

*Henry Dicks*

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## Notes on the Russian National Character\*

This chapter is a condensed restatement of some conclusions arrived at by the writer on the strength of intensive interviews with Soviet defectors (Dicks, 1952) revised in the light of later work by others and of reading some relevant Russian authors of the period under review. Since there has to be some pruning in such a large theme, this essay is almost entirely about the peasantry. Bearers of power in the Soviet Union are largely the children of Great Russian peasants, or the urban working class, many of whom have retained a close connection with their peasant background.

It may be desirable first to summarize the general conceptual framework within which I approached the interviews with Russian defectors. Some familiarity of the reader with psychoanalytic terms will be assumed.

Personal data and literary products can be used by a skilled psychiatric observer and interviewer working with psychoanalytic concepts for making inferences about deeper attitudes and motivations. For present purposes the analyst has only to vary his focus from what is idiosyncratic for individuals to what is *recurrent* in material from his sources.

By such means there can be defined a *modal character* which is shared by representatives of a given national cultural group over and above subgroup differences. It is this modal configuration of traits of behavior which I mean when speaking of "national character." Within the context of this volume's theme of transformation, I shall be interested in exploring what variation this basic configuration has undergone, and where it shows itself as still a live factor in my interpretation of the contemporary Russian scene.

So far the psychiatrist is in his own field—the motivations of individual behavior. Some extrapolations will also be made from personality study into the sphere of sociopolitical behavior, and these rest on more debatable conceptual ground. The writer is aware that the description of the functioning of a

\*A reproduction of the original in C.E. Black (Editor), *The Transformation of Russian Society: Aspects of Social Change Since 1861*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960.

society demands not only insight into the personalities of an adequate sample of members of that society, but also needs to consider historical, economic and similar factors. To this extent this paper is only *one* strand in a canvas woven by several disciplines, and it should not be assigned more status than its modest title of "some notes." There is, however, one crucial aspect of personality psychology inseparable from the interpretation of social behavior. This is the area of attitude to authority.

It is here assumed that the kind of experience a child has in authority relations within the primary family group will be internalized to form the basis of his later expectations as to how the role of power-bearer and of subordinate, of leader and of led, will be played in the wider social group. I assume further that a given culture rests on an internalized and more or less unconscious system of mental images or models for the regulation and channeling of psychological needs of individuals and for signaling what is sanctioned and approved, or forbidden and punished. The way authority roles are exercised within a society sharing such an internalized unconscious system will be conditioned by the qualities of this system—including its rigidities and irrationalities based on the culture "myth" concerning human nature. The main mental mechanisms involved in transferring the internal system of the members to the interpretation of their external world are those of displacement and substitution, and of projection and identification. It is precisely this shared regulation of biopsychological need systems and authority relations which imparts to a culture its distinctive modal characteristics.

Though some of my earlier conclusions have changed while thinking about the question at hand, my main concepts about the source of the authority problem in Russians do not seem controverted by any subsequent observations or reading.

The procedure will be followed of describing first some of the more fundamental characteristics of Russian behavior and relating them to the primary family group. This is the psychiatrist's proper sphere. Next there will be included some interpretations about the motivations of wider social behavior by reference to primary object relations. It is hoped that by stressing the nature of the primary processes we may be able to form estimates as to the depth and degree of irrationality behind some of the secondary social processes.

In 1952 my account of the modal Russian personality stressed ambivalence as the outstanding trait. Ambivalence as such is a universal characteristic of human beings. It is the manner in which this ambivalence is manifested and countered or disposed of which provides a key to the interpretation of Russian character. It is seen to oscillate in large swings of mood in relation to self, to primary love objects, and to out-groups. The quality of these swings is most

readily understood in terms of oral need satisfactions or deprivations. At one end there is the “omnivorousness,” the lusty greed and zest for life, the tendency to rush at things and “swallow them whole”; the need for quick and full gratification; the spells of manic omnipotence feeling and optimistic belief in unlimited achievement; the overflowing vitality, spontaneity and anarchic demand for abolition of all bounds and limitations to giving and receiving.

