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Within Thinkers’ Worlds: On The Anti-Soviet Promotion Of Honor And Humanity In The Works Of Soviet And Post-Soviet Historians

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WITHIN THINKERS’ WORLDS: ON THE ANTI-SOVIET PROMOTION OF HONOR AND HUMANITY IN THE WORKS OF SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET HISTORIANS

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by
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Abstract

Ilia Leon Bortsov-Shrugo

WITHIN THINKERS’ WORLDS: ON THE ANTI-SOVIET PROMOTION OF HONOR AND HUMANITY IN THE WORKS OF SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET HISTORIANS

This dissertation focuses on three Soviet and post-Soviet historians: Natan Eidelman, Yakov Gordin, and Yuri Lotman. It is my intention to show that through their published works as well as their public appearances, these men used their profession to subtly work against the realities, ideology and principles of the USSR, attempting to fight against the moral degradation enforced by this society by means of Aesopian language, and by a veiled system of references to their present, hidden in their works on the past. In studying the published works of these historians, as well as their personal biographies and reputations, I was convinced that they did indeed, deliberately and with full consciousness of their actions, attempt to undermine the Soviet ideology and educational demands by providing their readers and students with examples of moral and intellectual excellence which, in Russian history, led them to seek their models in the so-called ‘Golden’, Alexandrian period, that is to say the first quarter of the 19th century. The models they found in this period—primarily members of the Decembrist Rebellion and Alexander Pushkin, became for them models of honorable and decent behavior which, in their current reality, could not be equaled. They used these models to present alternative patterns of thought and morality to their Soviet-era audience, and thereby sought to fight against the pervasive influence of communist ideology.
Introduction

The purpose of this study is to attempt a textual analysis of the works of three major late Soviet-period historians or,—as some would have it,—popularizers of history, in order to determine whether they attempted to use their works as vehicles for what the Soviet state would consider “dissident” ideas. Specifically, it is my intention to examine the published works of Natan Eidelman, Yakov Gordin and Yuri Lotman—all three of whom grew up and came of age during the first and most fearsome period in Soviet history, and began to practice writing and pedagogy in the relatively less bloodthirsty “Thaw” and “Stagnation” periods,—in search of specific points at which their manner of writing about the Imperial period of Russian history would give subtle messages to the late-Soviet reader—messages which the Soviet state would have considered improper at best and seditious at worst and at times allowed to be published only because Soviet censors in the latest period of Soviet history no longer feared or cared enough to do their jobs and when it was possible to publish practically anything. I intend to focus particularly on the elements in their writing which have to do with the topic of human dignity and the
role it played—and continues to play—in Soviet and Russian society.

It is necessary to begin with a description of the atmosphere in which these three men came to their maturity as students of history. All three represent a bridge between the pre- and post-Revolutionary traditions of historical scholarship. Two connected elements had caused immeasurable damage to this field of study in the USSR: the initial extermination of countless people, including intellectuals of all varieties during the Revolution and the early years of so-called “War Communism” and which may be summed up, more justly, as a war of conquest by the newly-risen Bolshevik state against a country reluctant to go back under a new and harsher yoke; and the more methodical purges of the 1930’s which weeded out the temporary survivors. Daniil Al’ (1919-2012), only three years older than Lotman and later a famous historian, summarized the atmosphere of the year he started as a freshman student at the History Department of the Leningrad State University—1937, the year the state began its final destruction of the St. Petersburg school of history.

“The department, like all other institutes of higher learning in the country, existed, as it were, in two unmixable state. Like the yolk and the white in an egg. One of these substances—the constant atmosphere of denunciation, the search for ideological enemies, all manner of mistakes, perversions, ‘a struggle against the dulling of vigilance’. On the other hand, institutes of higher learning and other scientific establishments continued—unshaken—intense, truly scientific scholarly work, the preserved
the high potential and spirit of big scholarship. Naturally, history as a science was in a harder position than any other. First of all because this discipline, by its very nature, is ideological to the limit. Secondly, its sphere included specifically ‘Party-oriented’ departments; the history of the CPSU, the history of the Civil War and, finally, the current history of the country which included such themes as collectivization, industrialization, USSR foreign policy and so on. Objective investigation in this area was out of the question in principle. Although, as Peter the Great used to say, ‘the impossible happens’! Individual scientific—truly scientific, not just so-called—works appeared on these themes as well. Largely on personal concerns.

Under these conditions true investigatory-scientific life intensified in those compartments of historical knowledge which can, using modern terminology, be called relatively ‘free zones’. This includes the history of ancient peoples and civilizations (and thus of archeology as well), the history of antiquity and the Middle Ages. The history of feudal Russia. To a certain extent this included the modern history of a number of countries, including Russia of the 19th century. It goes without saying that scientific work in these spheres of historical scholarship also had to abide by certain rules of the game. Not to forget, for instance, about class struggle and historical materialism generally, which, to my mind, does not always do history harm. The selection of students took place accordingly. Some—weak largely, because of flaws in their general education, for instance incapable if only for reasons of age of mastering foreign, much less ancient languages or, having calculated the benefits of timely service, became ‘Party’ historians. Others, most prepared and, most importantly, sincerely determined to go into true scientific work chose a more difficult and less prestigious, but in exchange a truly scientific path, and went to study with true, big scholars.

Luckily, the students of my generation, then had people from whom to learn.”

Very shortly, however, the situation changes drastically for the worse.

“In our childish naivety, having crossed the threshold of the department we felt ourselves to be in a temple of pure scholarship where one serves only truth, only the true verity of history. We wanted to learn this truth so that we could serve it—

†“Небываемое бывает.”
‡ Al’, Daniil, St. Petersburg Tells the History of Russia, St. Petersburg, Neva Publishing House, p. 346. [Here and elsewhere all citations are in my translation—ILS]
selfless and inspired. We, first-years, did not take real notice of the dark clouds gathering above us. […] Soon the thunder struck right above us. In January of 1938, in front of hundreds of history students, a group of employees from Yezhov’s NKVD, guns in hand, arrested and took away Chernitsky, the deputy-dean. Soon it became known that he has been shot as a former leftist SR. One after the other professors, lecturers and even students who ‘turned out to be enemies of the people’ began to disappear. Almost every day one student or another was loudly thrown out of Komsomol for ‘connections to an enemy of the people’—their own father, friend or teacher, or for ‘connections to a daughter of an enemy of the people’, in other words, for connections to his own wife.

His stick crashing on the floors, the then-famous officious historian of the USSR, Nikolai Arsent’ evich Kornatovski strode through the department, forbidding students to ask him questions concerning pre-Soviet history. Passing his ignorance off as courage, he even boasted of not knowing or wishing to know the history of Russia prior to the reform of 1861. Karnach (karaul’nyj nachal’nik or ‘watch commander’ in army terminology), was his nickname to all the generations of history students who knew him—and he correspondingly despised his fellow-historians who worked on earlier, that is, ‘feudal’ and ‘bourgeois’ history.

Quite understandably, this watchful guardian of the party purity of historical scholarship expressed party, that is, state approaches to history.”

Thus, in Russian and particularly Soviet scholarship

history, no matter how distant, was never a topic free of ideological concern. Practically no topic was, but history in particular was a minefield and even if by the time the three men in question began to teach and write questionable statements were considerably less likely to lead to death or imprisonment as they would have in the 1930’s and 1940’s—they were still fully capable of causing the permanent destruction of a career. The Russian state had trained its subjects well over the centuries to expect it to

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3 Ibid. pp. 366-67
be capable of doing anything to them at any time. If some great scholars like Likhachev, managed to remain relatively safe by diving deep into medieval history, those who, like the three subjects of this work, attempted to deal with recent, i.e. Imperial Russian history, found themselves on highly dangerous ground. Their task was not made easier by the increasingly senseless and random nature of Soviet censorship. It was not so simple a matter as suppressing certain topics in favor of others, more ideologically acceptable. A historian could never be entirely certain which phrase or sentiment—perhaps perfectly innocent, perhaps not—might suddenly catch a censorious eye and lead to the cancellation of publications, professional opportunities, or one’s social, political—and at times, physical—existence. As a small but highly logocentric society, that part of the Soviet population which read anything at all beyond Pravda and its ilk developed particular ways of reading and interpreting historical texts in the context of a state which attempted, in principle, to limit their comprehension of their own history to ideologically correct sound-bites, largely devoid of connection, meaning or historical truth. The education provided by the state to the majority, and which ended at high-school, was meant to enforce the memorization of a great many facts and discouraged most strongly any line of independent thinking upon these facts. A good answer from a student was an
answer which had swallowed the textbook whole. Independent conclusions unnerved the majority of teachers who even by the 1980’s remembered on either a personal or a secondary level the time—just recently—when people who let their urge to speak out their independent opinions get the better of their common sense had had an odd way of vanishing. True, at the moment the state had ceased to behave like that—but no one could ever guarantee what would catch the attention of that famous three-letter acronym which the averaged Soviet citizen preferred not to name in unhushed tones,—in which case the blame could and likely would all too easily fly back to the hapless school teacher who had not maintained proper proletarian vigilance and had allowed the uttering of anti-Soviet and socially harmful opinions in the classroom... Under such circumstances it becomes necessary to write and read history in a way which would allow double, triple and quadruple layers of meaning—for the censors, the average reader, the informed reader and the author, who might occasionally have been the only one to understand all of his or her own allusions and hints. For instance, it would be hard to find modern political meaning in a phrase which Yuri Lotman wrote about the development of state-granted distinctions and titles in the 18th century:

“The fact that the mores and laws of the epoch allowed a man who had been deprived of an award to remind [the state] of
himself and to demand a reward by listing his claims to it 
witnesses that, in the perception of the epoch, this was not an 
extra-legal kindness, but an exchange of obligations between the 
serving man and the state which had been regulated and confirmed 
by the rules.”

To an individual brought up with what may conditionally 
be categorized as “Liberal” or “Western” values and viewpoints 
there is nothing unusual, much less criminal, about the idea of an 
exchange of obligations between the individual—particularly a 
servant of the state—and the state itself. However, it is vital to 
realize that to write this in the Soviet Union, even in its later years, 
even for so reputable and distinguished a pedagogue and scholar as 
Lotman himself, was still a brave action, for the idea itself was, by 
Soviet standards, highly questionable. The idea of there being 
mutual obligations between individuals and the state made the 
Soviet government intensely uncomfortable, even when the phrase 
in question was not directed at the Soviet government per se. 
Soviet censorship—muddled as illogical as it was—never managed 
to clearly distinguish between those unfavorable allusions to its 
Imperial predecessor as would flatter it, and those which would, on 
the contrary, bring its own imperfections into sharper relief.

Such academic, literary and educational sabotage in the 
later Soviet period is by no means unique to the field of history. 
Such quiet work against the demands of the Soviet state on the part

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of historians, history teachers and popularizers of history is comparable, in some respects, to other incidents of quiet subversion in different spheres of activity, united by a common desire and need for a re-introduction, or rather an introduction of the element of dignity, of respect and politeness to the interactions of the state and the citizens. To cite only one prominent case in the film industry: in the late 1970’s—a period which has acquired the moniker “the flowering of the stagnation of socialism”—Eldar Ryazanov, one of the greatest Soviet filmmakers who, sadly, died just a few days ago at the age of 88, filmed a tragicomic film⁵, one which has since become one of the gems of his beloved and widely collected works and which he considers one of his best. Set in the 1840’s, it barely passed censure and Ryazanov had to fight bureaucracy at the very highest level because he had made too…unpleasant, too “dark” a character of the main villain—an aristocratic representative of the Gendarmerie, a secret policeman and agent provocateur sent to sniff out sedition in a prominent Hussar regiment, quartered out in a provincial Russian town. Not that the idea was ever stated in so many words—but the state feared that this character would lead the public to make comparisons…naturally unflattering ones…to another, more current organization generally named in whispers. Would the

⁵ Speak a Word for the Poor Hussar, script written summer-autumn of 1978, film premier on January 1st, 1981
leadership of the KGB have been offended to be compared to the Imperial Secret Police? Most likely, yes. But neither did it wish its Imperial predecessor to be seen too unfavorably...after all, if people take the right to pass judgments on former power structures, they might take the next logical step and begin to criticize contemporary ones, which the Soviet government of the 1970’s had no intention of permitting.

“The secondary meaning was really the reason for its [the film’s] creation. Our film spoke—in allegorical form, based upon 19th century material, on the realities of Nicholayevan Russia—about the terrible, sick and sinister period of our lives, about the provocations and repressions of Stalinism. To make films, write plays or books about the destruction of many millions of completely guiltless people—the flower of the nation, essentially—was forbidden in those years. […]

Just before the meeting with Mamedov we were received by the management of “The Screen”—B. Hessin and G. Groshev. They muttered something about the “incorrect orientation of the director’s screenplay”. At first we didn’t understand what they wanted since things were not named clearly—Hessin and Groshev danced and twisted around the subject. Then Gorin and I exploded, raised our voices and started saying that we don’t understand this petty nitpicking. And that’s when the “Screen” management put their cards on the table: they were considering closing down “Hussar”. “The thing is”—we couldn’t believe our ears—“that the script casts in too dark a tone...the Third Department.” This secret chancellery of the days of Nicholas I is given too much significance in your screenplay and it is shown in too negative a fashion...

God! Could Benkendorf have thought that in more than a hundred years his honor would be defended by communists, top managers of Soviet television, active “builders of a socialistic Russia”!

Naturally, the concern over the “Third Department” was understandable: the “Screen” leadership was deathly afraid of disappointing the bureau located on Dzerzhinsky Square. They did not understand that by putting an = sign between the tsarist-era

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6 Strictly speaking Ryazanov uses the word “сталинщины”, which carries a far stronger contemptuously severe connotation than “Stalinism” does in English.
“Third Department” and modern State Security they were giving themselves away completely. Of course they had guessed our intentions and sought, by whitewashing the Nicholayevan gendarmerie, to stand up for the KGB.”

In censorship the issue never—and I should emphasize this,—very rarely depended on logic, common sense, the letter or the spirit of Soviet laws, the severity of which was usually mitigated by their non-obligatory nature, or on the professional qualifications of the censor in question. It frequently depended on simple, direct bribery, less simple threats and blackmail, and the intangibles—such as the mood and character of the censor. Did the author find a way to his heart or his wallet? Did his magic mirror please him this morning by assuring him that yes, he is the fairest in the land? If so—the questionable phrase, or scene, might pass. If not—no amount of logic, legality or lubrication would help and the book or film in question were dead in the water.

We find many such curious and questionable moments in the works of the popular author and teacher, Nathan Eidelman (1930-1989).

His view of Russian history centers upon the concept of what can be termed spiraling revolutions. In a complex interweaving of reform and repression, enlightenment and

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7 Ryazanov, E.A. *Un-summed up Results* [Неподведённые Итоги], Vagrius Publishing, Moscow, 1995, online via Litmir at [http://www.litmir.co/bd/?b=23685](http://www.litmir.co/bd/?b=23685), chapter 14.
brutality, society gradually advanced but never in a smooth and
unchallenged line. Over the centuries the domineering Russian
state which took over the running of the country in a truly and
terribly autocratic manner, due to the absence of a formidable
middle class and the presence of a thoroughly-broken aristocracy.
This state progressed in jerking, jumping advances—always made
in response to a desperate crisis causing popular unrest and usually
caused by its own repressive policies, always regretted and
repressed thereafter, leading to new crises and new unrest in a
pattern of what Eidelman terms “Revolution from Above”, which
became, in fact, the title of his last, posthumously published two-
volume swan song.

Eidelman shows that the state had progressed only in fear
of revolutions from below, and even those few figures who
attempted to move the country forward for reasons other than
simple power-lust also needed to compromise with their plans and
ideals, in order not to provide the population with more liberty than
the autocratic system could restrain. It is through a dark and bitter
lens that he views this parade of omnipotent rulers, trapped in a
country in which their omnipotence was in theory absolute, while
being limited practically to their own capital city, sometimes only
their own palace. From Ivan III, the Russian parallel to Louis XI,
Henry VII and Ferdinand of Aragon in his political approach, to
his grandson who wrote a relatively progressive code of law in the 1550’s only to drown it in blood by the 1580’s, to Peter I who saw no problem with regimenting, beating and torturing the country into European form, to Catherine II who gave many freedoms to the nobility, quite a few to the town population, but failed by and large to do much for the peasantry—causing her to call herself bitterly in old age, “the past-imperfect tense”, to her grandson Nicholas who grimly recognized all the existing problems and his own incapacity to deal with them while continuing to flog the country into his vision of a parade-ground paradise. A true, complete and perfect example of the “predatory monarchy”, the Russian autocratic system early on came to exist only for the sake of its own survival, never enjoying a broad base of support from the larger masses of the population. In vain did generations of Russian intellectuals try to comfort their fears by telling themselves that the hordes of peasants loved their “Little-Father” or his closest representative—the landlord. The peasants struggled for centuries against the state which fought tooth and nail to limit their freedom of movement and, once it had them chained to the land, deprived them even of personal freedom. Its laws were avoided at every opportunity; tolerated as the lesser of various evils at best, and forced upon the countryside at gunpoint at worst. Never was there a state which existed for the entirety of its nearly
500 years since its forced unification from a mass of feudal principalities, which would have existed as does the Russian state even to this day (and perhaps today more than ever before),—in a constant and clear knowledge of its isolation from its own people, of being more a conqueror than a ruler of its own country, of its own unwillingness and terminal incapacity to offer its subjects more than the minimum, while always striving to take the maximum. Predatory, grasping, arrogantly disdainful, locked away eternally within the Winter Palace or behind the Kremlin walls…

Justly fearing rebellion (which occurs frequently, punctuating all Russian history and varying, alas, only in scale, but never in its brutality or eventual bloody defeat), in the ruthlessly repressed countryside the state periodically gives small concessions. It struggles to maintain authority while reluctantly giving in to a minor amount of liberalization. From there one would, ideally, progress to the long-term and difficult process of internalizing these reforms, making them an accustomed fact of life. But this is where the state’s flexibility and willingness to maneuver come to a screeching halt. The fact of giving had been too much in and of itself. Even this small show of concern or kindness usually proves to be too much for the state to stomach, it soon turns away from the reforms in fear, attempting to control,
limit and counter-act them almost as soon as they had been
allowed, thus inspiring new crises of rebellion from below which
had to be meet with repression and then, later, another reluctant
granting of reforms. The process seems a circular one, and yet,
since every new cycle of
rebellion>>reform>>repression>>rebellion begins on the
achievements of the previous ones and, naturally, the actors and
circumstances are ever different, something of a spiral can be
envisioned, progressing slowly, hesitantly, brutally and
clumsily...but progressing over the centuries nonetheless.

Repression progresses along with liberalization, sometimes
outpacing it. Eidelman takes care to point out that while officially
the oprichnina of Ivan IV existed only for seven years, the institute
of the autocrat’s personal army—used primarily, almost
exclusively to control and terrify his or her own country—was then
founded and under different names continued to exist, fighting
subversion, doubt, political heresy and anything else the
government cared to have fought until the present day,
reincarnated currently as the FSB. We see this change effected
precisely at the time when Ivan IV brought the ideal of predatory
monarchy to a contemporary high peak. Previous Grand Princes
had their spies, naturally. They had their watch, their bodyguards,
their close companions, etc… But it is only during the reign of the
man who effectually welded Russia into a single country volens
nolens, that the institute of a monarch’s personal, repressive army
is formed and stamped firmly, one fears to say—permanently,—
into Russia’s political and social character.

As the historical process speeds up the intervals of
liberalization and repression recur more frequently: Eidelman
views the Revolution of 1905 and the following events down to the
assassination of Stolypin in 1911 as the last of these revolutions
from above; the last cycles of revolt, forced liberalization,
conservative withdrawal and renewed repression. The next
Revolution finally came from below.

“The country was united at the same time as the Western
monarchies, although the level of marketability, of bourgeois
mentality [Буржуазности], (which, with trade ties’ would unite
disparate, previously almost unconnected regions)—was
considerably lower in Russia and under stable circumstances it
should have taken another couple of centuries to develop this
bourgeois mentality, and only then united. However, there were
no stable circumstances: the struggle with the Mongolian and
Polish-Lithuanian pressure, as well as other dangerous neighbors,
doubtless hastened the unification. The role of a unifying,
connecting force, which in the West was played by the “Third
Estate”, was enthusiastically taken on by the Russian government
itself; thanks to this the state was approximately as many times less
limited than the Western monarchies, as the Russian bourgeois
mentality lagged behind the European. This is practically a
formula for autocracy! In the end of the 14th, and the 15th
centuries, ‘suddenly’ an enormous empire appeared under
Moscow’s control and later spread beyond the Urals.”

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8 Part 1, Chapter 2, online via http://vivovoco.rsl.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/CENTURY/CHAPT04.HTM#1
It is interesting to note how quickly and thoroughly the solidifying of the autocratic position had progressed. The Austrian diplomat Herbertstein noted in the early 1500’s, when he visited the Moscow of Vasily III, the common Muscovite saying in response to an unanswerable question: “That is known only to God and to the Great Sovereign”. A pious answer. Certainly a safe one…

The role Eidelman assigns to Peter I in the finalization of this system is central.

“Under Peter I, in 20-30 years, Russian industry grew 7-10 times larger (there had been 20-30 manufactures, now there were over 200); Russian metal production soon took first place in the world; the largest regular army in Europe was created, as well as artillery and a modern fleet; a ‘Window to Europe’ was opened, various diplomatic and trade connections were made, hundreds of specialists were invited, a new capital was built: moreover new cities were founded in different parts of the country, canals were dug, schools were opened, an Academy of Sciences, a newspaper, a new calendar. And many other novelties besides: a different structure of state power, a different way of life for the ‘higher classes’, different appearance, often even a different language...

Of course the social structure is still the same, the political system is the same—but the changes are unheard of, revolutionary, nowhere in the world had anything similar happened in such a short span of time.

But is this good or bad? Let us take a look at the ‘historical lessons’ we can draw from this.

Two characteristics of Russian history which have distinguished it over the course of many (though not all) historical centuries: we have already discussed them but let us now bring them together.

First, a relative lack of a bourgeois mentality. This is a most important trait in history, economics, politics, even the

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9 The specific word Eidelman uses is “Буржуазность”, which can refer to a bourgeois mentality, structures, manners, the presence and place of the bourgeoisie in society… The word “мещанство”—formerly a legal category of non-noble town and city-dwellers in Imperial Russia—which Eidelman uses a sentence later is a close, but not exact, approximate.
national character. Here is Russian daring, breadth, dislike of pettiness and meanness [...] This is the lack, compared with the West, of the despised bourgeoisie...

And at the same time, an insufficiency of economical thinking [хозяйственности], the refusal and the incapability to count and calculate; very often—heroism instead of normal, boring routine; an easy shift from rebellion to slavery; arbitrary rule, inadequate consciousness of rights.

Second (and partly as a result of the first), there is the enormous role of the state—super-centralization.

Even previously, starting with Ivan III, the role of the autocratic apparatus was even larger than in Europe; but Peter showed the enormous potentialities for good and evil which lay within this Russian specificity. So enormous that even Belinsky, even to the best Russian historians (representing the so-called state-legalistic school), it seemed that the state is the cause, everything else is its consequence: and if the peasants are serfs of the landowners, then all of them together are the serfs of the state which can do anything it wishes to serf and master alike. Both the people and the 'haves' possess practically no associations or organizations independently of the state, and that is why in Russia, more than in any other country, the decisions are made by the active minority; not by the tens and hundreds of regional units, not by the thousands and millions of people, but by the concentration of power—by St. Petersburg.”

The delicate use of the present tense is a particular Eidelman trademark at moments like this: he always wrote for an audience which needed to remember how little—in some respects,—had changed, how much their government still considered and treated them as slaves. He taught—and wrote for an audience which included—the farmers and the children and grandchildren of forcibly collectivized farmers who remembered how the Soviet state restored and exacerbated serfdom, after seventy years during which they had seen the beginnings of a

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10 Part 1, Chapter 4, online via http://vivovoco.rsl.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/CENTURY/CHAPT04.HTM#1
precarious but slowly increasing freedom, and only recently starved millions of them to death. He wrote for a wide audience of people for whom it was easy, altogether too easy, to replace St. Petersburg with Moscow in that paragraph, and to feel bitterly that nothing has changed. There was very little in the above passage that could not have been applied by his readers and listeners to their own lives.

Finally—essential, absolutely vital to this process of spiraling revolutions is the growth of the concept of personal dignity. Over and over in his collected works one comes across the phrase “the first two unwhipped generations” in Russian history, in reference to the people who grew up and attained maturity during the 34 year reign of Catherine II (1762-96). The following, from chapter 4 of Your 18th Century, may be considered a typical passage:

“‘The Liberation of the Nobility’... Now the time has come to say that the old, cruel times, could not have directly produced people with the personal dignity and honor which we are accustomed to see in Pushkin and the Decembrists... For such people to appear one needed at the very least two ‘unwhipped generations’...Starting with 1762.”

Eidelman was not being facetious, nor was he usually inclined to hyperbole—he was speaking of a plain, factual issue which reflected his own life in the most direct fashion. Those two

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11 Eidelman, N. “Your 18th Century”, Moscow, Vagrius, 2006, p.103
generations (of nobility), were indeed the first in Russian history to be officially free of the threat of corporal punishment, which had previously touched all Russians alike, high born or low, ecclesiastical or lay. The church never proved a secure sanctuary and indeed, proved ready to play the role of the state’s accomplice all too often and all too quickly. Russian rulers never saw a problem in besmirching their hands with disciplinary behavior—which ranged from Ivan IV murdering his noblemen at the dinner table, Peter I beheading his rebellious musketeers on the scaffold, or Anna and Elizabeth (Peter’s niece and daughter respectively), beating their slaves with their own royal hands. Prior to…and for that matter afterward as well… the 1760’s few and far between were the Russians who had not—at one point or another in their lives—been publicly flogged. True, one might argue that corporal punishment was common enough in Europe, as well as many other places. However, a distinction should be drawn. In Russia, whim replaced law. Peasants beat their families. Landlords beat their peasants. Wealthy landlords beat poor landlords. Nobles beat non-nobles. Royalty beat everyone who happened to be handy. Arbitrary brutality became the unspoken and daily law of the land, a permanent tradition. The idea that those who are in power can do anything they like to the average individual lead to this individual concluding that he or she may therefore do anything they like to
those in their power. All the way to the end of the Imperial period, a military officer could drag a merchant down the street by the beard, abusing him for all the world to hear—with total impunity. High birth did not guarantee one’s safety until the so-called liberation of the nobility, the one positive legacy planned by Elizabeth and instituted, during his whirlwind six months on the throne, by Peter III.

