

Thawed Selves

A Commentary on the Soviet First Person

BENJAMIN NATHANS

Here's a question worth pondering: why does the phrase "Soviet intellectual history" sound odd? Why is it that so much recent scholarship on the intellectual lives of Soviet citizens has focused almost entirely on their dialogues with themselves, on subjectivity and selfhood at the expense of the social? Is it that the USSR's war on capitalism eviscerated the public marketplace of ideas? Or that the enthronement of a state-sponsored ideology impoverished what had been a burgeoning tradition of social thought? Now that historians and anthropologists of the post-Stalin era have begun to dismantle the walls separating "official" from "nonconformist" texts, what structures of thought can we discern in the landscape of "developed socialism"?

The finely textured case studies by Andrew Stone and Benjamin Tromly give us an opportunity to address these questions from new vantage points. Their articles provide valuable portals into the lives and thought of two Soviet citizens who, in radically different ways, came to question some of the cardinal values of the Soviet state. Both lives were massively disrupted by that state, as were the lives of an extraordinary number of their contemporaries. In Anatolii Bakanichev's case, successive ordeals in Nazi and Soviet concentration camps produced a profound distancing from postwar Soviet society's deepest source of moral legitimacy: the triumph of Soviet good over Nazi evil. For Revol't Pimenov the sequence was reversed, as dissenting ideas led to biographical rupture in the form of arrest, imprisonment, and exile. In Stone's reading, Bakanichev's life offers an alternate genealogy of "other-thinking," distinct from the more familiar trajectories of metropolitan dissidents (such as Pimenov). At the same time, Stone argues, Bakanichev's self-emancipation from Soviet myth—along with glimpses of analogous processes in other World War II veterans—cracks open the supposedly monolithic worldview of the *frontovik* generation.

Bakanichev emerges as an emblem of unorthodox thought and genuine diversity in the mental world of late Soviet society.

Tromly's conclusions could hardly be more different. In his view, Revol't Pimenov's story speaks not to self-emancipation but to the tenacity of Stalin-era mental habits. What appears on the surface as Pimenov's revolt against Stalinism turns out to be a recapitulation (in the new circumstances of the "Thaw") of the quintessentially Bolshevik ambition to achieve an extrapersonal identity, the self as incarnation of revolutionary consciousness. Like Stone, Tromly endows his protagonist with broad significance in part by linking him to the subsequent history of the Soviet dissident movement. Here too, however, his conclusion points in a very different direction. Rather than offering an alternate path toward "other-thinking," Tromly argues, Pimenov's case casts "other-thinking" itself in a new and ambivalent light. Foreshadowing the dissidents' "extreme moral commitment" to "abstract ideals" (175), Pimenov's intellectual biography suggests "the lasting power of modes of Soviet selfhood" (175) into and beyond the Thaw era.

The stark contrast between the findings of these two talented historians does not trouble me. After all, they have reconstructed the intellectual journeys of two figures who were themselves quite different. Stone and Tromly belong to a cohort of scholars (among whom I count myself) who seek to scrutinize our still rather schematic understanding of what Zygmunt Bauman has called "second-generation socialism."¹ Rather than dwell on, much less attempt to resolve, the tensions between these richly suggestive accounts, I would like to examine individually some of their central arguments.



Each of the two articles leans heavily on a single concept. In Stone's case this is the idea of moral equivalence. Invoked more often (though not by Stone) for polemical than analytical purposes, moral equivalence typically asserts an identical degree of culpability between two parties, stances, methods, and so on, where one has been construed as morally worthier than the other. It is also typical for claims of moral equivalence to leave unclear exactly what is equivalent to what. These characteristics apply in spades to Bakanichev's account. As Stone notes, at various points in Bakanichev's memoir the two entities on either side of the ethical equal sign are Nazi POW camps and the Soviet Gulag, Hitler and Stalin, Nazi and Soviet ideologies, and the Third Reich and the Soviet Union *in toto*. Each of these pairings represents a radically different claim. Bakanichev's

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, "Second-Generation Socialism," in *Political Opposition in One-Party States*, ed. Leonard Schapiro (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1972), 217–40.

assertion that “the differences were only in the details” hardly helps, given the well-known proclivity of both God and the Devil to reside precisely there—in the details.