At the other end of the spectrum there is melancholy, dreary apathy; frugality; meanness and suspicion of universal hostility; anxious and sullen submissiveness; self-depreciation and moral masochism, together with a grudging admission of the necessity for a depriving and arbitrary authority, thought of as the only safeguard against the excesses of Russian nature. In this mood we find a diffuse guilt feeling, a capacity for subtle empathy, and a ruminative self-doubt and self-torment. Outward servility and secret obstinacy coexist, as if one could bend the knee to Caesar in outward conformity and yet inwardly remain wholly on the side of God before whom all men are equally small and fallible. Nothing is so persistent in the Russian as a sense of moral outrage (*izdevatel'stvo*)—that ubiquitous feeling of guilt and shame at injustice and a sensitiveness about whom to trust not to hurt one. The Russian can vary between feeling that he or she is no good or superior to all the rest of mankind. One can concede another's social status and at the same time be consumed with envy of superior wealth.

Whether in Bacchanalian mood or in depression, Russians always need direct, spontaneous, heart-to-heart contact and communication, a sense of being loved and belonging, and they respect that need in others. They love the fun of teamwork which goes with a swing and a song, and a total investment of strength and feeling. They understand commands and obedience. But they are distressed by distant hauteur, formalism and bureaucratic protocol and hierarchy, preferring direct informal leadership and spontaneous improvisation to methodical procedure in tackling difficulties. Elaborate hierarchy troubles them, as does any kind of rigidly and uniformly controlled activity.

A word should be added about what is connoted by unconscious oral needs and phantasies which to the writer appear to play such a large part in the Russian character. It is at primitive oral levels of human development (at the stage of the baby up to a year or so in age) that objects can be only partly distinguished in terms of self and not-self, and ego is not yet clearly demarcated. The contrast between objects felt to be “good” and “bad” is extreme, according to whether they gratify or deprive. At the oral level also there is an almost total separation between the attribution of loving and destructive powers to the self and to the external objects on whom this primitive dichotomy is projected. This concept helps us to understand the deeply embedded feeling that there are inscrutable remote and uncontrollable powers who can do what

they like, which is part of the tacit assumption of Russians about the world. To this type of feeling we give the name paranoid because of its domination of the mind in mental disorders of that category. This ties in with Margaret Mead's statement that "friends could behave like enemies" and then like friends again (see below). As examples of the break-in of oral level phantasy from my interviews, the following may suffice: grandmothers threaten children that they must keep their mouths shut because the devil who is ever lurking near will get in through the mouth, or smash the child's teeth and gain possession; "blood-sucker," "man-eater," hyena and such are standard epithets for capitalist enemies as well as Soviet oppressors. Here the bad objects are *outside* the self.

We also begin to understand the frequent appearance in Russian myth and self-appraisal of feelings of omnipotence, of a giantlike strength—even of infants—against which strong measures of constraint and control have to be taken. As Gorer and Rickman (1949) pointed out, Russian women swaddle their children because they believe that, left unconstrained with their uncontrolled strength, they will injure themselves. The peasant Khor's personality moved Turgenev to write about Peter the Great that he was a typical Russian, "so confident in his strength and power that he is not averse to breaking himself." The Russian word for "break" is *lomat'* and this carries the meaning of extreme exertion, as in the English "breaking one's neck" (to achieve a goal). Here the dangerous powers are located *inside*. This is the other side of paranoid feeling, more often experienced as a sense of anxiety or guilt.

About the same time as my study Margaret Mead (1951) wrote:

In this traditional [Russian] character, thought and action were so interchangeable, that there was a tendency for all effort to dissipate itself in talk or in symbolic behavior. While there was a strong emphasis on the need for certain kinds of control . . . this control was seen as imposed from without; lacking it, the individual would revert to an original impulsive and uncontrolled state. Those forms of behavior which involved self-control rather than endurance, measurement rather than unstinted giving or taking, and calculation rather than immediate response to a situation, were extremely undeveloped. The distinctions between the individual and the group and between the self and others were also less emphasized than in the West, while the organization of the *mir*, the large, extended families and religious and social rituals stressed confession and complete revelation of self to others and the merging of the individual in the group. . . .

