is frequently used in ancient Russian texts to translate a Greek word *eikon*. Hence while imagining Russia we are within a specifically Russian enterprise – to perceive Russian identity and particularity as though they were revealed by an icon, as though they were made visible to the mind's eye by «philosophy in colors», to use the famous title of Count Evgenii Trubetskoi's book.<sup>1</sup> Trubetskoi, who defended the specificity of ancient Russian thought as being embodied in visible iconographic images rather than in verbal discourse, may be taken as a response to Georgii Florovskii's puzzled question in the beginning of his fundamental overview of Russian theology over many centuries. Florovskii deals with the phenomenal silence of Russian religious thought – meaning the absence of written theological discourse -- almost all the way until the

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<sup>1</sup> E. N. Trubetskoi, *Tri ocherka o russkoi ikone: Umozrenie v kraskakh, Dva mira v drevne-russkoi ikonopisi, Rossiia v ee ikone*. Paris, YMCA-PRESS, 1965.

late eighteenth century, and finds scarcely any satisfying explanation.<sup>2</sup> Trubetskoi might have answered him that Russians did not need elaborate theological discourse and moral casuistry, since they had it embodied in their icons – all relevant religious truths shone on their own and could be easily perceived by a trained eye. The process of imagining Russia then -- Russia as Russia, and not as some borrowed West European conceptualization – Trubetskoi could argue, should be done with the help of an iconographic image, through direct revelation of the truth of Russia rather than by some means of imported verbiage.

Now, this is a rather tricky task. One of the reasons for this is that icons are not representational paintings. For example, Pavel Florenskii, who has a bad name among US historians for his quasi-mystical and ill-founded assertions, may be credited at least with one thing. In his seminal work *Ikonoostas*, he reminded an ignorant Russian reader that medieval icons did not represent Christ our Lord and the saints;<sup>3</sup> rather they were the very visible being of these saintly entities – a point stressed by Heidegger in relation to ancient Greek statues of divinities only some twenty years later in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (In Heidegger's argument, these statues did not represent pagan gods, as modern viewer uncritically assumes nowadays, but they allowed them to step out into the *aletheia*, the openness of being, and thus to become part and parcel of the everyday life of an ancient Greek). According to Florenskii, Greek painters knew the law of artistic perspective long before Dürer, but they intentionally eschewed it, their task being not representation of sacred reality for a human observer, but an opening of the sacred realm onto this world, which allows sacred reality to interact with fallen souls. Hence the characteristic “flatness” of icons, and so on.

I have produced this deliberately schematic exegesis of how *obraz* is linked to *eikon* in order to stress the fact that an image-*eikon* of Russia should not necessarily be tied to pictorial or verbal representation. On the contrary, the notion of the Russian Idea, developed by religious-philosophical thought of the nineteenth century, is linked to modern representation and thus, of course, for the most part ignores perennial Russian ways of perception of sacred and human reality. Being innately discursive, the religious-philosophical revival tried to put everything through the «endless mill of speech», to use the apt phrase of Michel Foucault, and thus it thrived on the notion of linguistic or mental representation. Idealist philosophers could spend hours debating different versions of representation of the Russian Idea, but they hardly ever put the mechanism of representation itself into question. Their legacy still seems to have a

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<sup>2</sup> Georgii Florovskii, *Puti russkogo bogosloviia*. Paris : YMCA Press, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> P. A. Florenskii, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir' s Seminary Press, 1996.

lasting effect on Russian culture – even the current president of the Russian Federation could not resist proposing his version of the national idea, thus hinting that versions offered by the experts sponsored by his predecessor were hardly successful.

It seems, however, that this search for the Russian Idea is misdirected, and for a very simple reason. Being a residue of the obsolete early modern ideology of representation that posited a very simple link between language and reality, the whole notion of Ideas as capturing something essential about national character or the fate of the people that manifests itself in practice is hardly acceptable in the twenty first century. Furthermore, the notion of the national idea was initially formulated against the background of an uncritical reception of the philosophical works of the German Idealists on the Russian soil, with concomitant Hegelian search for transcendental essences hardly to be registered by empirical research. Hence, for contemporary empirically-oriented social scientists, as well as for present-day theorists well versed in Wittgenstein and Heidegger, talking about ideas and essences is a remnant of the rather distant past in social and political thought.

For example, this early modern episteme of taking language as being simply a tool for the truthful representation of things or thoughts has been decisively challenged by Wittgenstein's and Austin's analyses of doing things with words which demonstrated the futility of attempts at constructing a realm of abstract ideas independent of the context of practices of linguistic usage. Similarly, Heidegger's essays described representation as being just one – and not necessarily the best – way of disclosing phenomena of this world. Even if our everyday usage still lets us speak about the Russian (or German, or American) idea, the concomitant belief that there might be found a definitive mental representation that reveals something essential about Russia hardly withstands criticism.

