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The Role of the Intelligentsia in the Collapse of the USSR: Soviet Intellectuals and the Idea of the West

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THE ROLE OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA IN THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR:
SOVIET INTELLECTUALS AND THE IDEA OF THE WEST

by

ALMA BOLTIRIK

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Role of the Intelligentsia in the Collapse of the USSR: Soviet Intellectuals and the Idea of the West

by

Alma Boltirik

Advisor: Karen Miller

A lot of scholars wrote about the causes of the system's collapse, paying close attention to economic, social, political, institutional, and external forces which are undoubtedly important, and I will certainly touch upon those in my thesis. Yet, almost none of them sufficiently addresses the essential cultural and ideological aspects which gave rise to the new thinking embraced by Gorbachev and ultimately influenced his policies of glasnost and perestroika. I will demonstrate that the revival of a particular social stratum known as the Soviet intelligentsia, developed new critical ways of thinking about the country's present, future and its domestic problems. My claim is that the process of cultural thaw, which can be traced back to the 1960s, a period marked as post-Stalin epoch, allowed for the spread of new ideas, liberalization of thought and subsequent development of new thinking that eventually influenced transformation of the Soviet political, social, economic, and cultural paths. I will focus on the nature of this new thinking shared among the writers and scientists, historians and economists, cinematographers and political activists. This Soviet intelligentsia disdained the Leninist-Stalinist ideology of a world built on a set of binaries and isolationism and preferred liberal priorities over socialist ideals. Furthermore, I closely examine the social position of the intelligentsia within the communist societal structure and provide an explanation of why the Soviet intellectuals are considered as a stratum rather than a class, an intermediary between the complex superstructures of the society.

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War marked by the collapse of the largest communist bloc became a surprising event for academia, policy makers, politicians and diplomats. But what exactly did collapse in the process of the Soviet Union's disintegration and what does it mean for the international world order in the long term? In searching for the answers to these questions, we should first briefly examine the genealogy of the current world dominance of neoliberalism in the context of the Soviet Union's collapse. The disintegration of the so-called "communist" states followed by their rapid adoption of free market economies and massive privatization opened an opportunity for neoliberalism to achieve global hegemony and enabled scholars like Francis Fukuyama to solemnly proclaim its ultimate victory and the "end of history." As a result of the American victory in the Cold War, discourse on any viable alternatives with the exception of the dominant neoliberal narrative was excluded from the public debate. Thus after the collapse of the Soviet bloc neoliberalism triumphed not only as a feasible development strategy but as the "Washington consensus" presumably being the only possible economic reform and "TINA" (There Is No Alternative) as the universal axiom of the nineties.

After the rapid demise of the system, Soviet scholars as well as Western academics began searching for causes of this unexpected historic turn. Some of them stressed the significance of economic stagnation and saw the collapse as a late retreat of an anachronistic bankrupt nation state (Aslund, 2007; Kotkin, 2001; Orłowski, 1992). The majority of Russian historians tend to blame Gorbachev's reforms of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) considering them as primary causes that weakened the power of the communist party, brought democratization and loosened the state apparatus in general (Karamurza, 2015; Medvedev, 2008). Other analysts focused on specific events that in their opinion demonstrated the inability of the system to continue its existence, such as the coup d'état against Gorbachev in August 1991, which was led by high-rank officials from the communist

party and KGB in order to save the old totalitarian system (Yanaev, 2010). In fact, by stressing the importance of this action, scholars interested in event-oriented causes point out that the August coup attempt denoted decline in Gorbachev's power and failure of perestroika, which in turn, solidified the ongoing collapse of the Soviet system. However, I shall argue that the August coup demonstrated the inability of the system to exist not because of the failure of perestroika, but because this event showed the people's rejection of the communist ideology, and thus the relative success of glasnost. In fact, the Soviet people resisted the conservative coup by surrounding the Russian Parliament forming a strong opposition consisted of thousands of Muscovites, since they did not want to return to the old totalitarian state. The Soviets enjoyed freedom of speech, the ability to freely practice cultural production and interpretation, determine what to watch and what kinds of books to read, and all of this was enabled by glasnost.

On the other hand, in searching for the explanations for this historic turn, we obviously cannot disregard the significance of the economic decline or other domestic problems surrounding the crumbling empire. Overall, there are too many variables in the process of the Soviet Union's endgame and the collapse of the largest communist system had many causes both external and internal. On the other hand, even though each of the explanations for the Cold War's end that I mention above stresses some critical aspects of the process, none of them sufficiently takes into account how cultural shifts helped to facilitate the collapse. Focusing on the Soviet crisis at home or its diminishing power abroad as a result of economic factors underestimates the impact of the new thinking and the role of intellectuals that ultimately became a major driving force behind Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika. Therefore, based on a set of primary sources exemplified by some literary texts and films created by the Soviet intelligentsia between the 1960s and 1980s, I will demonstrate that the revival of this social stratum developed new critical ways of understanding the country's

present and future along with the domestic problems that affected everyone in the USSR and paved the way to changes.

My main argument is that the process of cultural thaw which can be traced back to 1960s, a period marked as post-Stalin epoch, allowed for the spread of new ideas, the liberalization of thought, and the subsequent development of new thinking that eventually influenced transformation of the Soviet political, social, economic, and cultural paths. It is important to mention that these “new ideas” were not novel in nature, but rather represented a new critical examination of Soviet reality and a subsequent uncritical embrace of neoliberalism (English, 2000; Sowa, 2012). New thinking had been shared among philosophers and scientists, historians and economists, as well as other policy-academic intellectual elite, who in turn, represented a “westernizing minority” within the Soviet intelligentsia (English, 2000). This group disdained the Leninist-Stalinist ideology of a world built on a set of binaries where capitalism was seen as the enemy in favor of adherence to Western political and economic “freedoms.” This group attacked Eastern bloc’s isolationism and celebrated what they saw as liberal priorities over socialist ideals. For them, liberalism was democratic and just. I am interested in examining the nature of this intelligentsia and studying how they helped to facilitate a shift in hegemonic cultural sensibilities that helped lay the groundwork for the Cold War’s endgame. I will also explore what exemplified westernization for Soviet intellectuals.

In this thesis, I will also demonstrate that communist ideology lost its credibility in the minds of the Soviet people during this period and will explore why and how that happened. As pointed out by a Polish scholar Jan Sowa, this in turn paved the way to the triumph of neoliberalism not only as an economic system but as a powerful ideology that proliferated in the vast territory of the post-Soviet bloc (Sowa, 2012). My thesis examines the process of the cultural shift or break of consciousness that happened in the last decades of the USSR experienced by both the Soviet intelligentsia and the people who did not possess as much of

cultural capital as the intellectuals. I analyze the collapse of the Soviet Union as a gradual disintegration of the Leninist-Stalinist ideology that was not able to win its main battle, the battle for hearts and minds of the people. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War was not a victory of the West over the Evil Empire but a victory of a set of Western ideas represented by free market, laissez-faire capitalism, freedom of speech, and massive consumption over another set of ideas that inaccurately interpreted Marxism proclaiming itself as Leninist-Stalinist ideology exemplified by dictatorship, censorship, command economy and supply shortages. Sowa claims that the degeneration of centrally planned state economies, and hardship it brought on the citizens of Leninist states, created very important conditions for neoliberal hegemony. Thus the author argues that the collapse of the Soviet Union can be considered as an essential turning point in the process of the establishment of the global neoliberal hegemony (Sowa, 2012). While I agree that the collapse of the USSR allowed for the global spread of neoliberalism, this thesis shall analyze the domestic precursors for it, manifested in the literature and films of the late Soviet era.

The Russian intelligentsia was inclined towards westernization since its very emergence back in 18th century, when Peter I embarked the ideas of cultural change forcing the elites to practice Western education, values, morals, and ideals exemplified by experience of enlightened Europe. This cultural westernization of the Russian nobility eventually produced a specific social stratum, which became known as the intelligentsia (Shalin, 2012). It would be wrong, however, to claim that these intellectual strata which had been artificially created by Peter the Great instantly gave rise to westernized intellectuals who would uphold the ideals of political and religious liberalization, freedom of speech, and constitutional state. But it definitely set a mechanism that enabled further development of Russian intelligentsia as well as its ways of cooperation or opposition with the government.

The intelligentsia in the USSR

Certainly, not all Soviet intelligentsia opposed the communist regime. As pointed out by Gramsci who recognized the crucial role of intellectuals in the process of social change, there are two types of intellectuals in a society – organic and traditional. The former type of intellectual is directly related to the economic structure of a newly emerged social system, since it serves as a catalyst for economic development and spread of a new ideology (Gramsci, 1971). While traditional intellectuals constitute a social category whose primary role is to disseminate cultural and moral values that uphold and confirm the existing order. This second type of intellectual is interested in the proliferation of the status quo. At the same time, Gramsci recognized the inability of the proletariat to organize social elements assuming that the working class cannot successfully challenge the power of the class above it, as it lacks its own stratum of intellectuals who would act as spokesmen for them (Gramsci, 1971). Furthermore, the communists shared Gramsci's point of view regarding the question of the proletarians' inability to articulate their interests or aims and believed that the intellectuals should fulfill this role by representing the proletariat's class interests as well as Marxist-Leninist ideology (Konrad & Szelenyi, 1974).

On the other hand, neither Marx, nor Gramsci had questioned the fact that intellectuals might have their own interests which, if we think about it critically, would drastically differ from the proletarian agenda. In other words, how do the interests of the intelligentsia affect the knowledge produced by them and how does their position in the society influence this knowledge? In order to answer this question and challenge the seemingly neutral position of the intellectuals, there is a need to understand their structural position within the Soviet socioeconomic formation. Since the intelligentsia should not be considered as a mere transmitter of the dominant ideology without its own interests, beliefs, ambitions or views. However, for Marxist followers as well as for Marx himself, the question of defining the

intelligentsia as a class and providing it with an actual well-defined social position in a society was not of a particular importance, since the intellectuals are neither owners of capital nor proletarians per se (Konrad & Szelenyi, 1974). Yet, it was Lenin who claimed that the intelligentsia has a dichotomous nature in terms of class, for on one hand it bears a resemblance to the proletariat as it is generally exploited by those who own capital; but on the other hand, the intellectual considerably differs from the working class as he performs mental labor and usually fulfills managerial position with regards to the workers directing their efforts (Lenin, 1977.) Furthermore, because of these positions the intellectuals are able to earn more money and live in a manner resembling the bourgeoisie rather than the proletariat.