Traditional Russian character assumed the co-existence of both good and evil in all individuals, and, in attitudes towards individuals, an expectation that friends could behave like enemies was combined with an expectation that this behavior could also be reversed—by confession, repentance and restoration of the former state. . . . Little distinction was made between thought and deed, between the desire to murder and the murder itself. All men were held to be

guilty, in some degree, of all human crimes. Against this lack of distinction between thought and deed there was a strong emphasis upon distinction among persons, on a purely social basis, an intolerance of any ambiguity between superiors and subordinates. This rigidity in matters of deference and precedence, however, was relieved by a strong countertendency to establish complete equality among all human souls and to wipe out all social distinctions.

While this may be said to outline one end of the spectrum of the Russian modal personality as it is revealed both in literature and by my interviews, the behavioral characteristics here described are in great contrast to the other end of the scale—the expected role behavior of the elite. Although this is particularly true of the Communist Party elite, it may also be said to have been the role of pre-Communist authorities since Peter I, at least, to educate and force this modal-character structure toward a higher level of mastery over primitive impulses, to catch up with the West. The Communist revolution is sometimes compared to Russia's passing through the puritan phase of development, and there are grounds for making this comparison. The germs of puritan attitudes were discernible in Russia despite all that was stated above. Religious asceticism existed in Russia for centuries, for example, among the Old Believers. There was also a rather uncritical swallowing of Western scientific rationalism once it penetrated to the intelligentsia—typical of the Russians' immoderation in what they do. The "New Man" in Soviet psychology is he who overcomes his anarchic spontaneity in favor of leaderlike abstinence from immediate impulse gratification; he who suppresses sentiment and private feeling through systematic thought and planned purposeful activity in wholehearted pursuit of the party line. Virtue and charisma are attached by the culture to those who show this rational mastery over impulse and greed as against mere passive capacity to endure deprivation. This contrast between the modal mass character and the puritan prescription for elite behavior has been one of the abiding tensions in Russian society, part of that sense of the alien and remote character of elites which forms at once their claim to veneration and their incurring of highly ambivalent resentment. Dudintsev, in *Not by Bread Alone*, has a cynical party bureaucrat, Drozdov, say this to his wife: "Touch me where you like, you will always find a living, tender, sensitive spot. That's why I need armour like a snail . . . my strong will . . . not a bad thing for a man . . . holds him in check."

This is the sacrifice of modal Russian character which a man who climbs the party ladder to success has to make. This, indeed, is what I have called in psychoanalytic terms the oral-anal conflict in the Russian character. It need not be assumed from my emphasis on this polarization that there are not, or will not be, intermediate positions; nor that the educational efforts and the economic changes in the Soviet Union will not produce an approximation to personalities

more typical of an industrial society. The conflict, however, goes on both within the culture and within individuals who share in it. Such a conflict is much less settled than in Western European society.

It is in the context of these basic traits, including beliefs about the deeper nature of the child and about what is hidden in mankind, that we should look at the relationships in the primary social and economic unit of rural Russia—the peasant family as it existed on countless small holdings and, from available evidence, as it still exists today. It is typically a patriarchal family of grandfather and grandmother with their sons, wives and children, as well as any unmarried daughters and sons, living incredibly close together, farming the holding by joint labor. There is little privacy and the children participate in all that goes on in this living space. At the head of the household the child perceives a composite authority figure, a blend of both grandparents, of which one is the almost wholly awe-inspiring and arbitrary father-figure, shouting commands from his seat of power on the stove or at the head of the table. The other is an equally unpredictable, on the whole indulgent but also nagging and dominant, mother-figure, who inculcates prayer and demonology. Both claim divine sanction for their right to rule and chastise all their dependents, adults and children alike, and they are also the prescribed objects of love and pious duty. (One cannot help making the analogies: tsar and church, state and party.)

The typical prevailing feeling of terrified reverence for authority is best denoted by the Russian word *strakh*. In the family setting its presence leads to the phenomenon of marked duplicity in behavior. On the one hand, there is an astonishing degree of priggish, dutiful lip service and subjection to the grandfather; on the other hand, in his absence, something not far short of conspiracy of the adult sons against their father. This ambivalence is well described by Gladkov (1949) speaking of his father's relation during his childhood to the grandfather: "He nourished in himself a constant resentment against grandfather. . . . He bore himself with contempt toward grandfather in his absence, but to his face he expressed devotion and unconditional subordination."

