



## Changing minds, but not politics in Brezhnevs time



Hans-Heinrich Nolte

Universitätsprofessor für Osteuropäische Geschichte, Leibniz-Universität Hannover, im Ruhestand (i.R.), Bullerbachstr. 12, D-30890 Barsinghausen, Germany

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### ABSTRACT

To get a broad picture of the changes of minds and attitudes during the last decades of the Soviet Union contemporary western research on professional and other indirect groups is offering some material. Thesis is, that although the political system did not allow open discussions using hard facts considerable differences of opinions are documented in the Soviet media. The indirect groups though communicating in these media did not have a chance for a transition to preparliamentary organisations within the Soviet system (raising by comparison the question, whether such transitions will work in other Communist countries).

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### 1. The narrative “the intelligentsia against communism”

The intellectual history of the Brezhnev-Period mostly has been written as history of a relatively small and locally focussed minority, the “intelligentsia” fighting against Communism and the Bolshevik state. Dietrich Beyrau has described this history as “selfemancipation within a society characterised by force”.<sup>1</sup> Beyrau followed mainly the causes célèbres from Pasternak’s Dr. Zhivago to Solzhenicyn’s Archipel Gulag and in that context the development of

“informal communities of solidarity and mind” within the intelligentsia.<sup>2</sup> Alexei Yurchak followed the same narrative of the intelligentsia from Stalin to Gorbachev, emphasising the virtuality of their intellectual world, in which constructs of mind claimed an eternal appearance, as if they were forever – only to vanish completely following 1990.<sup>3</sup> Vladislav Zubok focussed on the years following the (Non-)publication of Dr. Zhivago and Pasternak’s funeral 1960.<sup>4</sup> He gives an especially vivid account of one of the main localities, the obshezhitie, where half a dozen or more students were living together in one room. His catchword for groups in the intellectual milieu is “company”.<sup>5</sup> Zubok characterises intelligentsia as Anti-Bolshevik from the very beginning of the Soviet Union. That is turning the classical interpretation upside down – classically Socialism was seen as part of the Russian intelligentsia, or as Peter Struve even put it 1909: “Up to the

E-mail address: [CNolteVGWS@aol.com](mailto:CNolteVGWS@aol.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Beyrau, *Intelligenz* 156–255, chapter “Selbstbefreiung im Zwangsstaat”.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 197: “informelle Gesinnungs und Solidargemeinschaften”.

<sup>3</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

<sup>4</sup> Zubok: *Zhivago’s Children*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–51.

reception of socialism there existed no Russian intelligentsia, there only was an <educated class> and different directions within that”.<sup>6</sup>

In my understanding the victory of the Bolsheviks – a party led by intellectuals in 1917 – has to be analysed within “the writings and ideas that have helped to shape the social and political consciousness of modern Russia”.<sup>7</sup> It would be inconsistent to emphasise the influence Russian intellectuals had on Russia and the modern world in general,<sup>8</sup> while excluding Bolshevism from the intelligentsia – the world has taken interest in the history of the Russian intelligentsia mainly because it was seen as one of the roots of the revolutions of 1917 and the global role, the Soviet Union played for some decades, most of all between the defeat of Germany in 1945 and the breakup of the Union in 1991.

The narrative “the intelligentsia against the state”, or against Communism is not wrong, and it is corresponding to many facts offered by the narrators. It is telling though, that the research, which in the 1960s and 1970s was conducted on the intellectual histories of more middle of the road Soviet people like professional groups, does not appear in the lists of literature, which Beyrau and Yurchak offer. Or, to put it shortly – following this narrative it is difficult to tell the whole story. Stephan Merl<sup>9</sup> has questioned recently, whether we really understand much of modern dictatorships, if we interpret them purely as quelling of a population, which we presume to be freedom-loving right from the start, maybe by their nature (or even by their “Wesen”). History does seem to be more complicated, than the narrative of the intelligentsia against communism implies. Obviously some dictatorships are capable to communicate with considerable parts of “their” people. The concepts, which these people develop and put forward, and sometimes the feelings of bargaining-power in the face of the powerful even may turn out as illusions. But communication there was, and starting changes of mind are discernable. This new interest in communication in dictatorships is inviting to recall some of the research done in the 1970s on the less outstanding groups of Soviet society than the intelligentsia was.