From the 1760’s on, a small percentage—less than 2% of the total population—could enjoy freedom from this threat, while continuing blithely to beat their serfs with no limitation.\textsuperscript{12} Eidelman’s frequently expressed idea is that the people he shows in the best light—the Decembrists, Pushkin, and the generation which went to war in 1812—were only capable of becoming the models of dignity and spiritual freedom they became in his eyes because they came from the first two generations in Russian history which were guaranteed personal dignity by the safety from physical abuse. One cannot, he seemed to say, develop a sense of personal honor, dignity and internal freedom, if one lives constantly under the threat of whipping by any social superior, with or without cause. Fear of punishment causes slavishness,

\textsuperscript{12} Much as we might now shudder at the Western “rule of thumb”, it is only just to admit that this was invented as a means of limiting brutality, not enhancing it, and that no such semi-civilized measure existed in Russia where a man could beat his wife, children, apprentices, serfs, servants, soldiers or subordinates at work with anything that came to hand…and for the most part, with near-total impunity. Even on the level of the private home, Russia frequently continued (continues?) to live on the principle once espoused by Ivan IV—“For we are free to be merciful unto our slaves, and we are free to execute them also.”
which prevents completely the development of a sense of personal dignity.\footnote{We might also argue, purely for the sake of the argument, the no matter how noble, honorable and free these people might have been, the very fact of their existence within a context of a slave society diminishes the effect of their own freedom. It’s easy to recall, for instance, Tolstoy’s Andrei Bolkonsky in “War and Peace”, who is presented as a model of honor and nobility—and as a man who calmly discusses on the question of serfdom only to come to the conclusion that the average peasant is a dull creature who can perceive no difference between a death in old age in his own bed, and a death at a young age, whipped to death at the master’s whim…}

We see the result of these two generations almost immediately. Briefly, during his five years on the throne Emperor Paul attempts to treat his subjects with equal severity, regardless of status. He returns to the methods of his great-grandfather, while only slightly reducing their brutality. People who had been treated with respect and courtesy by Catherine II, once more regardless of status, were now treated with severity, rudeness, a complete lack of respect and an overwhelming disdain born of towering self-importance. Nothing can stand in greater contrast with his mother’s carefully practiced and highly developed habit of universal courtesy than the public contempt with which Paul was capable of treating all, high and low. Peter I had made do with similar and worse methods his entire life to great effect…but not Paul, who was throttled in his own dressing room by the nobles he had raised to high office, and who enjoyed everything about his reign except him. They would not suffer to be treated as his great-grandfather had been accustomed to treating theirs.
To countries brought up with the tradition of *habeas corpus* this is neither a new nor an original idea. There is nothing criminal or even suspicious about this statement—unless and until we realize that Eidelman lived his entire life in what we could term a pre-Catherinian state, a state which neither had nor could permit any categories of “unwhippable” citizens…simply as the price of its own survival. The origins of the Soviet government made terror or, later, the ever-present *possibility* of terror more or less the only method by which this government remained in control, and even the highest-ranking functionary knew that his or her privileged place was never entirely secure—the state could take away their position, their function, their marks of distinction and thereby return them instantly to the ranks of the “whippable”. The very idea that personal dignity and personal—internal—freedom are connected and interdependent was anathema to the Soviet system and, given this circumstance, we can see the ideas Eidelman proposed in a new and rather more politically active light.

It is one of the many tragedies of the Soviet ideal and practice—that the USSR repeated in this, as in so many other things, the mistakes of the Russian Empire, and failed entirely to draw the connection between the treatment accorded by a state to its citizens and the subsequent political and personal qualities of these citizens. If I may be permitted so vast a simplification, the
Soviet State attempted to repeat the actions of Peter I in creating a completely new type of human being, and followed his errors in creating circumstances in which the qualities the state desired that being to develop were incapable of flourishing. It was impossible to create—much less en masse—an individual who would possess the internal strength and capacities of a free person, while remaining a slave, perfectly conscious of this slavery. The contradiction held no less true for the USSR than for the Empire, and both perished for similar reasons—but one can see why it was difficult and unsafe for Eidelman to express the idea at even so distant a remove. Placing this idea in the context of a historical discussion, an exploration of the 18th and 19th centuries made it only marginally safer for him, since the closer a studied period of history approached modernity, the thicker the dangers in the ideological minefield.

It is interesting to compare Eidelman’s ambiguous conclusions about the reign of Peter I with the conclusions of the Marxist historian Pokrovsky. Below is a summation of Pokrovsky’s views as provided in the historiographical introduction to chapter 8 of book 3 of the first volume of the fundamental 2-volume “History of the USSR from Ancient Times to
the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century”, published in Moscow by State Socio-Economic Publications in 1939.

“Pokrovsky considered the reforms of Peter I unsuccessful. He negatively characterizes economic policy, military reforms and foreign policy. The Petrine army which defeated the Swedes performed, according to him, merely the role of a gendarmerie. The fleet Peter created, according to him, was useless and rotted. Whereas it is known that the Petrine fleet more than once dealt crushing defeats to the first-class Swedish fleet, that by the end of Peter’s rule the Baltic fleet numbered 40 ships of the line, 20 frigates and 100 lesser vessels. In conclusion, Pokrovsky throws out the irresponsible and lying phrase: ‘the reformer’s death was a worthy final for this feast during the plague.’

Such an understanding of the Petrine era as a whole is false and anti-historical.”<sup>14</sup>

Further down the page Professor Lebedev provides the official view on Peter and the Petrine period as given by the classics—living and dead—of Marxism.

“One can find a number of mentions of the foreign policy, reforms and personality of Peter I in Marx and Engels. Marx speaks of Peter in ‘Secret Diplomacy of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century’. Engels, in his article ‘The Foreign Policy of Russian Tsarism’ (1890) calls Peter I ‘a truly great man’ [Marx and Engels, Collected Works, v. XVI, part 2, p. 12].

Lenin noted that Peter I effected a ‘europization of Russia’, not stopping before ‘barbaric means of fighting barbarism’ [Collected Works, v. XXII, p. 517].

Fundamental for the understanding of the Petrine era are the words of comrade Stalin in conversation with Emile Ludwig. ‘Peter the Great,’ says comrade Stalin, ‘did a lot to raise a class of landowners and develop the nascent merchant class. Peter did very much for the creation and strengthening of a national government of landowners and merchants. Comrade Stalin says that this development took place at the cost of the serf who was taxed unmercifully’. ”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lebedev, V.I. (Bakhrushina S.V., Grekova B.D. and Lebedev V.I. ed), History of the USSR from Ancient Times to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Moscow, State Socio-Economic Publications, 1939, p.595.
<sup>15</sup> Ibid. The specific phrase Stalin used re. the serf was that “three skins were stripped off him” or that he was “thrice flayed”, a charming Russian metaphor for heavy taxation which presupposes any person to have a possible seven skins for the taking. Without disagreeing with Stalin’s view on the matter in
This is the approach to Russian history on which two of the three historians in this study grew up. Yuri Lotman was born in 1922 and, fortunately for generations of students, managed to enjoy an education from professors of the old Imperial school before their generation was largely wiped out. Eidelman and Gordin however, born in 1930 and 1935 respectively, grew up with this same 2-volume edition until their early university days.

We see the questions of honor and dignity posed even more sharply in the works of Yakov A. Gordin, Eidelman’s friend for many years and, as he described himself in an interview with Tatiana Tolstaya and Avdot’ja Smirnova in the popular show “School for Scandal” on January 20th, 2012, a “historical writer”.16

For Gordin the main, consistent problem of Russian history lies precisely with the ruling power as the cause, instigator and beneficiary of the continuous degradation of the main body of the population. Avoiding at every turn the passion with which Soviet official historiography treated on groups and large-scale social movements, he prefers to focus on the individuals. Not in the sense of the hero-theory of history, there are few heroes for

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principle it is, perhaps, important to note that in the larger context of Russian history, the ordinary serf had been thrice flayed already, and it would be more just to say that Peter ripped off six skins of the available seven and nailed the last to the floor, so it would be easier to collect afterward.

16 “Литератор от истории.” Literally a writer from history, a writer who happens to work in the historical field. Interview online via Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEWzTmxXqUE
Gordin… But in the sense that all history is made up, in the long run, of individual human beings who require, if true understanding of events is to be achieved, an individual approach. It is interesting to compare the view taken by official historiography via Professor Lebedev in 1939 on the trial and death of Tsarevich Alexei with the arguments espoused by Gordin. Lebedev covers the incident briefly:

“Fearing and hating his father, Alexei became the soul of the intriguing conservative opposition which dreamed of staging a palace coup and assassinating Peter. Alexei escaped from Russia to his in-law, the Austrian Emperor Charles. The latter hid him first in Ehrenburg Castle in Tirol, later transferring him to Castel St. Elmo in Naples. A skilled diplomat, Peter Tolstoy, managed to discover the whereabouts of the tsarevich and convinced him to return to the motherland. Upon the tsarevich’s return to Moscow in 1718 he was forced to swear fealty to his younger brother from Peter’s second wife, Peter the Younger. Soon a conspiracy against the Tsar was uncovered and the Tsarevich’s participation in it established. Tsarevich Alexei was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. An extraordinary tribunal sentenced Alexei to death. So, fighting for the creation of a strong national state, Peter did not spare even his own son.”

Gordin gives this brief episode considerably importance.

The following passage from *Between Slavery and Freedom*, his work dedicated to the 1730 attempt to establish a constitutional monarchy in Russia is, while somewhat long, necessary to understand the essential difference of his approach to the matter.

“However, the ‘Alexei Affair’—despite all the marks of a usual family feud—was a principally new phenomenon. It opened

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17 Lebedev V.I. *History of the USSR*, p.p. 644-645
a line of rebellions against the military-bureaucratic monster\textsuperscript{18} which had, at this point, risen to its hind paws—which gave it a deceptively manlike appearance—and was reaching with the poll tax reform for the very throat of a tormented country. And the destruction of the tsarevich, the crushing—moral and physical—of those who had turned toward him, was in its deeper essence a blow not against Russia’s past, but against its future.

Strange? Of course. But it is paradoxical, not linear processes that move history.

All the previous major rebellions—the Streltsy Rebellion of 1698, the Astrakhan and Bulavin uprisings—were indeed a desperate reaction of the pre-Petrine socio-psychological framework to its cruel displacement from the process of life, to the movement into another existence, one which frightened with its cold, metallic novelty.

The ‘Alexei Affair’, despite the external abundance of old traits, was invested with a principally new meaning. Alexei himself did not guess of it. It was one of those paradoxical cases when two competing sides for different reasons both take part in the historical mystification. It is precisely the participation of both sides in the lie that is witness first and foremost not of ill will or greedy deceptiveness, but of a predetermined breach between a man’s ideas of his role in history, and the real task he is charged with carrying out...

The plot scheme of the ‘Peter and Alexei’ tragedy is simple and sufficiently well-known. The differences of character and worldview, the incapability of the son to live up to the severe demands of the father, the Tsar’s fear for the fate of his state inheritance in the event of Alexei ascending to the throne, the resentment of the tsarevich for his humiliated and constantly insulted mother, his fear for his own life and—as a result—the foolhardy escape over the border in the hopes of finding temporary sanctuary and constant support, his even more foolhardy return under the pressure of the strong, sly and quite amoral Peter Andreevich Tolstoy and, as a finale, an unavoidable death.

All this is of little special interest for us in this case, all the more since the situation from this point of view has been studied countless times by historians and writers. Our purpose is different: it is to try to understand what was hiding in the depths, beneath these bloody waves of this—seemingly at first,—simple tragedy; in what force-field composed of countless individual wills, aims, interests and conceptions did the two figures of the father and of the son move; how pre-determined were their actions, and to what extent were they consciously free.

\textsuperscript{18}“Военно-бюрократический монстр” is Gordin’s standard phrase for the government of the Peterburgian period.
Such purely human tragedies, embodied in historical breakdowns when one speaks of those possessing or striving for power, upon a close and un-prejudiced examination always turn out to be the result of attempts to spur or delay the flow of the historical process. In these cases the object of the deadly argument if not so much the vector of movement as its pace. Or—in a version quite characteristic of the 18th century—the cause of a ruler’s individual drama proves to be a total incapacity for decisive action along with the corresponding threat of a dead pause in the country’s life.

All the explosive changes of rulers on the Russian throne are connected in one way or another with the problems of reforms. The mechanism of this connection was started by Peter I and by inertia continues to move—in fits and starts—for nearly 300 years. The deaths of Paul I, Alexander II, Nicholas II, the dying tragedies of Alexander I and Nicholas I are the brightest illustrations of what has been said.

In Lenin’s tragedy the problem of pace overlapped with the problem of vector which is why his end was so terrible and the results of his activity were catastrophically unsuccessful.

The fate of Gorbachev, with his ‘Alexander II complex’—the impossibility of internally tearing away from the past and hence the fear of a new reality and desperate attempts to postpone its arrival,—is evidence of the fact that this mechanism, albeit corrected, continues to function to this day.

The ‘Peter—Alexei’ tragedy has an organic place in this lineup.”

Practically everything in this passage runs counter to official history which Gordin so easily dismisses. From his definition of the usual understanding of the “Alexei Affair” as a “plot”, to the direct connection to Gorbachev and the reforms contemporary to Gordin when he began to write this work. The first edition came out after the fall of the USSR, in 1994, however in the interview mentioned above Gordin says (36:00-36:30) that when he began to write it in 1989 he was moved primarily by the

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contemporary political circumstances, and with a clear message. That message was—“It is not the tactical differences but the strategical differences which must unite political powers.”

It is necessary to note, once more that while in 1989 the USSR was clearly inclining to decline, it was nonetheless still firmly in existence. Times were certainly relatively “vegetarian” and Gordin could conceive of publishing thoughts which, in the days of Professor Lebedev, could not be entrusted to either paper or conversation. But this relative safety was just that—relative. The growing insanity of the late Soviet state served to accidentally lessen some of the difficulties writers had to go through and it became possible to publish almost anything—not because ideological standards had changed, not because censorship laws had changed, but because no one even pretended to care about them anymore.

The primary element which had maintained state power in the second half of the 20th century was the absolute, firm conviction on the part of every Soviet citizen of sentient age that while the state has lessened the reins at the moment, it would be the height of foolishness to push for liberty greater than that which the state was prepared to accord, otherwise the methods utilized during the first half of the century, or rather, the scale upon which these methods had been utilized during the first two generations of
Communist rule could be brought right back. There was no one who could think, even in their wildest fantasies, that there was anything the state could not do to them, simply because they knew that the state could and would do absolutely anything and everything to anyone at any time with no reason or warning. No more un-flogged generations in Russia. No more sense of personal security for anyone, anywhere, ever. There are no groups to provide safety for the individual except the government itself, and even members of this government are in constant danger from it.

Two centuries after the foundation of the Russian Empire the nightmarish state terror of the 17/1920’s and 17/1930’s had given way to the relative stability of the 17/1970’s and 17/1980’s. But in both periods the state remained changeable, the limit to which it was prepared to go for the sake of liberalization uncertain, its decisions arbitrary, and its punishments severe. The fact that the late-Soviet state had turned away from the earlier traditions of mass terror and executions did not mean, in the eyes of the standard Soviet citizen, that the state could not return to these methods at any time. Modern Russia, sadly, continues this tradition, not bothering overmuch with originality.

Gordin’s views on Peter’s other activities and behavior are no less heretical. We come across the following characterization in the introduction to “The Reformers’ Rebellion: The Drama of
the Interregnum”, the first of his two-volume history of the Decembrist uprising; an introduction Gordin begins with a 100 page history of the role the Guards Regiments had come to play and had grown to enjoy during its first century of existence—that of kingmakers.

“The ‘loss of patience’, Peter’s difficult spiritual condition in his later years, of which Kliuchevsky wrote so expressively, reminds us of the dying drama of the other great demiurge—Lenin. However, unlike the ferocious reformer of the 20th century (who, perhaps without realizing it, followed in the first emperor’s footsteps), Peter did not try to change the model—due to his psychological setup he simply knew of no other way to go. He continued to try to stifle the internal political crisis with foreign activity—the 20 year-old Northern War has ended, the Persian War begins immediately. New spaces were gained at the cost of exhausting the main territory of the country. The gain of new spaces served to justify the extreme militarization of the state. Militarization of the state provided a possibility of giving the situation a stable appearance, using the loyalty and cruel energy of Guard emissaries.

The use of military force for the solution of internal political and economic problems is always a sign not only of a crisis and of an inorganic structure of control, but also of a loss of direction on the part of the ruling power. When Cromwell entered into an unresolvable conflict with the English parliamentary system and did not know how to get out of it, he—for all his extraordinary intelligence and political instinct—found no better solution than to introduce the famous regime of “major-generals”, giving the country into the hands of military allies loyal to him personally, of his Guard. However, unlike Peter I, he quickly realized the flawed nature of this principle and rejected it. Russia, on the other hand, was given into the hands of a militarized rule—for centuries.”

Gordin goes even further in a passage concerning the long-term development of the Peterburgian Empire, where he openly

compares this development to a war—a long, drawn-out war of the Russian government against its own people.

“Russian history proves that all concessions were torn from Russian autocracy by force or the threat of force. Russia’s path to the formation of Nicholas I was far from being smooth and consecutive. For over two hundred years—from Bolotnikov’s peasant war to the uprising of December 14th—Russia resisted desperately, trying first to avoid and then to shake off unlimited autocracy and the serfdom which grew stronger along with it. For over two centuries the autocracy, despite the dreadful lessons of the reign of Ivan the Terrible and the Time of Troubles, dragged the country along this catastrophic path, crushing attempts at resistance with a vast, cruel energy. So it was until Nicholas I, shooting at the rebels of December 14th, concentrated all the political, social and economic flaws of the system, and proved with the results of his reign that it was impossible to live like this.”

Finally there are the works of Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman (1922-1993), a revered professor of Tartu University and a historian of 18th and 19th century Russian culture. The contemporary of Daniil Al’, he too was fortunate to study at Leningrad State University back in the late 1930’s, early 1940’s, when a few of the surviving pre-Revolutionary professors still graced its halls.


Lotman is a particularly difficult figure to approach, to some extent because his fields of literature, semiotics and

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culturology lie partially outside the more easily traceable political sphere which is the preferred area of Gordin and Eidelman. In the context of this study it is important to focus most seriously on his ideas concerning human dignity, honor and honorable behavior. Once more it is vital to note that he grew up and lived his life in a country in which the possession of a sense of honor was, at the very best, a serious hindrance to obtaining elementary necessities, and at worst a possible death sentence depending on the period and situation. Letting someone go ahead of you in line would result only in there being no more priceless deficit product available when your turn finally came. Letting a lady take your seat in the bus meant only that you would ride standing. Refusing to sign a document denouncing someone for a crime of which you did not know them to be guilty would only lead to you being considered guilty along with them. In short—crime, in the USSR did, in fact, pay. Honesty and decency provided little more than discomfort or danger…and, presumably, moral consolation.

The remarkable thing about Lotman was that he managed to live his life in the USSR while retaining all the way to his death, the manner of a 19th century professor of the classical, imperial school. He behaved like a man born a generation too late, a man who somehow managed to avoid the collectivist indoctrination of the early Soviet Union and kept the quiet dignity, dedicated
honesty and solid professionalism of a man belonging to a period Lotman himself had never actually seen. It is important to recollect that the further one goes in the history of Soviet education, the less one sees of the collegial mentality, the benign dignity and camaraderie of imperial-era professors. Like everything else, education was sovietized, which meant a harsh, arbitrary rudeness in schools and, as time went on and old professors died or retired, a lazy, pragmatic and increasingly cynical indifference in universities. Lotman stood above this. His absolute courtesy, his soft-spoken, distinct and invariably polite tone, his manner of one who, rather than lecturing from the mountaintop, was welcoming his students to join with him in a search for the truth…all this clearly marked him as a separate figure in the Soviet establishment. He was an educator of the Old School despite having really been born far too late to be of it.

One of the most important ideas Lotman maintained in his writing and his life was the separation between thinking and non-thinking people, and the responsibility thinking people are forced to bear as a result of their choice, or nature. In his study of the life of 18th and 19th century nobility one frequently comes across the importance of personal honor and dignity, an importance which was sometimes greater than that of life itself. It is through this prism, for instance, that he viewed the process of a duel:
“A duel—a battle of two people which takes place according to certain rules and has as its object the restoration of honor, the removal from the insulted party of the stain inflicted by the insult. Thus, the role of the duel is socially meaningful. A duel is a determined procedure of restoring honor and cannot be understood outside the very specific concept of “honor” in the general ethical system of Europeanized, post-Petrine Russian noble society. Naturally, from a position which rejects this concept in principle, the duel lost meaning, turning into ritualized murder. A Russian nobleman of the 18th—early 19th century lived and acted under the influence of two contradictory regulators of social behavior. As a loyal subject, a servant of the state, he obeyed orders. A psychological stimulus to obedience was fear of the punishment which fell upon the disobedient. But at the same time, as a nobleman, a man of an estate which was at once the socially-dominant corporation and a cultural elite, he obeyed the laws of honor. The psychological stimulus to obedience in this case was shame. The ideal a noble culture creates for itself presupposes a complete banishment of fear and an assertion of honor as the main legislator of behavior. In this sense, actions which demonstrate fearlessness take on meaning. So, for instance, if the “regular government” of Peter I still views the behavior of a nobleman at war as service in the benefit of the state and his courage, merely as a means for the achievement of this end, then from the position of honor courage turns into an aim of its own.”

In this particular case Lotman emphasizes that the demands of honor, the necessity of completing the ceremony of a duel completely once the quarrel has started, deprives the participants of their individual will. From the moment the challenge has been accepted duelers may not see or communicate with one another, and even though the desire for vindication may have long passed by the time the actual encounter occurs, the demands of honor—which, in this case, may on occasion curiously coincide with the demands of public [peer-group] opinion—must be fulfilled.

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“A duel, with its strict ritual presenting a complete theatricalized action—a sacrifice for honor—has a rigid scenario. Like any strict ritual, it deprives the participants of individual willpower. An individual participant has no power to stop or change anything.”

These are the three scholars who have become the subject of this study. It is my hope that I shall be able to show how they, sometimes openly, sometimes clandestinely, worked against the Soviet reality around them, and attempted to use their position as authors and educators to inspire—or restore,—in their oft-brutalized compatriots a vision of a time and a world in which honor, loyalty, decency, pride and honesty were perceived as realities, powerful enough to raise rebellions or to preserve humanity within an inhuman and anti-humane world.

23 Ibid.
Chapter 1

Natan Yakovlevich Eidelman

“Everything is interwoven and everything, as it turns out, is extraordinarily close...
This connection, this joint in times is my theme”
Biography

Natan Yakovlevich Eidelman was born to a Jewish family in Moscow, on April 18th of 1930. He died in the same city on November 29th of 1989. During his fifty-nine years of life he wrote more than 20 books and over 200 articles and essays. The overwhelming majority of his oeuvre is dedicated to the imperial period of Russian history, from the foundation of the Empire by Peter I and down to the beginning [but only the beginning!] of World War I. His permanent focus was the connection—intimate and close—of this period to his present. More than a quarter of a century after his death he remains famous and, more importantly, loved by the reading Russian public: his books are still to be found at practically every possible location, from the bookstore of the St. Petersburg Philological Institute (where, as I recall from my visit in 2007, his works occupied a separate and fairly large bookcase), down to the small booths servicing St. Petersburg subway stations and the bookseller carts on the streets. Two generations grew up on his works. Even despite his shaken shares among the mass-market reader, swamped by easily available and colorfully idiotic pseudo-histories, he retains an important place.

Last April, on what would have been his 85th birthday, a large number of articles and a short documentary film came out, praising him to the skies and frequently giving him that title which
fatally marked the lives of other Russian authors—namely, that of “the conscience”. As one article, regrettably unsigned and, one must presume, the fruit of collaborative effort, gave the following description.

“Being one of Russia’s leading literary critics and scholars, he had also been the conscience of the intelligentsia, an example of honesty, openness and humanism—he possessed the qualities which had always distinguished the Russian intelligentsia.”

It is one of the most tragic elements of Russian history that the possession and—more importantly,—the active use of a conscience had long ago become so rare and so notable that it both elevated and endangered the life of the possessor. If we were to review briefly the lives of others often marked with that title—Avvakum, Radischev, Pushkin, Chekhov, Tolstoy (L.N.), Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Brodsky…we would see magnificent figures, head and shoulders above the surrounding slavish mediocrity. We would also see that this elevated status did nothing whatsoever to make their lives easier, on the contrary, the inability to hide or disown their conscience condemned them. In the best case, to internal exile. In the worst, to death.

Eidelman’s view of Russian future historical development (despite what turned out to be, in the quarter century following his death, its largely unfounded optimism), has since been the subject

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of much excited comment and dispute; regular historical readings named in his honor were hosted (the latest two years ago) by the “Knowledge—Power” [“Знание—Сила”] magazine which had published most of his articles, as well as some of his shorter books over the years. His name has been immortalized in a song—both affectionate and respectful—written for and about him by one of the more popular late-Soviet bards, Veronika Arkadievna Dolina, pupil to the famous Okudzhava. \(^{25}\) It seems worth noting that Dolina specifically refers to Eidelman as a historian of/belonging to Russia [российский историк], not a Russian [русский] one. His nationality—clearly stated on line 5 of every Soviet passport and of enormous importance in the Soviet setting,—is marked, thus, as unimportant in principle. Nationality is transcended and in the verse he becomes as it were, a man who can be Russian without being Russian, a historian who studies and describes Russia, and belongs to Russia in a way which is based on a historical and cultural relationship, not on a biological one.

In this chapter it is necessary to begin with an exploration of some of the educational, historic, historiographic, literary-stylistic and most importantly, the ethical experiences and premises which formed this man—not sufficiently known to the wider Western

—who, while living and writing under restraint and surveillance for most of his life, had managed to become, nonetheless, and to remain for over a quarter of a century after his death one of modern Russia’s most famous and beloved “Liberal” historians and pedagogues.27

Here I must, just once, allow myself the luxury of using the term in what I cannot but consider its primary and nearly only real meaning: Liberal, as one whose ethical and behavioral premises are based upon a strong consciousness of personal and ethical Liberty. Given the country—and era—into which Eidelman had the misfortune to be born, this consciousness was always set in a framework of forced in/action vis-à-vis the State, which had made it its express mission to stomp out utterly all and any but its own—highly…particular—definition of Liberty, and the ethical variety in particular.

This must be stated clearly—the USSR did not want or need ethical people. It needed ideologically trained, loyal and obedient people. If, on occasion, such people managed to preserve a certain ethical code28 the difference to their victims was generally but small.

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26 Only one of his books, Conspiracy Against the Tsar: a Portrait of the Decembrists has been translated to English. The first and only edition (thus far) was published in 1985. As of the time of this writing there are only 2 copies available on Amazon.com.

27 In justice one should note that some scholars, such as Irina Paperna of UC Berkeley, have called Eidelman a popularizer of history rather than a historian. I must confess that the distinction has always seemed a somewhat loose and arbitrary one to me.

28 For an example, one need only recall the incorruptible, loyal and truthful Prince Fedor Yurievich Romodanovsky in the early 18th century, or the incorruptible, loyal and truthful Count Arakcheev in the early 19th century, or the incorruptible, loyal and truthful Valentina Mikhailovna Zimmerman in the early
This battle of the singular, lonely individual intelligence and conscience against the vast force of the Collective defined Eidelman’s life, just as it had defined the lives of many, who in Pushkin’s famous phrase had the poor luck to be born with brains and talent—in Russia… Statistically speaking, Eidelman could not have chosen many worse places to be born, when one really thinks about it.

Whatever achievements in the realm of despotism other Eurasian nation states can claim, it is without a doubt Russia, in its various incarnations including current Putinist Neo-Fascism, that holds the longest continuous record for successfully seeking to embody the absolute, shining ideal, the perfect BIPM model preserved under glass and observed by millions in Paris, of the “Predatory Monarchy” par excellence.