Moral equivalence is especially fraught where Nazi Germany is concerned. Soon after its demise, the Third Reich became a benchmark—in some quarters, *the* benchmark—of absolute evil in the modern world, a status that came close to placing Nazism outside conventional history. To argue that another country has descended to the same moral level implies not just condemnation but absolute condemnation and a similarly liminal position with respect to the ebb and flow of history. At the same time, to suggest moral equivalence to Nazism is to deprive the latter of its unique, defining status. Does an argument for moral equivalence between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union imply that things would have been no worse had the Nazis won the war? If it does not imply that, then in what meaningful sense were the two regimes morally equivalent?

Despite its ambiguity, Stone rightly emphasizes the heretical character of Bakanichev’s claim vis-à-vis the Soviet cult of victory in World War II. No less significant, it seems to me, is the tension between that claim and the official Soviet interpretation of Nazism as a historical phenomenon. For in order to arrive at the idea that the USSR and the Third Reich were morally equivalent, Bakanichev—as well as Vasilii Grossman, Mikhail Romm, and other like-minded Soviet individuals mentioned by Stone—had to abandon a different and at the time far more pervasive claim of equivalence. This was the doctrine, relentlessly advanced by Soviet propaganda before, during, and after the war, that German fascism was not just morally equivalent to, but part of the same historical species as, capitalism. Soviet ideology required no new taxonomy, much less a post-Marxist category such as totalitarianism, to explain what had transpired in Germany after 1933. In many ways the Soviets offered a far more social scientific, perhaps even a more rigorous way of thinking about fascism than the elusive notion of moral equivalence. And it is telling that in order to move beyond the Soviet interpretation of Nazism as a historically determined (*zakonomernoe*) extension of capitalism, Bakanichev felt the need to turn, or perhaps return, to the elementary categories of good and evil.



The governing concept in Tromly’s analysis is not moral but psychological. “Self-fashioning”—a term that privileges identity construction as an explanation for behavior—appears over a dozen times in his article. “Pimenov’s approach to post-Stalin changes, however, has to be understood,” Tromly writes, “in terms

of his self-fashioning as a revolutionary personality” (165). “Rather than a clear rejection of Stalin-era mental strictures,” he argues, “Pimenov’s self-fashioning continued the distinctly Soviet practice of treating the self as a politicized subject of history” (154). In contrast to Stone, whose information about Bakanichev comes almost exclusively from the latter’s unpublished memoir, Tromly’s investigation deploys a wide range of sources, from transcripts of KGB interrogations of Pimenov and his circle at the time of their arrest, to published memoirs by Pimenov and his close friend Boris Vail’, to Tromly’s 2005 interview with Pimenov’s ex-wife Irina Verblovskaia, who was arrested and sent to the Gulag in connection with Pimenov’s case.² These and other sources allow Tromly to draw on multiple readings of his protagonist’s persona and to creatively apply Jochen Hellbeck’s and Igal Halfin’s influential work on Stalin-era Soviet subjectivity to the post-Stalin era.

Tromly productively resists the notion that Khrushchev’s “Thaw” unleashed a process of liberalization. Like other scholars who have questioned that notion in the realm of high politics, sociability, and popular opinion, he argues that dissenting intellectuals such as Pimenov, despite their claim to seek the emancipation of the personality from the straitjacket of Stalinist dictatorship, remained captive to Bolshevik models of the self.³ His skepticism