While Lenin was the one who started the persecution of intellectuals in the first place as he believed that they serve the bourgeois interests and purposefully alienate themselves from the proletariat, it was Stalin who initiated the actual prosecution and massive oppression of the intelligentsia in order to establish his own *prosloika* that would serve the administration's needs of spreading the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology (Alexeyeva & Goldberg, 1993; Grenoble, 2003). In fact, Stalin believed that art and literature should not merely serve the purposes of cultural production, but first and foremost must represent and uphold the interests of the party. As a result, all cultural organizations including various forms of intellectual, scientific, and artistic practice became subordinate to educational and political organizations. Therefore, cultural production was entirely controlled by the party. For instance, in 1932 the Communist Party declared socialist realism as the official and only acceptable art style in order to facilitate the incorporation of socialism among the Soviet people (Hough, 1979). At the same time, the process of cultural production and its interpretation was supervised by a number of newly established institutions such as Goskomizdat (State Committee for Publishing and Printing) along with Glavlit (Chief Administration for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press) (Hough, 1979). These entities were headed by members of the Communist Party who

controlled the political contents of newspapers, magazines, books, and generally everything that appeared in the Soviet media.

As pointed out by an American scholar Stein in his discussion of the Soviet intelligentsia, it was this subordinate position of intellectual and cultural life that allowed governmental organizations to exercise their “full creative potential in the construction of a new society” (Stein, 1951). At the same time, Stalin and his advisors believed that in order to build a strong communist nation the party should promote higher education among the masses, so the educated proletariat will be able to represent their own interests and further strengthen the socialist rhetoric. In this context, obtaining higher education becomes vital for one’s professional advancement in the Soviet states and marks a person’s position in the social structure. One of the pros of the communist rhetoric is the significant rise in literacy rates. In fact, while in Tsarist Russia the literacy levels were very low making only 24 percent for the entire population, the early years of the USSR demonstrated a staggering increase to 81 percent in 1939 (Grenoble, 2003). At the same time, some Soviet theoreticians claimed that the new intelligentsia will be able to gradually educate all workers and peasants in Bolshevik ways and when everyone in the society will become educated, the intelligentsia will cease to exist as a stratum of its own (Stein, 1951).

On the other hand, the abovementioned assumption regarding the intelligentsia and its existence in the Soviet society is plausible only in the context of the conventional communist definition of this stratum. In fact, based on the description provided by the CPSU, the intelligentsia is not a class of its own but a stratum (*prosloika*) that is positioned between the major classes of workers and peasants (Konrad & Szelenyi, 1974.) Furthermore, as pointed out by Hungarian sociologists Konrad and Szelenyi who witnessed the Soviet sociopolitical and economic formations from within, *prosloika* included people who were not workers performing manual labor or peasants but those who engaged in mental work by cultivating knowledge.

According to the conventional Soviet definition of the intelligentsia mentioned above, this stratum is comprised of all sorts of occupations including professors, librarians, writers, engineers, doctors and artists (Konrad & Szelenyi, 1974.) However, based on such point of view, the intellectuals are considered as mere knowledge producers and anyone who has a degree from university, not to mention the fact that it generates a remarkably vague notion of the intelligentsia.

Thus, I shall use another definition of the intelligentsia articulated by the Soviet intellectuals who became a part of the dissident movement that emerged in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. For instance, as pointed out by Shragin (1978), a Soviet human rights activist, dissident and prominent writer on the subject of the intellectuals:

The intelligentsia in the specifically Russian sense of this term represent the people who have matured spiritually to the point where they feel obliged to make sense of their lives, and can no longer submit unthinkingly to the lies and hypocrisy of Soviet life. (p.76)

Unlike the conventional notion of the intelligentsia which simply puts it under the category of the stratum that performs intellectual activity, this definition accentuates a specific spiritual and moral role of the intellectuals. Furthermore, according to the abovementioned self-definition of Shragin, the intelligentsia comprises individuals who challenge and transform the existing totalitarian order and enlighten the masses by contesting an alternative political culture. Such point of view resonates with Kagarlitsky's ideas about the role of the intelligentsia who argues:

The traditional role of the intelligentsia is to speak out in the name of the people against the undemocratic state: the intelligentsia defends not only its own interests, but those of the oppressed, viewing its activity as closely connected with the struggle for democracy. It is precisely these moral principles which used to bind the intelligentsia into a single whole. (Kagarlitsky, 1988, p. 32)

It is not accidental then that both of the definitions presented above demonstrate a deviation from the conventional communist understanding of the term and that both of them mention the opposition to the existing political culture on the basis of its oppression of human rights and individual freedoms. These ideas, in fact, became the defining principles of non-conforming left-wing intelligentsia. However, as pointed out by English, “Denying the status of *intelligentsia* to any but those who openly defied the regime is too restrictive” (English, 2000, p. 77). I agree that identifying only the overt dissidents as intelligentsia downplays the importance of private dissidence where people were openly discussing the Soviet politics in their communal kitchens. However, for the purposes of this research I shall focus on the open dissidents who publicly manifested their non-conformist political stances or expressed their opinions in cultural production of books and films, as they were the ones for whom the Soviet government reserved the harshest punishment and sanctions. In fact, in another chapter of his book on the westernizing Soviet intelligentsia, English claims that private criticism of the political culture in most cases was tolerated, while “even the smallest hint of public or organized dissent was swiftly punished” (English, 2000, p. 135). I assume that this organized dissident movement greatly affected the domestic as well as foreign Soviet policy and eventually paved the way to the collapse of the communist ideology exerting a tremendous influence on the nature and results of perestroika.

Thus contrary to the projections of Stalin’s advisors, the intelligentsia continued its existence and eventually even formed as a counter-force to the communist regime in the form of dissent. The initial impetus to strengthening westernization and anti-government tendencies among the Soviet intelligentsia was determined by the existence of pre-revolutionary intellectuals remaining in the USSR after Stalin’s massive liquidation. Furthermore, political dissent increasingly began to spread among the Soviet intelligentsia after Stalin’s death. This was largely due to the ideological monopoly installed by the communist party, which turned

the cultural and intellectual realms of the intelligentsia into obedient performance of the system's will (Shalin, 2012). After all, any attempt towards self-reflection or criticism of the government inevitably entailed sanctions from the state, which led to the Soviet intellectuals' aspirations about the Western ideals of democracy, freedom of speech, rule of law, and human rights. While during the Stalin period the intellectuals were persecuted and individual freedoms were totally erased from the public discourse, the subsequent era opened certain possibilities for creative expression as well as relative cultural interchange with the Western world, which will be examined in the following chapters. These possibilities enabled the intellectuals to critically reexamine the Soviet reality in their books, setting a stage for the reshaping of public consciousness in its understanding of the West.

Revival of Dissent in the Thaw Era

The process of destalinization that started in 1956 with Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party had set the stage for the revival of the public opinion and the consequent dissident movements that emerged in 1960's and were led primarily by the Soviet intellectuals (Bergman, 1992). This period in Soviet history is also known as the "thaw era" (*otpepel'*), as it finally neglected the old thinking and dogmas generated by Stalinist terror represented by total control over all spheres of life, erasure of national identity, harsh censorship, hostile isolationist worldview and systematic manipulation over people's understanding of the real world. Khrushchev's secret speech *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences* in turn exposed Stalin's cruelty and incompetence as a leader:

Stalin showed in a whole series of cases his intolerance, his brutality, and his abuse of power. Instead of proving his political correctness and mobilizing the masses, he often chose the path of repression and physical annihilation, not only against actual enemies, but also

against individuals who had not committed any crimes against the party and the Soviet Government (Khrushchev, 1956).

In the abovementioned passage Khrushchev means the massive liquidation of the intelligentsia in Gulags, numerous fabricated court cases based on which Stalin conducted repressions of individuals and even death sentences, and the fact that he created and actively sustained the idea of the public enemy of the people. Even though Khrushchev's revelation was first met with outrage at the CPSU, eventually it helped to rupture the cult of Stalin and his dictatorship paving the way to the liberalization of thought. Furthermore, according to English (2000), the subsequent thaw era enabled "exposure to foreign diversity together with the intellectual liberties" which gave people opportunities for foreign interchange, "greater worldliness" and extensive embracement of the West (p. 103). However, this "exposure" was still very much controlled by the CPSU and only those studying at the best national universities such as the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) had access to some Western academic sources to obtain information about what was happening *zagranitsei* (abroad).

Moreover, it was not only the limited amount of exposure to the Western sources that disabled the masses to form an oppositional force to status quo or even perceive a reality that was not distorted by the Soviet propaganda. In addition to this, another feature of the Soviet reality served as a deterrent for the formation of a strong and active counterforce to the government among the masses that remained relatively unchanged even after Stalin's death. According to the prominent Russian scholar and human rights activist Alexeyeva (1987), "Any criticism of the regime was limited strictly to the Stalinist period itself and was not permitted to extend backward to the Leninist period or ahead to the post-Stalin period, i.e., to the present moment" (p. 7). Which means that during the thaw era dissent was still publicly condemned,

and only those who were willing and ready to openly challenge the political culture would stand on the front lines of advocating for human rights and basic individual freedoms.

The revival of intellectual thought during the thaw era was especially obvious in the academic environments where professors as well as students started calling into question the communist ideology, eventually forming ideas that clashed with the Soviet reality represented by the still existing censorship and restrictions on political and cultural expressions (Alexeyeva & Goldberg, 1993). In this context, the dissident movement can be considered as a revival and not an emergence of dissidence, since considering the traditional role of the intelligentsia back in 19th and 20th centuries the intellectuals always sacrificed their own interests for the sake of communal good and individual freedoms (Kagarlitsky, 1988). For example, Dostoevsky was imprisoned back in 1850's for his contesting ideas about abolishment of serfdom and mocking the Russian elites of the time (Kagarlitsky, 1988). Another prominent Russian writer Radishchev was imprisoned and sentenced to death in 1802 for embracing the ideas of European Enlightenment and criticizing political and social flaws of Tsarist Russia (Lang, 1947). These examples demonstrate that some representatives of the Russian intelligentsia always leaned toward anti-governmental tendencies and challenged the existing regime, be it the Tsarist Russia that was based on the serfdom or the Soviet state with the Leninist-Stalinist oppression of individual freedoms.