The essential raison d’être of this monarchy29 is and for the last five centuries has been to continue its existence by the means of

20th century; director of Elgen Labor Camp in North-Eastern Siberia, who was so vividly described in the memoirs of Evgenia Ginzburg. A murderer of countless thousands, terrifying, pitiless and for all that absolutely, unbreakably honest, and even coldly polite to the helpless people “over whose terrified heads she spent years holding an axe”. (Ginzburg, Chap. 18, online via http://modernlib.ru/books/ginzburg_evgeniya/krutoy_marshrut/read/)

29 Let’s not waste time pretending Russia is not a monarchy. While the double headed eagle on Russian coins has been humble enough to refrain from putting on precious and weighty hats, the one above the gates in the new, approximately twentieth Presidential Residence at Gelendzhik has not. Photograph available online from Svoboda.org via http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26704277.html If he doesn’t bother faking it anymore, we’re not going to either. A popular joke has been making its way back and forth across the Russian internet for years:

"Vladimir Vladimirovich, are you planning to take part in the 2018 elections?"
- “I really don’t know. I haven’t decided yet… I’m tired, worn out… I’ve been thinking, maybe let’s just forget the elections and just go straight for the coronation?” This version published on 04/27/2015, online via http://www.anekdot.ru/last/burning/2015-04-27/
taking, with all the use of force it considers necessary (and then some), the absolute maximum from the land and people it owns and then converting that which was taken to precious forms of one sort of another. Nothing exotic, of course. Just a few palaces, churches, favorites, jewels and ballerinas here, just a few scorched-earth expansionist campaigns, peasant uprisings and a few fleets there, all with a little sprinkling of artistic appreciation, psychopathic cruelty, jovial humor, nepotism, the occasional bit of debauchery and with a few palace-coup cherries on top. Only the small things a self-respecting predatory monarchy needs to feel good about itself. Upon gathering said minimum of pretty trifles (whether in secular or religious form is relatively insignificant as the state factually owns the church), said state proceeds to enjoy its position like a dragon with a belly full of Siegfried and a comfortable gold blanket. It feels no particular obligation to its people. For centuries the Russian rulers had been, and remain today the richest rulers of the poorest subjects. No matter what slogans, religious, military or otherwise have appeared over the centuries; no matter how recent or frequent the periods of high employee/subject turnover rates—the attitude of the rulers toward the ruled retains a simple, blunt, proprietary framework. Even the occasional “good tsar” who threw a few reforms and lessened obligations here or there had not been
sufficient to counteract this tendency and, thus far, neither have all the Russian revolutions put together...

Peter I inherited the Russian tradition of letting one’s chattel forage for its own feed, in other words to collect as much of your wealth to your own person and court as possible while paying the vast majority of those slaves to whom you are forced to pay anything at all the absolute minimum necessary to keep them minimally fed, clothed and housed—and ideally, do not pay them at all.

The reference to chattel is neither facetious nor inaccurate, it reflects precisely the attitude of the older formulas used in government. The imperial *gubernii* and their *gubernatory* are very little more than a slightly refreshed new version of the same method the old Muscovite Princes had used to send subordinate aristocrats to govern a distant city, officially giving them a city with its territories “на кормление”—the closest English translation here would be “for the foraging.” “To prey upon” carries the meaning fairly well. This was of course, the classic “Take everything you can as long as I get my cut” scenario. One could use the more general term “feeding”, but the primary term of the root “корм” is nonetheless “forage”, food for household livestock. For animals. So Moscow made perfectly clear a very long time ago how it viewed its subjects and treated them accordingly.
The aristocrats in their turn understood—and to a large extent so did the lower classes,—that the rules of the game require them to use any opportunity while it is there to be used. The ever-present absence of secure guarantees has then and continues to enforce upon the officialdom of all ranks and titles of at least the last five centuries a permanent fear. Everything can be lost in a moment and then, given the next-to-non-existent social safety net and the climate, yesterday’s arrogant, fat-faced, all-but-God grandee is tomorrow’s frozen, starving, all-but-corpse in a ditch. The centuries of Russian history are one long, monumentally depressing, non-stop precedent. The nobles filled their pockets and stomachs at a feverish pace—which is to say that they sent Moscow the absolute minimum in taxes, excused the shortages with bad harvests, plague, Tatar raids or bandits while personally leading a desperate campaign to rob blind and drive into famine and destitution whatever unfortunate territory had been given into their charge so as to increase personal wealth, precisely because they knew all the while that they are not there forever…that a possibility exists at any moment that they may be transferred to another district or worse, through intrigues at court deprived of everything down to their fur coats and very likely sent somewhere very cold. What possible meaning could the welfare of those plundered territories present to those perpetually frightened people? They were a temporary and unsecure source of enrichment,
nothing more. Those noblemen really were, quite literally sent out to forage, to gain those precious, life-saving pounds of subcutaneous fat while they were there to be gained.

The Petrine reforms, while exacerbating the worst features of the system did not, for all the visible differences, bring a serious, qualitative change to it. There was merely a new generation of an impoverished and insecure class of bureaucrats which was forced to survive—in the literal meaning of the word—from the very beginning on corruption. Now they shaved and their clothing was different. That’s all. The state would never pay the overwhelming majority of its clerks and paper-pushers enough to actually live on. That privilege is reserved for those few who have been of sufficient value to the state to warrant its personal attention and they can lose their privilege if they cease to be useful. But the government’s nameless, numerous and replaceable cattle can fend for itself. It has done so for half of a millennium. It continues to do so now.

And as for the irreplaceable ones? Whether in medieval, imperial, soviet or modern Russia—in what seems to be the oddest long-term form of national suicide the world may yet have seen,—time and again the state deliberately creates an atmosphere which crushes the best there is within its people. And naturally, those who attempted to be the best sort of people spend their lives as permanent
strangers, internal exiles, constantly choking for air like a fish out of water.

For what was unfortunately far too short a time, Eidelman fought this tendency; and countless thousands though—as far as current events unfortunately show—not enough, have been under his influence for more than half a century. All in all, his fate is luckier than it could easily have been.

Having grown up and come to maturity in the terrified Moscow of the 1930’s and ‘40’s, the college student Eidelman was in a more difficult position than most. On the one hand—he had the exceptional good fortune to be born, raised and educated in the capital. Primarily, of course, this was an advantage in terms of elementary creature comforts—no mean consideration given the devastating poverty to which communist policies had reduced the overwhelming majority of the population. There were lines for food and all other goods in Moscow of course, long lines, and long they remained all the way until the collapse of 1991, however—due to the mass presence of high-ranking Party members who would get fed no matter what,—these lines were at least marginally shorter than in Leningrad, and far, far shorter than in the rest of the country. Whatever the countryside lacked in resources, Moscow possessed until literally the last days of the Soviet state’s existence…though,
of course, even in Moscow it was only a tiny percentage that had actual access to these resources.

Far more important was the question of education. Given the extremely uneven nature of education as spread across the Soviet landscape (a very high level of education in the larger cities, and a far lower one out in the smaller towns and the countryside), being born in Moscow with access to Moscow schools was automatically a winning lottery ticket for which the majority of the Soviet population would have given practically everything, up to and including lives...albeit not always their own. In those days the Moscow State University was indeed one of the best schools in the world, certainly the best in the Soviet Union—in certain areas. In the 1940’s and 1950’s it, as well as the Leningrad State University described by Daniil Al’ in the introduction, still possessed a few pre-revolutionary professors who tried to preserve some of the best 19th century traditions in scholarship. In those subjects which were minimally affected by ideology (particularly engineering, physics, abstract mathematics—generally speaking, the precise sciences), the school provided an unquestionably excellent education.

Of course all subjects were touched by Communist ideology in one respect or another and, as is well known from the difficult path genetics had to tread during Stalin’s lifetime, even the precise sciences failed to provide a wholly secure sanctuary. Certainly,
Eidelman made his own life considerably more complicated than it might have been by choosing the imperial period as his subject. Many another scholar, such as Panchenko or the legendary Likhachev, retreated into the safer depths of medieval, pre-Petrine history with which Soviet ideology was simply less concerned. Choosing to study recent, pre-revolutionary history however, was a much riskier proposition, burdened with more severe censorship and official suspicion. Revolutionary history was its own minefield, and it is not surprising the Eidelman, while bringing his period of interest to the threshold of World War I, carefully avoided stepping a single toe over the line into 1917…

The question of nationality was an additional problem. A Jew—clearly marked by as such—was already in a disadvantageous position. The official cosmopolitanism of the early Soviet State disappeared with remarkable speed, and by the time young Eidelman was of age to go to University the anti-Semitic “Doctor’s Case” and anti-cosmopolitan campaign of Stalin’s later years was in full swing. The humanities were all but barred for Jews. A Jew

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30 Many a joke was made on the matter—for in the USSR jokes were (and in modern Russia still remain) always a delicate, sensitive and extremely rapid political barometer, reacting to official atmospheric pressure within hours or days. One of the more famous jokes portrayed a graduate admissions committee of a university history department which—having failed to find a single reason to avoid admitting a clever young Jewish student who “did not fit their profile”,—finally asked if he could prove that he had a sufficiently good memory to become a historian. “Indeed yes,” the young man replied sardonically. “Why, I remember myself at the age of eight days, when a bearded old Jew bent over me and snipped off my access to graduate school!” Online via vseanekdoti.ru at www.vseanekdoti.ru/natsionalnie/evrey_03.htm
who had a father in the camps\textsuperscript{31} could safely drop the idea of graduate studies altogether. This does not mean that Eidelman dropped the thought of writing a dissertation— he wrote two. The first, naturally found to be “non-passable”—compared contemporary Soviet economy to that of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, and a safer second one, dealt with the more innocuous 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

Once Eidelman graduated and had spent three years teaching in a night school, he found his way to graduate school blocked. The combination of a history degree and an unfortunate fifth line in his passport made finding work exceptionally difficult and Eidelman can be considered lucky to have avoided the common fate of his fellows who ended up working in factories or sweeping the streets. He succeeded in finding a job as a history teacher at a small secondary school, just North-West of Moscow, midway between the capital and the famous New-Jerusalem Monastery constructed by Patriarch Nikon in the 1600’s.

Until recent times of state-enforced co-education this had been a quiet all-girls school in the little suburb of Likino-Dulevo, ruled with an iron hand by its formidable, ideologically devout, sensible and occasionally kindly principal—the mighty and

\textsuperscript{31} Yakov Naumovich Eidelman, a famous journalist and theatrical critic was arrested in 1950, when his son was completing his third year of pre-graduate studies. He was released in 1954. For some more detail about this extraordinary biography, see an interview with his granddaughter, historian Tamara Eidelman in Izvestia magazine from 12/1/2009 at http://www.izvestia.ru/culture/article3135995/ or at http://www.peoples.ru/family/father/natan_eidelman/interview/html
matriarchal Dora Mironovna Sheveleva. Only 8 years away from high school himself, it was here that Eidelman began to teach in 1955. He was entrusted with German, geography, astronomy and that history which would become his true and only field. Here, in charge of students he consciously sought to protect from the influence of the Stalinist state’s idea of a proper education, he began to refine the story-telling skills which, when carried over into his writing, would establish a very distinctive historical style.

Those brief years established Eidelman the teacher, as well as furthering the development of Eidelman the historian. Indeed, the two facets are never clearly separated in his work or his life. It is very telling that the children who studied under the young Eidelman back then never forgot him. All his life he had been forbidden to leave the Soviet Union—until the last year of his life when a grateful former student from Likino-Dulevo arranged for the former teacher to finally see Italy, Germany and California…places which, for the overwhelming majority of Soviet people were as distant and unreachable as the far side of the moon. Another former student recalled that when she, in her senior year, dared write a paper criticizing Soviet policy [Stalin may have been dead by then, but the action was still an enormously risky one, both for the girl and for her family], Eidelman was the only adult in the school who had
dared stand up for her to Sheveleva who, in this case, was in her “official outrage” mode.\(^3\)

The permanent sense of terror which infused Soviet life from top to bottom usually meant that a Soviet teacher was in a delicate position vis-à-vis their own school administration as well as the state. In this sense one may argue that Eidelman was lucky to have worked under Sheveleva. True, she was a solid product of early Communism and a faithful, dedicated Stalinist. True, she was a domineering authoritarian who could, upon hearing that students were smoking in the boys’ restroom, burst in there howling and drag the offenders out by the ear to face public disgrace. True, she could insist—purely out of a sense of order,—that the entire school, teachers and students, spend recess walking around in orderly rows, in pairs, holding hands…

And yet, the harsh structure of the system imposed upon her did not fully manage to destroy the human being underneath…the woman who could sometimes give way to her ineradicable kindliness and common sense [the term used to describe her in the article referenced above is “простонародная”, literally a woman of the simple or common people…meaning a woman whose common sense, derived from common, peasant roots, had not yet been destroyed by an excess of education]. When a student’s parent or a

\(^3\) [http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/DIARIES.HTM](http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/DIARIES.HTM) The incident is described almost all the way at the end, in the afterword written by Eidelman’s widow, Julia Madora.
teacher’s spouse was arrested she would go against Soviet norms—which tended to condemn the family of the offender in public life—and hold long talks with the staff and students, explaining that family should not be forced to answer for individual family members, and that the student or teacher in question is already dealing with enough pain, that there is no call to make their lives harder than they are already. A devoted and true sergeant of the system—she nevertheless stood firm and helped, on those occasions when the armor of her ideology was pierced by the fact that one of her children needed that help.

Certainly not every time—but the courage it took for any Soviet person alone to challenge the government in any way after what so many had seen and experienced over their lifetime is formidable. Given the social context—this willingness to listen to her own heart and common sense was almost exceptionally rare and evidenced no small amount of courage...and simple, rare human decency. Sheveleva was a true Stalinist and Communist, while managing—to the extent it was possible in her social context—to remain a human being.

In his diary, excerpts from which his widow posthumously published online, Eidelman compared Sheveleva to his own former high school principal—the legendary Ivan Kuzmich Novikov who had for many years been in charge of Moscow’s prestigious 110th
School, which Eidelman considered their version of the Lyceum. In the most dangerous years of the 1930’s and ‘40’s this man managed to save many pre-revolutionary teachers from poverty or worse by finding them jobs in his school, well attended by the sons of “Important” men and later, well attended by the sons of “enemies of the people” whom Novikov—in marked contrast to many another principal—did not expel from school upon learning of the arrest of their fathers. From his fortress Novikov ruled autocratically, refusing to submit to his charges’ mighty fathers and behaving instead as though they were the ones in great debt to him—these high-ranking parvenus, only a step away from the factory or the plow, who now wanted him to provide their children with an education fit for pre-revolutionary nobility.

In one of his diary entries Eidelman formulated the difficulty such people as Novikov and Sheveleva encountered in attempting, one the one hand, to live according to the principles of the State and of surrounding society—and on the other hand, in attempting to preserve some standards of kindness, protectiveness, respect and simple, human decency for the children they taught.

“People so different as Novikov and Sheveleva instinctively understood that ‘big politics’ must not be allowed into schools, that the watchfulness preached by the newspapers must not be transferred to the children and the teachers (which did not, however, come into contradiction with the fact that in every class Ivan Kuzmich had his informers who secretly reported to him on internal
affairs; nor with the fact that the doors in our school, the former Flerov Gymnasium, were made in such a way as to allow the principal to observe each class from the hallway while remaining unnoticed himself.

Who can count or generalize—how much incredible, seemingly hopeless effort such principals and teachers had to make in order to combine three theses: 1) their undoubted conviction and loyalty to the general idea, 2) from this—agreement, the impossibility of disagreement with a number of phenomena which will much later come to be considered negative, unlawful results of the ‘Cult of Personality’ (mass denunciation of enemies of the people, calls for mutual suspicion, the explanation of practically all problems by sabotage); 3) the understanding—to a significant measure instinctive—that if all this were to be literally transferred to the school, to the kids—that this would be the end of everything."

After spending three years at Likino-Dulevo, Eidelman was transferred to a school in Moscow proper. Soon thereafter it was discovered that a group of his fellow university graduates had formed a secret group, agitating for reform and distributing leaflets in worker housing areas. Eidelman was arrested, unsurprisingly, on a charge based on a moral question—namely on that of having known of the existence of this group and having failed to report it to the authorities. In later years he himself never would quite make it clear whether he had known and sympathized, or whether he had participated in secret. In either case—he refused to cooperate with his interrogators, was expelled from the Communist Youth

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33 As a modern Russian fantasy—and alas, an all-too-popular pseudo-history—author, A. Bushkov phrased it: “A commander is not ‘snitched to’! A commander is kept informed of morale. Get the difference?”

34 http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/DIARIES.HTM

35 The days when people received two years for being at a party where a joke was told, and having failed to overhear and report it (for having failed to show proper proletarian vigilance, as the formula went—once again see Ginzburg for an example), were only a few very short years in the past...so few in fact, and so short that they could easily and safely still be considered present.
Organization and fired from the school. It is at this point that one must bid farewell to Eidelman the teacher, and begin to deal with Eidelman the writer. He never fully recovered from that loss.

“Fate bypassed Eidelman in not allowing him to teach. According to the reminiscences of his friends he had been a born pedagogue, not by education but by calling. He frequently sorrowed over this [сокрушался, which is best translated as “was crushed by”]: ‘I know so much, I’ve gathered up such a number of archives which I’ve studied exhaustively, and there’s no one to pass them to. I will leave and a great deal will leave with me’.”

His daughter Tamara Eidelman, a famous historian and pedagogue in her own right, relates that he went on to work in a small museum in the town of Istra. He began by challenging the entire museum collective to a game of chess, and having defeated every single member, so impressed the administration as to be allowed a virtually free reign. It was then, at what might have been the nadir of a non-start career that he began to write, and to study Herzen who would always remain one of his favorite subjects.

Never again would he be allowed to teach and, being kept under supervision for the rest of his life, Eidelman determined to write, to reach his audience—adult now, as well as children—through books and articles if he could not do so in person. In fact, the situation was, in some respects, an improvement as it allowed him to reach a

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36 Article from tvkultura.ru, online via http://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article_id/131583/ Once again, regrettably anonymous, signed merely by “the press service of the television channel RussiaK”.
37 http://www.peoples.ru/family/father/natan_eidelman/interview/html
formerly inaccessible adult audience which, after all, had also been mangled by the educational system.

The historian Lev Annenkov recalled: "Times were such that all history was separated by stages and formations, there were answers to all questions. And suddenly a historian appears who tells stories from the lives of one character and then another as though he had known all of them personally. After all, Russia has enough talented story-tellers, and generally talented people, we don’t have enough clever ones. Natan was from their number. His ability to tell the story that is what amazed me most of all."38

A delicately fought, subtle battle against the system of Soviet education; protecting his students, young and old, from it and all it stood for quickly became not merely Eidelman’s guiding principle, but a complete way of thought and life—as it had to become in a country and society where principles had either to guide one’s life and thought, or be abandoned. To a significant extent this was the principle which defines Eidelman’s place in historiography. After all, when studying an author of the Soviet period the historian frequently tends to run into a binary framework. The primary question asked of almost any author—regardless of their genre or quality—concerned their attitude toward the state and the communist ideal. These questions were essential to the state for obvious reasons; but essential also to the mass reader who demanded a positive attitude toward both and to the rare, non-mass reader who on the contrary, demanded an inquiring and critical examination of both, and separately too. True this did not necessarily mean that

38 http://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article_id/131583/
such readers demanded an unambiguously negative attitude—merely a critical one which, from the viewpoint of the state and the mass reader was a negative approach by its very nature. Political views came to be viewed as inseparable from historical insight or literary talent. Pushkin’s curse had come true and in Russia, a poet was indeed much more than a poet.

In Eidelman’s case the question of binaries was exacerbated by the fact that for the most part he wrote history and what’s much worse—recent history, one of the more loaded and volatile fields. In its later years the government could take exception to practically anything with no seeming rhyme or reason; a Jewish historian, already kept under supervision, with…questionable…moments in his CV and writing, in addition, on the delicate subject of imperial Russian history had to be very careful and careful he was. Like all Soviet people, he knew—as a basic fact of existence, learned from infancy—that the relative mildness of the State after 1956 did not mean for a moment that the Terror could not return at a moment’s notice. There was a great deal of fascinating life going on around him—and he determined to remain alive to observe it.

His acquaintances frequently recalled his near-obsession with the preservation of the present and the past, particularly in the realm of popular folklore: incidents, anecdotes, reflections…Whenever he heard that something funny had happened to someone
on the way to the Forum, his immediate and invariable response was to query—“Have you written this down?” Have you preserved the living memory beyond the limits of your own living person? He had grown up in an age and a country which had already destroyed a past and had started, quickly, agonizingly, with ferocious inconsistency and limitless sacrifices to construct an unpredictable and frightening ideologized future. Thus, the preservation of what little unrestricted thought and uncensored memory still remained became a vital question, and remained such for the rest of his life.

“A rare intellectual, who yearned for knowledge of the world, – so Eidelman was called by film director Sergei Soloviev. – The cultural and historical genome of his people was the meaning of life for him. He was one of the fundamental bases of a great community of people which today has entirely disappeared. But Natan Yakovlevich remains”.”

39 http://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article_id/131583/ Remains, of course, through his works. But the use of the present tense in regards to a man dead for more than a quarter of a century is telling.
Style

One of the most curious and attractive aspects of Eidelman’s writing style is its conversational nature which aided enormously in giving his books such wide-ranging appeal. His casual, eloquent and fluent writing worked well for everyone—from professional historians, to young school pupils, to the uneducated masses whose usual level of reading material consisted of *Pravda* and...well, practically nothing else. Eidelman is, above all, that very oldest archetype of both teacher and historian—the storyteller. He has an interesting story to tell in an engaging manner and reading his works produces almost the impression of a man who could be addressing a convention of colleagues, or a classroom of students...or just a few friends over a cup of tea.

The library website of the Novosibirsk State Technical University, in a brief page dedicated to Eidelman’s 85th birthday described his style so:

"His works combined documentality [документальность, in other words, heavy use of primary documents], profound and non-standard historico-philosophical perception of facts with literary entertainment, psychological vividness and a particular interest to moral problematics."\(^{40}\)

He achieves this effect by an easily flowing synthesis of very frequent primary source citation and connecting paragraphs of a conversational nature. This is—or rather, has the potential to be, if

\(^{40}\) [http://library.nstu.ru/liter_year/dostup_eideman/?print=yes](http://library.nstu.ru/liter_year/dostup_eideman/?print=yes)
misused—a particularly deceptive means of delivering information: the events are presented by the historian who seems…but merely seems…a conduit for the story told by the sources themselves. Eidelman always, inevitably, focuses on human history as a history of individual human beings, sympathetically and humanely—but without skirting the unavoidable negative aspects. In the end he succeeds—if not in making his reader believe that this was the way history really was—in at least making his reader wish to believe that this is the way it was. The readers are kept safe from the illusion only on the condition that they remember of the existence of countless other sources with countless other viewpoints, and force themselves to bear in mind that single viewpoint, no matter how expansive, cannot encompass the totality of any single historical event.

Having said this however, rarely—at least since the days of Gibbon, Macauley or Putnam—has historical writing joined together so nuanced and sympathetic understanding of human nature, so incisive and reasonably objective analysis of the source material, a clear understanding of numbers and their significance, and a flowing, graceful, almost lyrical literary style. Besides being informative, Eidelman’s books are vivid, lively and evocative.

His close friend (and subject of the next chapter) Yakov Gordin recalled:
“He was not merely a historian, but also a wonderful writer. This did not keep him from remaining very accurate methodologically and professionally, but he did develop his own, special style. Not for nothing did he write a novel, ‘Big Janno’, in which he tried to recreate reality through the eyes of one of his favorite heroes, Ivan Puschin, a prominent member of the Decembrist society and a Lyceum friend of Pushkin. Natan placed an incredible value on nobility—an infrequent trait in history. That is what he sought, found in his main characters and tried to bring to the audience.”

The frequent use of primary sources is the essential key to this method. Whatever the document cited—a letter, a diary entry, the record of a conversation, an official report—Eidelman always takes on the aspect of a detective, a Poirot of history who examines the subject’s/suspect’s story from various angles, searching for flaws, half-truths, motives and fears. The difference in years begins to fade, the past is seen as though analyzed in the present, the background context of every event and document is given its proper, and duly important place. In just one instance, we see this in The Border Between Centuries, where, in analyzing the actions of General Bennigsen in the assassination of Emperor Paul I, Eidelman considers the distinctions between the four different versions of the story the old general later told of his role that cold spring night. In each case we are informed of the nature of his relationship to his interlocutor, the time and place in which the conversation took place, the possible gains and risks to Bennigsen for revealing a greater or lesser part of the truth to that particular person at that

41 http://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article_id/131583/
particular time and place…all this shapes the event and informs interpretation.⁴²

Former teacher or not [and one could argue that teachers, like KGB agents, never actually become “former”], Eidelman avoids excessively didactic notes. He did not lecture, nor force his view or presume ignorance on the part of the reader—in marked contrast to most Soviet teachers, who treated their students of any age as blank slates which by definition had no right to opinions of their own. On the contrary, as truly good pedagogue he speaks in such a way as to convey information along with the impression—convincing, however false,—of speaking with his intellectual equals in a friendly, comfortable atmosphere. It is not the scribbling of a master on a blank slate, but the gentle sharing of information which produces the sense in the audience that, in reality, they had already known all this, but had temporarily forgotten. He does not so much lecture as he does converse. He does not so much reveal as he does remind.

An important detail of this approach is his frequent use of ellipses which are used to invite a pause on the part of the reader…rather like a good teacher would pause to invite reflection (and hopefully questions) from the audience. Of course Eidelman

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⁴² Not that Eidelman didn’t leave plenty of work behind for future generations of historians. Bennigsen’s private archive has been preserved to the present day by his descendants at the family estate in Germany. And when I say “preserved” I mean very jealously preserved, especially from nosy historians…
gives the conclusion to those ellipses, but they serve as a small breathing space, a comfortable little break in which he allows the reader, as doubtless he invited his students, to come to their own conclusions.

An absolutely essential element of his writing is the artful mixture of tenses, and the frequent questions addressed to the reader. The books quite frankly beg to be read aloud. As an example, here we can analyze one small episode from *Your Eighteenth Century*, written deliberately for a student audience and therefore provided with a slightly lower density of numbers and citations. This is the only distinction he made as a favor to the young age of the presumed readership, in all other respects his style remains the same. These are the opening paragraphs of the short chapter on the short reign of Peter III, appropriately entitled “Only Half-a-Year…”

“Elizabeth is dying, who shall receive the realm? Peter III, the official heir, known as such to the entire country, certainly has his rights: nephew to the Tsaritsa and grandson of Peter I. However, Elizabeth—no fool, though capricious and uneducated—comes to understand all the more every day, that her nephew is weak, stupid, plays with toy soldiers, hangs rats, depends not so much on Russian nobility as on his friends, drinking buddies from the German princedom of Holstein where he was born, and whence he came to Russia…”

Now let us examine the method here. A sense of urgency and mourning is established at once: the specific phrase used in Russian is rather more ceremonious than the brief “Elizabeth is

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43 Eidelman, N. *Your 18th Century*, , Vagrius Publications, Moscow, 2006, p. 101
dying”, used here purely for the sake of brevity: “Елизавета при смерти” has a more solemn tone to it—Elizabeth is near/approaching Death. The English “at death’s door”, while not an accurate translation, would probably be the most appropriate. The legitimacy of Peter III has been acknowledged—in fact, Eidelman gives him the imperial title before Elizabeth has expired!—but the last part of the sentence is cutting, brief, as though hinting that mere legitimacy may not be sufficient. Justice is rendered to the personality of the dying Empress—a very characteristic and sympathetic Eidelman note—and then the sentence takes off and gains speed, rising from crisis to crisis, reaching fever pitch and leading to the inevitable ellipsis—both a breathing space for the reader/lecturer/storyteller, and a moment of suspension which in both written and verbal form invites the audience to pause, to think of the conclusion which lies ahead before it is reached. In using ellipses Eidelman works like a classical fictional detective, a Poirot or a Holmes who gives his Hastings or Watson the pieces to the puzzle, and then sits back comfortably, to watch his friend puzzle over them. The list of X points has been written, now let the good Doctor or le bon Capitaine mull them over… In this case, the first sentence of the next paragraph is composed of two phrases which, from Eidelman’s standpoint, should occur to the audience a fraction of a second before he actually
goes on to say them or the audience to read them. Rather in Bakhtin’s style, he interacts with the audience and the audience, in turn, interacts with the text and the subject.

“Peter III is unsuitable—but to whom shall the throne go? The dying Tsaritsa changes one plan after another: should she proclaim the seven year-old Paul Petrovich heir, Peter and Catherine’s son? But it’s obvious that someone will become regent and rule in the juvenile’s name. Who then?”