² Tromly is sensitive to the challenge of using records of KGB interrogations as sources, seeking independent confirmation wherever possible from other kinds of texts. In my view, however, his mistrust on this score might have gone further. To claim, when writing about the 1950s, that “the KGB sought to find evidence . . . that would stand up in court” (155) and that “the interrogators did not resort to coercion or threats” (155 n. 15) strikes me as at best incomplete. Of course, the KGB liked evidence that could withstand legal scrutiny, but its employees were also known to use other kinds of evidence and, more to the point, it did not take much for the prosecution to “stand up in court,” given the state of Soviet jurisprudence, especially in “political” cases such as Pimenov’s. If in some instances interrogators did not physically harm, or even threaten to harm, their subjects, the reason is simple: they did not need to. In the 1950s, the possibility of state-sanctioned violence loomed so massively in the background as to be virtually omnipresent. Finally, while Irina Verblovskaia knew Pimenov as well as anyone, her overwhelmingly negative descriptions of his motives also require careful scrutiny. In her recently published memoir *Moi prekrasnyi strashnyi vek* (St. Petersburg: Zvezda, 2011—too recent for Tromly to have used in his article), Verblovskaia makes several claims regarding Pimenov’s activities that diverge from contemporary accounts. Referring to Pimenov as “my disturber of the peace” and citing his “absolute egocentrism,” she claims that he “thought neither about those near to him nor about those far away” (133, 139, 143). Her description of Pimenov as having “consciously and purposefully *constructed* his own biography” (133; emphasis in original) is very close to Tromly’s thesis on self-fashioning. I leave it to readers to ponder which kind of text presents the greater challenge for source criticism: transcripts of KGB interrogations or memoirs written at a half-century’s distance by a hostile ex-spouse.

³ See, for example, Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev’s*

serves as a healthy reminder that emancipatory projects are often far more specific about what it is they seek to escape than where they might lead. And yet I have my own doubts regarding Tromly's skepticism. By placing so much interpretive weight on the concept of self-fashioning, Tromly's article effectively situates the drama of Pimenov's life wholly within his psyche, thereby relegating his clash with the Stalinist order to the sidelines—or rather, reducing the content of that clash to symbolic material for Pimenov's identity formation. This strikes me as an instance of what is known as the psychologizing of dissent—the attempt to explain (away) oppositional behavior as a function of inner psychic needs. Half a century ago, the renowned historian Richard Hofstadter triggered a vigorous debate on this topic with his claim that populism—the American variety, not the Russian—was driven by its leaders' "status anxiety" and "paranoid style" rather than by any genuine popular grievances against political and financial elites.⁴ Written at roughly the same time but addressing the Russian variant, Martin Malia's intellectual biography of Alexander Herzen famously argued that it was his protagonist's "aristocratic ideal of honor" that "became the psychological source of revolutionary populism." "The democratic ideal arose in Russia," Malia concluded, "not by direct reflection on the plight of the masses, but through the introspection of relatively privileged individuals who, out of frustration, generalized from a sense of their own dignity to the ideal dignity of all men."⁵

Like Malia, who found in Herzen's "cult of individuality" the root of his political engagement, Tromly ascribes Pimenov's extraordinarily risky protests against the anticommunist campaign and the Soviet crackdown on Hungary in 1956 to his "cult of personality." The problem with these arguments is not that they are wrong, but that they shrink politics to the purely biographical—as if operating under the reversed slogan "The political is personal." Issues of identity and affect are, of course, never absent from

Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Robert Hornsby, *Citizens against the State: Political Dissent and Repression in Khrushchev's USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ On Hofstadter's work and the debate that ensued, see Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 219–23.

⁵ Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 421–22. In Hofstadter's case, the idea of a "paranoid style" was, among other things, part of an attempt to account for (and discredit) the hysteria of McCarthyism. For Malia, the idea that Herzen projected his own sense of affronted dignity onto the Russian peasantry was, among other things, a way of explaining (and discrediting) Russian socialism as an ideology of psychic compensation.

political as well as intellectual life, but neither do they monopolize it. By most accounts, as a young man Revol't Pimenov had an outsized sense of his own importance and perhaps even of his historical destiny. But this cannot eclipse the actual content of his conflicts with specific Soviet policies, foreign and domestic, nor can it explain dissenting behavior by other individuals who did not harbor such grandiose visions of themselves.