Therefore, historically the dissident movement in Russia existed for a very long time. Although eliminated during Stalin's years, it gained momentum again after his death to continue challenging the system's ideology and strict rules. Obviously, dissidence is not limited to the Soviet Union and can take place in any country or political system. This undeniable fact was often used by the communist party in order to oppose the Western disapproval of the way the Soviet government behaved toward the dissident movement (Maggard, 1986). However,

the Soviet politicians tended to downplay an essential difference between dissent in the West and the one existing in the USSR. In the Western democracies which arguably, have their own flaws and imperfections, there is at least an opportunity for contesting ideas and articulation of alternative points of view or criticism of the government. While in the Soviet Union expression of dissenting sentiments regarding the Leninist-Stalinist regime was not an option whatsoever. In conformist Soviet understanding of the term itself, “dissent” is equivalent to thinking differently (*inakomyslyaschi*) and this was enough to consider it a pejorative term and justified the harsh intolerance toward anyone who questioned the status quo.

From Utopia to Dystopia: Analysis of *Noon, 22nd Century* and *Roadside Picnic*

In order to understand the Soviet perception of the West along with some other domestic sentiments in the 1980's and 1990's that were shared among the intelligentsia, I shall analyze a set of primary sources created during the “thaw era” and the period of stagnation from the beginning of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s respectively. The examined sources include literary fiction and films of the time which represent various cultural manifestations of the Soviet intellectuals regarding the generation's search for identity and its relationship to the West. Such authors as the Strugatsky brothers mirrored the climate of Soviet reality from the promising 1960s (thaw era) all the way to the period of stagnation that began in the 1970s. Their books disguise the intelligentsia's understanding and perception of the “imaginary” West as an abstract place behind the Iron Curtain. In what follows, I shall demonstrate the hidden meanings behind Strugatskys' texts and their efforts to mirror Soviet reality in science fiction. At the same time, understanding one's identity and depicting reality was a challenging task considering that the Soviet Union existed in its own ideological vacuum separated from the rest of the world even with arrival of the supposedly promising thaw era. An individual's perception of reality and himself, exposure to other cultures, and understanding

of domestic as well as universal changes were confined to one's personal observations and critical thinking.

The widespread interest of the Soviet people in science fiction (*nauchnaya fantastika*) in the 1960's emerged out of the political moment. It was the time of international competition between the Soviet Union and the United States for scientific and technological superiority in the outer space also known as the Space Race. Driven by the USSR's accomplishments in space pioneering, Khrushchev strongly encouraged development of aerospace engineering as well as artistic expressions in sci-fi genre emphasizing the leading position of the USSR in the Space Race. As a result, the thaw era cultivated an immense interest and success of *nauchnaya fantastika* among the Soviets, eventually becoming one of the most popular forms of fiction and a norm of cultural expression that in some cases mirrored the real socio-political situation in the USSR.

As mentioned by a number of scholars specializing in science fiction, this genre actualizes the main challenge of literature in general: how to make the reader believe in the existence of a non-existent using only the tools of the language (Bykov, 2014; Csicsery-Ronay, 2004; Sawyer & Seed, 2001). In addition to this arduous task, the Soviet writers were constantly faced with yet another issue - the ideological censorship of the USSR. Fortunately, some authors were able to find ways of coexisting with ubiquitous control exerted on all forms of cultural production and even criticize the system disguising moral dilemmas and challenging questions with phantasmagoric environment. Such authors include Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, whose cultural significance and intellectual heritage are enormous. Arguably, it is difficult to name any other writers of the 1960s - 1980s who would have an equally powerful effect on the educated class of the Soviet Union. For several decades the Strugatsky brothers led a large part of the Soviet intelligentsia trying to mirror widely shared yet publicly unspoken

thoughts, aspirations and ethical attitudes of intellectuals and later on dissidents in their books (Bykov, 2014). Corresponding to the optimistic political climate of post-Stalin thaw era, the Strugatsky's early works, that came out in the 1960s, attempted to develop the idea of a harmonious communist utopia. However, in the second half of the Strugatskys career (1970's – 1980's) they could be characterized as dissidents (Bykov, 2014; Simon, 2004).

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to analyze how the Strugatskys' understanding of the Soviet reality in the stagnant 1970's changed compared to their earlier works taking into consideration the political climate in the Soviet Union. Surprisingly, there are very few Russian scholars who analyzed the cultural significance of the Strugatsky brothers, particularly with regard to their efforts to mirror the Soviet reality and common sentiments of the Soviet people. In fact, mostly Western scholars have written about the Strugatskys, but they missed the complexity of the brothers' multilayered science fiction, the geopolitical context, as well as some specific contradictory strands of the Soviet mentality on which the authors built their characters and storylines.

The beginning of 1960s brought a climate of promising changes for the Soviet intelligentsia improving their social position and easing ideological control over scientific as well as humanistic research. Like the rest of the intelligentsia, the Strugatsky brothers were inspired by new possibilities and hopes offered by the thaw era, which is demonstrated in one of their first books *Noon: 22nd Century* published in 1961. Mirroring the optimistic sentiments of the time, this work presents a utopian future dominated by communism due to its socio-economic and moral superiority to other social systems. In the idealistic world of *Noon: 22nd Century*, human community overcame the issues of consumerism and expansionist tendencies represented by capitalism and imperialism developing an advanced technocratic-communist way of life. Furthermore, the protagonists of this book actively explore the interstellar space

seeking contact with extraterrestrial civilizations, since the monopoly on space exploration was a signifier of global power. As mentioned by Boris Strugatsky (1961) in one of his commentaries on the book:

The thaw era was a time when we sincerely believed in communism as the highest and most perfect stage of development of human society. Eventually, we understood who should fill this fantastic world - our contemporaries, or rather, the best of our contemporaries. Our friends and family, pure, honest, kind people, above all appreciating the artistic work and joy of knowledge. We understood the word “communism” as something transparent and pure, promising and absolute, and it meant for us the world in which we want to live and work. (p. 11)

The protagonists of *Noon: 22nd Century* resemble this optimistic intelligentsia of the early thaw era that Boris Strugatsky refers to. As argued by an American scholar Erik Simon, who started his analysis of Strugatskys back in 1992, the brothers populated their early science fiction “with humans who exist in contemporary reality” on purpose and by placing their protagonists in the context of socialist utopia, they opposed the notion that the "perfected Communist human being" propagated by the government must be qualitatively different from the current one (Simon, 2004, p. 381). Thus the Soviet society was the Strugatskys’ subject of study and reference as well as their addressee.

Even though *Noon: 22nd Century* contains different stories that are loosely connected, each of them has common characters – the space travelers Slavin and Kondratev. These characters exemplify the “new Soviet man” who believes in the power of scientific advancement, rationality and equality while sustaining a society based on moral humanistic ideals of socialism that was supposedly shared among all people. In examining the early works of the Strugatsky brothers in the political context of the 1960s Simon points out that the conflict

in *Noon: 22nd Century* is between “the good and the better” instead of taking place between the good and the evil (Simon, 2004, p. 392). Thus, the novels in this book serve as hopeful reminders of why the Soviet promise to build an ideal communist world filled with kindness, equality, and peace was so attractive to begin with.

Moreover, the positive heroes of *Noon: 22nd Century* are directly connected to the Soviet rhetoric of the time. For example, in 1961 Khrushchev aimed at promoting a universal strategy for the "formation of a future unitary culture of communist society, common to all mankind" by strengthening international cooperation and mutual understanding among the people (Khrushchev, 1962). Moreover, Khrushchev believed that the Soviet scientific developments in aerospace led to what he called the Scientific-Technological Revolution and based on this notion, there was a need for modification of the existing superstructure where the scientific intelligentsia would become the major driving force in building new communism (utopic socialism). Such promising and optimistic rhetoric in turn, highly influenced the early works of the Strugatsky brothers and some other intellectuals of the 1960s who felt free from the Stalinist terror and not yet burdened by the political, social and economic failures of Khrushchev's attempts on the road to the so-called socialism.

Gradually but steadily, domestic and international actions of the Soviet government were met with increasing skepticism from the intelligentsia. The end of the sixties marked by Czechoslovakian crisis, where the Soviet troops invaded Prague in order to crush the reformist tendencies has led to a domestic ideological crisis in the USSR. The Strugatsky brothers came to the conclusion that their understanding of communism drastically differed from the one practiced by the authorities. This shift in the Strugatskys' works has been widely observed by Western scholars in the field of the Soviet sci-fi, since *inter alia* it became a turning point that led to dissolution of the socialist utopian dream among the intelligentsia (Sawyer & Seed, 2001;

Simon, 2004). This study however, shall emphasize not only the importance of the external factors that influenced the Strugatskys' shift from socialist utopianism, but also their personal dissatisfaction with the government. In fact, while for the Strugatsky brothers communism meant a world of artistic freedom and intellectual labor, for the Soviet government it referred to a world where working people unquestionably fulfill all decisions of the authorities without accepting any opposition to their actions. Once again disappointed in the regime intellectuals came to the conclusion that communism in fact is utopic, and from this point their works start to exemplify a new milestone in the science fiction genre (Simon, 2004).

The Soviet sci-fi can be read in different ways: as a door into the communist perception of its own future, as criticism of its political reality disguised as non-existent futurism, or as a criterion for understanding the Soviet relationship with the West. While Strugatskys' early works such as *Noon: 22nd Century* exemplify the first type of analysis serving as a window to their own reflections on the ideal communist future, their later books symbolize a critical reevaluation of the existing social order and life on the other side of the Iron Curtain. A great example of this phase is Strugatskys' bleak anti-utopia *Roadside Picnic* published in 1972. In order to fully comprehend the meanings behind the supposedly non-existent world depicted in this book, the readers needed to decipher and decode the text to find out what is hidden under certain strange and fantastic elements of narration. Eventually, a coded message might become a prophecy, since the brothers were also known for their ability to predict current trends and problems including the dominance of popular culture along with its massive consumerism.

The story in the *Roadside Picnic* takes place on Earth in the city of Harmont at the end of XX century. The city is located near one of the Zones, where the aliens landed for several hours leaving mysterious material traces that end up being toxic. The title of the book comes from a hypothesis suggesting that these unexplainable artifacts are extraterrestrial trash left by

aliens after having a roadside picnic on Earth. The Zone is fenced and carefully guarded, while the entry is allowed only to employees of the International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures. However, some people called “stalkers” manage to sneak in the Zone, taking illegal artifacts (called swag) to sell them on black market. A number of Western scholars including an American professor Stephen Potts, argued that the *Roadside Picnic* is a pro-communist book, reducing the Zone to mere capitalism that produced artifacts “polluting” the Soviet Union (Potts, 1991). However, such reading of Strugatskys’ novel undermines some critical aspects encoded in the larger meta-narrative of the *Roadside Picnic*, which I shall demonstrate in the following passages.