Well, we expected him to pose that question, didn’t we—we were already posing it ourselves. Will Poirot relent and tell Hastings the answer? No, of course not! What kind of Poirot would he be if he didn’t let you struggle with the problem for yourself? What would the pedagogical benefit be? Oh no, you’ll have to struggle a bit longer! The use of young Paul’s patronymic, as well as the blunt statement of his parentage is suggestive…after all, the likelihood that Paul truly was Peter’s son is vanishingly small—so why remind us so obviously? Perhaps to narrow the choices—the legitimate Peter or the capable Catherine—both foreigners, both strangers, both tied to the boy, but only one unquestionably so. We have already been shown that Peter is unsuitable—unsuitable for any power, regardless of whether it comes with a crown or not. Catherine then? But for now she is mentioned only as a possible regent…

“There was even the idea of bringing back Ivan VI who, since the fatal night of November 25th, 1741 is under the strictest guard, long separated from brothers, sisters, his father, and placed

44 Ibid.
in Schlüsselburg. But that unhappy prince seems to be incurably ill, his consciousness is unclear and besides, it is dangerous to bring the Braunschweigs back from exile, they will start taking revenge, blood will spill...”

His consciousness is unclear—“сознание замутнено”. The root of the word is ‘муть”, as in “мутная вода”, muddied, non-transparent water. It is, of course, the same root as in “смута” or “trouble”, “смутян” or “troublemaker” and “Смутное Время” or “The Time of Troubles” of tragic memory. Let us note the romantic notes here, perhaps gestures toward a younger audience, but not too far out of the way of Eidelman’s usual eloquence; the night was fatal, the prince is unhappy…"cela se voit. Then once again the ellipsis leads us to pause and consider—this time the perilous situation of the worried courtiers gathered at the dying Empress’ bedside, hearing her discuss this plan and wondering fearfully, whose exact necks will be the first on the block should the deposed and vengeful Braunschweig line return to the throne they had lost to the young and merciless Elizabeth twenty years earlier...

“Among the projects there was an idea of bringing to the throne the heir’s smart and energetic wife, Catherine II.”

No more as yet, just that one brief sentence—but the name has been said. Not the title of Grand Princess, nor the more neutral Catherine Alexeevna—but the name of future, legendary Empress.

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
“In any case, it is obvious that no one was asking the people, and in the rabid battle for the throne it was not taken into consideration.”

And at once, by a sudden change to the present tense in the second part of that brief sentence, the reader is jolted from the 18th century into the Soviet realities of the 20th, to force an uncomfortable comparison…not stated, of course, but quite heavily implied…to modernity. This passage is followed by a rather lengthy quote from Herzen, who accompanies Eidelman throughout the 2-volume set and becomes a central figure in Your Nineteenth Century.

The shift from micro to macro-history can be a very brief one. In analyzing the reign of Peter III he briefly evaluates the effect of the 1762 Edict on the Emancipation of the Nobility.

“No more than a small number received civil rights in 1762—one to two percent of the population. Let us say immediately: the first to feel their backs ache from the onset of noble liberties were the peasants; the lords, willingly returning to their manors started demanding more and punishing harder… But nonetheless, for the first time in Russian history the law forbade the whipping of at least some part of the population. Previously, under Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Biron—of course noble masters beat and tormented their inferiors., but quite often they too ‘received’ the knout or the rack. The Emancipation of the Nobility… Now the time has come to say that people with the personal dignity and honor which we are accustomed to seeing in Pushkin or the Decembrists could not have come straight out of the old, cruel times… For such people to appear, at least two ‘unwhipped generations’ will be needed… Starting with 1762.”

Two unwhipped generations… This is an absolutely vital point to which we shall return in detail later, a position Eidelman

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. p. 103
maintained in all his published literature and for fairly obvious reasons: for his entire life he lived and worked in a context which excluded the very possibility of “unwhipped” people. From birth to death he lived in a pseudo-Petrine period in which the state could—and did—do anything and everything it wanted to anyone unfortunate enough to be within its borders. Stalin’s thirty years had brought the country back to the pre-Emancipation age when no one…not even the highest ranking and most influential servants of the state…could claim security from brutal treatment. There were simply no guarantees.

In a particularly individual manner Eidelman utilizes time and space to form an introduction to the socio-cultural sphere. His opening chapter in *The Border Between Centuries* is essentially an introduction to the Russian landscape in the last years of the 18th century—and it is truly difficult to tell whether the landscape we see is geographic, demographic, political, social or cultural…or perhaps an amalgam of all. He emphasizes the nature of the perception of time in the 18th century by discussing the speed of travel and its effect on the perception of distances. Once more, let us note the tenses and ellipses…

“On December 11th, 1796, a cathedral service and a cannon salute began in honor of the new emperor: early in the morning a state courier arrived (starting with Paul’s reign he will be known as a Feld-Jeger), who travelled the six thousand versts49 separating the

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49 Pre-revolutionary Russian measure of distance, equivalent to 1.0668 kilometers, hence, in 34 days the man rode almost 3,977 miles, and that’s in the winter, across a snowed-in landscape no less. True, winter
capital on the Neva from the provincial center on the Angara in a mere 34 days. For over a month Irkutsk lived according to the will of the deceased Catherine II. Kamchatka will not swear allegiance until early 1797… Six thousand versts, divided by 34 days, around 180 versts per 24 hours—truly a courier’s speed… From the most ancient times to the first steam engines, the maximum speed of human movement was the speed of the fastest horse, or troika, or chariot: approximately 20 km per hour on a short trip, and less if you divide the long versts by the long hours. That is why Russia in 1796 is an enormous country, a slow country (30-40 times slower and so, as many times ‘larger’ than today… A vast country in the grip of the most ferocious frosts. The eighteenth century was the coldest time the northern hemisphere had in the last three to four hundred years- […] Some forty million people and a vast space, with the maximum speed of movement not exceeding 10-20 kilometers per hour… Like rare islands in the snowy ocean of plain—cities, towns (by the end of Catherine’s reign there were 610), although one third (230) were demoted to villages and shtetls by Paul I. Only six souls out of every hundred are urbanites, while 94 out of 100 are villagers. Like tiny islets, reefs, rocks—villages of 100-200 souls, and sixty-two out of every hundred are serfs. […] One hundred thousand villages, which can come to life in a favorable ‘historical climate’, but are overtaken by forests, disappear whole areas at a time after a plague, a famine, and even more often, a heavy war or a terrible tsar."

The final sentence gives the reader a clear awareness of a story being told about the past—but the form of the first sentences is such as to evoke a sense of being present.

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travel, with good horses and a small, light sleigh could be quite rapid and for a single man on a horse more rapid still, but nonetheless, we end up with a very impressive speed of nearly 117 miles per 24 hours…and presumably the poor man ate and slept occasionally, and not just in the saddle.

50 And let’s not forget, a courier—hopefully not that same one!—would have had to go further still, to bring the news to Alaska and Northern California!

51 Earlier in the same chapter Eidelman mentions an illustrative case: upon ascending to the throne in 1741 Empress Elizabeth sent a courier to Kamchatka, in order to bring back six lovely local maidens for her Moscow coronation, scheduled in 18 months’ time. Elizabeth—while no fool—had only the vaguest knowledge of geography or of the actual size of her empire. It took six years for the courier and the maidens—most of whom were no longer by any stretch of the imagination maidens—to reach Irkutsk, and from there it was only a few months to St. Petersburg. In the even slower 17th century, a provincial governor appointed in Moscow to rule over eastern Siberia from the city of Yakutsk took an average 3 years to reach his destination.

Catherine the Great has died. One of the most singular embodiments of the Gallant 18th century—the age of Absolutism, Enlightenment and Freedom—all finally conscious and realized. The age of Kosciuszko, Voltaire, Beaumarchais, Mozart, Captain Cook, Choderlos de Laclos, Casanova and Fragonard…and now the age has died with its last Enlightened Autocrat on a cold November evening…and with Eidelman we watch as a courier, wrapped tightly in a fur cloak against the ferocious Siberian winds, flogs his wolf-hounded horses across the snowy steppes and rides East, sent by a single phrase of the new Emperor to spread the news of the passing of an era. Human beings, statistics, geography and fates—all part of the landscape. Such is the beginning of the book dedicated to the conspiracy which ended the life and reign of Paul I on March 11th, 1801. The stage is set, Poirot is ready to get to work and history speeds up to become, quite literally, a page-turner. By the time the book reaches the last third, Eidelman is discussing the actual night of the assassination, mostly through the stories told by witnesses and participants. Primary source citations are thicker on the page than his own text and the narrative which began with a leisurely discussion of countless miles of snow distance and time perception in the distant 18th century now narrows to St. Petersburg—a single night, a single palace, a few rooms, the words and movements of a few significant individuals, their emotions, relationships and
ideas… Narrative, biographical, *personal* history. Like a novelist Eidelman never fails to pay attention to the personal—the detailed micro-history of moods, grudges, gains, losses, ambitions and wounded vanities. There is certainly a plot to his history, there is dialogue, indeed, there are many versions of dialogue—between the reader and the author, the author and the primary sources, between the primary sources themselves.

Eidelman’s dissent from the dry, pompous style of official history was formulated partially in this lively, conversational style which would not allow living history to remain dead matter in the hands of Marxist formers and shapers. He notices the importance of appearances, spending some time on Platon Zubov’s conceited, weak-natured good looks, on the brilliant Pahlen’s sly charm\(^{53}\), on the famous Bennigsen’s tall, thin, white-haired, eagle-beaked and regal self-possession which did so much to keep the soldiers in line… He describes in detail the orders and medals they wore when they came that night—attired as though for a parade, the self-appointed representatives of the State, the Law and the Empire—to kill the Emperor to whom they had sworn allegiance only five years ago, the one from whom they had received with obsequious gratitude so many of those orders and medals.

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\(^{53}\) Eidelman shows remarkable…though perhaps, understandable… respect and no small amount of admiration for this clever conspirator—Pahlen is, in a very real sense the hero, or at least major protagonist of the narrative.
Eidelman—and we with him—follow them like unseen future shades, hovering over their shoulders, tracing their movements through the dark halls and stairs—silent, cold, dim candles barely visible in the murky fog rising from the still-damp plastered walls in the barely-finished palace,—past puzzled servants and suspicious guards…

He goes over the process of the actual assassination from the viewpoints of witnesses and participants (who, as mentioned earlier, told different versions of the story to different people and different times). The voices fight for space on the page.

After detailing the desperate attempts by the raging, power-hungry, newly-Dowager Empress to seize her husband’s barely vacated throne, after discussing Alexander’s cowardly, night-time flight to the Winter Palace, Eidelman finishes his last, pre-conclusion chapter with the sparse words:

"So came the morning of March 12th, 1801. The coup d’état was coming to an end. One or two wounded. One killed."

No ellipsis this time. No need, really. In any case the reader is more than likely to be jolted into a few minutes’ silent thought. Our roller coaster has come to a halt and the reader, still slightly breathless from the mad pace of the last few speedy chapters, is left to face the bare results of the book—the final combination of those endless miles of snowy wasteland and the chilly halls of grand
palaces, peasants, royals, soldiers, nobles, letters, orders, statistics, actions, lives and fates…and here we are. One or two wounded. One killed. The border has been crossed. The 19th century has arrived…
I mentioned earlier the all-important phrase, “two un-whipped generations”. For Eidelman this was a vital moment. In 1762, in an edict planned and all-too-long delayed by the dying Elizabeth and finally written and published under Peter III in his one and only serious contribution to the history of the country he never managed to rule, the first generation appeared which was legally declared secure against the threat of corporal punishment. It is absolutely impossible to overemphasize the importance of this. For centuries the founding basis of the autocrat’s right to rule had been this exact power. Not divine right, not hereditary claims, not tradition and history…but the simple, plain and inescapable threat of physical pain and humiliation. One could argue that Russia was, in this particular sense, the home and forerunner of modern fascism in its precise meaning—a means of gaining and keeping political power. Religion, inheritance, tradition—all this was icing on the cake. The cake itself consisted of the plain and inescapable fact—the people who are in charge are in charge because they have the means to exercise physical violence and they tend to be very plain on the matter.

No one was secure from this. No one had been secure from this situation for centuries. Bishops beat their priests. Abbots beat
their monks. Abbesses beat their nuns. Husbands beat their wives. Fathers beat their children. Overseers beat peasants. Landlords beat overseers. Nobles beat the lesser landlords. The autocrat beat the nobles. Alexius Romanov, the father of Peter I, was famous for his kindness and restraint—a notion based, fundamentally, not on either quality, but on his incredible capacity, previously unknown in an autocrat, for apologizing to nobles whom he had, in a fit of anger, slapped across the face with his personal, royal hand. Peter I beat anyone, high and low, with hand, stick and foot with neither restraint nor apology. The excesses of Ivan IV will not bear going into in civilized company. Anna Ioannovna, with all the physical strength befitting a person standing some 6’5” and weighing over 250lbs, used the royal hand frequently and to powerful effect. Even the relatively gentle Elizabeth could slap her courtiers one day and caress them the next. Wealth, ancient lineage, social position, rank, power at court—none of this held against the power of those higher to beat, physically, painfully and humiliatingly, those who were below. It was a fundamental fact of existence and across all Russia few and far between were backs without scars.

And in a moment—for a tiny percentage of the population—this changed. What Peter III started in 1762, Catherine completed in 1785. In her “Granted Charter” they were given not merely a royal whim, by which her Majesty had decided to refrain from
violence the past twenty-three years—but an actual guarantee that noble rank protects, permanently, from this threat. Yes, the edict provided the nobles with many other benefits—travelling outside the country, freedom from mandatory state service, increased rights over their slaves, etc…but this was the one, great, fundamental fact which raised the nobility higher above the rest than they had ever been. They could not be beaten! True, this did not apply to youngsters in state-run schools, but this can hardly be counted a significant exception, practically all theories of upbringing at the time, and not only in Russia, were based on the idea of corporal punishment as a tool of discipline and education. But adults, who had completed their education, were now free forever of that horrifying possibility.

Personal dignity is not possible otherwise, is Eidelman’s lifelong position. The nobility of former times, no matter how far raised above their peasants, always knew that they themselves were slaves, that the mighty hand from above might descend at any moment, for any reason or lack thereof to deprive them of everything. In 1762 there were plenty of people still alive and well who remembered the all-powerful Menshikov—the factual ruler of the empire, one of the richest men on earth (and quite possibly the richest in Europe)—deprived in an instant, by the whim of a capricious, cruel and stupid adolescent, of absolutely everything
down to his warm clothing, exiled and condemned to die under permanent guard in a tiny, barely heated house in Eastern Siberia. A day previously—the highest nobles of the empire, descendants of the oldest Rurikid lines bowed and scraped to the parvenu son of a groom…and now he and his family, impoverished, freezing and hungry, were heading East…

Everyone knew that they could share the same fate. In the 1740’s, only a few years before the edict was published, one of the most famous beauties of court, kin to an old family, was implicated in a plot against the Empress…and Elizabeth showed her family character to the fullest. It was not enough to merely remove Lopukhina from court…no! Public flogging, a branded cheek and a sliced tongue in the square before the palace, in the presence of the entire court. And only then, bleeding and screaming, was she flung into a peasant cart to be taken into permanent exile. No one was left in any doubt that as kind and gentle as Elizabeth could show herself to be…and indeed, as she could actually be…she retained to the full the royal privilege. A few years later, the same smiling Empress made Russia one of the most liberal countries in the world with a stroke of her pen, by banning the death penalty… The assembled nobility of the empire was left in no doubt that, despite their position, wealth, elegant clothing, vast estates and personal influence, they were slaves. Factually powerless, helpless, owning
nothing, capable of nothing…puppets animated by the royal will or
tossed aside by the royal hand when their turn on stage was done.
No guarantees.

And now they finally had them! And slowly, painfully,
among a tiny percentage the development began of that personal,
innate dignity which had long existed in the Europe of which Peter
I had forced them to dream. Catherine’s reign cemented this idea in
the minds of the nobles by giving them those thirty-four years of a
reign in which—for, quite literally, the first time in Russian
history,—the autocrat proved not merely kindly, but polite.

Naturally, this was not the primary consideration in
Catherine’s mind. She was working, first and foremost, for her own
security. It is difficult for anyone—including your own son, the
legitimate heir—to arrange a palace coup in which absolutely
everyone, from the commander of the guards to the lowest servant
boy like you more than they like him. But nonetheless, the effect
was surprisingly powerful, all the more so because of its novelty.
Russians were simply unaccustomed to those in charge being polite.
Patronizingly kind sometimes, but never polite. Catherine’s habit,
carefully cultivated and polished over the years of being both kind
and polite to absolutely everyone, starting with the servants, paid
off. And in the process, an entire generation grew up which became
accustomed to courtesy. Yes, it was a very small generation—but its importance in Eidelman’s worldview is absolutely critical.

It is this, Eidelman considers, that played one of the key parts if not the central part in the assassination. Not Paul’s questionable foreign policy. Not his religiously dubious, though inwardly logical, assumption of the mantle of the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta, not his inconsistency and irritable changeability. Paul began to dismantle the decrees of his parents. He considered the concept of honor his own, a personal prerogative which could only be given, not guaranteed, for such a guarantee would deprive him of freedom of action which he considered his inalienable, inherited right.

“The rods [in Russian, the plural ‘розги’]—are the apotheosis of personal insecurity. Their very existence is mandatorily connected with an entire system of other repressions [‘ущемление’, closer akin to squeezing or strangulation] of the individual.”

It was this system of guarantees that Paul threatened. He seems never to have considered, in his desire to undo his hated mother’s work, that her system was a system which provided security for him and his family, as well as for herself. He wanted to rule according to the model of his mighty great-grandfather, but if the nobility of Peter’s time accepted blows from the royal hand and stick as an inevitable, God-ordained punishment…the educated, polished and above all, dignified nobles with a strong sense of their

54 Eidelman, Border Between Centuries, p.122
personal worth raised during the Catherinian period did not. They had, in a sense, lost their immunity, and so, Paul’s behavior was not only a rude shock—it was something they saw as personally offensive, unacceptable. His rudeness came to be viewed as an infringement of what they had come to consider their right, and to poor Paul the very idea of anyone possessing rights he had not granted them personally was anathema.

His death, in this sense, became absolutely inevitable from the moment he ascended to the throne—his worldview and that of many of his highest noblemen were absolutely antithetical. It tells us something of Catherine’s reign that there was now such a concept as “unacceptable” behavior from a monarch. For more than thirty years they had travelled abroad, been present at the courts of Europe and they came to realize, to their own shame and horror, how far behind they actually were.

They could bring wealth and occasional beauty to the table, but even in the exceptionally rare cases of the high-born and wealthy travelling nobility possessing an exceptionally high-class education dedicated to as close an acquaintance as possible with the dominant Western European culture, the exchange was still somewhat uneven. The Venus Muscovite charmed with her beauty and dances at the court of Louis XV, but in her old age it is a French aria the tired Queen of Spades whispers by the fire at night, and she is angered by
day when she hears her granddaughter sing a common Russian peasant song. They had their sense of inalienable dignity—they had their assurance from physical punishment at last, the one thing which in this respect did make them equal. They had come to view honor and dignity as their inalienable qualities.

And now, to their horror, Paul threatened to take them back to a time when he alone decides who had honor and dignity. They were accustomed to being ruled by an absolute monarch—after all, the unspoken agreement struck back in the days of Ivan IV and extended in formal terms by generations of later rulers was precisely that the landlords and monasteries (up until the Catherinian period) receive near-total power over their serfs while renouncing practically all claim to participate in politics unless summoned and ordered to do so. But they were no longer accustomed to being treated as slaves, as those who could be deprived of their dignity as well as their goods. They were categorically no longer accustomed to being treated as those who could be beaten. When Bezborodko, Catherine’s supremely capable Vice-Chancellor and Paul’s Chancellor refused to help the Emperor arrange a liaison with a compliant court beauty, the outraged Paul chased the fat old man down the palace halls, waving a dog-whip. And the nobility saw a clear signal—to this man, they are fundamentally dogs. Catherine had been a good mistress but now, due to a fluke of birth and
upbringing they were back to this. Petted and praised one day, flogged and sent to the kennel without supper the next. And they were no longer prepared to accept this as a status-quo.

Paul deprived bureaucrats of the possibility of moving without the approval of the Senate. Censure became even stricter than during the last, frightened years of Catherine’s life. Freedom from service was cancelled.

“In 1797 Paul I not only orders [once again the present tense] the fictional young nobles [недоросли]55, enlisted since infancy, to show up in their regiments, but also demands the lists of ‘non-serving nobility’: in Voronezh province (August of 1800) there were discovered, for instance, 57 nobles who ‘are not taught to read, some spend their days in idleness but their main and almost only exercise consists of working the land and running the household’. Soon, of the 57 who were ‘noticed’ 43, aged up to forty, were ‘determined for military service’.

Another Pauline method used to pull up [literally ‘подтянуть’, to pull up or tighten up] the nobility was to limit in every possible way the transfer from military to civil service. From October of 1799 no one could choose civil service over the military ‘according to their own will’: one needed the permission of the Senate, ratified by the Emperor! By the way, in ordering (1800) for ‘all to enter service’, Paul struck at the representatives of the so-called ‘free professions’ (artists, for example).

Leaving service is all the more dangerous; retirement for many would come to be a ‘turning-off’ [выключка], i.e. a repressive measure, which deprived the punished man of all his privileges and which cut off the possibility of returning to service.”56

Freedom from taxes soon went the same route.

55 A legal term for young nobles who had not received a state-approved education and were thus ineligible for civil service and forbidden to marry. In Catherine’s time the practice flourished of enrolling them in prestigious regiments at birth or even earlier (if a daughter was born, the death of the young sergeant of the guards was announced), in order to allow them to enter service as adolescents with a number of years already registered, and thus to claim an early retirement after a minimal number of years actually served.
56 Ibid, p. 118
“On December 18th of 1797 the nobles were ordered to pay a tax of 1,640 rubles for the maintenance of provincial administration and above all, for the courts.

A few months later the sum was increased, and from 1799 the nobles paid 1,748 rubles, i.e. approximately 20 rubles ‘per soul’.”

The right to assembly, guaranteed by no fewer than thirty-three articles of the edict of 1785?

“Under Catherine II, approximately one hundred officials were elected in each province, which means that in the entire country there were several thousand elected noble officials, no small number in the Russian government.

From the very beginning of Paul’s reign preparation began for an edict accepted on October 14th of 1799: about the severe limitation of assemblies and elections. The Tsar expressed his displeasure about the lengthy ‘brides’ fairs’—the usual, long-lasting noble assemblies

The provincial assemblies, as the most influential, were cancelled entirely; the district ones were severely limited. The number of noble electors was cut down by some five times. The right of the governor to interfere in noble elections increased significantly.

The very word ‘elections’ was so unpleasant for the monarch, that a different, more realistic term was used, ‘noble selection’. This way, Pauline centralization, the autocracy, would not bear even the district-estate elements of ‘noble democracy’.”

The right of representation was severely limited as well.

Even loyal petitions required the permission of the governor or the general-procurator before they could be sent ‘to the Highest Name’.

Only one privilege was left intact—that of no one, save the Emperor in person, having the power to revoke noble status. As Eidelman

57 Ibid
58 Paul was being sarcastic, but only to a point. No doubt some marriage alliances were agreed upon during these assemblies which provided the nobles of a district or the province a rare chance to meet en-masse, outside their estates.
59 Ibid, p.119
points out, this was precisely because this privilege was very much in the spirit of Paul’s reign. Permission and prohibition could only work from the top down, but any non-royal initiative was viewed with extreme suspicion. Paul can give anything—when he wishes and only the way he wishes. Or not.

Finally—the prohibition on corporal punishment. Almost anything else the nobles would have borne. But here, Paul struck right at the sacred heart of their position. Eidelman mentions the severe sentence Paul personally passed against two officers who dared complain…not even of beating, but of insults suffered from Paul’s favorite, Arakcheev. Corporal punishment of junior officers resumed in the regiments. And finally, on January 3rd of 1798, Paul famously proclaimed that if a man was deprived of nobility, the privilege no longer applied, and corporal punishment was, thus, given retroactive status."

"Let us sum up briefly. Only one point of the Granted Charter [the edict of 1785] remained in force (nobility can be taken away only by the tsar). ‘The noble estate’, which combined slave-owning [soul-owning, ‘душевладение’] with elements of enlightenment and which had spent several generations making their way to these ‘granted rights’ [дарованным правам], to

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60 Upbringing tells. Paul’s attitude was, essentially, that of his son Alexander, save that the latter covered it with a thicker lacquer of social graces learned from Grandmother. He would gladly have given freedom to all the world—if only his power to do so were acknowledged and enshrined as supreme, and that this freedom be received solely from his own hands and on his conditions. One is somewhat reminded of the touching father-daughter talk between Sylvester Stallone playing a Prohibition-era bootlegger baron, and his daughter Lisa in “Oscar”.

“Daddy, I want to run with the bulls in Spain! I want to go shopping in Paris! I want to lie on the beach in Honolulu!”

“Do anything you want!!! Just! Don’t! Leave! This! Room!”

61 Ibid, p. 121
personal untouchability, suddenly sees itself returned to the times of Peter I and his first successors.

Much of what the head of state was doing in the end of the 1790’s would have seemed normal or historically inevitable to the nobility half a century earlier. However, since then at least two ‘unwhipped’ noble generations had grown up, who had enjoyed the law on noble freedom and the ‘Granted Charter’. An entire layer [of the population], accustomed to their freedom!” […]

The author of this book wrote lines a few years ago which he considers suitable for repetition.

‘Without those Muravyovs who enlighten, there never would have appeared those Muravyovs ‘who are hanged’. Pushkin and the Decembrists…could never have appeared straight from the days of Biron.

Vasily Osipovich Kliuchevsky noted of the times following Ivan Kalita: ‘In those calm years there were born and raised two whole generations to whose nerves the impressions of childhood did not fix an answerless terror their fathers and grandfathers had felt before the Tatar; they were the ones who went out to Kulikovo field.’

The two generations of Catherian nobility were also getting rid of the fears of their fathers and grandfathers, even though they have no thought of going up against ‘Mamai’.

Two unbeaten noble generations—without them Pushkin would not have been Pushkin nor would Lunin have been Lunin.’

62

It is important to go more detail here to the previously mentioned Knights of Malta. This incident reveals, perhaps most clearly, the reason the high nobles were afraid of Paul. His plans and ambitions became simply too grand, too overwhelmingly universal… Those who were highest in the land and therefore most frequently exposed to the autocrat’s stern, unpredictable and severe gaze were men and women who had only just, during the last couple of generations—literally, barely forty short years!—reached a high place in the world. As far as the majority of them were concerned almost all change was bad change if it led them away from the

62 Ibid. pp. 125-26
peaceful, lazy, luxurious and glorious dream world which Catherine had bequeathed them—to her supporters, her faithful and loyal servants, her creations and adorers who had found in the beautiful young foreign usurper the loving, gentle, protective mother, an example of which their former rulers had not given them since the days of the previous Sophia, if ever...

Now, in addition to shocking them with behavior they had forgotten or had never known, and to hedging in their accustomed freedom of action with endless and senseless decrees, Paul’s international plans were threatening to stir up their world to a degree they had difficulty imagining. As eccentric and senseless an action as it seemed at the time for a Russian-Orthodox Emperor to take on the role of a Grand Master of a Catholic chivalrous order, Eidelman makes it clear that within Paul’s viewpoint this made perfect sense—it is merely that his viewpoint, in addition to its eccentricity, was now some centuries outdated and inapplicable in modern circumstances.

“A chivalrous order which brought together the warrior and the priest was a find for Paul, who even before becoming the Maltese Grand Master had united secular and spiritual power.

Besides Paul’s favorite formula ‘the Russian sovereign is the head of the Church’ we might recall the tsar’s contacts with the Jesuits (and of his request, directed to Pope Pius VII, to cancel the prohibition of the Jesuit order), of the famous Father Gruber, a Jesuit who had played a large part at court during the last months of Paul’s reign. Paul’s correspondence with Pius VII was very warm. In the end of 1800 the Pope received the tsar’s personal invitation to make his home in Petersurg if French policy were to make his remaining in Italy impossible. Later Pius VII will have a
funeral mass served for the Russian tsar. All this is hard to understand outside of the ‘chivalrous idea’: the union of the Maltese tsar with the Universal Church—an important aim for a monarch who was planning to give back to the entire world the ‘chief idea’ it had lost. This was not a question of betraying Orthodoxy or converting to Catholicism: for Paul the distinction of the churches was a secondary concern, unessential against the background of the main theocratic idea.