To get back to the beginning of this exposition once again: I would like to suggest that imagining Russia in terms of supplying a representational picture of its life or an abstract concept capturing its historical mission is hopelessly passé. By contrast, imagining it without the tools of early modern representation – similar, for example, to the way an image-*eikon* of the saint was revealed in a medieval icon – may be more fruitful. That is, one will have to help an image of Russia to reveal itself in full non-representational splendor next to us, just as an icon helps the divine world reveal itself in this world.

Lest this thesis sound even more mystical than the works of the obscure religious-philosophical minds that first invented the Russian Idea, I will now give some examples and articulate possible ways for reimagining Russia in the manner discussed above.

Russia as a configuration of practices.

Rather than trying to express the main essence of Russia in one single idea, one may better try analyzing Russia as a set of practices that Russians habitually follow in their everyday lives. Many of these practices were picked up or perfected through the universal system of Soviet secondary schooling, which turned peasants into Soviets no better and no worse than the educational system of the Third Republic turned peasants into Frenchmen.<sup>4</sup> On the margins of the Soviet system, of course, the pervasiveness of these practices might have been challenged by the persistence and recalcitrance of local religious practices, but to the extent that the Soviet system managed to bring up at least a couple of generations of outwardly atheist people, there were hardly many serious differences between, say, practices of self-cognition as employed by young people growing up in Yakutsk, Kazan', Tashkent or Leningrad during the last years of the Soviet regime.

This shared basis of everyday practices still allows to appeal to a certain commonality of something nebulous called either a Russian way of life or a Russian national character, notwithstanding serious splintering effects produced by re-awakenings in such regions as Tatarstan or Yakutiia. Given that the standard secondary schooling system persists all over the Russian Federation (the one notable change being an introduction of ethnic nation-centered history courses in some regions, taught, however, by means of the same old Soviet models and practices), there is still some foundation for perceiving the commonality of this way of life. Now, what is it?

My recent book on the origins of individualism in Soviet Russia allowed to draw some rather broad comparisons between the Russian and what may be termed West European, or -- more broadly -- Occidental cases, thus articulating a set of specifically Russian practices of social discipline and self-fashioning.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if one is willing to adopt the distinction between objectifying practices (the ways in which individual humans were made the objects of knowledge and action) and subjectifying practices (the ways in which individuals were made subjects who act and know) described in the works of Michel Foucault, one may formulate two broad comparative hypotheses.

The first hypothesis states that objectification of the individual in Russia relied on practices of mutual horizontal surveillance among peers, rather than on the hierarchical surveillance of subordinates by superiors that characterized the West.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

More precisely, this surveillance operated through three practices recommended by all books on canon law and by the New Testament from where this law sprang: revelation of sins, admonition to right behavior, and excommunication. Before 1917 these three practices were joined only on the margins of society, for example, in the operation of the ecclesiastical courts and in some monasteries arranged according to the statute of St. Joseph of Volokolamsk. After the revolution these practices pervaded almost every social body. As they spread far and wide, to be sure, these practices were also adapted to new aims or differently interpreted.

For example, discipline in mature Soviet society was enforced through heightened admonition, while the atrocities of the Great Terror in the 1930s happened in its absence, against the background of a direct merger of practices of revelation and of excommunication, unmediated by admonition, that is, contrary to what the New Testament would require. The irony of history, however, consists in the fact that this profound terror was linked to an attempt to install mutual surveillance to the fullest, that is, to transform the Party cell or the workers' collective into a group tied together precisely by admonition. The universal introduction of the gentle disciplinary means happened by means of the wildest bloodshed. Khrushchev merely completed the job started under Stalin when he ultimately helped admonition spread throughout the whole body social in the 1950s and 60s, and let it mediate the murderous coupling of revelation and excommunication.<sup>6</sup>

In a parallel development, the ancient Russian practice of revelation of sins was intensified and recast to reveal new objects: first, the revolutionary self of a Bolshevik and later the person of each Soviet individual. This practice was recast in that its publicizing aspect was first stressed equally with the heretofore prevalent accusatory aspect, while in the late Soviet days the accusatory element was radically de-emphasized. This brought about a specific Soviet kind of individual, formed in the public gaze of his or her peers, who evaluated this individual in the specific setting of the purge, or later, in some of its routinized versions, like the Party member's "individual report" or the Lenin Pass of a high school pupil.