In fact, Strugatskys’ book hides a number of references to the Soviet government disguising them as parts of the fictional world, which in turn, allowed the authors to criticize and mock it. For example, the International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures is portrayed as if it is an arm of the Soviet bureaucratic machine with its various governmental institutions including the KGB and the State Planning Committee that controlled all aspects of people’s lives. The fictitious organization in the *Roadside Picnic* is corrupted, self-centered and even its high-rank officials engage in illegal smuggling of the swag. This institution constantly fails the citizens of Harmont by being indifferent to their needs but at the same time, paying close attention to their actions by installing a system of mass surveillance. All of this evokes the Soviet state with its empty promises to build socialism while persistently exerting control over people’s lives with the assistance of the secret police. In this context, the *Roadside Picnic* already neglects the existing status quo and thus, cannot be considered as a pro-communist piece that simply describes the “slow and often deadly invasion” of capitalism, as argued by Potts (1991).

Moreover, due to the inability of the surveillance state to support the working class, the

main protagonist Redrick Schuhart (Red), whose official occupation as a worker for the Institute is a cover for his actual job as a stalker. The Strugatsky brothers demonstrate that the high rank officials who work for the Institute are corrupted and engage in illegal activities instead of providing the working class with basic support, such as medical assistance and normal wages. For example, Richard Noonan, a representative of the electronics distribution for the Institute secretly owns a bar and a brothel, even though it is supposedly illegal. Or the fact that the stalkers' children are becoming mutants because their fathers visited the Zone, but the Institute never took care of them demonstrating total indifference to anything except its own wealth. For instance, Red's daughter born as a normal happy kid, degrades throughout the book, becoming a strange creature who looks and acts like a monkey. The Institute, however, does not provide the citizens of Harmont with anything but low-paid jobs. As a result, Red's attitude about the government is summed up in his phrase, "I don't want to work for you, your work makes me want to puke, you understand?" (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 128). So, the weird and often deadly dangerous objects from the Zone eventually become the source of his earnings, since Red hates the official authorities with their indifference, control and corruption.

Strugatskys' choice of the word "zone" which is semantically one of the most loaded words in Russian language, is one of the biggest puzzles throughout the book. The etymology of the word "zone" (*zona*) starts as an isolated area differing from general environment, it also means prison or in unofficial use of the word – Gulag camp. As suggested by Dmitry Bykov, one of the most versatile and critically thinking public intellectuals of contemporary Russia, Strugatskys' Zone refers to Gulag (the Soviet forced labor camp for those who even slightly opposed the Leninist-Stalinist ideology) or to the Soviet reality itself. In one of his lectures, the prominent Russian critic argues that the Zone is akin to the Gulag. It is a deadly dangerous place that altered people's minds making them unthinkingly follow the rules of its environment (Bykov, 2014). No one really knew what was happening there, but it was clearly fatal for

everyone who set foot in it. Corresponding to the Gulag's prisoners, not all stalkers who visited the Zone had the ability to return from it and if they did, they were never the same. Some of them died in the Zone's traps like Red's friend Kirill in the beginning of the book. Kirill got into the so-called "spider web", which is an invisible substance that penetrates into any organic material leaving no signs of physical harm but affecting a person on a molecular level. Hours after encountering the "spider web", Kirill dies of a heart attack, and Stalker blames himself for bringing his friend to the Zone. Another example of the Zone's evil and even deadly properties is the "witches jelly", a gas that transforms anyone who touches it into itself. Another stalker named Burbridge loses his legs after stepping on it in the second part of the book, because the "witches jelly" leaves his legs boneless. Bykov (2014) argues that this is an example of the Soviet reality in which the people were "boneless" meaning that they lacked a strong identity and belief system, because the Soviet project tried to erase the national consciousness of the masses leading them to massive degradation.

Bykov (2014) further points out that another example of the Zone's resemblance to the Gulag or the Soviet reality is the idea of the so-called "replicas", which are the dead people once buried in cemeteries on the territory of the Zone long before the aliens' visit. These replicas are like zombies, they slowly move around and have no intelligence but they return to their homes to simply sit there and do nothing but remind of themselves. The Soviet Union was built on the ideas of generational heredity, where it was believed that the younger generations were obliged to continue the revolutionary path of their ancestors who fought for their freedom during the October Revolution and later in the World War II. Considering this as a central point of the Soviet project, Bykov argues that Strugatskys meant that these replicas represent the great ancestors of the Soviets and thus the Zone is the Soviet Union or the Gulag. Moreover, visiting the Zone causes mutations in the children of stalkers making them resemble the animals, like Red's daughter "Monkey" who screams at night and does not talk. This can be

related to the Soviet ideology that treated people inhumanely trying to make them obedient and act cowardly unquestionably following the rules.

However, such reading of the text does not explain the meaning behind mysterious artifacts left in the Zone, which in my opinion are essential for understanding the key message – the relationship of the Soviets to the West, as every individual in the book is defined based on his exposure to the Zone. For example, even though it is clearly dangerous and illegal Red keeps coming back to the Zone not only to sustain his family, but for the sake of escaping the monotonous and pathetic routine of everyday existence. The intensity, mystery and the unknown extraterrestrial advancements behind the wall are enchanting to the stalker, the Zone is often referred to as the portal into the future, “the path to the other world” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 29). Moreover, this phantasmagoric space is juxtaposed with Red’s monotone reality. The wall supposedly protecting the people from the Zone is under full jurisdiction of the Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures, which strikingly evokes the Berlin Wall that was built in 1961 and operated all the way until 1989. In this case, the Zone represents capitalism (West Berlin) and the city of Harmont refers to communism (East Berlin). This forceful separation between the two worlds and their striking differences symbolize the climate of hopelessness and discontent shared among the Soviet intelligentsia because of the annihilation of the reformist movement in Prague accompanied by the apathy of the masses in the stagnating country of the 1970s.

On the other hand, a Hungarian author Csicsery-Ronay argues that the plot of the *Roadside Picnic* suggests a strong critique of the capitalist ethic, and like the other scholars of the Cold War period believes that Strugatskys merely captured the pro-Soviet rhetoric of the time criticizing the “toxic” West (Csicsery-Ronay, 1986). In fact, the smuggled material objects in the book can be considered as Western goods highly praised in the Soviet Union, such as cosmetics which in the book are referred to “black sprays” worn by women to look pretty,

music records which appear as magical “pins that talk” when one presses on them, or contact lenses disguised as “lobster eyes” that sharpen humans’ eyesight. This type of swag is known as “empties” meaning that it has no useful application for scientific research and does not serve any larger moral purpose. In this regard, the *Roadside Picnic* does criticize the capitalist ethic with its massive consumerism and preoccupation with material goods that are “polluting” the world, as argued by Csicsery-Ronay and Potts. At the same time, the authors also tend to blame the Soviet society for its blind imitation of the West and satisfaction with material “empties” smuggled from the other side. Thus, the Strugatsky brothers are criticizing the Eastern fantasy of the West in which the ideas of consumerism and preoccupation with material goods take the central role, and it is also likely that their *Roadside Picnic* denounces capitalism for massive dissemination of the conspicuous consumption.

On the other hand, there are other more dangerous and toxic objects left by the aliens in the Zone that cannot be as easily converted to equivalent material goods as the “empties”, and which were not taken into consideration by the Western scholars. Such artifacts in my opinion represent the ephemeral (to the Soviets) and far-reaching ideas of Western democracy, human rights and freedom of speech. Being objects without subjects or ideas without instructions, these artifacts are useless and even toxic for societies with different social, cultural and ideological orders than capitalism. Considering the technological and ideological gap between the Soviet Union and the rest of the advanced world, no wonder why the scattered artifacts and the Zone itself were perceived as mere manifestations of otherness that ended up being detrimental to the society. That is why in the beginning of the novel *Red states*, “The further into the Zone, the nearer to Heaven” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 16). This quote summarizes the cultural understanding of the Soviets about the “other side” serving as a metaphor of the West, the imaginative world behind the wall that seemed to be as far as the kingdom of heaven. Something desirable, unknown and allegedly close, yet unreachable, distant, and thus, largely

speculative (abstract). Thus, the *Roadside Picnic* presents a multilayered work that should not be reduced to what it seemingly manifests on the surface. As mentioned before, their works require “decoding” and searching for meanings that could be disguised as pro-communist propaganda in order to pass the censorship.

The Soviet Self-perception in the Stagnation Period: *I Am Twenty* and *Stalker*

At the same time, it is necessary to understand that the Soviet culture was not monolithic and uncompromising, and at different stages of its history, the boundaries of reality changed opening up new ways for its interpretation and creation of meanings. The Soviet artistic intelligentsia of the 1970s, in particular, the leading cinematographers (directors and scriptwriters) also tried to mirror the Soviet domestic sentiments shared among the intellectuals and in some cases among the masses. According to the prominent Russian sociologist Yuri Levada, the “gray” stagnant era of the 1970s was in fact a period of intensive formation of the very forces and aspirations that came to the surface in the middle of 1980s, and determined directions of subsequent shifts and conflicts during *perestroika* in all its multilayered contradictions (Levada, 1998).

The Soviet self-perception of the late stagnation era (end of 1970s - first half of the 1980s) is paradoxical. According to numerous testimonies, the late Soviet Empire was perceived to be very stable, even those who were extremely critical of the system were confident that it would survive for generations to come (Yurchak, 2006). However, many films of that era, especially those that had a cult status among the Soviet intelligentsia, convey a completely different image of the existing socio-cultural reality. In these films, we regularly are presented with a decaying civilization experiencing a deep crisis with an unclear outcome. The Soviet Union portrayed in the films after the thaw era does not look solid and stable at all. Paraphrasing an American writer John Barthes (1981), one can refer to the cinema of that era

as the “cinema of depletion, with the difference that this depletion alludes not only to cinema as a medium, but also to the Soviet reality in which it existed and which it captured.

At the same time, the extent to which the reality presented in films of the 1970s – 1980s exemplified a common social experience shared by the Soviet people should be discussed with great caution. Since we interpret a film not as a source directly documenting reality, but as its construction, as a space of alternative reality which creates various kinds of meanings, conditions and forms of interaction between individuals along with mediated perceptions of those. Based on the Soviet films of the 1960s, the artistic intelligentsia was preoccupied with the problem of the massive divergence between the collective represented by the state and personal exemplified by an individual. The role of an individual starts to occupy a central place in the value system of that era, while the idea of collective identity was in crisis and demanded the search for new pillars in order to exist. And due to the fact that the Soviet government failed to provide the people with a strong coherent ideology that would not be based solely on oppression and conformism, the cultural and political climate stagnated leading the masses to seek the truth in the Western culture, or rather its fragmented pieces that they were able to obtain.