It is curious that the other ‘universal actor’—Napoleon, was at the time on the threshold of his Concordat with Pope Pius VII, in other words to an action very close to Paul’s own plans. The rumors, conversations about the plans of the Russian emperor to unite the churches (and in time even to assume the Papal tiara!) do not seem baseless in the context.

Tsar-Pope, the Maltese Grand Master—this is both the purely Russian consumption of the church by the state (‘Here’s your Patriarch!’ exclaims tsar Peter the Great in Pushkin’s interpretation, striking his chest upon hearing the clergy’s request to appoint the head of the church); this is also the Russian analogy of the ‘Napoleonic direction’: not for nothing will Paul and the First Consul come so easily to mutual understanding...

Paul’s chivalrous idea engenders a particular tone, style, theatricality and humor.

When scolding Admiral Chichagov (who had just previously been imprisoned in the fortress, supposedly for Jacobinism), Paul says: ‘If you are a Jacobin, then imagine that I have a red hat, that I am the main chief of all the Jacobins and obey me’ (the joke about the Jacobin-interlocutor seems to have been used often).

The Russian tsar’s mocking challenge for all the monarchs to meet in a duel (with their prime ministers as seconds) was published as though from a ‘third party’ in the Hamburg Gazette.

And so, Paul’s conservative-chivalrous utopia was based on two foundations (and factually on landmines Paul was placing there himself): omnipotence and honor; the first presupposed Paul’s exclusive monopoly on the highest understandings of honor, which came into complete conflict with the attempt of chivalry to ennoble an entire estate.

The foundation of chivalry is the freedom of the personality which preserves the principles of honor even in its relations with the higher-standing, with the monarch, whereas the tsar-knight constantly crushes personal freedom.

Honor is introduced by order, by arbitrary despotism which is dishonorable in its very essence. In the XII-XIV centuries, maybe even later, much of this nature would have been considered natural. However, in 1800 the world lived in a different system of values, and the tsar was accompanied to the grave by a joke both sad and funny;
Paul asks the murderers to wait, because he wants to plan out the ceremony for his own funeral.”  

And there we have one of the basic and most important elements of the ethical historian Eidelman. “—arbitrary despotism which is dishonorable in its very essence”. It took courage, even in the when there seemed to be no rules at all and anything seemed possible, to go against centuries of Russian—and not only Russian—history and to condemn, openly and clearly, one of the most basic features of the historical landscape. For century after century—and especially during those two key centuries—the 18th and the 20th—vast changes occur in Russian society, they require human sacrifice on a scale previously unheard of and unimagined and time and time again arbitrary despotism drives one society or another forward into a bright and shining future, cheerfully cracking the whip…

Countless people among Eidelman’s readers had lost family, friends, or years of their own life and health to the concept that the state could, arbitrarily, do anything it wanted to its people in the name of what it, the state, considered good. Many continued to consider all their lives that though the state had made a mistake in sending them personally to prison or hard labor—the essential rightness and right of the state to do so remained sacred. If on

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occasion the state attempts to do something beneficial— institute a system of education, for instance, or instill vast numbers of people with a particular idea—the result is burdened with evil at the outset because the system which attempted to do something honorable was in itself innately, ineradically dishonorable, incapable of honor by its very nature because honor and absolutism are incompatible by their very nature. The Petrine reforms cost Russia 15% of its population, Eidelman mentions on more than one occasion and his audience would have had a lot to compare with and would be given quite seriously to think.

For three generations Eidelman’s audience had been told and told of vast industrial and military accomplishments, of the grand deeds of the Soviet Union. They were forced to learn these accomplishments and deeds by heart, to admire them, to praise them, to worship them, to honor the glorious dead…and when the price paid for this by tens of millions of people—many of them still living as best they could with the consequences of all those grand achievements which had run over their lives like a steamroller—was grudgingly (or quietly) brought up at all, very few and very far between were the people who had the conscience and courage to say openly and honestly that it was not worth it! That the cost in lives for the attempt to refashion reality had been too high. Catherinian noblemen admired the deeds of Peter I while thanking every saint in
the calendar that they did not live in his time. Eidelman’s audiences in the 1970’s and 1980’s had been overwhelmingly taught to admire the deeds of Stalin, while thanking whatever higher powers they still believed in for having either outlived him or having been born after his death. The grand monstrosity was best admired from a distance.

And back then in the 1790’s Paul’s nobles were suddenly faced with the specter coming back to life, returning to beat, to scream insults, to order, to refashion the world again in some monstrous and insane way which would lead to nothing but chaos and which would disrupt forever what had quickly become the established and very comfortable reality of their lives. It is absolutely understandable that they were terrified. Not even so much of Paul himself…the ludicrous little pug-nosed figure who could lead a military parade while wearing a dalmatic, no. Of what he had the potential power to do, and of the means he seemed determined to use in order to do it…

It was not merely Paul’s insistence on his autocratic authority that condemned him to death. It was not even, strictly speaking, his rudeness. *It was his insistence on his unchallengeable right to rudeness and worse*…and in the eyes of enlightened, capable cynics like Pahlen, the removal of the Emperor—by any means necessary—becomes not merely a way to assure their threatened position and privileges but a patriotic deed, a means of
saving the country of which they considered themselves the best representatives. For them, somewhat educated in Russian history by the enormous educational rise of Catherine’s time, returning to the days when the autocrat could be rude meant, automatically, a return to the days when the autocrat could dispose of their lives and property at whim. True, technically speaking Catherine also possessed this right—but she had the brains and tact never to make an issue of it! Paul, if one may use the image, took this right, dusted it off and started banging people on the head with it. In the footnote to page 308 of Border Between Centuries Eidelman notes that much later, in Siberia, Lunin and Nikita Muravyov generally looked upon Pahlen with sympathy, as did Fonvizin who considered that while Pahlen was not overly picky in his methods, he was, with all his soul, dedicated to his fatherland. And if that dedication required assassination—well, in Pahlen’s favorite phrase, you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs…

From Pahlen’s viewpoint the assassination was not a selfish attempt to save their privileged positions. They were saving their entire world—and perhaps even more, the world—which this maniac was trying to overturn and reshape just as his magnificent

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64 Ibid. p. 308
65 Eidelman, Border Between Centuries, Moscow, Vagrius, 2004, p. 398
66 Does anyone even want to imagine Paul, the Pope of a re-united Apostolic Church? With all the actual power this implies? And in a [possibly permanently!] friendly alliance with Napoleon I to boot? And with all that nice ‘heathen’ territory out in Asia and India to expand to? All jokes aside, the concept is as ludicrous from a long historical distance as it had seemed terrifying back then, up-close and personal...
and cursed great-grandfather had overturned another established world a century earlier. They remembered now what it had cost. They knew that their grandfathers’ failure to reign in the monarchy after the death of Peter II had cost their fathers another thirty years of non-stop royal whim, indulgence and luxury while the whips and axes continued to fall to the sound of palace ballroom dances and fireworks. They had had enough.

As we see, it can be argued that Eidelman’s historical views are, essentially, of the Romantic school. He is focused almost exclusively on the ability of individual persons to form, or use, events to change the historical process at particular, key points which are often not perceived as such at the time. In reading his works we will rarely, other than in the case of the Decembrists, encounter mention of groups or corporate entities. He admits the existence of groups, naturally, but never forgets that each of these groups was composed of individuals who had their own, frequently overlapping but always individual reasons for being there.

Biography is far more his genre—he takes almost endless pleasure in figuring out the specific reasons for actions and decisions which stem from personal motivations and emotions. Individual emotions—love, hatred, wounded vanity, pride—all are vital to understanding the true course of events. The human factor is all-

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67 A trait, we will see, which his long-term friend Yakov Gordin shared and developed even further.
important to him and there is no detail of a human life which can really be unimportant, for every single one of those details shaped the individual, unrepeatable and uniquely fascinating human being. Individuals living their lives for individual reasons create that which later individuals, for their individual reasons, call history. They do not need to know that their actions make a serious difference either in the short or the long run, and most of the time they do not know this. And so, Eidelman’s works frequently focuses on particular moments when an individual could have acted differently. This is not Chaos theory. Eidelman firmly believes that everything has a cause and an effect. The difficulty lies in the fact that most historical phenomena are traceable to so many sources that the difficulty for the historian lies mostly in figuring out which ones to trace.

His two companion volumes, *Your Eighteenth Century* and *Your Nineteenth Century* are written in precisely this manner. In the first Eidelman chooses fourteen particular days as his focus. Fourteen days out of an entire century.

We see January 27th of 1723 when Pushkin’s great-grandfather, the Abyssinian Prince turned Russian officer returns home from his sojourn in Regency France, to be met at the border (but did this meeting truly take place, Eidelman wonders?) by his illustrious Godfather, Peter I in person. Eidelman traces the process
by which, a hundred years later, the young poet-historian Pushkin seeks to track down news of his famous ancestor.

The next chapter lands us in the worst years of Anne’s rule—October 4th of 1737. Luckily we are far from the gorgeous and dangerous capital—we see a young soldier’s son who now, thanks to the Petrine reforms, has become a scientist and has, despite great dangers, reached Kamchatka at the furthest end of the earth.

In the next chapter another four years have passed. The scientist has returned to the Siberian capital at Irkutsk and in the meantime, back in St. Petersburg, the founder’s beautiful and deadly daughter seizes the throne and deposes the Braunschweig line but, to her own endless danger and fear, has neither the kindness to send them home to Europe nor the ruthlessness to simply kill them and be done with it. As the great Humanist Machiavelli taught long ago, half-measures in such matters never serve, and this one will haunt Elizabeth for the rest of her life...

Twenty years pass before the next chapter opens, and we see Catherine II seizing the throne in her turn from Elizabeth’s hapless nephew. Eidelman has some measure of sympathy for Peter III—but the task of ruling an absolute monarchy requires an absolute monarch and poor Peter, for all that he played at being a martinet, was not suitable to the task. Alas, monarchies of this sort rarely come with a comfortable retirement plan…
In 1773 we see the danger Catherine faces when her son comes closer to maturity and she is forced to deal with the constitutionalist intrigues of his scheming old tutor Nikita Panin in addition to the rising shadow of the Pugachev rebellion in the East—the terrifying result of all the broken promises of her first decade in power coming home to roost.

In 1780 we see the end of the tragic Braunschweig line whom Elizabeth’s rise to power condemned to deposition, imprisonment and death. Here it’s due to pause for a moment and to give credit to the teacher, storyteller, humanist and historian all at once. What possible difference, one might ask with full justification, can it make to the larger historical process that the aged sister of a deposed monarch preserved—through all the searches and exiles of her long life—a single coin? A silver ruble struck in 1741 with the profile of a baby—her older brother whom she, born in captivity, never saw, and who had been murdered decades earlier?

None, really. And yet—it does make a difference to Eidelman, who sees the power this episode possesses as a poignant note which has the power of recalling our emotions to a time long past, so that for a moment we may feel with at least some fraction of the intensity with which, long ago, living human beings had felt, the full-scale tragedy of their lives. Only a brief, but incredibly powerful reminder of the fact that the passing of centuries need not
impose an emotional distance. Moreover, Eidelman insists strongly that the passing of centuries should do no such thing!

This is not a “tear-jerker episode”. This is a vital, integral part of his approach to history. He does not make any effort to add sentiment—on the contrary, the episode is shown almost dispassionately, with his usual ellipsis, just as another stitch in the historical tapestry. But it is precisely the core of Eidelman’s historical approach that every single one of these tiny stitches matters, as an individual human being. We—the living—are the ones left to fathom for ourselves the position of an old woman…imprisoned from birth and for the entire sixty-five years of her existence, clutching for her entire life the only claim she had to identity. A single silver coin. In the larger historical framework she, the last representative of a destroyed house, means less than nothing.

But on the level of human interaction, the level which politics—in theory—should not be able to touch, she is tragic enough to make Euripides weep, and Eidelman takes care to remind of this, lest his readers fall into the error made by all too many of his countrymen over all too many centuries, and forget to feel even a little, for individual human beings.

In the second volume, Your Nineteenth Century, Eidelman accompanies his eternal favorite Herzen, along with the latter’s
close friend, co-conspirator and associate, Maria Casparovna
Reichel. It is here, in the last pre-conclusion page of this volume,
that we see Eidelman’s view on human nature and the part it plays
in history fully revealed.

"""We know practically nothing about her in 1914, 1915,
1916. The World Massacre—she foresaw it. Her motherland and
that of her husband are both sending millions of people to shoot,
chop, poison and hate each other. But she is not deceived by tales
of ‘Russian barbarity’ or ‘German brutality’. It must, of course,
have been very sad for her—the deaf, intelligent woman, born in the
end of Alexander I’s reign, and present for the last months of that of
Nicholas II; she who had read the fresh, newly published chapters
of ‘Onegin’ and the fresh, newly published works by Gorky,
Chekhov, Leonid Andreyev, Alexey Tolstoy. Packages for
[Herzen’s] ‘The Bell’ passed through her apartment—and here she
is, discussing the Olympics and aviation.

It is written sometimes, of very old people: ‘He could have
seen…’ followed by a last of celebrities from the 19th century whom
he could have seen ‘if he had wished’. But it is ‘could have’, not
‘saw’, perhaps because he lived so long in his native mountains that
he never did see, was not concerned.

But she really did see everything in person. She really was
party to Herzen’s planned elopement with his bride. She really did
cry ‘Evviva!’ on the streets of Naples in winter of 1848.

She died on August 20th, 1916, six months before the Second
Russian Revolution, on the 94th year of her life.

I do not believe in the abyss between youth and age in the
life of an individual human being (‘Oh, if only you could have seen
him when he was young—he was brilliant, an eagle! And now—old
and silly…’).

Everything that exists within us at sixty—eighty—one
hundred years ago was there at eighteen or twenty, but in youth that
which counts was sometimes hidden, the non-vital too obvious;
while in old age the layers have been stripped away—and the
essence of the person is open, that which it had always been.

If you ‘live trembling’, then you ‘die trembling’. The ‘fat-
clogged heart of Princess Maria Alexeevna’ cannot grow into the
wise heart of Maria Casparovna. ‘A horseradish won’t grow
pineapples’, as that wise old man, Admiral Mordvinov said in his
time.

The chief of the headquarters of the Free Word had had a
good youth, during years which were very bad for her country. That
youth was enough to last her for her entire, nearly century-long life. Two centuries—the 19th and the 20th—failed to age her.

‘Genius is the luxury of history’, as Alexander Ivanovich Herzen used to repeat: he supposed that humanity has a shortage of ordinary, good and free people.”

And one can only imagine the feelings of Soviet readers—or Eidelman’s listeners at a performance—wondering about their own world, and its catastrophic, manmade shortage of ordinary, good and free people, and the widely varying ways they and theirs had survived what their life had done to the them. And vice versa.

Eidelman has no problem with the possibility of accidents in history. His human beings live their lives and in doing so, participate—as best they can—in a vast historical process. The fact that they do not perceive this process or are unable to name it makes little enough difference, though the results can me exceptional when some try. In taking a random day in the early 1790’s we will see a vast range of completely different individuals. We see peasants, working the fields and raising children who will soon go off to fight in the Napoleonic Wars. We see the teenaged Grand Prince Alexander, dreaming of abdication along with liberalism, fearing the throne and yearning for it. We see the tired and aging Catherine II, encouraging education with one lavish hand, while banning suspicious French books with the other. We see the future historian Karamzin, a young traveler, recording his thoughts on

68 Eidelman, Natan, Your Nineteenth Century, Vagrius, Moscow, 2006, pp. 358-59
Revolutionary France. We see an enlightened “soul-owner” and Senator learning the craft of bookbinding, in order to prepare for survival after the Russian Revolution he expects to speedily follow the French one, all the while quite unaware that it would come—briefly—in thirty years’ time, and would begin among his own family, among the little sons and nephews in distant provinces to whom he, the loving father and uncle, had sent many an enlightened French and English text. All of them, with no knowledge of each other, preparing for the Freedom they all knew must come but which, by the day of Eidelman’s death in 1989, somehow still had not. Strictly speaking, in Russia it still has not…

Freedom is the key. Freedom is Eidelman’s lodestone, the center of his teleological view. From the late Rurikids to Alexander II Russian history is the long, slow story of enslavement, and a shorter, even slower one of all-too-temporary and insufficient liberation. But not only political freedom—which is however, the basic sine-qua-non—it is the freedom of the mind and spirit that concerns him, it is the importance of free thought and the essential dignity which is vested within the personal freedom of every individual human being. Even in dealing with the semi-insane eccentricity of Emperor Paul, Eidelman frequently feels bound to note his chivalrous side, which could occasionally conceive of freedom, albeit within the bounds of one individual. He praises the
Emperor’s strict—if very unique—sense of honor, of personal duty and of responsibility. But he also makes clear that the very sense in which Paul perceived these concepts was stillborn.

Honor, duty, responsibility and freedom...we can only understand the importance of those concepts to Eidelman when we remember the entourage of his life and work—the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union in which these words had largely disappeared from the vocabulary, or had become so twisted as to be unrecognizable. Eidelman always wrote in a particularly programmatic fashion. He was disgusted with the present. He saw a great deal of hope for the future and none of living to see it. And so, for his ideal he turned to the past, to the early, Alexandrian 19th century which has been the source of so much (frequently mistaken) optimism and which, within the context of Russian history, had never really been surpassed as the greatest moment of unity between the State and the people it ruled. He used those words in the same sense as his models—the officers and gentleman of the Alexandrian period—had used them. As words the meaning of which was vested not in the State, not in patriotism or an ideology...but in the personal behavior of individual living human beings.

In his article A History Lesson is an Entire Life, Eidelman points out that these qualities could turn against their bearers.
Indeed, in his own historical context they simply became incompatible with a secure existence.

“The behavior of the revolutionaries before royal investigation and judgment also requires a careful historical approach. Many of the Decembrists proved too sincere during the interrogations led by Nicholas I and his subordinates, they named names. Many... But not all: Lunin, Puschin, Yakushkin, Nicholas Kriukov bore themselves excellently... Two historical concepts of honor came into conflict: on the one hand one cannot surrender one’s friends, one cannot forget one’s personal dignity nor, besides other things, of one’s personal rights which the Decembrists, as noblemen, possessed; those who based their behavior primarily on this viewpoint stood strong. However, among the noble virtues there was also the recognition of the tsar’s special role as the ‘first nobleman’, the noble rule to speak the truth turned into the impossibility of concealing anything during royal interrogation.”

In dealing with the affair that led to Pushkin’s duel and death Eidelman emphasizes again and again: the problem for Pushkin lay specifically in his incapability—really an almost physical one—to survive in the stifling climate of Russia where his sense of personal honor and personal dignity was insulted and hemmed in at every turn. It is not that the surrounding atmosphere at court or in the two capitals was deliberately hostile to him, not at all. That would have been easier to understand and to deal with. It was simply wrong. If a fish accustomed to the pressures of the deep is raised closer to the surface, it will die. This is the fault of neither the fish nor the surface. The two are simply incompatible. Long before the duel, as early as 1834, the end was already approaching and the final events

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69 Eidelman, Natan, A History Lesson is an Entire Life, Knowledge-Power Magazine, #1, 1987, online via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/NYE_1.HTM
which led to the meeting at Black River were no more than the culmina-
tion, not the cause. For the last few years of his life Pushkin realized, more and more clearly, the impossibility of continued survival in the only place he had in the world.

“*And so, from summer of 1834 the situation becomes deadly* [literally, ‘ситуация чревата гибелью’, the situation is pregnant, or laden with doom.] *This happens quite independently of any of Pushkin’s family problems: his relationship with his wife is good and kind, they have new children, true his debts increase but this is no more than the burdening background of events.*

*Nor is the problem with D’Anthes, although the tragedy begins by a pure coincidence when the Frenchman arrives in Russia. An entry in Pushkin’s journal (January 26th, 1834): ‘Baron D’Anthes and Marquis de Pina, two juans [sic.], will be taken into the Guard directly as officers. The Guard grumbles’. These lines have no personal character, they deal with an important public theme, the decline of the Guard, of honor.*

*Not jealousy, not D’Anthes and finally, not the tsar. Pushkin did not see Nicholas as a sort of ‘evil genius’ and even if he had, then this evil would have been, so to speak, personified and it would have been easier to escape. No! The very horror of the situation lay in the fact that no one—not the tsar, not Benkendorf, nor anyone else consciously aimed at destroying the poet. By and large they did so ‘unwittingly’, they were killing him with the very fact of their social existence. Nicholas I would have been, quite likely, sincerely surprised, even outraged if he could have imagined the strength of Pushkin’s fury about the opening of his family letter: the tsar was unquestionably convinced that this is a ‘fatherly’ action, that one does not take offense at one’s father...*

*The question of honor, the problem of internal freedom became the most important conditions of existence. One can live ‘perfectly well’ without political freedom, but without honor, dignity, one cannot breathe—‘hard labor would be much easier’.*

*‘And Pushkin was not killed by D’Anthes’ bullet at all. He was killed by the absence of air.’ (Alexander Blok). There was no ‘air’. Either in the palace, or beyond it.*  

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One of the most prominent figures of the Decembrist movement Lunin, who became for Eidelman one of the rare ideals and an inspiration. In describing the courageous form of his answer upon interrogation, Eidelman emphasizes that this particular form was chosen by the man as a deliberate form of rebellion. The enterprise has failed, doom threatens, but Lunin will both avoid denouncing his co-conspirators and the dangers of obsequiousness.  

“Question: ‘What was the content of your meeting [совещание’, the modern meaning is closer to ‘conference’] with Pestel in 1820 or 1821? Did Pestel read to you the Russian Pravda, a constitution he had prepared? How to answer? The question makes it clear that his acquaintance and meeting with Pestel is known. It is stupid to reply ‘I don’t remember’, ‘I didn’t read it’, no one will believe it, [they] will easily prove the reverse... So, it is necessary to confess. But submission, self-abasing sincerity—is not to Lunin’s taste.  

Response: ‘Having always been in friendly relations with Pestel, on my way back from Odessa in 1821 I visited him in Tulchin and spent three days there. There were no political meetings between us... The length of time passed prevents me from remembering the subject of the pieces Pestel read to me from his Russian Pravda. But I do remember that my opinion upon the

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71 To the generation preceding the Decembrist movement a certain degree of obsequiousness was merely a part of good upbringing, necessary in the difficult art of making a career. It was partially this attitude on the part of the older generation that occasionally irritated the new generation, which considered it unnatural to sacrifice their essential dignity to the needs of making a career. We’ll have occasion to go into more detail on this in Chapter 3.

72 The specific phrase used was “не в духе”, or “not in his spirit”. The closest modern equivalent would be that such abasement was not in Lunin’s style. For comparison, the popular Goth band Voltaire numbers in its repertoire a much-loved song “Hell in a Handbasket”, which includes the following lines.

“I'm going to Hell in a handbasket.
I'd pray if I had the guile.
No, this ain’t no fib
I'd rather be a splatter on the Devil’s bib
‘Cause on my knees repentin’ ain't my style.”

Online via http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/voltaire/hellinahandbasket.html

I am rather inclined to suspect that both Lunin and Eidelman would have shown at least some approval for the sentiment... Eidelman would have been almost certainly familiar with the Russian-Jewish saying: “Either do not sin, or do not repent” [Либо не греши, либо не кайся].
reading of these pieces was favorable, and I remember that they certainly deserved this opinion by their worthiness and utility, by their rightness of their aim and by the depth of their reasoning’.

Constantine, and then the committee were likely quite surprised, reading that a man threatened with the fortress and hard labor underlines his friendly relations with the chief of the Decembrists and praises the Russian Pravda. In so responding Lunin does not allow himself even the least repentance. Whereas if he had spoken of the Russian Pravda more carefully it might have counted for him.”

Earlier in Lunin Eidelman brings up a citation from his other favorite and idol Pushkin, to illustrate a point. Once again, this is entirely characteristic of his writing. All his working life Pushkin and the Decembrists, whose lives he had studied deeply, thoroughly and with infinite affection were his friends, his interlocutors, his aids in inspiration, his ideals in strength, courage and conscience…

“Gradually the grandfathers of Michail Muravyov, those who did not yet really ‘get’ [еще слабо «морокали» , a deliberate use of an antiquated usage] Torquato Tasso and studied dioptics from under the Petrine club, departed from the stage. Peter I did not fear popular [народной] freedom—the inevitable result of enlightenment, but enlightenment, while penetrating bit by bit, inevitably demanded liberation, for a start, of noble souls.”

‘Foreigners who insist that among our ancient nobility there had been no concept of honor are greatly mistaken. This honor, consisting of the readiness to sacrifice anything for the sake of supporting some meaningless formality [not an exact translation, unfortunately. Pushkin’s phrase ‘какого-нибудь условного правила’ is difficult. A rule, yes, but a purely formal, theoretically perhaps an unenforceable one. ‘An arbitrary formality’ can also be considered close in meaning], can be seen in all the splendor of its madness in our ancient ‘mestnichestvo’. The boyars risked disfavor


74 As we shall see later, here Eidelman is not at all in agreement with his friend Yakov Gordin, who considers on the contrary that Peter loathed and feared the concept of individual freedom as it applied to anyone save for his own royal person. Gordin considers that Peter, despite being the father of noblemen of the Decembrist type, had never wanted their appearance in the world.
and execution, giving up their genealogical arguments for royal judgment’. (Pushkin).

The boyars have been killed off, bent, healed from the ‘splendor of their madness’, but the free type was multiplying.\(^\text{75}\)

Personal dignity in Lunin mixed with what we could call an almost allergic reaction to the surrounding, Alexandrian-Arakcheevan reality, and it is easy to see that in studying some episodes in his life Eidelman would have seen a close similarity with his own experiences. His own resistance to an attempt at forced collaboration; his own carefully preserved dignity in a country where it was commonly and traditionally accepted that those above have the unchallengeable right to raise their voice to those below; where is was accepted that a higher-ranking worker could speak to a lower-ranking worker in the informal ‘ty’ rather than the formal ‘vy’, and where common boorishness was becoming more and more common as the decrepit Soviet Union crept to its demise. It is easy to see, for instance, that Lunin’s interactions with Emperor Alexander and his brother Constantine both delighted and inspired Eidelman.

“‘The Heir to the throne, Grand Prince Constantine Pavlovich...had spoken very harshly about the Chevalier Guards [Кавалергард] regiment. Since the accusation proved unmerited, he received orders from above to apologize before the regiment. He chose a day when the regiment was assembled for training and, riding up to the line, loudly proclaimed: ‘I have heard that the Chevalier Guards consider themselves offended by me, and I am ready to give them satisfaction—who wants it?’ And, mockingly looking over the ranks, he counted upon [their] inevitable

\(^{75}\) Ibid, Part 1 online via \url{http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/LUNIN/PART_1/LUNIN_1.HTM}
embarrassment before so sudden a challenge. However, one of the officers, M.S. Lunin, known to all of Petersburg for his whole-hearted courage and frequent duels, spurred his horse and rose before him. ‘Your Highness’— he replied, in a respectful tone but while looking him straight in the eyes, the honor is so great that I fear only one thing, that none of my comrades will agree to allow it to me.’ The whole business was hushed up and the duel, of course, could not take place.’

That is how the story is told in the notes of A.P. Arapova. According to another version, upon hearing the answer Constantine joked [a particular form of the word is used here—‘отшутился’—, which approximately means that the joke is used as a defensive weapon or a shield, he ‘joked the challenge away’ as it were.]‘Well brother, you’re still too young for it!’

The Grand Prince had preserved face, but if he had suddenly fallen prey to a usual fit of senseless fury, the officer would have been in serious trouble; at the very least—retirement and exile to his estate.