Understanding the nexus between consciousness and behavior is one of the greatest challenges in the human sciences—indeed, in the form of the mind/body enigma, it has been called the fundamental problem of Western philosophy. Fashioning an ideal self was certainly an important theme in Pimenov's youthful exploits, but I suspect it may explain less than Tromly wants it to. Even if we grant Pimenov's subjectivity an important role in his dissenting activities, I am inclined to regard that subjectivity as less Stalinist, and less instrumental, than Tromly does. I will attempt to illustrate my point—and conclude this essay—with a specific example.

In his closing speech at his 1957 trial on charges of anti-Soviet propaganda and participation in a counterrevolutionary organization, Pimenov related to the court how, as a young boy in the 1940s, he had once witnessed the shockingly brutal treatment of Gulag prisoners who were being transferred through the port of Magadan to the nearby concentration camp (Pimenov's family had recently moved to a local town, where his father worked on a collective farm). In his posthumously published memoirs, Pimenov describes how this episode made its way into his speech:

This picture engraved itself as an image in my memory. I would often "see" this scene with my mind's eye. As I recounted it in court as part of my explanation of how my political views were formed.... I pronounced these words: "I had to decide for myself: with whom do I stand—with those who treat people this way, or with those who are subjected to such treatment?" I spoke the truth. And my lawyer, Raikhman, was correct when he assigned this scene an important place in his speech on behalf of the defense, [arguing that] my political position was formed under the influence of Soviet, and only Soviet, reality, not of "Western propaganda." But as with everything that is said in court, this was only a partial, prepared truth. I didn't declare my oath of Hannibal there, in the Bay of Nagaev [at the Magadan port], but some nine years later, when I read Herzen and his famous slogan "I stand not with those who do the hanging, but with those who are hanged." ... At the time I actually witnessed [the scene], I didn't draw or attempt to draw any broad political or social conclusions from it. It's like when you're riding in a bus, and it slows down at a turn, and you see in the opposite lane, stretched out across the pavement, the arm of a dead bicyclist and his crumpled

bicycle. You see this—and you don't demand that the bus stop, or that they execute the traffic cop, or forbid automobile traffic or get rid of bicycles, or reform society so that this kind of thing wouldn't be possible. You see it and, accepting the sad necessity, you continue on your way. So it was with me in 1943 or 1944; I saw the shipment of *zeks* in the Bay of Nagaevo and I accepted this [as] life.⁶

Citing this same passage, Tromly delivers an unsympathetic verdict: Pimenov “created stories about his witnessing of the Gulag during his childhood years in Magadan” (174 n. 101); Pimenov “used his trial as a propaganda opportunity, going so far as to embellish his own biographical story for greater effect” (173–74). Like his larger claim that Pimenov's political activism was driven by his “self-fashioning as a revolutionary personality” (165) this verdict seems not so much wrong as narrow. Insofar as Pimenov's account reveals a complex process of selection, appropriation, and reinterpretation of memory across layers of subsequent experience (and reading), it does not strike me as specifically indebted to “Stalinist subjectivity.” Perhaps it owes something to deeper patterns of memory culture in the Russian intelligentsia, with its magnetic literary models capable of organizing the life of the reader—and with its nearly inevitable nod to Herzen. Or is this simply the way human memory works, endlessly weaving experience with representations of experience?

Dept. of History
University of Pennsylvania
208 College Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6379 USA
bnathans@history.upenn.edu

⁶ Revol't Ivanovich Pimenov, “Dela semeinye,” in his *Vospominaniia*, vol. 1, in *Dokumenty po istorii dvizheniia inakomyслиashchikh*, no. 6, ed. Nikolai Mitrokhin (Moscow: Panorama, 1996), 382–83.