Alexei Yurchak, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, raised and born in the Soviet Union, analyzes the process of this stagnation and the reasons for the loss of hope in the Soviet government in his book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*. This book illustrates clearly how this sense of hope was diminishing. I am interested in how intellectual production both reflected and helped produce these sensibilities. Moreover, Yurchak points out that even though the collapse of the USSR was a surprise for the Soviets, many people realized that they actually sensed it, especially during the last decades of its existence (Yurchak, 2006). And while Robert English (2000) argued that Soviet society

gradually experienced a break in consciousness during the thaw era referring to the emergence of the new thinking, Yurchak (2006) claims that this break was sudden and happened under Gorbachev's rule when the people realized that the communist ideology outdated itself to a point where it could no longer exist. However, even during the stagnation era of the 1970s – 1980s, the majority of the people behaved as if the Soviet system was constant and immutable. They went to the annual parades, joined the Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth), and engaged in the activities demanded by the state. In other words, the people sustained the fake reality propagated by the CPSU, and over time, this “fakeness” became accepted as real, a phenomenon that Yurchak (2006) called “hypernormalization” of authoritative discourse manifested in “the structure of rituals, visual representations, texts, public events, spatial designs, and so on” (p. 211). So, the Soviets maintained the authoritative discourse while the meaning of it was lost. At the same time, however, some individuals were searching for the truth, internally demanding the answers and solutions to the fake national discourse, where everyone acted as if “everything was forever until it was no more”. This vacuum allowed for an interest in Western ideology, goods, etc. They are able to produce ideas that come to be resonant for Soviet people because of this moment in time.

An example of such search for oneself and juxtaposition of individual versus collective is a coming of age drama film by Marlen Khutsiev *I Am Twenty* also known as *Ilich's Gate* meaning Lenin's gate (*Zastava Ilicha: Mne Dvadsat Let*). When the film came out in 1965, it mirrored the political climate of the Soviet Union that was less optimistic, less promising and more suppressed comparing with the early thaw period. Khutsiev's work captures the existential quest for self-actualization, uncertainty, intellectual as well as spiritual agitation shared among the young Muscovites, and the huge gap between the state and the people in understanding the everyday Soviet reality along with individual necessities and aspirations.

The main protagonist Sergei firmly believes in a certain universal ideal that in his point of view permeates all spheres of life, and thus he neglects the ideas of socialist realism that fails to recognize the existing societal problems and gives a supposedly multipurpose answer to all questions at once. In one of the most important scenes throughout the film the protagonist has a dream, in which he meets his father who died in the World War II. Sergei asks him, "Father, tell me, what should I do?" To what his father's phantom replies, "How old are you?" Sergei answers that he is twenty, and father says, "Well, I am 19...So, what can I advise you?" (*Zastava Ilichia: Mne Dvadsat Let*, 1965). Because of this scene the film was met with hostility and critiqued by Khrushchev and other apparatchicks. In fact, from their point of view it undermined the very foundations of the communist ideology based *inter alia* on the continuity of generations. The fact that Sergei's father did not provide his son with parting words that would affirm the communist ethic or inspire him to follow the path of supposedly the only truth fueled with blind Soviet patriotism eventually became the reason for numerous alterations and cuttings of the film. The government actively propagated the ideas of generational continuity claiming that the great heritage left by the grandfathers who made revolution possible should be cherished, implying that the younger generation must continue the work of their ancestors in preserving the ideals of the communist ethic and building the "ideal" socialist society. In fact, one of Khrushchev's main criticisms was that the film showed the generation of the 1960s as hesitant seekers of the ultimate truth, as the people who did not know how to live and what to strive for (*Iskusstvo Kino*, 1988).

Instead of following traditional socialist realism in depicting characters and uncovering the narrative, *I Am Twenty* demonstrates techniques resembling the French New Wave style that emerged in Europe in the wake of the World War II. In fact, Khutsiev's film has a documentary-like feel, especially when the camera attentively follows the disillusioned protagonist through the busy streets of Moscow capturing him in one long take. These

continuous shots allow us to see the real Moscow of 1965 in all its urban sophistication and glorification of conformism, while we contemplate Sergei in his existential quest for self-actualization questioning the existing socialist dogmas and rules. Unable to find the answers in the socialist reality and culture the protagonist seeks purpose and contentment in the counterculture of jazz, poetry, and boogie woogie. In one of the scenes Khutsiev captures the real figures of the Russian New Wave including poets Andrei Voznesensky, Bulat Okudzhava, Bella Akhmadulina and cinematographer Andrei Tarkovsky, who also searched for answers and inspiration in the ideological vacuum of the USSR that could not provide neither the latter, nor the former.

As pointed out by a Russian professor of film studies Andrey Shcherbenok, the Soviet cinematography of the late thaw era and onwards should be analyzed in the context of an intellectual and spiritual stagnation of Soviet society as a whole. In his book on identity crisis that was mirrored in the Soviet films of 1970s, Shcherbenok (2013) argues:

When a problem of one's personal crisis is repeated from one film to another, it becomes a social symptom, rather than an issue that considers concrete or theoretical elements of the problem as challenges inviting the people involved to change the situation. At the same time, the depleted and decaying environment portrayed in the late Soviet films further demonstrates the unforeseen but inevitably approaching end of the Soviet civilization. (p. 3)

In other words, the inability of the protagonists presented in the Soviet films of the stagnation era (1970s and beyond) to resolve existential dilemmas is directly connected to the crisis of the official value system and the Soviet ideology as a whole. A vivid example of this recurring theme typified by one's search for happiness is the film *Stalker* directed by Andrei Tarkovsky in 1979. Loosely based on the Strugatskys' novel *Roadside Picnic*, the main protagonists of this film search for the "magic" Room located in the Zone, which is a mysterious abstract place that fulfills one's deepest wishes. The end of the film leaves

protagonists as well as the audience with a feeling of incompleteness and emptiness, since none of them accomplish what they intended. The Writer does not enter the room because of his uncertainty and inability to decide what he actually wants, the Professor does not have guts to destroy it, while Stalker eventually loses his only hope in humanity.

Stalker's desperate monologue toward the end of the film vividly captures the ideological and cultural stagnation of the 1970s: "I am so tired of this indifference! Calling themselves intellectuals, those writers and scientists... They don't believe in anything. They've got the organ with which one believes atrophied for lack of use!" (*Stalker*, 1979). In this pessimistic bravado Tarkovsky and the Strugatskys brothers, who wrote the script for the film refer to the problem of self-actualization and inability of the masses to articulate their own wishes because the reality propagated by the Soviet government was fake, ever shifting and unstable which they asserted, had become absolutely obvious by the 1970s. Instead of becoming a better version of themselves as it was initially planned by the communist party, the Soviet intellectuals lost any trust in the future becoming a society where no one believes in anything, and this is exactly what Tarkovsky shows in *Stalker*.

The famous Russian director also touched upon the symbolism of the *Zone* which refers to the Soviet perception of the West as an abstract place on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In *Stalker* the *Zone* works like one's imagination, since akin to the reality it is ever changing and deceiving. This film correlates with Shcherbenok's proposition about the recurring tendency within the late Soviet cinematography to portray reality in the films of the 1970s as decaying, hopeless, and gray (Shcherbenok, 2013). However, the Russian scholar tends to underestimate the importance of the *Zone* and its imagery in Tarkovsky's cinematic masterpiece. In fact, while the territory outside the *Zone* is shot in grubby sepia showing its oppressiveness and hopelessness, the *Zone* is the only place that appears in vibrant colors. The use of colors as a cinematic technique is applied in order to further juxtapose the Soviet reality

with the unknown but promising space of the Zone. Thus, Tarkovsky's Zone is less ambivalent and more critical about the Soviet reality compared to the Zone depicted in Strugatskys' *Roadside Picnic*. An important shift that appears in the film comes from the Zone's ultimate power over humankind. If in the novel the characters are somewhat in charge of their destiny (Red is in charge of his decision to keep visiting the Zone, Kirill follows his dream of going there even though he dies after his trip, the artifacts are utilized based on one's needs), in the film everyone becomes relegated only to his or her relationship to the Zone. The Writer depends on the Zone as he believes that it will bring him inspiration, the Professor wants to examine it from the scientific point of view for the sake of humanity's progress, while Stalker sees it as a land of opportunity that allows him to escape the existing world order that he so despises.

Therefore, for Tarkovsky the Zone means different things to the people who go there, and importantly, their final goal is the Room that grants its visitors the fulfillment of their most sacred wishes. Tarkovsky created the Room as a substitution for the Strugatskys' Golden Sphere that similarly granted the fulfillment of one's innermost desires. So, for the Writer and the Professor, the journey is rather exasperating as they do not know what to expect from the Zone and are not sure whether the Room will make their wishes come true, not to mention that they do not even know what to wish for as they appear to be hopeless and cynical. On the other hand, for Stalker the time spent in the Zone is peaceful and pleasant, he seems to be enchanted by it, and truly believes in its magic properties. When the camera captures Stalker, it slowly lingers on him against the beautiful green landscape of the Zone, allowing the audience to contemplate and reflect on eternal philosophical questions of what is our purpose and where do we truly belong. The slow camera movement also makes the viewer understand the complex nature of the Zone, that it presents both natural and supernatural properties.

At the same time, the inhabitants of the real world in the cinematic space of *Stalker* appear to be exhausted, empty, hopeless, and worn down just like their environment. While the

Zone looks green, organic, peaceful and colorful creating a vivid contrast to the deteriorating austerity that exists outside of it. Overall, the cinematic portrayal of the Zone by Tarkovsky further demonstrates the shared perception of the intelligentsia about the West as an unknown but alluring space, as a place that thrives based on its own rules, yet is guarded and forbidden, and thus is only an imaginative construct in the minds of the people who supposedly do not belong there.

Dissent for National Self-Determination

Coming back to the idea of the Soviet dissident movement that questioned the communist ideology and facilitated such critical literary texts and films that are discussed above, even though in the 1970s it has become almost synonymous to the human rights movement it was not limited to it (Alexeyeva, 1987). As a matter of fact, Alexeyeva was a dissident during the thaw era and beyond, even after she fled to the United States in 1977 in order to avoid an arrest for being a member of the underground press (samizdat) called *Chronicle of Current Events* that elucidated the violations of human rights in the Soviet Union (Bigg, 2016). Even though Alexeyeva herself was a human rights activist, she acknowledged the existence of two other essential types of dissent in the USSR and paid close attention to them, that is, national and religious movements. She points out that these movements were especially widespread and active during the thaw era and perestroika (Alexeyeva, 1987). Considering that in the last decade of the USSR's existence the communist party was immensely challenged by the republics which actively fought for political and economic sovereignty and legal supremacy over the union's draconian laws, the question of national dissent comes to the fore as this power struggle certainly facilitated the failure of status quo. Evidently, the question of nation and nationality constituted an essential counterforce to the Soviet ideological machine, since the opposition to Russo-centrism was creating tension in both the periphery and Moscow (Alexeyeva, 1987). These kinds of movements – for the

protection of local national cultures – were precursors to some of the movements in the 1970s and 1980s that in turn weakened the Soviet project internally and affected the collapse of the system.