With no previous agreement his friends insisted that Lunin found such pleasure in various dangers, that he supposed security to be worse for him [‘более для себя гибельной’, more ‘deadly’ or ‘fatal’ for himself] than danger.

After a joke with Highness comes the turn of Majesty.

‘To avenge Austerlitz…This feeling was the upmost in all and each and was so strong, that in this feeling alone, we supposed, lay our civic duty, and we did not understand that love for the fatherland is not in military glory alone, but should have as its aim the placement of Russia in civic terms [‘в гражданственности’, ‘in civic-ness’ as it were.] on the level of Europe’ (S. Volkonsky)

Austerlitz and Napoleon became the precise reason for Lunin’s dispute with Majesty.

Between 1807 and 1812 there is a peace and an alliance with Napoleon and it is not recommended to be insolent in the address of the former enemy, for this touched the friendship of the two emperors.

Newspapers are urgently ordered to love the French and to hate Englishmen and the other allies of yesterday, as a result of which Bonaparte’s new victories over old dynasties are presented to the Russian reader with an almost Republican playfulness:

‘The Braganza House has lost Portugal; it has been subject to the fate of all those rulers who had placed all their hope in England… A new part of an ancient, experience earth is being

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76 In itself something of a breach of courtesy!
77 I could have used the even more literal translation “he joked off”. I didn’t. You’re quite welcome.
78 And this, this was Constantine’s version of an apology! With all respect to the memory of Catherine II, the education she had so carefully lavished upon her two oldest grandsons definitely had some gaps…
released of English influence. It is notable that the Portuguese queen who, as is known, had been greatly disturbed in her wits, had much improved her health after spending only two or three days at sea (during the flight from Lisbon).

At this time Michel Lunin and Serge Volkonsky get a dog in Petersburg, one who jumps on a passerby and rips off the hat upon hearing the command ‘Bonaparte!’ Napoleon owns Europe from the Baltic to Gibraltar and from the English Channel to the Niemen. Only Spain dare offer real resistance and Lunin, it seems, asks for permission to go there while the Russian government is so peaceful and patience. Unclear reports have been preserved that Alexander forbade it, and was angry...

Once, Lunin hires a boat in Kronstadt and heads out to sea. He is arrested and brought to the tsar:

Alexander demanded an explanation to this insolent deed.

‘Your Majesty,’ Lunin responded, ‘I am seriously interested in the military art, and since at the moment I am studying Vauban, I should like to compare his system with the system of our engineers.’

‘But you could have received permission, your request would not have been denied.’

‘I am at fault, sovereign, [in Russian this is the brief, non-engaging and formal phrase ‘Виноват, государь’.] I did not want to receive a refusal.

‘You going alone in a boat, in stormy weather—you placed yourself in danger.’

‘Your Majesty, your ancestor, Peter the Great, knew how to battle the elements. And what if I had discovered an unknown land in the Gulf of Finland? I would have raised Your Majesty’s flag upon it

They say you are not entirely in your right mind, Lunin. [And there’s Paul’s son for you, and to hell with all his youthful idealism...it is easier to believe a man is insane than to believe he can think differently than you want him to think.]

‘Your Majesty, they said the same thing about Columbus.’

Quite possibly the emphatic risk at which Lunin placed himself, and the phrase about Peter who knew how to battle the elements were a rebuke to the cautious Alexander. ‘I did not want to receive a refusal’—is that a hint at the request about Spain?

This episode was written down from Lunin’s own words and it was noted that Alexander ‘did not forget’... They started tearing the hat from the real Bonaparte only a few months after this story,

79 And once again once must give credit to Lunin’s nearly-suicidal courage. For 99.99% of the Russian population at all times the phrase “the tsar is angry”, [царь гневается] inspired a centuries-old, instinctive, genetic reaction of sheer gut terror and a desire to grab the children and head for the wide Eastern woods with all possible speed...
but there was now no way for Lunin to make a serious military career.”

In his 1975 Vievarum Eidelman marks several curious moments in the life of Prince Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov, Pushkin’s friend and the last survivor of the original graduating class from the Lyceum. In the future he would rise to be Chancellor of the Empire…and strictly speaking, to become one of the best to ever fill that position. In tracing his career—which was shunted aside, managed to survive the Nicholayevan period and flowered during the following reign—Eidelman marks a number of occasions when Gorchakov’s proud insistence on maintaining his dignity hindered his advancement.

“He managed to speak too loudly of his superior, Prince Lieven; ‘You cannot imagine such a situation, being alive and tied to a corpse’. For this Gorchakov is transferred from London to the position of first secretary in Rome; by the standards of the time a serious demotion.

1828. April 17 – transferred to Berlin as Counselor to the Embassy.
1828. December 3 – granted the rank of chamberlain.
1831 – granted the rank of Collegiate Counselor.
1834 – granted the rank of Counselor of State, carries out plenipotentiary duties in Vienna, replaced the absent Ambassador.

The ranks keep coming, but not quickly. He is nearly 40, but not yet a general. Service in the new reign is not very merry somehow; it is still necessary to prove to oneself that a career and honor are compatible.”

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80 Ibid.
81 Eidelman, Natan, Vievarum, chapter 3, online via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/V/V_CH_03.HTM#1
Only a short while later, while discussing Pushkin’s famous poem to his Lyceum classmates, Eidelman begins by going into some distinctions between the characteristics which advanced and hindered the careers of two of them—the unsuccessful Gorchakov and the successful Nicholayevan statesman Korf. He then goes on to discuss the brief conversation with Benckendorf which cost the Russian Empire and Goncharov many years of what might have been very good policy.

The case Eidelman brings up illustrates with exceptional clarity his strong-held view on the focus the time imposed on being not the suitable person, but the suitable personality. Eidelman often points out that the little details in day-to-day human interactions, and that the seemingly negligible emotions to which these details give rise have a powerful effect on long-term events in human history. Consequently, he is usually inclined to give a great deal of attention to small incidents.

The conflict between a diplomat with an inflexible sense of dignity and an all-powerful royal favorite took place over what the vast majority of Russians either in the 19th or the 20th centuries, would have considered a mere trifle, and it is highly notable that neither Gorchakov nor Eidelman consider the question unimportant. On the contrary…

"The chief star-bearer ['Главным звездоносцем', referring to medals, orders, etc…] was State-Secretary Modest Andreevich
Korf, the 30’s-50’s were his time. Very capable, knowleable—and a character quite in the Nicholayevan spirit so that his capability and knowledge are accepted and put to use: he considers the times good and aims his sights for the portfolio of the Minister of Education [Enlightenment technically, ‘просвещения’, ‘ministry of popular enlightenment’ was the official title at the time] (he was nicknamed ‘a lover to every ministerial portfolio”), but he ends up in the Buturlin Committee—the most severe censorship office Russia had yet known; Korff, according to the expression of one venomous grandee, became from that moment on an informer no longer secret but open, and soon reported to Nicholas I ‘The sword of Damocles hanging over the journalists seems to be bearing good fruit’.

Gorchakov and Korf serve in the same harness but nothing seems to match: ambition loves honor [‘честолюбие – любит честь’]... His career was once paused by the following document: ‘By Highest personal decree from the 25th of July, 1838, Prince Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov is released [‘уволен’, today meaning ‘fired’ but closer, in the 19th century, to ‘freed’ due to the root of the word ‘воля’, ‘freedom’] in accordance with his petition, entirely from service with a promotion to the rank of Active State Counselor’.

Here was what actually happened (as told by the Prince himself):

‘Count Alexander Khristoforovich Benckendorff came to Vienna once, among the small entourage of Emperor Nicholas Pavlovich. In the absence of the ambassador I, carrying out his functions in my capacity as the senior counselor of the embassy, among other things hurried to pay my respects to Count Benckendorff.

After a few cold phrases he, not inviting me to sit, said: “Take the trouble [‘Потрудитесь’ from the root “труд” — ‘work’ or ‘labor’] to order the innkeeper my dinner for today’. I, perfectly calmly walked over to the bell and summoned the maître d’hotel of the inn. “What does this mean?” Count Benckendorff asked angrily.

“Nothing more, Count, that that you yourself can address the order for dinner to the maître d’hotel of the inn.’

This answer composed for me, in the eyes of the then-all-powerful Count Benckendorff, the reputation of a liberal”.

Soon a case was started on Gorchakov, where it was marked: ‘Prince Gorchakov is not without capabilities, but he does not love Russia.’

Even though Benckendorff soon died, the case remained. Only in a few years and not without difficulty did Gorchakov receive the humble post of an ambassador to the little German kingdom of Württemberg, where he passed thirteen years.
He is past fifty now, and more than thirty of them spent in service; he’d be glad to serve, it’s the servility that nauseates. His life and career are close to sunset ['Жизнь и карьера - к закату '—five simple, clean, poetic words—one of Eidelman’s lyrical moments]. Pushkin had predicted a glittering fortune in service for the prince, but, learning of the beautiful Princess Maria Alexandrovna, two sons and the Prince’s pale career,—upon learning this, Pushkin, perhaps, might have been glad. The Princess, however, suddenly falls ill and dies....

Every phrase in this passage is loaded with meaning. Let’s begin with the capable and knowledgeable Count Modest von Korf. His capacity and personality, as well as his suitability for the Nicholayevan age are best described in the short, four-page memoir of him by the distinguished philologist, Jakov Karlovich Grot (1812-93):

“In respect to his subordinates he was a kind and loving chief: from highest to lowest everyone could expect just attention to their labor and readiness to help all in need. The routine of clerical work reached perfection. Cases were processed non-stop...he was a master at presenting even the most tangled affairs; conciseness and clarity of speech achieved the highest level under his pen.”

Oh indeed, this was a man right after Nicholas’ heart. Precision, efficiency, skill, attention to detail, a kind attitude toward his inferiors and a properly respectful one toward his superiors—of which admittedly, he had very few. He is not a particularly

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82 Chatsky’s famous phrase from Griboedov’s “Woe from Wit” has long enough been such common currency among everyone who went to school in Russia that Eidelman did not feel obligated to put it in quotation marks.
83 Eidelman, *Vlevarium*, Chap 5, online via [http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/V/V_CH_05.HTM#1](http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/V/V_CH_05.HTM#1)
inventive man, given to flights of fancy and “free thinking”, but he likes this system, he is perfectly at home in it. He worked. He got things done and that was all Nicholas wanted.

If I may continue the earlier fish metaphor—the pressure of the Nicholayevan depth is perfect for Korf—he swims comfortably and eats abundantly; attached closely to, fed and protected entirely by the single greatest fish in the sea.

He is a proper, highly efficient and accordingly highly valued part of the government mechanism, a part whose professional skills—as well it seems, as the personal qualities,—the Emperor accurately evaluated and for which, with characteristic skill, he found a proper place and function. Nicholas throughout his entire reign consistently valued and rewarded not those who were inventive, idealistic or broad-minded—but those who were efficient and served to their best capacity in whatever function it had pleased him to appoint them. The educational system of his era focused heavily on technology and engineering, diplomacy and above all—military service. Architects, engineers, [successful] diplomats, capable military men…yes, he instituted a factual legal tolerance of corruption throughout the system, but like any real absolute monarch—a very special and rare breed of political animal—Nicholas knew how to select, promote and reward capable people.
As long as they were willing to work his way and play by his rules, naturally.

And this was a case in point. Organized corruption implies organized reports and denunciations and the original sharp teeth Korf had started demonstrating as a child at Tsarskoe Selo, where Pushkin’s razor wit named him Deacon Mordant—from the French for his “biting” speech, now came to be exceptionally useful in making a career. He saw nothing wrong with holding the sword of Damocles over writers if this was in line with the interests of the government which—for him—are synonymous with the interests of the country and every person therein.

But this is not the case for Gorchakov.

Ambition loves honor—a phrase with a double meaning here, loves honor, meaning the sense of honor; or loves honor as in the honors brought by government service… And it seems that in 1838 Gorchakov has renounced his lifelong ambition of making a grand diplomatic career and is headed for a sad old age and obscurity. Promoted, yes, but the doors are now likely to be shut. Like his father Paul, Nicholas did not lightly welcome back a renegade from what he saw as the universal obligation to serve the state, an obligation he imposed, first and foremost, upon himself. How does he explain the event which caused this?
Let’s examine the situation. Nicholas and his entourage arrive in Vienna. Even with the best arrangements, getting important travelers settled in and comfortable inevitably takes a certain amount of time and in the meantime Gorchakov scrambles to fill in for the absent ambassador. Benckendorff was, unquestionably, tired from the journey at the end of which he, like all of the imperial group would have had to abide by the strict regimen of extremely formal etiquette prevailing at the Austrian court before finally arriving at his lodgings and he was looking forward to supper and bed. He was tired. He was hungry. For all we know he might have been hypoglycemic and willing to throttle any idiot who got between him and carbohydrates—in any case!—none of us are at our best under such circumstances. But it was more than a question of cold behavior and politeness…there was a principle involved and it is one which both Eidelman and his heroes considered a matter of life and death.

Gorchakov is looking upon this as a conversation between two noblemen. True, one of them is older, in favor at court, more powerful…but strictly speaking, in Gorchakov’s perception, their nobility places them on an equal basis. One is younger, one is older. One is stronger, one is weaker. One is a Prince of Rurikid blood and one is a Baltic-German Count, only the first of his family to be born in Russia. But the individual, innate and personal dignity their
nobility gives them transcends these differences for Gorchakov. He perceives the absence of an invitation to sit as an offense to an equal. He perceives the effort to make him—a fellow nobleman—play the role of a waiter by giving a peremptory and imperious order as a slight upon his position and his dignity.

But not Benckendorff. Benckendorff was not making a deliberate effort to slight the Senior Counselor of the Russian Embassy in Vienna. Benckendorff sincerely looked upon him as a subordinate, not an equal, for in the factual vertical axis of power, based as always in Russia on proximity to the throne, he stood far above Gorchakov and it simply did not occur to him to treat a subordinate as anything else. What is more, the former hero of the War of 1812 was, after all, a military man and tended to think through lifelong habit within the framework, first of all, of orders and obedience, as opposed to the framework of equal human interaction. The military obeys or commands. As high-ranking a man as Benckendorff had a very limited number of equals and he knew that Gorchakov was by no means one of them.

An attempt by a subordinate to behave as an equal, to assume the right to flaunt an order clearly given in what Benckendorff understands as entirely adequate terms with no need for any further courtesy is something Benckendorff perceives as something akin to mutiny. He wants food to be ordered. It is absolutely immaterial to
him which more-or-less equally unimportant subordinate—the diplomat or the maître d’hotel,—orders it and he views as completely unnatural an attempt by a subordinate to suddenly transfer the conversation into an entirely different tone, one which sharply breaks with his *only* existing concept of correct interaction.

A man of the Pauline/Arakcheevan school, Benckendorff fit into the Nicholayevan age better than almost anyone imaginable. It is important to remember that he is not, in principle, a malignant man. He is looking at this conversation from the viewpoint of arbitrary power which does not, in principle, allow for the possibility of an equal basis. From the point of view of Benckendorff and the people like him, people who flourished and succeeded in Nicholayevan Russia, there neither does nor should exist any such concept, for that would overturn their concept of the world and how it should be. Their internal estimate is inextricably linked with the estimate of the surrounding social group. True, his upbringing and the formal rules of the conversational language force him to address Gorchakov in the formal “vy” form—‘Потрудитесь’, however, this note does little to hide the fact that this is indeed a direct and coldly phrased order. Benckendorff sees no reason to waste his dwindling strength on courtesy to an inferior and he will not be bothered to imitate this. He would have spoken as curtly to any serf at home, save for the fact that he would have used the informal ‘ty’. From his
viewpoint there is no insult. For him it is impossible to insult a subordinate for the simple reason that a subordinate—by definition—does not have the right to be insulted by anything done by a legal superior.

That which is done by a superior is right by default and challenging the legitimacy of any such action by taking offense at it, i.e. by behaving as though said action should not, for any reason whatsoever, have happened becomes in itself a mark of resistance to the status quo and thus, automatically suspicious and unnatural.

The label “liberal” which caused Gorchakov,—the most significant and successful student in his chosen field that the Lyceum’s first class produced, one of the most prominent and influential European statesmen who was instrumental in pulling Russia from the abyss to which Nicholas failed to prevent it from going—to be condemned in a file with the contemptuous line “but does not love Russia” is clearest evidence of the distinction of principle implicit here. How much could he have accomplished had he occupied the post of Foreign Minister all those years, rather than the obedient and weak-willed Nesselrode, that instrument of imperial will with no program or policy of his own! But he was not the sort Nicholas wanted, needed or trusted. For Nicholas and Benckendorff there is only one way to love Russia—their way. The Imperial way. The military way. And so Gorchakov became one of
so many young, educated, patriotic and capable men who were pushed away,—at best consigned to second-rate positions, at worst to Siberian mines—deliberately, coldly removed by a government which in Alexander’s day resented and mistrusted such people, and in Nicholas’ day simply did not see the need for them.

The long-term effects of Nicholas’ approach were manifold and profound. Despite his heavy reliance upon the military in opposition to the officialdom, for instance his preferred use of military men as provincial governors, the behavioral tendencies of the latter tended to overwhelm the former. Curiously, only on the 17th of this March an article published by a Russian blog called The Interpreter [“Толкователь”], which argued that it was specifically during the reign of Nicholas I that two previously existing trends of the imperial period—increasing bureaucratization and increasing corruption—were at the peak of their pre-Revolutionary efflorescence, and it was then, the author argues, that they essentially formed the government system which, never truly suppressed under the early Communists, grew during the Soviet Stagnation period, largely survived the 1990’s and frankly, openly and unabashedly, rules Russia today. I would rather argue that the kleptomaniacal officialdom has at long last blended with the autocracy with which it had struggled. It has become the ruling class.
“The Nicholayevan era is the formative time for the government [not entirely accurate here, the exact word used in the original is ‘власть’, which is simply ‘power’, not exactly ‘government’ which more accurately translates to ‘правительство’, from ‘править’,—‘to rule’] we see to this day: incompetent, thieving and arrogant. The time when even the aristocracy has been ‘moved aside’ [a possible alternative is ‘moved to the background’, ‘задвинута’], and those nobles who went into government ['что шли во власть'] were soon permeated with the spirit of officialdom.

In 1804 there were more than 13,000 ‘class’ officials in Russia, in 1850—72,000, in 1856—more than 82,000. To these it is necessary to add the office workers ['канцелярских служителей'], who numbered more than 26,000 in 1850 and around 32,000 in 1856. By 1901 Russia numbered approximately half-a-million officials.

It is precisely in this period when bribery and embezzlement by officials became Russia’s ulcer. They stole before this and plenty—but it is only under Nicholas I that corruption came to be considered the norm and the higher ranks received immunity. […]

In the end of the 1840’s Nicholas I ordered the gendarmerie to investigate, who among the governors takes no bribes whatsoever, even from monopolists. According to the report, out of more than fifty governors there were only two such to be found, I. Funduklei of Kiev and A. Radischev of Kovno (as it happens, the sun of the famous revolutionary enlightener).

The view which the ‘sovereign’s eyes’, which is what the governors were, took of theft and bribery was simple. Annenkov, the Nizhegorodsky governor did not ‘take’ personally, or at least did not stand out against the common background, but he did patronize several dishonest contractors, and when once the Minister of Finance remarked to him ‘How are you not ashamed to ask for men who are known to be scum ['за заведомых мерзавцев'], Annenkov replied: ‘We are all scum, Your Excellency’.”

Nicholas—who was neither an evil nor an incapable man—did the best he could to protect and preserve from collapse a system he knew better than anyone to be riddled with corruption from top to bottom. He attempted to protect his house and his inheritance for

85 ‘Interpreter’, Corruption under Nicholas I as a National Idea, available online via http://ttolk.ru/?p=26383
Citations in the article are from: Belovinsky, Leonid, The Life of the Russian Common Man: from Palace to Prison, Kuchkovo Pole Publications, Moscow, 2015. Not an unflawed, but a very interesting article.
at least another generation or two by giving Russia its first code of law in nearly 200 years. An unjust code, yes. A badly flawed one which factually legalized the existing, corrupt status quo but at least preserved it from utter collapse for a while longer, as he hoped. But within this world he attempted to change into would-be changelessness there was no place for people like Gorchakov—the same people for whom Alexander had once opened the Lyceum, hoping to raise a team which would help him save the Empire. Between them Paul’s sons managed to doom it.

It was not two men that came together in that Vienna inn. It was Nobility vs. Officialdom. Officialdom won the battle and a capable man was barred from high-level diplomacy for thirty crucial years. In the long run, they both lost the war…

No indeed, it was not a merry reign for the talented Gorchakov and his peers to serve. And that is what those young men wanted—those who had experienced military service and victory as mere youths, sometimes teenagers, and those who grew up admiring them from afar within the walls of the Lyceum—they had wanted to serve their state willingly, and perhaps even merrily, as Catherine, with all her efforts (and against at least some of her wishes), had taught them to try to do. Loyally, bravely, and most importantly, with the conviction that they serve as free individuals, those who serve the state not because they are ordered, not because
they wish to fill their pockets and bellies…but because it is theirs, because they feel for it a personal and binding attachment which supersedes the importance of orders and career ambitions. Gorchakov had been taught to selflessly serve his country, but now, in the cold, gloomy, officious and stifling atmosphere of the Nicholayevan age he and many others saw their privileged education and sincere dedication stranding them in a lonely place of isolation and cold-indifference from the higher spheres for which they had been raised.

An entire generation of the most dedicated, patriotic, able, educated and loyal men in the entire history of their country—shunted aside to become the “spare men” of history and literature. Not only because the new, Nicholayevan empire did not want their sort of service—full of initiative, personal responsibility, drive and inventiveness,—it did not want the sort of people capable of that sort of service. It wanted obedience. Order. Regularity. The clockwork precision of parades. It wanted absolute submission from the top down, with every little screw in the mechanism doing precisely what it was required to do at all times with no nonsense like personal initiative, and no hang-ups about carrying out orders because of foolishness like “honor”, “dignity”, “decency”, “humanity”, “magnanimity”…and other, similar made-up words
which are useful on parade and in distinguished company but need have no effect on real policy in serious issues.

This is a vital passage in aiding us to understand the connections Eidelman consistently and deliberately strings between ethics—individual human lives—responsibility for individual decisions—historical events of greater or lesser significance. In the case of the people and times Eidelman chose to investigate, usually greater. And that is natural enough; the smaller the number of the people ruling a state, the greater the individual responsibility each and every one of them bears for its achievements, mistakes, rise and eventual, inevitable downfall.

Gorchakov agonized for years over this question but always stood firm, maintained by the memory of those golden years at Tsarskoe Selo and by that of his friends and classmates—of which he had the sad fate to be the last survivor. By late Soviet times, however, the question of compatibility had been permanently solved and the vast majority knew perfectly well that a career—not only in government, alas—and honor are not compatible. What’s more, they have in modern Russia become, to all intents and purposes, antithetical.

As a popular Soviet joke had it\(^\text{86}\); a proper Soviet citizen should be a loyal Party member [партийный], clever and honest.

However, somehow it so worked out that people only got two qualities out of three. If a citizen is smart and honest, they are not Party members. If they are honest and Party members, they are not smart. And if they are smart and Party members—they are absolutely, definitely clearly and unmistakably not honest! The idealism of the early years of the Revolution wore off very quickly and to the audiences of Khruschev’s, Brezhnev’s & Co periods the connection was clear and depressingly familiar. Somehow, Eidelman was saying, despite all those years of Revolution, warfare and a total rebuilding of society—something absolutely vital remained unchanged, and until it does no other change will be possible.

Eidelman’s audience would have understood Gorchakov’s reluctance and hesitation. They had all grown up under a very similar government, and they saw personally how generation after generation of people who went into government work were engulfed by this vast, corrupt morass of unprincipled, uncaring, incompetent, ill-educated, lazy and vicious officialdom, to the point where the admission of working in government led to an automatic presumption that one was guilty of every possible corruption-related crime. And usually, quite correctly.

Officialdom—with its cult of corruption—stripped away decency, courage, dignity (which was replaced by the usual
combination of obsequiousness toward those above and arrogance toward those below). To be an official came to be simply synonymous with “thief” centuries ago. In the later-day USSR just as in late-Imperial Russia, a low-ranking man who did not take bribes was not considered honest, he was considered a fool who had not risen to high enough to be offered bribes: that which in the 19th century was called “a breadless position”—“нехлебное место”. A high-ranking man who did not take (and give!) bribes was simply considered a dangerous freethinker—“вольнодумец”. For instance, in describing Valentina Zimmerman, Evgenia Ginzburg mentions that Zimmerman’s absolute abstention from the corruption or debauchery of high-ranking labor camp staff gained her not the respect of her colleagues, but rather their suspicion and hatred, as though they perceived her the way a wolf perceives a predator of a different species and, snarling, shies away.

In his final book, ‘Revolution from Above’ in Russia, Eidelman set out his view of Russia’s long-term formation and development, as well as his hopes and fears for its future. He traced the development of Russian state/population relations as a series of Revolutions allowed by the autocracy in response to a crisis, afterward regretted, partially revoked and leading thus to a new crisis.
“Peter’s famous club strolls along the backs of ministers, governors, generals, officers. The Russian D’Artagnans, like the famous Alexander Rumjantsev do great deeds in royal service but their concepts of honor are very different from the French ones. We are not going to idealize the musketeers of Paris, would they have been able to consider beating, whipping and other forms of executions done to them as a perfectly normal thing? In his ‘Spirit of the Laws’, written, by the way, during this same period, Montesquieu found that ‘monarchy’ (he meant absolutism of the European type) was maintained by a ‘feeling of honor’, whereas despotism—‘on a feeling of fear’. The French thinker considered it an example of a ‘deed of honor’ that a 16th century nobleman decisively refused to obey an order to act the role of executioner. We can imagine stubborn boyars in Russia too, who would have refused to carry out a similar royal order; however many oprichniks or Petrine Guards personally and without consideration carried out the duties of torturer and executioner—indeed, Peter chopped off more than one Strelets head himself. In any case, there was no firm, clear concept of the incompatibility of such a state of affairs with noble dignity.

Fear, not honor—the heritage of Ivan the Terrible seems plain to see. But the executioners, not accustomed to European codes of honor do, at the same time pick up enlightened ideas themselves. They look into Europe through the forcibly-opened window [‘пробитое’ or ‘beaten through’], and besides that, the Emperor himself, while swinging his club as it happens, that pounds into their heads new, elevated concepts: about noble honor, service to the fatherland, rules of noble behavior...”

And always the question so vital for Eidelman—the question of the price to be paid for these innovations.

“Under Peter, during 20-30 years Russian industry grew by 7-10 times (there were 20-30 manufactures, there came to be over 200); Russia soon took the world lead in iron production, the largest regular army was created artillery, a modern fleet, a ‘window to Europe’ has been ‘knocked through’, various diplomatic and trade connections have been opened, hundreds of specialists have been invited, a new capital has been built; beyond that, new cities have been founded in other parts of the country, canals were dug, schools...

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87 Eidelman, Natan, ‘Revolutions from Above’ in Russia, Knowledge-Power Magazine, #’s 10-12, 1988 and 1-3, 1989, part 1, chap. 3. Online via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/REV/REV_1.HTM#A
founded, the Academy of Science, a newspaper, a new calendar. And a multitude of other novelties: a different structure of state power, a different habitus for the 'upper layer', a different external appearance, frequently even a different language... Of course the structure of society is the same, the political system is the same—but the changes are unheard of, revolutionary, nowhere in the world had anything similar happened in so short a time.”

However—was this good or bad? Let us look at the historical 'lessons' to be drawn.

Two qualities of Russian history which have distinguished it for the duration of many, though not all, historical centuries; we have already spoken of the, but let us briefly join them together.