Periodically there occur violent outbursts against the authority of the grandfather by the grown-up sons in fits of sudden desperation, more often than not terminated by remorseful and self-humiliating contrition (such as prostration at his feet) and begging for forgiveness. The motive ascribed to these revolts is the sons' wish for freedom to leave home because the old man will not make over to them their independent plot of land, their inheritance. But it is also moral outrage and hurt dignity as a result of his tyranny. It is no accident that parricide forms such a prominent theme in Russian literature. The child's own image of immediate adults is of people subject to higher authority and filled with ambivalent resentment and submissive love for the authority figure. A

little later he learns that even grandfather is but a serf and can be bullied and humiliated by his *barin* (landowner, lord) or the police. There is indeed a series of infinite regress, leading via grandfather to the *barin* and so to the tsar and to God.

A correlate of this situation is the frequency with which the sons identify themselves with grandfather's arbitrary power and play their own role in due course in a like manner. Aggression passes down the echelon of the family structure: the grandmother, herself under her husband's heel, coerces and torments her daughters-in-law; the adult sons assert their status and dignity by beating or bullying their wives, children or younger brothers. Lowest in rank order is the daughter-in-law, as a "stranger." At all levels of this group, obedience is exacted by beating, threats of expulsion from the homestead and invocation of terrible sanctions based on a near-medieval religious and demonological system of beliefs, followed by contrition, tears and forgiveness. Emotion of every kind flows fully and unrestrainedly in comparison to, say, a nineteenth-century English family.

In sum, the typical childhood of a Russian peasant, including many a prominent Russian now in his prime, was spent in helpless participation in scenes of his elders' crude emotional oscillations between tenderness and brutality. He received an ambivalent perception of his own father as strong and good as well as cowardly and weak, his mother (grandparents' daughter-in-law) as lovable but despised, and himself as powerless and dependent. A rich if chaotic inner world of emotional potentials is thus created. The experience also develops a capacity to tolerate silently the most contradictory and powerful emotions. The nature of the identifications made is highly paradoxical. The little boy will tend to idealize and to identify himself in part with the victim position—with the tender, persecuted, suffering mother. There is evidence that this theme is later elaborated into the hero fantasy of rescuing the oppressed, suffering mother-figure. For example, the fairy tale of the prince who delivers the maiden from the evil sorcerer, Koshchei "The Immortal" (cf. "Firebird"). Such motivations are also one source of fervent love of the mother-country. It was remarkable how often my interviewees expressed the postwar state of Russia in terms of their "starving, neglected mother." But it makes for a kind of despair about weak, tender emotions which can never lead to happy endings. These are covered only by a defensive identification with the power and cruelty of the male line, by repression of the inner "mother's boy" in favor of rugged, swaggering "masculine" behavior. The mother-figure is treated with sadistic contempt in fantasy—for instance, the unprintable standard oath of Russian men—and also revered, pitied and idealized. Girls will harbor much hostility toward men and rebellion against the marital role as a fate not much worse than death. Love is always tragic in Russia. The strong, independent woman is admired.

The young child receives a good deal of spoiling, praise and love from the *babushka*, from aunts and neighboring women, and a special kind of intimate, almost forbidden, love from his own mother who scarcely dares show she is human. All these female figures, except perhaps the tragic mother, convey a sense of support and shield the child from the excess of paternal wrath. The boy's emotional reward comes when he feels he is considered strong, a good little helper, an eager student, and above all obedient and quiet. From this source we may visualize arising some typical attitudes toward good citizenship behavior in present Russian society.

Lastly there is also a strongly marked motive to escape from the tyranny and oppression toward a distant beckoning land of freedom, equality and opportunity, where one can be one's own master and lead one's own life. This may have its sources in the oedipal feelings about the mother. The tight control of the kinship group by the patriarch, no less than the experience of swaddling in infancy, may be more reasons for the need for more space, more elbowroom (*prostor*), by which the Russians are driven despite the size of their territory. Qualities which may be expected to persist, and are indeed seen to be modal, are a high degree of *strakh*, a duplicity of behavior which combines a certain priggish eager-beaver subordination with a capacity for impassive absorption of humiliation and indignity, together with a smoldering sensitiveness and vindictive revolt in quick sympathy with the underdog against the authority that perpetuates these insults. This *strakh* has nothing to do with cowardice in external danger, but with a kind of awe given to authority-bearers. An example is the poor fellow Suchok, in Turgenev, who was more afraid of the barin than of drowning when his boat sank.