The second hypothesis holds that Russian subjectifying practices were formed out of practices of self-knowledge characteristic of Eastern Christianity, that is, out of penitential practices rather than the confessional practices that constitute the background for self-knowledge in Western Christianity. To state this second

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<sup>6</sup> It seems that Russians would do better if they got rid of the age-old preoccupation with the famous questions "What is to be done?" and "Who is to blame?", especially when they are combined in the question "What is to be done concerning those who are to blame?" made possible by the murderous merging of revelation and excommunication practices. Perhaps, dissociating the practices that constitute the paradigmatic triad "reveal-admonish-excommunicate" and re-molding each separate element of this triad to suit new, different aims, might form other groupings of practices that could preclude the possibility of the reemergence of the deadly constellation of 1937.

comparison slightly differently, the Western individual was produced by confessing matters of sex, or by some parallel hermeneutic analysis of desire: by confessing to a priest, to a psychoanalyst, to a diary. By contrast, the Russian individual was produced by submitting to consideration by the relevant group that reviewed his or her morality, a procedure rooted in the practices of penance in the public gaze. If according to Foucault, Western man was born as a confessing animal, then the Soviet individual came into existence as a penitent beast.

In my further analysis of the Soviet techniques of self-fashioning I have relied on Foucault's discussion of the two potential technologies of the self inherent in early Christianity. The first one was "the truth technology of the self oriented toward the manifestation of the sinner,"<sup>7</sup> expressed in the early Christian rite of *exomologesis*: the truth about the sinner manifested itself in visible deeds. In Foucault's suggestive phrase, this penitential technology of self-knowledge expresses "the ontological temptation of Christianity," since being manifests itself directly without the mediation of words. The second technology of the self -- an expression of "the epistemological temptation of Christianity" -- was a different truth technology, which comprised "discursive and permanent analysis of thought." This confessional technology was an aspect of the early Christian practice of *exaugoresis*, which concerned itself with knowledge stated in words rather than with visible being. According to Foucault, the second technology eclipsed the first in Western Europe after some "conflicts and fluctuation." My book has come to a conclusion that a contrary development occurred in Russia: the first, penitential technology, survived and predominated in the Christian East.<sup>8</sup>

Soviet subjectifying practices -- like the Soviet objectifying practices based on mutual surveillance -- also included a series of components that were recast to suit new aims and were merged together in novel configurations. Before submitting oneself to the judgment of peers on the success of one's self-fashioning demonstrated in deeds, an individual could work on him- or herself primarily through the secular equivalent of Christian *imitatio Dei*, by choosing a personal hero and imitating this hero in everyday life. This Christian means of self-fashioning was amended, however, by its coupling with a secular technique of self-planning or self-programming, which was superimposed on hero identification following the doctrinal requirements of the Bolshevik discourse. Coupled together, self-programming and hero-identification,

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutic of the Self," *Political Theory* 21:2, May 1993, p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> This general preponderance of penitential over confessional practices of self-fashioning in Russian culture may somehow explain the general paucity of discursive articulations throughout centuries of Russian life and the concomitant preoccupation of Russian culture with direct manifestations of the truth of being without verbal mediation -- be it in visible deeds or in icons.

eventually judged by the relevant community, became the primary means of self-fashioning.

With the ritualization of life in Soviet official sphere, I have argued, the practices of hero identification and submitting one's morality to the judgment of the relevant community were transposed to the informal sphere of networks, subcultures and friendship. However, new means of self-fashioning also developed, characteristic only of this informal sphere. The first development was the spread of individual dissimulation, the practice protecting the individual from any interference, which resulted in the creation of a secret sphere of intimate life, available to the gaze of the closest friends or family members, but sometimes kept secret even from them. This proliferation of secret, intimate spheres, created and controlled only by the individual, prepared the way to the easy public assertion of the value of privacy after 1991.

The second means of informal self-fashioning was individualization through distinction in style or possessions. This individualization revealed the presence of a non-moral self, and thus was fought by both the official ideologists and the critical intelligentsia as "surrogate individualization." However, in debates over distinction through style a reconceptualization of self-fashioning occurred: instead of being a means to obtain a higher moral self, self-fashioning became an end in itself, a value cherished on its own. One may suggest that the concomitant spread of the practices of autonomous self-fashioning contributed to a preparation of the grounds for an easy and almost natural assertion of autonomy as one of the ultimate values of human existence in the post-1991 discourse.

## Conclusions

This set of formal and informal practices of self-fashioning and social discipline constitutes the generally shared (even if largely unnoticed) background of contemporary everyday life in the Russian Federation. Notwithstanding widespread experimentation with educational standards and forms, the majority of educational institutions in all eighty seven subject units of the Russian Federation are still more or less successfully transmitting this general set of practices. If a unifying image of Russia could be articulated now, it would surely rely on this shared non-problematic background of widespread cultural practices.

This paper, however, has strayed away from the initial demand for an iconic revelation of the image of Russia, and has supplied instead a verbal representation of practices that may serve as a foundation for this future articulation of an image. Of course, poetic rather than scientific skills are needed in order to produce a non-representational iconic image that will fill the lives of many ordinary Russians with

the light of this revealed image, thus highlighting multiple dimensions of a meaningful life in the world of shared practices that is Russia today. This task is beyond the reach of this paper indeed.