First of all, relative lack of the bourgeois mentality ['небуржуазность', 'non-bourgeoisite' to coin a dubious phrase. A lack of that which it means to be bourgeois]. This is a most important trait in history, economics, politics, and even national character. Here is Russian prowess, expansiveness, dislike of pettiness and penny-penching—'Stretch my arm, swing my shoulder!' This is an absence, in comparison with the West, of the despised bourgeoisie [and here the term is ‘мещанство’, the non-noble city-dwellers and, actually, a much closer translation of ‘bourgeoisie’ in Russian]...

And at the same time a lack of thrift [once again, difficult. ‘хозяйственность’ and its opposite ‘бесхозяйственность’ carry a somewhat deeper meaning than thrift or lack thereof; ‘хозяйство’ can mean ‘economy’, ‘business’ ‘farm’, ‘household’...in short, something, no matter what its specific nature, that requires to be run, to be managed and administered. Hence the word ‘хозяин’ or ‘хозяйка’ can range in meaning from ‘boss’ to ‘employer’ to ‘master’/’mistress’]. the lack of skill or desire to count and calculate, very frequently—heroism instead of normal, boring daily routine; an easy passage from rebellion to slavery, lawlessness ['произвол'], a shortage of legal mentality.

And secondly (partially as a result of the first), the enormous role of the state, super-centralization.

Even earlier, starting with Ivan III, the relatively large (compared to Europe) role of the autocratic apparatus was obvious; but Peter showed the enormous potential for good and evil that was lodged in that Russian peculiarity. So enormous that even Belinsky, even the best Russian historians (representing the so-called State-Juridistical School) considered that the state is the cause, everything else is the effect; and if the peasants are the serfs of the landlords, they all of them together are the serfs of the state which can do with both peasant and master whatever it wishes.

Since both the people and the propertied layers practically don’t have any associations or organizations independent of the
state, in Russian, more so than in any other country, decisions are made by the active minority; not by the tens and hundreds of districts, not by the thousands and the millions of people, but by the focus of powers—Petersburg. ”

Again and again Eidelman points out the inconsistent nature of autocracy in the 18th century, focusing particularly on the characteristic back and forth between theoretically enlightened ‘European’ laws and the savage ‘Asian’ edicts.

If one were to compare Catherinian Russia (say of the 1770’s-1780’s) and the major European monarchies of the times, we could say that they are quite similar in appearance. We’ve already noted another period of ‘external similarity’ with Europe— as the end of the 15th century when at the same time the unification of England, France, Spain and Russia concluded; then Russia’s ‘dissimilarity’ becomes more noticeable [бросалась в глаза”— ‘threw itself in the eyes’]; between the 16th and 17th centuries Russia came to be all the more different from European powers. And now it caught up again.

By the end of the 18th century (we have not yet, of course, crossed the line of 1789), both in Russia and the West—the ‘fruits of the enlightenment’, similar styles in architecture, literature, music, painting, more or less similar technical achievements, armies in similar uniforms and tri-corner hats. Instead of the Petrine fear, Russian noble life is seeing the strengthening of concepts of honor, which is fixated by the law on noble freedom (1762), and the Granted Charter for the Nobility (1785). Moreover, Russian mores are in some ways gentler than European ones: Russia is the first major country which, since 1754, banned the death penalty; of course this does not concern the constant (then and later) extra-judicial murders of soldiers and peasants—but nonetheless, not a single court in the Empire had, from now on, the right to pass a sentence of death without an extreme ‘highest’ confirmation (as occurred in the cases of Mirovich, Pugachev, the Decembrists). And as much as we might say and write today about the hypocrisy, the relative nature of such mercies, the very fact of their proclamation still had a great moral significance.

If a country, a society, has officially banned the death penalty—its harmfulness and unnatural state is thereby recognized.

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Alright, ‘[we’ve] caught up to Europe’. But West of the Elbe, let’s remind again and again, there has been no serfdom for several centuries; The French nobles, the Spanish hidalgo do not take care of their own land ['хозяйство’ again], do not demand the corvee which would demand the attachment of the peasants to the soil. The enormous possessions of the counts, dukes, marquises, viscounts are rented out to the peasants who pay a quitrent for it, as well as being obligated to a number of other duties—to the landlord, church and state. Naturally the French seigneurs try to increase the dues, doing the same as the Russian landlords who increased the corvee; and the peasants resist the pressure as best they can, bringing ever close the last day and hour of the old masters.

In Russia however, as has long been noted, in the 18th century, one after the other laws of the 'European' and 'Asian' types appear; that which advanced technology, science and culture, and that which enserfs it. Here is a far-from-full list.

1725 – The foundation of the Academy of Sciences.
1731 – The prohibition for serfs to take on contracts and monopolies,
1736 - “Perpetual enserfment” of laborers and workmen ['рабочих и мастеровых'] in factories.
1754 – The abolition of the death penalty.
1755 – The foundation of Moscow University.
1757 – The foundation of the Academy of Arts.
1760 – Landlords gain the right to exile their serfs to Siberia.
1765 – The foundation of the Free Economic Society and the right of the landlords to condemn their serfs to hard labor.
1767 – The prohibition for serfs to complain about their owners.
1774 – Foundation of the Mining Institute in St. Petersburg.
1783 – Serfdom is introduced in Ukraine and the Russian Academy is founded.

Russian industry, working mainly on serf labor, by 1800 leads the world in production of pig iron (today—a laughable amount; fewer than two-hundred thousand tonnes per year, which is about half the daily standard for today’s soviet metallurgy, but it was enough for the time.

Russia has the first or one of the first places in production of metal, armaments, military technology, in some respects equaling even England where capitalism had been in the lead for two centuries...

One can say that the Petersburgian Empire was a brilliantly goaded cart which, obedient to the ‘Petrine knout’ managed, for a time, to outdo the slowly warming, still imperfect Western ‘steamer’—but later, when by the efforts of Watt, Stephenson and Fulton it will pick up steam...
But that still seems to be a while away. For now though, in the end of the 18th century, in Western and Eastern Europe we seen different types of economies and similar, in many ways deceptive indicators which would make someone think that the extra-market, bastinado way [внёрыночный, палочный путь] is no worse than foreign, infidel [заморских, басурманских] traditions. So things stand in economics.

What of politics? East and West there are absolute monarchies, indeed the enlightened rule of Catherine II is held up by the best European philosophers as an example to Louis XV, Friedrich II, Maria-Theresa and other rulers.

In the meantime the many minuses of the Western monarchies—cruel conflicts of the state with society, the French kings’ multiple dissolutions of the ancient French judicial foundations—the Parlements, at the time when Russia ‘has no need’ of anything of the sort, the prohibition on the works of Diderot and Voltaire in France (while they were being widely published in Russia)—all this evoked the thought of a more prosperous and stable arrangement in the Peterburgian Empire rather than the Parisian one (just at this time Louis XV exclaimed: ‘We hold out power exclusively from God, and the right to issue the laws by which our subjects are to be directed, belong to us wholly and indivisibly.’)

In the famous conversations between Catherine II and Diderot, both sides agreed that the dissolution of the Parlement of Paris in 1771 is a foul and hideous action ['мерзость и безобразие']; Diderot noted down: ‘The Empress told me that the violence used against Parlement and its destruction has presented the French people in a most unworthy and pitiful light.

So, perhaps, also thought the progressive man of state Necker, whose reasonable measure were cut short by an unreasonable state, and at the end this conflict became one of the causes of the Great French Revolution.

Catherine’s seemingly far more stable reign might seem an ideal for the intelligent personalities of pre-Revolutionary France: only much later will Necker’s daughter, the famous author Germaine de Staël, upon visiting Russia, cast a popular aphorism which in Pushkin’s translation read: ‘The Russian government is an autocracy, limited by the strangulation cord’.

There, in the West, the autocracy for a long time now had encountered not the cord, but the resistance of society—the counteractions of Parlements, municipal and provincial councils, the intelligentsia, the bourgeoisie, a part of the nobility. Catherine II had far fewer conflicts with Russian society (this does not mean the peasants), because society is still very under-developed: other than noble organizations and a few, very weak municipal ones, practically nothing counterpoises the practically super-powerful
state. Nothing except the ‘cord’ in those extreme cases (Peter III, Paul I), when the omnipotent monarch crosses a certain line between the state and society which exists everywhere, but ‘on different levels’. This is why the ‘bad French kings’ of the 18th century—are a sign of a ‘good’, well-developed society; the kindliness of the Russian Empress—is indicative of a far more delayed social level. By special order of Chancellor M.I. Vorontsov a Frenchman, de Boulard, composed a note in which he proved the utility for the state of a ‘third rank’ (in other words, a ‘third estate’): ‘This is the soul of society, it is for the political corps like the human stomach…Any power within which lacks the third rank is imperfect no matter how strong it is.’

After this a report was composed for Catherine II, which recommended that ‘the merchants would have more freedom and respect among us’, and suggested different measures for this. The Tsaritsa took an interest in the idea and invited 28 prominent merchants for discussion; however their requests turned out to be purely pragmatic (duties, prices, monopolies) and completely failed to touch political or judicial rights, which were so important for the French bourgeois: the average Russian merchants and urban population at the time was scared that the top of the merchant pyramid—those the tsaritsa had invited—might win from the new privileges and become stronger.

After this Catherine ‘cooled off’—gave up the projects for a ‘third rank’. 89

In covering the results of the Great Reforms Eidelman points out a specific weakness in the system, the limp, as it were, which caused the reforms to stagger back and forth rather than move in a straight line.

“The problem was not that little was given, but the historical inflexibility of those who were doing the giving. ‘Revolution from Above’ under Russian conditions is, on the one hand, very effective, for it is realized by the most powerful force in the country—the unlimited state: on the other hand, this ‘plus’ rapidly becomes a ‘minus’ as soon as it comes to continuing, internalizing the reforms. Changes started above can only be fastened down, taken in, continued with the active participation, cooperation of society.

Let’s remember, this is what happened with the noble society which took all of the 18th century to ‘digest’ Peter’s revolution; the

89 Ibid via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/REV/REV_1.HTM#8
most important principle of the internalization was that society continued and then transformed in its own spirit that which had been started by the state (for instance it demanded and received the law on noble liberty which had not been a part of Peter’s plans). The Petrine reforms continued successfully because for a long time the noble society and the state were largely on the same side...

All that which had been done between 1855 and 1874 also required ‘social continuation’, public participation, but this is where the scythe hit the stone...”

Upon reading that passage it somehow becomes almost impossible not to consider Russia today, stepping on the same rake over and over again, for centuries. Between 1991 and 2000 there had been many changes, many reforms, and since 2000 it seemed there was an opportunity to slowly allow society to internalize them, to get used to them and to allow the new liberties to become an accustomed, daily part of the social network….Yet once again the state failed. Once again, frightened of having the semblance of democracy go so far it threatened to become real, the state turned to the usual recipe. Repressing reforms. Repressing (by means up to and including murder) the expression of loud dissenting opinions. The fomenting of strife on neighboring borders with an eye to grabbing a bit of territory. Militant bluster. Getting involved in a ‘small victorious war’ (Syria). Quite honestly, if everything happens twice in history, once as tragedy, the second time as farce—I don’t know what to call Russia, which had repeated its mistakes on new and new stages of its history, forgetting nothing, learning

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90 Ibid via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/REV/REV_2.HTM#25
nothing, determined to keep making the same mistakes no matter how insane. This is no longer even farce. This is the Jerry Springer Show. On a bad budget. Had Eidelman lived I cannot but feel he would have been howling in frustration. Although, who knows… Perhaps, had he lived, he would have been around to inspire more people, help more student learn the truth about their country. That would have helped Russia, no doubt. Whether it would have been enough to prevent today’s catastrophic economic, environmental, political, diplomatic and social disaster zone—which is still claiming to be a great power—from coming to be? I doubt it.

The conclusions to which he came in his last work proved prophetic and continue to resonate today. Russia failed to seize the chance back a quarter century ago and now, once more, it does not really know what it is. A cut-rate monarchy. A sovereign-democracy. A huge piece of land—mostly uninhabitable. Vast natural resources—mostly unattainable. A big country—a relatively small population. Not yet properly industrial. No longer properly agricultural. Not yet actually atheist, despite Soviet efforts. Miles removed from the Christianity of the early 20th century. Russia failed to solve the question of whether it is Europe or Asia. Prior to his death he saw the state begin to retreat from the path of tentative reform as it had so often before. He would have been disappointed had he lived to see the results. Russia turned to the path of
unreconstructed powers and its attempts today to restore its Great Power status would be laughable if they were not killing so many real people. Russia has turned to the increasingly aloof, xenophobic and nationalist conservative isolation and this time, I doubt it has enough strength to rebuild itself again.

“Since the sixteenth century, Russia had several times faced the alternative of taking the ‘European’ or the ‘Asian’ path. Sometimes the [European path of] market economy and self-government [*товарность и самоуправление*] was chosen, at other times it was a compromise, but often in was the corvee [*барщина*] that won out.

For every such victory was a historical tragedy for the people, and for the country that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands, even millions of people, and which through fear and slavery humiliated, robbed and corrupted the souls of the survivors.

The latest great attempt is taking place before our eyes.

The supreme leadership which began core revolutionary reforms—against the mighty bureaucratic powers which, in the fight for survival, threaten, delay, sabotage even those changes which are necessary for them and for their children.

In the event (God forbid!) of failure and another ten to twenty years of stagnation...I think the country will be doomed to the fate of such ‘unreconstructed’ powers as Ottoman Turkey and Austria-Hungary; it will be doomed to irreparable changed, and after experiencing terrible crises and enormous sacrifices, it will, all the same, be compelled to introduce a free market and democracy.

One of the advantages of the present revolution is the enormous historical experience that has been accumulated over the centuries of tsarism and the decades of Soviet power.

We believe in success, not in a one-time gift of fortune, but a difficult progress, ebbing and glowing, yet ever moving forwards.

We believe in success: there is no other way.”

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91 1989-2017. Alright, it turned out to be 28 years. Let’s not get picky.
Historiography

More than twenty-seven years have passed since Natan Eidelman died of a heart attack in Moscow. His works go into new editions, they are available online and are popular among a remarkably wide range of readers.

For many years the Znanie-Sila magazine continued to hold regular readings in his memory. The last and 17th Tynianov reading took place two years ago and it is not yet clear whether the bi-annual meeting will meet again this year. The meeting reports have not been published since 2009.

In 1993 the historian and art scholar A.G. Tartakovsky wrote a powerful introduction to a new edition of Eidelman’s From the Clandestine History of 18th and 19th century Russia.

"Today, in reviewing the legacy of Natan Yakovlevich Eidelman—a prominent writer-historian, who died before his time, at the height of his spiritual powers on November 29th, 1989, one involuntarily falls silent at the vastness of what he had done in different spheres of historico-literary and properly historical science. The author of some 25 books, several hundred articles, features, essays and other ‘small genre’ works. A participant (as a publisher, textologist, commentator) in the publication of a whole series of priceless monuments of Russian social thought and the social-literary moment of the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the initiators and editors of the multi-volume collection of documents and memoirs on the Decembrists ‘The North Star’. A scholar of Pushkin, the Decembrists, Herzen [each of these three has its own perfectly legitimate noun: ‘пушкинист’, ‘декабристовед’, and ‘герценовед’. I won’t try to translate them. There is only so much abuse English will take.] The most authoritative specialist in the two hundred year old history of Russian absolutism from Peter I to Stolypin (where it would be difficult to name a single large event of notable historical personage which his questioning investigator’s
eye would not have touched). An excellent connoisseur of new Russian literature who tirelessly thought (and wrote a great deal) about the art and life ['жизненном поприще', life's field] of D.I. Fonvizin and A.N. Radischev, A.S. Griboedov and V.A. Zhukovsky, P.A. Vyazemsky and A.I. Odoevsky, F.I. Tiutchev and L.N. Tolstoy. In all these areas Eidelman left his significant trace, and in some he proved an innovator and the author of works which have become the classics of modern historical literature.

In addition a born biographer who breathed fresh air into the principles of building a life a biography [the word used is a bit more old-fashioned than ‘biography’; ‘жизнеописание’ is literally ‘life-portrayal’ or ‘life-description’] for the personalities of the past—let’s remember at least his notable Decembrist tetralogy about M. Lunin, S. Muravyov-Apostol, I. Puschin, V. Raevsky which only now appears to us in its internal integrity.

In addition a tireless archivist, who opened the way into a multitude of domestic archives and had started to explore the wealth of foreign archives on Russian history: the geography of his ‘archival trips’ is not only Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, it stretches from Irkutsk and Chita, Saratov and Odessa to Stanford and Paris [and, as it turns out, Italy! More on that in a bit.]

In addition a publicist who responded to the burning problems of contemporary political and literary life and who had done a great deal to make realizable the connection of the needs of today’s social development with the experience of the past.

In addition...in addition...in addition...the range of Eidelman’s historico-literary interests is difficult to sum up in full.

An understanding of them would not be complete if I were not to mention his plans which, for one reason or another, were not realized. I shall only name some. So, in different years he had made plans to write biographies of E. Pugachev, Catherine II, Alexander I, D.V. Davydov, G.R. Derzhavin, F.B. Bulgarin, A.O. Kornilovich, A.I. Herzen, about the first pushkinists P.V. Annenkov and P.I. Bartenev. In connection with the latter, I cannot fail to mention so original a plan (Eidelman had told me of it back in the early 1970’s), as ‘Pushkin in Southern Russia’,— the publication of a work of the same name by P.I. Bartenev, once printed in the ‘Russian Archive’ and a companion piece of I.P. Liprandi’s memoiristic diary entries. This was also to have included detailed commentary which would have taken account of the latest achievements of Pushkinism and Decembristology.

In the bewildering variety of all these works and projects one is impressed first and foremost by the productivity of a phenomenally—if not to say more—gifted man. Puzzling was the very rapidity with which he fundamentally grasped what were for him new spheres of history and literary scholarship with all its
established traditions, schools, problems and enormous, decades-old compilations of literature. That which took others many years if not a significant part of their life, Eidelman learned in maximally condensed periods with a certain lightness and freedom, with the joyous surprise of the first discoverer of unexplored continents of the past.”

During the 10th meeting, in 1999, for the first time Eidelman himself became the subject of discussion in two presentations; the first prepared by B.S. Ilizarov, which compared historical narrative in the films of Sergei Eisenstein, the novels of Thomas Mann and the historical writing of Natan Eidelman.

“In the report ‘Methods of Submersion into a Historical Epoch’ B.S. Ilizarov compared three types of historican narrative: Thomas Mann’s novel Joseph and his Brothers, S.M. Eisenstein’s film ‘Ivan the Terrible’ and the works of Natan Eidelman. According to Ilizarov, T. Mann uses enlarged details to build a historical lense through which the readers look at the past and see only the past—and not the period of the author, T. Mann. On the contrary, Eisenstein also uses details to leave marks in his films which would allow us to see contemporary people in the personages of Ivan the Terrible’s epoch: so, the odd mimicry of the actor Cherkasov in the role of Ivan is reminiscent of the movements of Stalin as preserved on film, Maliuta Skuratov—the tsar’s Eye—reminds one of Beria, etc... In other words, Eisenstein does not submerge his audience in the past, but brings that past close to his own time. Finallym Eidelman always begins the tale with modernity (partially like Eisenstein, but later, in order to give the reader a conception of the historic time and space, he puts up supporting sign-posts (memorable details, characteristic for the described epoch but unthinkable in modernity) which supports the entire construction of his books.”

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94 Knowledge-Power Magazine, ##’s 11-12, 1999, online via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/MILCHINA.HTM

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We have observed many such sign-posts. The foundations of academies and hospitals accompanied by soul-owning. European gowns and the heavy hand of Anna Ioannovna. An Emperor hard at work issuing edict after edict all day into dusk—to march in front of an Orthodox regiment the next day, in a dalmatic with the Maltese Cross on his chest. The charming Pahlen, who breaks a few eggs to make an omelet, but even during that horrifying night when he, having helped throttle his Emperor and being forced to rush back and forth between the Winter Palace and Mikhailovsky Castle several times to keep the situation from getting unruly, still finds the time to stop by his home and assure his frightened wife in person that from now on, she may sleep safely.95

The second presentation concerned Eidelman more directly. This was a selection from his diaries (1977-89), in which his widow, Ju. M. Madora traced the development of Eidelman’s historical thought during his later years. The Gorbachev reforms, which Eidelman welcomed with great enthusiasm, also made his life harder on a moral and intellectual level. For many years before the reforms had started he had suffered from the inability to act. The passive avoidance of lies was no longer enough for him—he wanted to actively tell the truth. There was some risk to actually beginning to do so. Nowadays the idea of a street in Moscow named after

95 Eidelman, Border Between Centuries, Moscow, Vagrius, 2004, p.434
Academician Sakharov does not inspire a second glance, but Eidelman publicly supposed that it would happen in December of 1986 when the proposal was a considerably riskier one than now. Now we know that he was not and would not have been arrested or imprisoned—but he, with all the experience Russian history possessed of unpredictable and sudden violence by the state, could not have been 100% certain. The possibility of retaliation by the state was small, but not nonexistent. He was tired of hiding his conclusions and ideas in the safe 18th and 19th centuries—now he wanted to study modernity, to figure out how the secrets of his own Soviet past and present. In the late 1980’s a great deal seemed possible and Eidelman seems to have lived the last three years of his life in a sort of euphoria—a pure delight at the changes, and the sheer scale of changes that swept the country. One of the most joyous events of his last years, Madora noted, was the long-awaited publication of a book he had edited—Lunin’s Siberian letters. He was more excited, she said, than for a work of his own being published. For a brief time it seemed that the freedom of which he and his heroes dreamed would finally arrive.

In the interview with Izvestia Magazine his daughter was asked:

“I: Why was he always so interested in revolutionaries than in conservatives?”
-Eidelman: He really was interested in people who fight for freedom. I recall, once in college I said that it would be good to study Katkov (a publicist, public figure of the 19th century, editor of the Russkii Vestnik—Izvestia). Father was very surprised.

I: His heroes were Lunin, Puschin and Herzen?

-Eidelman: Yes. They were simply sympathetic to him as people. And he predicted for himself that, like his favorite personages, he will die between 57 and 59. Several times he said to various people: ‘I won’t live to see sixty’. And so it happened…”

In an article dedicated to him after his death, Marietta Chudakova, a famous literary scholar wrote of how Eidelman began to write for all audiences.

Natan began to write not for colleagues, not for humanitarians—for the entire country, for all readers. He was thinking not of his own shop ['цех', workshop or department might do as alternative meanings in a pinch] but, one might say, of his class in the Moscow school in Merzljakov Lane. His classmates who had become physicists and doctors in the 1950’s hadn’t a single good word to say [that’s a somewhat toned down translation, in the original ‘ругательски ругали’—‘scolded scolding'] about his department, his profession, his shop. He wanted to write in such a way that he would not be ashamed before them. They became his first readers, first appreciators or rather, first detractors. They scolding, their detractions did not embarrass him. They spurred him to describe the history of the country in such a way that it would be interesting and clear to everybody. And indeed they helped us catapult ourselves from the historical swamp we had back then. Natan told me more than once of how much he owes them.”

His friend, Semyon Reznik described his performances, seemingly unstudied, simple and somehow mesmerizing:

“A man of heightened conscientiousness, he always seemed to feel guilty. For not having reached someone by phone, for not having answered a letter in time, for being forced to ask for

96 Interview online via http://www.peoples.ru/family/father/natan_eidelman/interview/html
97 Chudakova, Marietta, Natan Eidelman, Russian Historian, Knowledge-Power Magazine, #12, 1990, archived version preserved online via http://www.webcitation.org/6FHPERvjG
something... And for the fact that he was inevitably the center of attention in any company. For his performances gathering audiences of many thousands, for the crowds. It was as though he felt awkward that so many people left their affairs and came to listen to him. He came out to face the audience in an elderly suit jacket. He never wore a tie, a mighty neck pushed wide the open shirt-collar. At first he seemed lost and spoke uncertainly, with frequent pauses, as though not knowing where to begin. I never managed to catch that mysterious, breaking moment when the coughing and whispering audience suddenly froze and started greedily catching every word. It's hard to understand how he achieved this. He did not possess a bit of the artistic nature [артистизма] with which, for instance, Irakly Andronikov conquered his listeners.

Eidelman stood on stage, practically not moving, only occasionally shifting his weight from one foot to another. He never gesticulated. His hands were more a hindrance than aid and he tried to hide them behind his back. His thick baritone was, perhaps, the only artistic instrument nature had given Natan, but even that he used without calculation, never resorting to oratorical effects. And nonetheless, his performances turned into brilliant spectacles. The play of living, seeking thought unfolded before the viewers. If along with Andronikov the past came out onto the stage, a past into which he took the admiring listeners and viewers, then Natan Eidelman brought the past into our today. With Lunin and Herzen, with Nicholas I and Pushkin he spoke of today's pains and troubles. The miracle of separated times uniting took place. The listeners realized: that which this small, thickset man is saying about the people and events of a century ago concerns them directly. And when the room exploded in applause, it inevitably embarrassed the orator, and the usual guilty smile appeared in his eyes again."98

Curiously enough, a few years ago Eidelmaniana has been extended by a book previously unknown! In the last year of his life, with the aid of his former student Eidelman finally managed to travel outside the USSR. One of the places he visited was Italy where the world “saw” the publication of a collaborative effort, the only book he wrote alongside his old friend Dr. Yuli Krelin (1929-2006).

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The book was written in 1985. Russian censure rejected the manuscript and for many years it fell out of sight and mind. However, Francesco Lancelloti and Roberto Toscano prepared an abridged Italian translation which finally saw the light in 1987, thanks to the sponsorship of the famous playwright and poet Tonino Guerra. If anyone is planning to brush up on their Italian—don’t bother. This is a bibliographical rarity. It was printed in the publishing house of San Marino Customs to the total number of...100 copies, instantly vanished into private collections and was forgotten.

A review by Alexei Bukalov (who boasts of having one of the original Italian editions, autographed by Eidelman in Italian!) from April of 2012 reads in part:

“They wrote a story of love. Of the undefeatable yearning of the Italians—travellers and adventurers, merchants and priests, architects and painters, authors and musicians—to a distant, snowy country the name of which is Russia. The feeling of lively, genuine curiosity and sincere sympathy proved mutual for our countries. Not for nothing did Russians, for centuries, see Italy as ‘the land of highest inspirations’.

Before us is a scrupulous collection not only of obvious truths which have become common property, but also of little-known facts and archival discoveries. ‘Italian Russia’ is dedicated to the truly extraordinary artistic involvement of the residents of the Apennines in Russian culture, architecture, literature and even mores for over six centuries (1247-1917). Eidelman and Krelin, like Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson study an enigmatic, almost detective history of Italo-Russian mutual exploration, whimsically crossed fates, they seek and find traces of bitter defeats and brilliant victories.

This is a circumstantial (more than four-hundred page) tale, full of surprising discoveries, funny observations and important details. The travel guide to Italian Russia consists of several large
chapters: ‘First Italians’, ‘From Rastrelli to Rastrelli’, ‘Farewell to the 18th Century’, ‘The Sounds of Italy’ and others. The Russian edition has restored a fascinating chapter missed by the Italians ‘The Sons of Happy Ausonia’—a hundred pages [nearly a quarter of the book!] on the building of Odessa by the famous De Ribas, on the genius decorations Pietro Gonzaga had created for the serf theater of Arkhangelskoe, a suburban Moscow estate, about the Petersburg street of Architect Rossi…”

A Russian edition, I hear you say? Well, it can’t be as difficult to find as—oh yes it can.

“The Russian manuscript, rejected by censorship for reasons unknown to me, was considered hopelessly lost and was only recently, accidentally discovered in his vast archive by the wonderful Moscow musicologist Lev Ginzburg. And now it had been published by Moscow’s Gamma-Press publications, with a foreword by the 90-year old maestro Guerra and an introduction by publisher Mark Zilberkvit. Unlike its San Marino predecessor this book is generously supplied with wonderful illustrations (design and execution by Arkady Trojanker). A husband and wife pair of ‘Russian Italians’—translator Valery Surin and Irma Bruni, became generous sponsors to this project. Their home library is one of the best private collections of Russian books in Rome.”