The economic situation of most peasants ensured that the Russian learned to live on very little. But this itself, together with the fitful indulgences by the mother-figures of childhood, may partly account for the undoubted longing for softness and tenderness and fat living as a basic motif. This is very directly expressed at the most typical end of the scale, and is strongly counteracted in the authoritarian leader sort of person. Periods of joy and happiness occur when the child sees his elders in merry harmonious teamwork at harvest time for the common purpose; and at festival times when, relaxed and all status forgotten, they feast and dance together, full of warmth and generosity. At the peasant level, it is this nature-imposed rhythm and economic necessity which exacts the discipline, not any principle or consistent handling by humans, which modally is fitful and arbitrary as well as contradictory.

The March 1917 revolution was made by the heirs of the epoch just sketched against authorities essentially unchanged for centuries. It was a revolt against intolerable conditions as were all the desperate anarchic spontaneous mass

risings which ineffectively preceded it. There followed a brief honeymoon *à la Russe*—a spate of egalitarian sentiment and talking in town and village meetings, and of possession of land taken from the murdered father-figures. The authorities whom the Russians had thrown off had been weak and ineffective, men, though remote in status, too much like themselves: unorganized, lazy, greedy. Into the power vacuum stepped Lenin and his coterie of exiles, with an appeal which was thoroughly culture-congenial: a father speaking in angry peasant tones yet in the terms of Western science, promising bread and land and revenge on oppressors, a severe order and a material plenty. It would be interesting to attempt, however imperfectly, an analysis of the psychological vicissitudes of authority relations with this peasant character, of their mutual interaction, during the last eighty or ninety years.

During Turgenev's time the established order was a unity and could be taken for granted by both him and his characters. As a barin himself, he could naively describe his wonderment at the human qualities he discovers among his peasants: how wise and shrewd the old men; how tender the muzhik in his friendship and how like the barins in his veneration of order. In brief, during the Victorian era there is no difficulty in transposing our concepts from the family to the social scene, except for that tiny top crust—the French-speaking upper aristocracy, almost entirely alien to their own lower orders. The peasants viewed the “infinite regress of authorities,” to which allusion was made above, much as sons viewed fathers and grandfathers, with *strakh* and duplicity, but with an understanding of their authoritarian ferocities and a use of the same methods of propitiation and self-abasement toward them that they expected to receive from their own dependents. These traits were so ingrained that they persisted into the writer's own recollection of peasant behavior in the early 1900s. Serfdom seemed like a safe order, a knowing where one stood. The barin, the village mayor (*starosta*) and the county police were near to their “children.” Their impact was personal and their *izdevatel'stvo* was often linked with tenderness and paternalism. The bad object that deprived could be projected into a blurred distant “They,” but was also attributed to one's own sinfulness.

As serfdom is abolished there always comes a loosening of the bonds of pious tradition, felt by the older peasants as a dangerous loss of security. For what happened to the barin begins to happen to the elder's own authority over his sons. The predicament is touchingly presented by Gladkov (1949) whose grandfather's family were Old Believers and anticlerical. In a scene in which the eldest son tells his father that times have changed and he feels free to leave home where there is no land. The old man, in an effort to preserve his hold over his son, bursts out:

We are the servants of God. We are *krest'iane* [peasants; *krest* means cross].  
From olden times we bear the labor of the cross; but never the slaves of Anti-

Christ and his angels, of priests or of German [the Russian is *nemetskii*, meaning “foreigner” in general and German in particular] authority, of heretics who smoke tobacco, of shaven men with their tinsel and badges. You young have no freedom nor sense but what comes from the elders. In them alone is order and firmness of life.

This quotation illuminates the complex feelings of the peasant in the 1890s. There is his own identification with due authority and fear of anarchy of the young. At the same time, there is total hostility to what are felt to be *alien*, bureaucratic, newfangled secular authorities and their hirelings—the clergy. Gladkov’s book might have been satirizing the incursion of the Communists into the life of the village. Equally, that plea could have belonged to the era of Peter the Great. Long suffering and hard fate are transfigured by the sanction of the Cross which gives the dignity of moral principle both to humility and to obstinacy.