In order to fully understand the nature of the movement for national self-determination and how it affected the outcome of perestroika, one needs to take into consideration the structure of the Soviet Union. The USSR existed under the system of socialist federalism where the fifteen republics held a truly impotent position in terms of economy, politics and culture (Saxer, 1992). One would possibly expect the country driven by the idea of class equality to be relatively equal at least with regard to income distribution; however, it was not the case in the former Soviet Union where all financial allocations were controlled by Moscow. For example, research about the regional economic disparities in the former USSR demonstrates the following:

The pattern of investment distribution among the union republics during the period of 1976-88 does not reveal any systematic effort to use the allocation of investment as a policy tool for reducing development disparities, particularly when allowance is made for the differing rates of population growth. (Ozornoy, 1991, p. 386)

Consequently, the economic inequality greatly varies from one republic to another, as each of them has different demographic indicators and levels of development, and thus should not be considered as one whole entity. Ozornoy, however, only considered financial distributions coming *from* the center (Moscow) and not the ones coming *in* the form of taxes from the republics. Fortunately, this gap is filled with another study pointing out that the general provision governing tax sharing between the Union and the republican budgets was that the enterprises were under all-union jurisdiction, and had to pay 40 percent of profit taxes to the republican budget with the rest disposed to the central budget (Orlowski, 1992). This makes

the issue of regional economic discrepancies even more unfair, since it shows that the officials in Moscow did not pay proper attention to the republics.

At this point, there is a need to indicate Stalin's understanding of the nation, as it paved the way to the Soviet domestic policy and gave momentum to the development of the national dissident movement. As pointed out by Stalin in his book on the national question of the USSR, "a nation is a stable community based upon the common possession of a common language, a common territory, and a common psychological make-up manifesting itself in common specific features of national culture" (Slider, 1985). Because of this uniform definition, the communist party faced a challenging task in terms of establishing one nation out of many, considering that the Soviet Union was a multinational entity that consisted of different countries ranging from Caucasus to Central Asia each having their own language and culture. Nevertheless, the long term goal of the Soviet national policy was "the integration of all national groups into a universal (communist) empire" (Slider, 1985).

As pointed out by Grenoble in his study on Soviet domestic policy and its impact on language and culture, the massive homogenization of national minorities was manifested in the policy of Russification that took place starting in 1939 (Grenoble, 2003). As a result of the massive Russification, the Russian language and Russians became *primus inter pares* among many indigenous languages and minorities present in the Soviet bloc. The clearest example of this Russo-centrism is the language policy introduced in the 1940's, where Russian was proclaimed as the lingua franca which was followed by mandatory cyrillicization of Latin and Arabic alphabets that were used in the Baltic states and Central Asia, respectively (Grenoble, 2003). Furthermore, any attempt to maintain indigenous culture or religion was considered "petty-bourgeois nationalism", and the communist party used it as an accusation against national minorities that were against Russification (including Ukrainians, Lithuanians,

Estonians, Georgians, Armenians, and nationalities of Central Asia – Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and etc).

Central Asian Literature of the Stagnation Period

After the disintegration of the USSR international scholars have mostly focused on the fate of Western Soviet Republics in the process of their transition to independence and capitalism. Meanwhile Central Asia represented by five republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan received less attention and remained relatively understudied. However, this region makes an interesting case study due to its landlocked location, history of transition to the Soviet satellite republics, vastness as well as ethnic and cultural diversity. In fact, Central Asia has a peculiar history of transition from being a locus of Muslim culture to a place where religion was considered as “the opium of the people”. Although this famous saying by Marx is quite misunderstood as it is ripped out of the context. In fact, what goes after these words states that people actually need such “opium”, since they always seek answers to the questions of their creation (Amin, 1989). And religion provides a simple explanation serving as sort of a blinder and at the same time, a solution for various problems in life.

As pointed out by academicians Nourzhanov and Bleuer (2013) in their recent research on Tajikistan, it was particularly hard for the Soviet government to homogenize Central Asia because of its ethnic diversity and the fact that before the existence of the USSR there were no real borders in the region. Furthermore, before 1924 Central Asians were grouped and lived in certain areas based on religion, traditions as well as language, and due to their nomadic lifestyles of some of the nations these locations were not defined by borders (Nourzhanov & Bleuer, 2013). However, under the Soviets, the people’s national and ethnic identity became defined as strictly as the borders that they demarcated. Becoming a part of the Soviet project implied *inter alia* standardization of language, suppression of religious beliefs and any pre-

existing ethnic identities based on one's clan or tribe, and arrangement of traditions that confined them to the Soviet ideology.

On the other hand, since Nourzhanov and Bleuer focus their study only on Tajikistan, the authors tend to undermine the larger impact of the Soviet policy on the region and the significance of local movements for national self-determination that sprung in Central Asia because of these policies. As pointed out by Fiona Hill (2002), a frequent commentator on Russian and Eurasian affairs, similarly to any other imperialist state, the USSR left a burdening colonial legacy to its satellite republics in the form of economic and cultural deprivation. Furthermore, the Central Asian states were particularly damaged by collapse of the Soviet Union, as they were among the least developed in the USSR, and were not ready for the rapid changes in social, political and economic spheres. In fact, according to the World Bank, the years of 1990-1996 showed 20 to 60 percent decline in their GDP (Hill, 2002). At the same time, another group of scholars focused on the long-lasting environmental damage caused by the Soviet domestic policies exemplified numerous nuclear tests conducted at Semipalatinsk polygon (Eastern part of Kazakhstan) between 1949 and 1989 (Grosche, 2002). In fact, Grosche (2002) further points out that after gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan was left with the world's fourth largest nuclear weapon arsenal located in Semipalatinsk. Yet, the government decided to close the toxic testing site, dismantle the weaponry as well as all nuclear facilities that were left there by the Soviet authorities.

However, even the field of research about the Soviet colonial policy and its implications for the Central Asian region do not address the significant role played by local intelligentsia, who aimed at rediscovering their cultural heritage and national identity. Therefore, for the purposes of this study I shall analyze regional dissident literature that addressed the questions of national self-determination, which arguably paved the way to independence of Central Asian

republics and weakened the Soviet project from within. The works produced by Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals in turn, demonstrate that the local intelligentsia found ways of re-imagining the national identity of minorities contributing to their unity through the usage of Russian historical symbols (for instance, the Russian cultural manifesto *The Igor's Tale* that I shall discuss in the following passages.) Furthermore, these sentiments for national self-determination were enabled by the growing influence of dissidence in the 1970s and 1980s that opposed the injustices toward minorities in the Soviet Union, which altogether threatened the already crumbling Soviet Empire (Alexeyeva, 1987; Grenoble, 2003; Hill, 2002).

The most notable intervention by a non-Russian intellectual that publicly challenged the question of ethnic and cultural relations along with their consequences for Soviet and Central Asian history was done by Olzhas Suleimenov in his book *Az i Ya: The Book of a Well-Intentioned Reader* (*AZ i YA: Kniga Blagonamerennogo Chitatelia*) published in 1975. Suleimenov is a contemporary Kazakh poet, diplomat, politician, initiator and leader of the first anti-nuclear movement in the USSR called "Nevada – Semipalatinsk" founded in 1989, which advocated for the closure of the extensive Soviet nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk and other places in the world (Redzhepbaev, 2017). Suleimenov also became the first Kazakh intellectual who began the cultural debate concerning the Central Asian past by challenging the Soviet nationalist tradition in his controversial piece mentioned above. His book *Az i Ya* (the title refers to “Asia”) consists of two very different and loosely connected parts. The first part interprets the Russian historic chronicle *The Igor's Tale* also known as *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (*Slovo o Polku Igoreve*) based on its undetected Turkisms, claiming that the Slavs and the Turks have a long interconnected relationship (Suleimenov, 1975). While the second part of the book is less controversial and ambitious, as it is devoted to the history of the Sumerian language and attempts to draw its proximity to the Turkic language.

In order to analyze the reasons for the controversy and criticisms surrounding *Az i Ya*, it is necessary to understand what exactly the book tried to address. Suleimenov's seminal piece critically reexamines one of the most significant cultural artifacts of the Russian people – *The Igor's Tale*. Written in the form of an epic tale and dating back to the medieval times, particularly the Kievan period (late 12th century), *The Igor's Tale* has attracted a lot of attention and speculation ever since it was published back in 1800 (Likhachev, 1978). The text commemorates a crusade undertaken in 1185 by Igor Sviatoslavich, a Russian prince against the Polovtsy (Kipchaks or nomads) (*The Song of Igor's Campaign* 1960). It is important to mention that the epic Russian poem has a lot of obscurities attributed to the fact that it was rewritten and reinterpreted in the sixteenth century, which in turn became the topic of Suleimenov's book (Suleimenov, 1975). The author believes that these obscurities in the text hide the undetected Turkisms, which were misunderstood and thus changed by the Russian copyists of the text in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, in one of his interviews Suleimenov pointed out:

I became the first author, who claimed that the *The Igor's Tale* was written for a bilingual reader by a bilingual author. In fact, the people in the medieval Russia (Kievan Rus') used two languages (Russian and Turkic). I tried to prove it in *Az i Ya* based on the data from many ancient Russian sources. While the Soviet historical scholars believed that only few Turkic words were used in the Russian language in the course of the Mongol invasion of Kievan Rus'. However, *Az i Ya* addressed the invisible Turkisms, which have always been considered Russian, and perhaps this was the reason for harsh denunciation of my book. Oddly enough, it turned out that I was the first bilingual reader of *The Igor's Tale*. (Suleimenov, 2016)

As a result, in 504 lines contained in *The Igor's Tale* Suleimenov was able to detect more than 40 explicit Turkic terms (Suleimenov, 1975). Their diversity is fascinating ranging

from personal names, names of tribes to the rivers, cities, titles, and everyday notions. As pointed out by Frizman, a liberal Soviet literary critic and writer, this became the reason for the overwhelming attention and criticisms that *Az i Ya* confronted in the Soviet academic environment. In fact, the Soviet scholars accused Suleimenov of being “Anti-Russian” and pro-Turkic (Frizman, 2002). Even though the book was initially published in 1975, it was banned after strong criticism issued by academicians from the Academy of Sciences (in Moscow) as well as Brezhnev. Suleimenov was even forced to write a letter of apology for his attempt to reimagine the Russian historical tradition (Frizman, 2002).