## 2. Notes from the inner circle of the party

Reading literary texts like Dr. Zhivago or highly sophisticated ones like some Medvedevs “Truth is our strength” might obscure the fact, that many arguments against the powerful were simple. The risk to call crimes by their names was great for a Soviet poet and could really be deadly for a common person. But powerful Party-Members used, under circumstances, language common to all of us and called a misjudgement a failure and a willfull killing barbarious. Within the Communist Party itself, within the organisation of perpetrators many were aware, that the masscrimes

committed were monstrous and the resources spent without rationality were enormous. Differing to my knowledge from NS-Texts, within the inner circle they did not camouflage these crimes but called them by name.<sup>10</sup>

For instance in the meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU (TsCP) of January 30th. and February 1st. 1956, where the “secret speech” of Chrushev on the 20th. Party.convention was discussed beforehand, positions varied between Molotov and Kaganovich and the Secretary General (Gensek) and Mikojan. The first insisted, that in his speech the Gensek should point out, that Stalin’s leadership brought socialism, while the Gensek emphasised, that Stalin was “using most barbarious means, destroyed the Party and was no Marxist”.<sup>11</sup> Comparably on May 26th. 1961, where the meeting of Kennedy and Chrushev in Vienna scheduled for June was prepared, the Gensek upheld the position, that in the West “in my opinion the social powergroups are rising and that there will be no war”, while Mikojan countered “in my opinion, they might start military measures without using Atomic warfare”.<sup>12</sup>

Similar in the meeting of the Presidium of the Tsentral Committee of October 13th. 1964,<sup>13</sup> during which Chruschevs term as secretary was ended, we find quite differing but mostly plain language arguments. Besides Chrushev and Brezhnev 15 members took the floor with a longer statement. Some of the arguments were repeatedly used, others not. For instance almost all agreed, that Chruschevs political stile had led to a new personality-cult around him. Mzhavadnadze from Georgia put it simply – you think, “everything is allowed to you”, Voronov put it as a replica of Chruschevs criticism of Stalin – “a new personality-cult”; Suslov coined more theoretically as “violation of Lenins principles of political leadership”. Shelest’ from the Ukraine made that point quite explicitly. Many criticised, that Chrushev had weakened the role of the party, governed by “zapiski” and not argued his decisions collectively. Five criticised Chruschevs campaign against the production-managements – Shelest’, Voronov, Efremov, Grishin and Rashhidov – four of these were party-workers from districts with heavy industries – Ukraine, Ourals, Kursk and Moscow. Five criticised the plans to divide obkomy and rajkomy – Shelest’, Voronov, Mzhavadnadze from Georgia, Mikojan and Rashhidov. Four criticised Chrushev for using family-ties in politics, three the lack of care for military technology – Voronov from Chelyabinsk, Kosygin and Podgornyj. Two attacked the housing-problems, but Shelest’ was the only one to satirically point to the loss of power of the republics: “responsibility and rights of the republics: there is responsibility, but no rights”. Many criticised the agrarian politics, Shelepin as “merrygoround”, but only

<sup>6</sup> Struve, *Intelligentsia i revoliutsiia*, 151. For the change of many intellectuals against Marxism before 1917 – see Smirnov, *Ot marksizma k idealizmu*.

<sup>7</sup> Raeff *Anthology*, 66 (introduction).

<sup>8</sup> Malia, *Intelligentsia?*

<sup>9</sup> Merl: *Kommunikation in der Diktatur*.

<sup>10</sup> Used to reading the camouflaged talk of NS-perpetrators of masscrimes this struck me as a difference. The latter talk of “Aktion”, “Aus-siedlung”, “Umsiedlung” “Evakuierung” etc. when talking about genocide; see Longerich, *Ermordung*. The propaganda in the occupied territories of the SU differed and was in some nationalistic publications more plainspoken, see Alt’man, *Zhertvy nenavisti*. 49–54.

<sup>11</sup> Fursenko, *Presidium CK*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 862–872.

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