After the reforms of the 1860s, secularization evolved along with industrialization and social mobility. The almost mythical freedom and opportunity of factory work lures the emancipated landless sons to the cities. They take with them their ambivalent expectations of oppression and of boundless hope. They already have a conviction that the urban dweller (*fabrichnyi chelovek*) is a smarter fellow than they. They find nothing reassuring in labor conditions which exploit and deprive, without the compensation of paternal affection. Gorky was the finest painter of these conditions. Crafty townsmen and kulaks multiply in the countryside and batten on the average peasant no less than on his barin. They are hated as “man-eaters” and “fat men.” We still read of religious resignation, in Gladkov, for instance, as a valued form of defense against mounting despair and envious resentment. Peasant-saints, ambivalently preaching love and self-surrender but also calling for the repentance of the oppressors, seem ubiquitous and revered by the population just as the people of India revere their holy men.

Another attitude is so typical that it requires mention. Gladkov describes the scene of arrival of the police inspector in his native village for the supervision of rent and debt collection. When his carriage appears, the whole population berates its children, pushes the wives around and flogs its horses—even the chickens scatter. This behavior means: “Look, we are calling our dependents to order to show due reverence.” But it also means: “Scatter, for the Antichrist is riding among us. *We*, the heads of families, show *strakh*, but see how we can control all this undisciplined rabble.” In miniature, here is the quintessence of modal Russian authority feelings as felt by the underlings: hate of the policemen who come to support and protect the exploiters—the barin and his bailiff; eagerness to show one’s siding with authority by displacing the resentment down to “stupid, unruly women and children,” who must be made to toe the

line and punished. Scenes with similar meaning were reported to me by the defectors I interviewed, and I have also witnessed such things personally. The police or the mayor could not be seen instrumentally—only as total enemies. Some of this is, doubtless, more of a feudal than a specific Russian trait.

Closely related is the culturally prevalent mechanism of self-undoing. Caught in hopeless impotent revolt against the all-powerful creditor or oppressor, resignation and passivity fail, and smoldering hate turns against the self and its good objects. This well-documented behavior pattern of Russian life, widespread in all classes, usually takes the form of depressive apathy, neglect or desertion of work and family, wife and child beating, bouts of desperate, reckless drinking. Both observer and subject usually have insight that this is a symbolic attack on the authorities. In my more recent interview material there were many examples of this “throwing in the sponge,” of “making of one’s own ruin a stick to beat the authorities with.” It is like Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, who makes a total mad protest by murder, equivalent to suicide, accusing and expiating at one and the same time the guilt of the evil dominating persecutor with whom he also feels at one.

Scenes like those reported during the collectivization of farms under Stalin, when peasants destroyed crops and livestock rather than hand them over, knowing they would be shot or deported, occurred often during prerevolutionary days at impoundings of property for debt. Behavior under MVD interrogation as described by my interviewees followed the same pattern: “Do what you like—I am through.” “All right—kill me then,” and so on.

The Soviet masters of Russia with Lenin at their head have given convincing evidence of both their Russian-ness and their hate of Russian-ness in the above sense. Psychologically we may think of them as a conspiratorial band of determined parricides who were able to catalyze the release of endless paranoid hate of Russians for the bad inner authority figure; to sanction cathartic revenge against ever-present scapegoats, and so to free also the lusty, constructive omnipotence feelings. It was a psycho-catharsis on the grand scale. But how to ride this storm of anarchic, savage hate that accompanied the constructive energy? The Bolsheviks’ Russian-ness was demonstrated by their wholesale, uncompromising acceptance of Western patterns of socialism but with their paranoid lack of discrimination of finer shades between black and white, by their belief that nothing was impossible, by their magical faith in the entirely scientific rational nature of their system, supplanting the sense of mission of orthodox Russian Christianity, ever watchful of the least error which would enable “the devil to get in.” It was thus consonant with the deepest modal phantasies that before long they re-established the persistent authority model inherent in the Russian mind: an absolute power which is the sole repository of Truth and which cannot be questioned or deviated from. This restoration was well on its way by 1928 and completed during the purges and by the reintroduc-