However, when the book came out Suleimenov’s so-called “Anti-Russian” sentiment was not addressed explicitly, but was rather hidden under criticisms concerning the book’s linguistic and scientific inaccuracy, since the Soviets acted as if the minorities had equal opportunities and rights in the USSR. For example, one of the supposedly most radical criticisms of *Az i Ya* was expressed by a renown Soviet linguist and patriot, Dmitrii Likhachev, who discharged Suleimenov’s piece claiming that it lacks “any sense of responsibility toward the historical facts” and calling it a “fiction-research” (Likhachev, 1978, p. 9). Whether Likhachev was unable or simply reluctant to see what the Kazakh intellectual was addressing in his work remains unknown. However, I will demonstrate that *Az i Ya* presents a breakthrough in the history of non-Russian intelligentsia and its relationship to the long-lasting Soviet tradition of Russocentrism, as it tackled some deep cultural issues concerning the national identity of Central Asian people.

At the same time, while other scholars who studied the politics of *Az i Ya* mainly focused on ethnic and minority rights manifested in the Central Asian literature, they did not take into consideration a particular historical aspect that enabled the creation of such piece. I shall argue that these books should be understood as part of the larger cultural emergence of

dissent in the 1970s. In fact, the 1970s symbolized an era of active search for oneself both spiritually and nationally, especially among the intelligentsia, which eventually paved the way to the independence of satellite states (Bykov, 2014; English, 2000). This search for oneself can be exemplified by the cinema of that time as well as the literature written in the stagnant period including but not limited to reflective films of Andrei Tarkovsky, dark and multilayered works by the Strugatsky brothers, philosophical poems of Joseph Brodsky, Chingiz Aitmatov's novels on the search for the Soviet memory, and etc.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Alexeyeva, the 1970s saw a strong wave of dissidents addressing the injustices of the Soviet system toward the minorities, such as the Crimean Tatars who had been evicted from their homelands to the steppes of Kazakhstan, Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists fighting for their independence, and Jews who wanted to emigrate from the Soviet Union because of the growing anti-Semitism among the Russian nationalists (Alexeyeva, 1987). As later analyzed by Vladislav Zubok, a professor of international history at the London School of Economics, the Russian intelligentsia was particularly inspired by the ideas of Lev Gumilev, a prominent Soviet historian, anthropologist and translator from Persian, who spent years in the Gulag (Zubok, 2011). There Gumilev studied the history of the Central Asian nomadic people, as he was greatly influenced by the Eurasian intellectuals from the camps. The Soviet historian claimed that the Russian civilization cannot be considered a truly European entity but rather is a Eurasian geopolitical and cultural phenomenon, since Russian ethnos, culture and language were deeply influenced by the Turks and Mongols (Zubok, 2011). Furthermore, Gumilev believed that "Europe was in a state of permanent decline and that rejuvenation could come only from the East" (Zubok, 2011, p. 203). Interestingly, in the 1950s Gumilev was imprisoned in the Zhezkazgan camp located in central Kazakhstan with Suleimenov's father, a Kazakh cavalry officer Omar Suleimenov (Suleimenov, 2016).

The Russian historian and the Kazakh writer knew each other, and Suleimenov's *Az i Ya* was in part inspired by Gumilev's views on the Turkic origins of the Russian ethnos (Bassin, 2016). Furthermore, perhaps Suleimenov was aware of Lev Gumilev's popularity within the dissidents as well as of his successful theories about the cultural significance of the nomadic people shared among the Soviet intellectuals. Thus it can be argued that these domestic sentiments for resurrection of the national memory and Central Asian self-determination, in turn, enabled the creation of such dissent oriented literature as *Az i Ya* that addressed the questions of individualism along with national memory, and suggested a strong influence of Turkic language and history on traditional, supposedly truly Russian heritage of *The Igor's Tale*.

As pointed out by Harsha Ram, a contemporary scholar and professor from the department of Slavic Languages and Literature at University of California, Berkeley, the reason for harsh criticisms of *Az i Ya* in the late Soviet period is explained by the fact it aimed to restore the past of the Kazakh people that had been consistently and repeatedly erased from the nation's memory (Ram, 2001). Furthermore, in rediscovering this past, Suleimenov tried to place the Turkic nations that lived on the territory of Central Asia before the USSR's annexation into the larger history of the region. Ram goes further in examining the politics of *Az i Ya* by claiming that Suleimenov questioned the very nature and "extent of cultural interaction between the Slavic and Turkic peoples" in his interpretation of the lexical and etymological obscurities of the *Igor Tale* as Turkisms (Ram, 2001). In addition, even the book's title *Az i Ya* suggests Suleimenov's cultural assertion about the national self-awareness of the Kazakh people that was suppressed by the Soviet project in its quest for building "one common nation" that shares common language, culture and psyche, as proclaimed by Stalin in 1950. Ram (2001) in his discussion of the title, points out:

Corresponding to the English place-name Asia, the Russian title *Az i Ya* is split by Suleimenov into its three constituent syllables Az-i-ya. Thus broken down, the title becomes a pun, a folk-etymology that derives the geographical term Asia from three Slavic words, az, the Old Slavic word for the first person pronoun "I," i, the conjunction and, and ya, the Russian word for the same first person pronoun "I": the title might thus also be translated "I and I." (p. 296)

The author claims that by naming the book in such way, Suleimenov addressed the issue of national identity shared among ethnic groups of Central Asia. These groups, which initially constituted one nation were forcefully differentiated based on their territorial affiliations (that were not permanent, as mentioned before), and then brought together again under supposedly uniting and common Soviet ideology (Ram, 2001). In this regard, Suleimenov during one of his latest interviews said: "The dream of a monoethnic state is not just mistaken but damaging – for Kazakhs above all" (Suleimenov, 2016). In the context of this research, this comment can be considered as the author's stand regarding the failure of the Soviet project to create one nation out of many disregarding local traditions, ethnic differentiations and national identities.

While *Az i Ya* was met with harsh criticism from the Soviet cultural elite as well as the authorities, there was another literary piece written by Kyrgyz intellectual Chingiz Aitmatov in 1980, which also touched upon the issues of national identity but in a subtler and more disguised way, and thus was not banned. Because of his parents, who had studied in Russian schools, Aitmatov was exposed to Russian language, literature and culture from a very early age (Mozur, 1982). Like Suleimenov, he was bilingual (fluent in Russian and Kyrgyz languages), and became famous for his novels in Russian. For the purposes of this research, I shall focus on Aitmatov's novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (*I Dol'she Veka*

Dlitsia Den'), in which he popularized the notion of “mankurt”, a person who does not know anything about his past and lives unthinkingly following the rules. In this novel Kyrgyz intellectual Aitmatov told a Kazakh story. Indeed, his characters are Kazakhs travelling through the Kazakh steppes.

The novel has a non-linear narrative structure and tells three different stories happening in the present, future and past. As pointed out by Canadian scholar Norman Shneidman, author of numerous books about Aitmatov's literary heritage, "The mankurt motif, taken from Central Asian lore, is the dominant idea of the novel and connects the different narrative levels and time sequences" (Shneidman, 1980, p. 132). The most notable and at the same time the scariest tale about mankurts takes place in the past, and describes the terrible fate of the soldiers captured by a nomadic tribe Zhuan Zhuan, who believed that in order to create “perfect” slaves, they need to erase the memories of the captured victims. In order to complete this task, Zhuan people stretched camel skin over the shaven head of their prisoners and attached an iron hoop on their heads leaving the victims in the steppe under the blazing sun. The dried out camel skin then created an enormous pressure on the skull, and nine out of ten died. This can be read as a metaphor for the inability of the people to live without remembering their past, that there is no present without a past, and no future without knowing where you came from and what is your purpose. Therefore, those who stayed alive turned into absolutely obedient slaves forgetting their past and origin, suffering from enormous constant pain caused by the iron hoop (Aitmatov, 1980).

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years tells a story of Edigei, a railway worker who lost his best friend Kazangap, and wants to bury him in the ancient Ana-Beiit cemetery that is surrounded with many legends and traditions *inter alia* with the horrible tale of mankurt. The legend describing how to create unquestionably obedient slaves by erasing their memories

correlates with the Soviet project in its treatment of ethnic minorities by disregarding their national consciousness. As pointed out by Katerina Clark, an American-Australian scholar who analyzed *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, the theme of memory has been actively discussed by various writers of the Soviet political spectrum (Clark, 1984). It is important to mention however that memory played an especially significant role in the literature of ethnic minorities, which the Central Asian intellectuals used in order to engage with an idea of national identity and as a motivation for their fellow citizens to rediscover their cultural heritage. For instance, the protagonist of Aitmatov's novel, Edigei is a Muslim that respects Kazakh traditions, and thus his aim is to bury his friend in a cemetery located in a remote desert of Kazakhstan that has a long history of Kazakh folkloric tales (Aitmatov, 1980). After the book was published, the term *mankurt* was widely applied in everyday Soviet speech, describing the alienation that non-Russians had toward a society that repressed them and distorted their history and cultural memory (Horton & Brashinsky, 1992).

There is another storyline woven into the fabric of Aitmatov's novel, which happens in the future and is about two astronauts from the United States and the Soviet Union. They find an extraterrestrial civilization called the Forest Brest (*Lesnaia grud'*) and decide to visit the planet without telling their superiors on Earth, since they are afraid that the people would use this opportunity to escalate their hostilities. Correspondingly to the Strugatsky brothers, Aitmatov disguises his inner concerns about the country's future and its isolationism as a sci-fi plot happening in the distant future in order to pass the censorship. Considering the broader historical context of this anti-isolationist tendency among the intelligentsia, it can be argued that it was enabled by the earlier thaw era under Khrushchev. As pointed out by English, the 1980s was an era of an expanded intercourse with Western literature, sociology, and economy among the academicians, which motivated the intellectuals to lean toward "broader integration with the liberal international community" (English, 2000, p. 126). Although this was not

explicitly demonstrated in the literature of the time, we can see the hints of this global outlook in Aitmatov's novel.

The developed civilization depicted in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* represents an ideal world, a world without wars, national and religious differences, a world built on principles of justice and universal goodness. The inhabitants of this planet offer their friendship and cooperation to earthlings, but the people are not ready for such contact. The Earth, torn by social and political conflicts decides to refuse cooperation, and surrounds itself with an impenetrable ring of combat robots. As suggested by Clark, this military operation codenamed Operation Iron Hoop correlates with the legend of mankurt with its iron hoops worn on the people's heads and desire to be in total control of them (Clark, 1984). Therefore, the tale of mankurt is not just an old legend. It connects different parts of the narrative together and serves as central theme of the novel. For instance, the story of Edigei correlates with this tale as his quest for burying Kazangap ends in the cemetery that is mystified by the legend of mankurt. The sci-fi part of the novel exemplified by the story of the Forest Breast planet also echoes the tale, since the people decide to surround the Earth with an iron hoop in order to prevent cooperation with more intelligent extraterrestrial mind. Thus the legend of mankurt represents the main idea of the novel: the human race as a whole and each individual deprived of historical memory, having forgotten or trying to forget his own past and past of his people turns into a puppet that is easy to manipulate for those who have more power. As a result, historical memory can be considered as a kind of spiritual vaccination against immorality and underdevelopment.

On the other hand, as pointed out by Erika Haber in her recent contribution to the field of Aitmatov's literary universe, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* demonstrates how legends provide us with a means of comprehending and reinterpreting the world (Haber, 2003).

The author suggests that because the tale of mankurt is the central theme of the novel and can be applied to all of its narratives (be it present, past or future), it becomes “no less possible or plausible than the Soviet reality” (Haber, 2003, p. 143). Meaning that Aitmatov’s uses the legend as a tool for contrasting it with the Soviet reality that is built on artificially created dogmas that are neither necessarily real or true. However, by proposing that the author considers Soviet ideology as merely a myth, Haber underestimates the significance of memory in Aitmatov’s novel. Since the role of Kazakh folkloric legends in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* represent exactly this notion of national self-consciousness that was erased from the memory of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, even the story of the Forest Breast engages with the idea of time which is inevitably related to remembrance. While the tale of mankurt refers to the erasure of national identity of ethnic minorities in the past, the Iron Hoop built by the earthlings in the sci-fi narrative of the novel symbolizes the Iron Curtain which isolates the Soviets (Russians and minorities) from their future. By setting up the hostile isolationist Iron Hoop, the superiors in Aitmatov’s book separate themselves from something that could possibly advance the whole nation, which echoes the ideas shared among the progressive outward looking intelligentsia of the time.

Conclusion

On the other hand, in order to understand the development of western thought among intellectuals, one needs to take into consideration broader dynamics and its proliferation among the masses. So, what exactly did westernization mean to the Soviet people and why did it become so appealing to them? A peculiar thing about the Soviet nation was that the majority of population believed that the communist ideas and ideals were universal and outward looking, yet at the same time, they were also aware of the fact that travelling abroad was an unattainable goal. As a result, the world beyond the border was viewed as something very distant from reality, something mysterious and unknown, and was not necessarily about any real location.

Moreover, “the West” became the archetypal embodiment of this abstract place which could not be encountered, yet was so attractive in its foreignness. The widespread interest in the western thought and culture can be explained by the fact that the Soviet government was too conformist in its definitions of cultural narratives and too strict in imposing censorship in cinema, music and art.

As pointed out by Alexander, culture can be conceived as a system of symbolic codes that identify the good and the evil. These symbolic codes are built on a set of binaries which in turn, inform public action by providing a powerful moral imperative (Alexander 1993). In the case of the Soviet Union, the major binary was represented by the conflicting ideas and values between the East and West, communism with its manifestation of collective good, classless society, and hypernormalization of culture versus capitalism exemplified by individualistic attitudes, bourgeois values and detrimental cultural diversity. Rather than applying these binary imperatives only to the political realm, the Soviet government was trying to shape public conscience about culture using the binary rhetoric as well. In fact, the communist party was persistently attempting to impose its understanding of good and bad forms of international culture (Yurchak, 2006). For instance, some forms of jazz (usually played in an alternative way arranged to fit Soviet context and musical style or inserted in Soviet songs) were accepted by the government and was allowed to be played even during official gatherings. While if it was a pure avant-garde jazz performed without any interpretations, the authorities perceived it as the music that represented detrimental “bourgeois style” and thus, was condemned as low culture (Yurchak, 2006).

The same binaries of good vs bad were used in the realm of cultural production. In fact, all cultural production including art, writing, cinematography, and music were evaluated by the Soviet government as right (good) or wrong (bad) from a political viewpoint (Yurchak, 2006). This idea was manifested during Stalin’s reign, when the cultural sphere of people’s lives was

under attack of another set of binaries represented by distinction between cosmopolitanism and internationalism. The Soviet vision was hostile to the former, since cosmopolitanism was depicted by the government as the evil legacy of Western imperialism that aimed to sabotage patriotic morals and eventually impair people's national sovereignty. On the other hand, the latter was not perceived as detrimental to the individual identity and patriotic values. Internationalism was considered to be good and enriching to the national culture, since it did not undermine it (Yurchak 2006). Such binary framework in turn, resulted in loose interpretation of western cultural forms and their influences. For instance, in some cases foreign culture was perceived as good internationalism pertaining to the common realistic representations of Soviet culture, while in another situations it was seen as bad cosmopolitanism that conveys the ideas of bourgeoisie and malevolent capitalism represented by low moral standards, individualism and glorification of massive consumption.

As a result of the government's policies toward conformism and hypernormalization in all aspects of life Soviet people began seeking freedom and diversity in various cultural and intellectual manifestations from the West represented by foreign languages, European literature, western philosophy, avant-garde jazz, rock bands, rock and roll, and cinema in quest of alternative points of view and expressions of oneself. Despite of the people's outward, and sometimes, inward, submission to the official communist worldview, the majority of population became preoccupied with Western way of life which the Soviets tried to imitate as much as it was possible (Shlapentokh, 1999). Such tendency became most evident during 1960s, the era known as the cultural thaw that happened after Stalin's death and turned out to be the most sensitive political, cultural and social issue in the Soviet Union. In fact, in order to trace this "destructive" tendencies within the Soviet population, the government starts conducting national sociological research regarding people's preferences in various cultural forms and its origins. For instance, as pointed out by Shlapentokh (1999), a survey conducted

by *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (Literature Newspaper) in 1973, shown that one-third of all Soviet youth openly asserted (in spite of the government's utterly negative position toward the ideology of the Western lifestyle) that imitation of the Western culture was one of their primary values. While fifty-eight percent of the population declared that obtaining Western goods was among their ultimate goals.

The average Soviet person tried to obtain as much international information as he or she could, which became a challenging task considering the regime's strict control of any facts about the West. At the same time, while international news attracted individuals of all educational backgrounds, interest in Western culture represented by literature and philosophy to a greater extent appealed to the intelligentsia who were able to understand these sources in the original language in which they were written. In fact, in the Soviet Union and pre-revolutionary Russia, as well as in contemporary Russia, knowledge of foreign languages indicated one's socio-cultural prestige (Shlapentokh, 1999). In the USSR this high social status based on an individual's ability to speak different languages was predominantly monopolized by intellectuals and apparatchiks (loyal officials from the Soviet government, representatives of the Communist Party). Obviously, this was considered to be an advantage, since it was opening possibilities for gaining knowledge about the Western culture in its pure form. While apparatchiks used this knowledge in order to inform the government, intellectuals were translating it to the masses. Thus, the Soviet intellectuals were regarded as crucial connectors between the people and Western ideas, and eventually became highly influential in forming public opinion.

At the same time, intellectuals became people's role models and the ones who inspired the rest of the population. In fact, based on the data obtained from a popular Soviet journal *Pravda* (*Truth*), the amount of those who stated their interest in foreign literature in 1978 was fifty percent higher compared to those who preferred Soviet literature, while the majority of

people wanted both, the Western authors as well as the native ones (Fomicheva, 1978). These findings demonstrate that the majority of Soviet people believed that it was possible and even more important, necessary to allow a peaceful coexistence of the Western and Soviet cultures. Moreover, this shows that the artificially imposed binary framework failed to endure in the people's minds.

An example of this internal confrontation between the communist party and the people is the August putsch of 1991, which vividly demonstrated that the Soviets were not willing to live under the old totalitarian system. Gennady Yanaev, who was one of the main initiators and executors of the coup has written memoirs that present a historical approach to the question of why did the State Emergency Committee initiated the coup against Gorbachev. By recollecting the events that happened in August of 1991, Yanaev (2010) points out that the stated goal of the Emergency Committee was to preserve the Soviet Union and suspend the ongoing reforms in the country. According to the committee members who consisted of high rank officials from the Communist Party and KGB, perestroika and glasnost were leading to the collapse of the USSR. However this putsch failed, demonstrating a shared attachment to democracy among the Soviets, since thousands of Muscovites surrounded the White House and rallied to oppose the return to the old political system.

The failure of the coup surprised many scholars, who believed that the Soviets would accept the restoration of the communist order since it offered at least some kind of social stability (Fleron, 1996; Gibson, 1997). However, the Western observers underestimated the impact of the new thinking shared among the Soviet people, the success of glasnost that paved the way to the emergence of neoliberal political structure, and their spiritual and materialistic hunger for individual freedom and consumption of Western goods, as demonstrated in the previous chapters. As a result, even though the putsch leaders aimed to preserve the USSR, the failed coup ironically turned out to have the opposite effect. In the short term, instead of

generating a conservative restoration, the coup triggered a revolution that eventually led to the collapse of the old totalitarian political structures (Gibson, 1997). One of the short term consequences of the coup, was that people all over the Soviet Union began to remove and even destroy the communist symbols, icons, images, and monuments. In the long term the coup resulted in the removal of conservative apparatchiks from their administrative offices (Yanaev, 2010). Furthermore, the Russian republic blocked the Communist party from conducting any political activity, and eventually, it ceased to exist as a strong ruling entity.

To conclude, the widespread interest of Western cultural forms during the decades preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union can be interpreted as an evidence of massive resistance to the communist regime, an aspiration to get away from it to the West. At the same time, the ambiguous interpretation of the Western culture by the Soviets cannot be considered to be true or even real. The idea of the West rather introduced the people to sort of a mythological world that created new intriguing opportunities for cultural production and interpretation, freedom that could not be obtained in the conformist reality of the Soviet state. The liquidation of intellectuals during Stalin era led to the erasure of collective memory and consciousness of the people, while the new conservative ideology and culture based on a set of binaries failed to persist because it was created in a vacuum of questionable communist ideals and ideas. What the Soviet government failed to understand is that culture cannot exist in a vacuum, it does not inform without being informed. Cultural forms, symbols, interpretations and manifestations can only exist in historical contexts and temporal circumstances, they are bound by various structures that restrain or lead to social change. However, manipulation or imposition of limitations on cultural production and interpretation, is deemed to failure, as we saw in the example of the collapse of the Soviet state.

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