There were 1,500 copies published. Five years ago. In a city which loves Eidelman. Unless someone does the right thing, ignores copyright, scans this treasure and puts it out online (possible but one should be wary with Russian websites), at this point it is probably fairly safe to say that this book has vanished. Perhaps in 50 or 60 years it may pop up again, like the white whale, and send new generation of historians scrambling…

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100 Ibid.
Chapter 2

Yakov Arkadievich Gordin

“Yes, history is ethical, in precisely the measure that the people creating it hold to ethics. In other words—us.”

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101 Interview with Svetlana Bunina of Lechaim.ru from December of 2008, online via http://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/200/LKL.htm
Biography

Yakov Arkadievich Gordin, the second of our historical rebels, is the only one of the three still alive and active in maintaining a social position to which he has held, it seems, his entire conscious life.

He was born in Leningrad in 1935, into a literary family; the son of Arkadiy Moiseevich Gordin (1913-1997), and Mariana Yakovlevna Basina (1916-1994). The themes which were to become central to Gordin’s works—Pushkin, the Decembrists, and the remarkable (and remarkably short-lived), spiritual freedom of the Alexandrian age,—surrounded him from infancy. Both his parents had graduated from the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad—proud child of the Catherinian favorite Zavadovsky—and both eventually worked with great distinction in the field of children’s literature and school textbooks. Mariana Basina’s more famous works were a tetralogy on Pushkin, a mandatory and much beloved series on which several generations of Soviet schoolchildren had grown up, as well as books on Gogol, Dostoevsky and Nekrasov. Arkadiy Gordin, over his long career wrote several books on Pushkin, as well as some works dealing with Krylov, Belinsky, Gogol and Griboedov. From 1957-1963 he was deputy director of All-Union Pushkin Museum.
Not all children follow in the footsteps of their parents, of course, but in this case it seems that the atmosphere in Gordin’s family was saturated, grace of this research by both parents, with the particular atmosphere of a bygone (and inevitably, somewhat mythologized), era which was, in many vital respects, an antithesis to the surrounding Soviet reality. To counter-balance this quiet and scholarly existence a young boy wanted an entirely different set of references, and Gordin found it in the works of Jack London—the mythmaker of the Great Outdoors. And later, after school, this was what pulled him into the army. Happily, Gordin, in his life, found time for both components, and thoroughly enjoyed them. In a 2012 interview with Ivan Tolstoy on “Radio Svoboda” he recalled:

“—Yakov Arkadievich, I’ve been listening and thus far I’ve heard nothing of your relationship with your father, who was your precursor on the path you took later. When did you first take an interest in your father’s work?

“—Both my father’s and my mother’s. It’s a strange story. Now, and for a long time now, I’ve understood the part my parents have played in this part of my life. But it did not seem so then. By and large this is rather funny, because, whatever I have said, I did not want to be a philologist, I wanted to be a zoologist. In 1945 father, though he had participated in the defense of Leningrad and had been decorated, was given 48 hours to leave Leningrad because two of his older brothers had been repressed. And here, he and all of us were very fortunate. He went to the Pushkin House, (back before the war in 1939 he had published a book, “The Pushkin Preserve’) to Tomashevsky whom he knew well and who thought well of him, and Boris Viktorovich said that there is a position in the Pushkin Preserve, a form of exile [такая ссылка],—Deputy Director for Research. Naturally father gathered his things at once and went there. Just recently Geichenko had arrived on the spot and they began working there almost simultaneously, Geichenko as the Director-Administrator while father, as a Pushkinist, developed the scientific concept of restoring the preserve.
And he worked there up until 1949 when—after the anniversary [Pushkin’s 150th birthday and oh, wouldn’t he have been proud…]—he was fired as a cosmopolitan. And so I, knowing, seeing and yes, respecting that which my father did, and it had seemed to me that father knows everything, he really was a very erudite man, especially in that which concerns Russian culture, but, strange as it is, I did not perceive it as a form of guidance or teaching. And later, many years later, I understood that I had taken in not even that which father said, although we talked, he and I and mother, and there were many conversations between them when father edited mother’s books, but the very atmosphere of the conversations influenced me far more than any direct attempts to incline me toward this path, in fact there really were no such attempts. ‘If you want to be a zoologist, be a zoologist’. I wanted to be a zoologist, to live in the woods, to hunt. I even prepared myself for it. Mother made fun of me. For instance I wouldn’t eat sweets for an entire year to prepare myself for tribulations—no candy, no pastries. And sometimes all of this was on the table, I’d steel my heart to refuse, and mother—who knew how to turn a sharp joke—made fun of me a good deal for this. But I managed it. That’s how it all mixed together; attempts to write a novel about Tamerlane, and on the other, animals in the forest, a cabin, a gun—as a certain ideal.”

The choice of the Alexandrian era is understandable. Many scholars chose to dive in the safer and deeper waters of the medieval past. Gordin’s parents chose, as their primary field, the ideologically loaded 19th century, particularly the Alexandrian period and Pushkin. Dangerous themes. As mentioned before, the more recent the past, the more attention it received from censorship, while Pushkin was an official sacred cow and all research concerning him had to be properly polished into a shape fit for the morally-sensitive Soviet readership. In the most terrible years—1938 to 1941—it was Arkadiy Gordin that was editor-in-charge of

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102 Interview from 11/25/1012, online via http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24781027.html
the Russian literature department of the Leningrad UchPedGiz Publishing house, which dealt with school textbooks and educational literature. Perhaps it is possible to argue that the polished, moralistically educational image of Pushkin the Soviet state pushed on its students (an image quite far from reality, as nothing human was foreign to Pushkin and whatever he may be considered a poster child for, morality,—conjugal or otherwise,—is hardly likely to be first on the list), was, to some extent, the work of Arkadiy Gordin. It would be entirely unfair to blame him of course, this was neither the time or place to ‘stand up for historical accuracy in school textbooks’, and as a man one of whose older brothers spent 17 years in the camps—and another had been executed there—Arkadiy Gordin knew this perfectly. Certainly, like Eidelman’s principal Sheveleva, both of Gordin’s parents did their best to keep the ideological part of the work they did with children’s literature to an absolute minimum, while still carrying out the demands of censorship. It seems reasonable enough to allow that in personal domestic conversation he and his wife spoke of their subject with greater freedom than at work. It was, at any rate, enough to lure their son into choosing the same age and some of the same people as his primary topics. In an interview from May 15th of last year,

103 A third brother, on the other hand, seems to have made a successful Party career, rising to become Deputy People’s Commissar for Finance. As Gordin said in the same interview—‘ours is not a trivial genealogy’.
given to Gennady Katsov of RunyWeb.com he talked about some of his early influences.

“There were several stages. In my youth I had not planned to work with literature, history. I dreamed of being a zoologist, living in the woods, travelling. My teacher of life was Jack London, whose stories and novels I read and reread. And the main meaning was to make myself worthy of his heroes. Which meant an organic union of the intellect and physical capacity. Martin Eden as an ideal, in a word.

But at some point this element was pushed aside by another—historical novels: the works of Jan, especially “Chingis Khan”, “The Great Mouravi” by Anna Antonovskaya. In 10th grade I tried to write a novel about Timur and gathered some quantity of materials. I’ve kept a school notebook [in another interview, two notebooks], somewhere with the first chapters.

Then other literature appeared which back then—in the forties, early fifties—was inaccessible to most of my peers. Nietzsche, D’Annunzio, the Polish decadent-Nietzschean Przebyszewski. Thanks to the fact that my father, a known Pushkinist had a pass to the GosLit Library, and I could use that pass, I could get all these books. Then Romain Rolland’s “Jean Christophe” became exceptionally important, and his history of European music, Zweig’s biographical essays. All of these things were from the “overcoming” genre, “career novels” in the elevated sense.

But the Jack London part remained—hence the yearning to go into the army, as well as boxing in the army and at University. And geology—the Far North.

However, sooner or later some meaning must have crystallized. And it appeared, slowly. It was initially, as I now understand, a complex combination of all of the above, but upended, in a strange manner, onto Russian history. The army played its role—the toughest flesh of history, if you see what I mean...

In the early sixties I had formed the outlines of the problem: how did Russia get to her current place? Why did she go through the Dantean circles she went through? And what is the experience of people who have tried to change this tragic course?”

In the Svoboda.org interview of 2012, he spoke of other early influences, particularly the Taskin family which was, for Gordin, a vital connection to the antediluvian period.

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104 Interview from 5/15/2015, online via http://www.runyweb.com/articles/culture/literature/yakov-gordin-interview-1.html
“There was a man who played a very important role in my life. It’s odd, but I only remembered it now—you see the tricks memory plays. There was a theater back then called the Council of Lenin Theater, and which is now called the New Theater. There was a well-known producer there, Boris Szuszkiewicz. And there was an actor who played important roles in this theater, Vladimir Alexeevich Taskin. He was from a very good family, his father had been a pianist, specifically had accompanied Chaliapin. And Vladimir Alexeevich was a man of refined education, a wonderful pianist and musical connoisseur. As for his roles, he has played Philip in ‘Don Carlos’. I went to all his performances. Our families were friends, we were friends with him and with his wife Raisa Vasilievna, also an actress. And Vladimir Alexeevich quite consciously worked on the upbringing of the Soviet schoolchild, gently introducing certain cultural principles [emphasis-mine. ILS]. Particularly in the area of music, but not only there. He had an excellent library, an old, pre-Revolutionary one his parents had left him. There were didactic autobiographies, autobiographical upbringing-novels, a once-famous autobiography of John Stuart Mill, an English sociologist and philosopher. Extremely interesting. I remember my amazement when Mill wrote that he learned Latin at age 4. I was studying German at the time and, though a good deal older, had trouble with it. He introduced me to Wagner, gave me a large, multi-volume biography of Wagner which I read as though intoxicated, and I went to the Chapel105, this was the only place where the conductor, Rabinovich, performed Wagner from time to time, this was the only place where he was performed.106 I used to remember the “Der Fliegende Holländer” and Wagner’s early pieces by heart. I still have…I don’t see it right now, it must have gotten lost in my chaos… a bronze imprint image of Wagner—a little image, I still have it on my desk. Well, if we’re talking about such teachers of culture and life in culture, Vladimir Alexeevich Taskin was the first—and that was a great piece of luck. Because our house was a philological house. In a sufficiently definite and, I would even say, somewhat limited fashion. Not even mentioning the fact that life was hard, either Father was being exiled or his older brothers were being arrested, one even died. This defined the atmosphere of the house. The Taskin house, were we went as a family and where I went by myself, the atmosphere was entirely different. As I understand it was a rather ancien-regime atmosphere which, in a certain sense, was a counter-example to the surrounding Soviet habitus.”107

105 The famous St. Petersburg Kapella, a miracle of acoustics.
106 To anyone born in the USSR, the very idea of a man named Rabinovich conducting Wagner in St. Petersburg is an exercise in irony, cubed.
107 Interview from 11/25/2012, online via http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24781027.html
It is true that many of those who had the fortune of meeting the pre-Revolutionary generation remained stricken forever by the incredible gulf between them—between their Soviet existence which, over the years, became in the most literal sense ruder and ruder, and the pre-Revolutionary upbringing which allowed many of the older generation to survive the loss of practically everything while retaining their manners, their grace and easy eloquence of speech, their knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, sometimes some of their libraries…and even more unusually, remarkable self-possession under even the most dire circumstances (understandable, I suppose, for people who had already survived all the worst things imaginable and were now quite literally unshakable). And with a generous hand the older generation shared with the younger, so terribly crippled by Soviet education, as much as they could of the cultural wealth they had managed to salvage from the deluge. Many of these people, banished from ‘main-land’ Russia after serving their sentences, remained in Siberia, and till the end of their lives worked in quiet little jobs, and continued to share their treasures with local children.108

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108 Back in the 1970’s my mother, a young university student in Leningrad at the time, was acquainted with a lady—once a famous beauty of pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg—who had completed the famous Bestuzhev Courses for Women. Upon hearing my mother discuss modern society she lifted a formerly sable brow and said: “Of course, your generation has not seen anything. For you, even Lunacharsky is an intellectual…”
After high school, without waiting for the draft Gordin volunteered for the army. He began his studies in the Philological Department of Leningrad University but left on his fourth year, having done two as an extern, choosing instead to complete technical courses in geophysics with a focus on Arctic geology. In an interview with Pavel Chernomorsky at Jewish.ru three years ago he remembered this period:

“—One might say that I ran to the military office myself after school. I didn’t want to study, I wanted real life. And I have absolutely no regrets about this. First I served in the Far East, in the famous Vaninsky Port where there was a separate rifle battalion, then I went to the Mongolian border. I served with wonderful guys, many of whom had been released from the camps by Beria’s amnesty. In short I travelled around the country. After demobilization I went to University. I studied for a couple of years, and quite decently, by the way. But I understood that this is not right somehow. And then a school friend of mine happened to visit, who was working in a geological party in Kazakhstan. He was heading for Yakutia, to look for diamonds and he called me. And I, as they say, sparked up. Exams were coming up but I made a firm decision. I went right to the head of our department, Fedor Abramov. Abramov was a well-known man by then, a writer with a reputation. And he told me he’s against it. But we also had a professor Naumov, who read a course of Soviet Literature and was the head of LITO in which Brodsky, I and others actively participated. He didn’t particularly like me—neither my poetry nor my behavior. He immediately wrote—I don’t know what—to the Dean and I was released.”

Gordin spent five years working as a geologist, a profession which, perhaps more than any other in the USSR allowed for great

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109 Housed—unlike the rest of the of the University which occupies the Petrine 12 Colleges building—in the lovely little pale-green Baroque palace the omnipotent Menshikov had built for his young Emperor, Peter II, right next door to Menshikov’s own, far grander house. In post-Soviet times one of the larger rooms on the ground floor—down the stairs from the entrance and the first large doors on the right if you happen to visit—became home to one of the best bookstores in St. Petersburg, where Gordin’s books were always amply represented...

110 Interview from 7/6/2013, online via http://www.jewish.ru/culture/events/2013/06/news994318466.php
freedom of movement, including in places where human feet had never stepped before, a decent salary (especially if one worked in the Far North for which rates were higher), and a certain, theoretical amount of freedom of speech. I will not argue that geologists are naturally better than other professions in this regard—although there seems to be something about work in the great outdoors that seems to attract nice people…—but for the purely pragmatic reason that in a distant encampment surrounded by wilderness, where communication is close, authorities distant and the number of people limited, it’s almost impossible not to find out which of the group is a KGB snitch, if there happens to be one. Another perk of the profession is that it was not heavy on that kind of people, the state simply saw little enough possibility for ideological danger in this particular profession and didn’t bother keeping an excessive number of agents in it.111 If there is one such in the group, however, and it becomes known…well, once that is known, a few months together in the Siberian wilderness can become all kinds of inconvenient and a man can meet with all kinds of…accidents.

“I spent five years in Geology. Back then it was a peculiar sphere of freedom, I suppose. When we went to spend half a year in the Verkhoyan Mountains [Northern Yakutia], regional committees

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111 And in this way the state lost a great deal of wealth. A former geologist of my acquaintance once met another group of geologists out in Siberia in the mid-1980’s, who had been sent there to seek gold. And the little gold they found they had, quite honestly, sent in. There was no snitch in the group to inform the government, however, of the hip-deep pile of platinum they had also collected, and since they had been sent out to look, quite specifically, for gold, they saw no need to burden those poor bureaucrats in Moscow with additional information. One can only assume (and hope), that the survivors of the eventual ‘share and share alike’ process are enjoying a very good life somewhere with some sun, surf and a very ‘friendly’ tax-code.
and city committees become virtual things. There were party members, of course, but even they, in that Rousseauistic existence behaved differently. I should note that there were many decent people among geologists. There was a selection. Lousy people [“Люди паршивые”] did not stick around long. And I did not abandon literature. I worked for five years. And for five years I wrote poetry there.  

Immediately the interviewer suggested a parallel to 19th century Russian officers serving in the Caucasus and Gordin agrees on a vital and characteristic note of freedom, of a departure from official life (regional and city committees…):

“—An obvious parallel comes to mind at once: the Caucasus in the 19th century. The escape of disappointed young noblemen to mountain warfare. There may be blood there. But there is life, and there is the truth of life.

—Yes, there is even a classical saying: “The Caucasus is a hot Siberia”. Russian officers yearned to go to the Caucasus [the specific term is somewhat stronger, they “рвались на Кавказ”, which can be approximated as “tore for the Caucasus”, “рваться” is to tear for something against an implied resistance.] I wrote a book about how the Caucasus changed Russian public consciousness. After the war with Napoleon society fell into a very deep crisis—to some extent a psychological one. It was impossible to apply oneself in this world, all attempts are muffled with cotton! While there, there was another life, a Caucasian utopia. Even Caucasian more and traditions seemed beautiful in comparison to what they saw at home. A respected officer was a man who had a real mountaineer’s clothing, a mountain horse, mountain weapons. Whereas it is impossible to even imagine a British aristocrat in India who would wear traditional local clothing. The English even tried to dress native military units according to a European example.”

A slight liberty with the translation there, I’m afraid. The actual Russian phrase is “Невозможно применить себя в этом мире, все утыкается в вату!” so, “everything bumps into cotton!”

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
The deadening obscurantism and general disappointed *malaise* of the post-Napoleonic Alexandrian period do indeed bear comparison with Gordin’s own circumstances. This romantic escape from school to the army and again from university studies to the wilds of North-Eastern Siberia to look for diamonds in some of the loneliest and most beautiful places in the world is rather symptomatic of the Thaw, with the popular tourism and alpinism movements which saw a whole young generation head out to the wilds every summer, not to mention all the young enthusiasts who went to work on BAM and other projects.

‘The last era of historical optimism’, which came to an end wrought by internal turmoil and foreign scandal, while all the optimism, all the hope for a rejuvenation of the system and the ideal gave way to the gray, stagnant disappointment of the Brezhnev years (parallel with the late-Alexandrian and Nicholayevan), eventually, of course, leading to the final fossilization of the system which even the reforms of the next generation could not restore to vitality.

Gordin began to publish in 1963, with poetry, a volume of which came out in 1972, as well as a historical tragi-comedy “Your head, Emperor!” which was staged in the Leningrad Theater for Young Viewers in 1967. In his critical works and essays, however, he quickly focused on the period of High Absolutism in Russian
history, and particularly on the Decembrist Rebellion, on Pushkin, and on the history of Russia’s conquest of the Caucasus Mountains.

The uniting theme which he discovered and took to heart was that of struggle and most importantly—the struggle of the individual against the government and the collective. Writing in the USSR he immediately found it a popular theme, near and dear to many of his readers. Like Eidelman he was not interested in studying the safe conformists, however talented. No Katkovs, no Bulgarins. Give them battles for a worthy cause! Give them resistance to the domineering monstrosity of the State! Give them the struggling Prometheus who may be thrown down again and again but he will wait forever and rise once more!

“Hence the corresponding personages—‘the resisting man’ who cuts across or goes against the flow of history. Everything started with the Decembrists. Then there were: Vasily Nikitich Tatischev, our first historian who tried to redirect the flow of history; Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn who, five years after Peter I’s death tried to limit the power not only of the reigning person but of the monstrous machine-state Peter had created.

Then Pushkin—a historian and a politician who prophesied catastrophe for the Empire; Leo Tolstoy with his fierce rejection of the existing world. And recently—General Ermolov, a significantly different character but also one who dreamed—in his chivalrous, general’s fashion, to redirect Russia’s movement. And of course, Peter. The creator of the state in which we live to this day, and we can do nothing with the heavy inheritance of the first Emperor, ‘the miraculous builder’.”

With great respect for Gordin, one is tempted to argue, as in the previous chapter, that Peter, rather than creating a principally

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new system, had rather exacerbated and temporarily—at inhumanly
great cost—reinvigorated a pre-existing social arrangement. But we
shall deal with this later. A more detailed passage on Golitsyn—a
man whom Gordin holds in great respect—is to be found in the
introduction to Gordin’s famous “Between Slavery and Freedom”,
a book dealing with the constitutional inheritance crisis of 1730 and
the rise to the throne of one of Russia’s worst monarchs.

“On April 14th of 1737, two hundred years before an
unprecedentedly terrible year which flooded Russia with blood, for
a long time broke her will to freedom and bent her soul, a drama
concluded which had, in many respects, pre-defined this catastrophe
and threw a dark little backwards and forwards—for centuries.

On that day, in Shlisselburg, not far from the fortress church,
a quiet funeral took place for a prisoner of that fortress, Prince
Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn. Leaving aside secondary traits, it
can be said that the old man, whom four servants laid into the frozen
soil of the old Swedish stronghold Peter the Great had seized, was
the most dangerous posthumous opponent of the first Emperor, for
he nearly blew up the soulless labyrinth of the Petrine system115. It
can also be said that it was from Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich that
the idea of a correct constitutional monarchy had its beginning in
our social existence, an idea the realization of which was to have,
besides everything else, restored the natural connection of the
government and the country which Peter in his self-confidence had
torn apart, and to give the development of Russian statehood a
principally different direction.

Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich, who has been left an oligarch,
motivated by estate and familial greed, was in reality the tragic
forerunner of the great and unsuccessful reformer Speransky, to
speak nothing of the constitutionalist-aristocrats of the Catherinian
and Alexandrian reigns, and the moderate Decembrists. It was this
line which promised Russia the most trouble-free development.

Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn is the most important,
but not the only hero of this book. However, his fate is a
concentrate, a quintessence of the drama of a responsible individual
consciousness which comes into conflict with mass consciousness,

115 Unlike quite a few historians, such as Robert Massie, who tend to forgive Peter I his cruelties and
excesses for the sake of the grand monument of statehood he constructed, Gordin finds this to be the
primary and most damning indictment against the man.
which rejects the very idea of personal responsibility for a common
destiny—an all-too-frequent collision in our history.”\textsuperscript{116}

For a Soviet audience, these last words struck very close to home.

In comparing the careers of Eidelman and Gordin the role of anti-Semitism must be discussed, if briefly. We can encapsulate by saying that this element of Soviet society, coming, as it did, in waves, hit the former harder than the latter. To an extent this is a function of age, Eidelman was, after all, five years older. The hardline anti-Semitism of the late 1940’s-early 1950’s affected him more seriously as he was a young college student and then a struggling young professional. As Gordin himself admits, he was a schoolboy with entirely different concerns at the time. More interesting is the fact that these few years seem to have led to an entire life somewhat less affected by the anti-Semitic factor than might, generally speaking, have been expected.

“—You know, it did not really touch me personally. Among the simple people I almost never met real anti-Semites. Not in the army, not in the geological parties. The Russian people are generally tolerant by nature. [The events of the last few years…and the historical experience of some few centuries more might lead one to a slight questioning of that particular statement, but I will restrain myself.] I got into the University with no problem. When I was not published, this was not because I was a Jew. As for state-sponsored anti-Semitism, by and large my entire generation was relatively lucky. The older ones [Eidelman, for instance] were not so lucky, but we caught the Doctor’s Case as kids and there was no strife in a post-war school. True, this did hit hard at the ones who came after us. That was when

\textsuperscript{116} Online via Rulit.me at \url{http://www.rulit.me/books/mezh-rabstvom-i-svobodoj-prichiny-istoricheskoj-katastrofy-read-375953-1.html}
they started stopping the possibility of getting an education, wouldn’t hire you. Though, to a certain degree it could be heard of in our time too. […] The Brodsky case was based on anti-Semitism,—that was even made clear in court by the judge in person when the passports of the witnesses were verified in an absolutely revolting manner. But I can’t say that I personally particularly suffered from it. That being said, I should confess that I do not particularly worry [[как-то не особенно рефлексирую]] about my nationality. In connection with this I often recall the phrase of a historian, a Jew who was also a Frenchman117. He said that he only feels himself to be a Jew when he stands before an anti-Semite.118

It is true that coming from a family which, if not long established in Leningrad was, in any case, well established in literary circles, could not possibly hurt. But Gordin is right, the people born around his dates simply slipped between the swings of the pendulum. On the other hand, it is curious to see, in this interview, that his approach to the Soviet reality around him, in which a great deal of anti-Semitism did touch a great many people, including his friends, like Eidelman or Brodsky, seems to be based not merely on moral, but on an almost aesthetic basis. He fought the State in his own way, not so much because it had been a threat to him personally, but because he personally found it repugnant on an almost physical level.

“—You once said that by 1968 you had clear, anti-Soviet views. However, you were not a dissident.

—Well, even before that I had been known in that context. There was the letter in support of Brodsky when he was put on trial. I signed that letter along with forty-nine of my colleagues. It so happened that my name came first. That letter went to the procurator’s office in Moscow and stayed there, it caused no real resonance in Peter[sburg, sic.]. In 1968 I signed a letter in support

117 Marc Bloch.
118 Online via http://www.runyweb.com/articles/culture/literature/yakov-gordin-interview-1.html
of Sinyavsky and Daniel, then I signed a letter about the Ginsburg and Galanskov process. And one of those letters came back to the regional committee. This time the reaction followed immediately. Some were thrown out of work, from the Journalist’s Union, from their jobs in the newspaper. But I, officially, did not work anywhere even though I was part of a so-called literary professional-group. This was a sort of insurance which had been invented after the Brodsky case, so that one could not be put on trial for social parasitism. And when that letter came it was, as they say, sent down the chain of command [спустили по инстанциям]. The Author’s Union decided not to make a big fuss about this story. I was called in for a conversation. I said that I will not repent or remove my signature from that letter. They called me in again, listened to me, badgered me a little [помурлыли], and said that in the future they advise me to express my opinion individually rather than to sign any collective petitions. Formally all these talks and rebukes seemed to mean nothing, but factually I ended up in a black list which prevented any possibility of publication.

—Did you stop publishing?

—No. I had a family to feed. And back in those days the Soviet regime was easily fooled. I kept writing, say, scripts for television just as I had before. Then I gave them to my friends, they published the scripts under their own names and I received the money. There were comical situations. Say I write a script about Antokolsky, which I gave to my friend Igor Smirnov. Igor got the money, gave it to me. And later I meet a literary editor from TV who teaches me how to write scripts, using that same play about Antokolsky as an example.

—What was it that made you sign those letters back then? Brodsky is understandable. You were friends since your early youth. But why did you support the others?119

—Because it was just plain disgusting to look at it. This letter-signing, by the way, was a very active movement back then. Hundreds, thousands of people signed, it was a sort of an industry. Then those letters went to ‘enemy voices’, were publicized. The objects (and the signers as well), also received notoriety in a certain context, a form of PR I suppose. But that is mostly a Moscow story. The letters we signed, here, were originally addressed—as was our protest—to the structures of power; the procurator’s office, the KGB, the Supreme Council, the Executive Committee. We addressed our message to those who were the primary cause of it. We solidarized with the disagreeable [‘неугодными’, a term flavored with the 18th and 19th century, those whom the state finds ‘disagreeable’ or ‘displeasing’ to itself]. Because just to sit there,

119 A question which tells us something about the interviewer, the target audience or both. And I’m not at all sure any of it is good...
as though nothing was going on was foul. People were not shot, but they were tormented to death [‘мордовали до смерти’ is the specific term used and this begs of closer translation. It is rooted in the word ‘morda’ or ‘animal snout’. Mordovat’ is, in common parlance, to beat a person as though they were an animal, and just like its predecessor, the Soviet state was not chary of its strength in that regard, nor did it ever lapse in the proprietary way in which it viewed its citizens].”

And le voila in a nutshell. Gordin could not sit still while foul deeds were being done all around him, even if their effect on his own life was minimal. He reacted against surrounding Soviet existence on a level which seems to range between the aesthetic and the instinctual, reacting to a reality which was so wrong, so foul, so completely out of accordance with his idea of what reality should be, that he could not peacefully co-exist with it. And this is a principle on which Gordin has never stopped acting.

“—I suppose you could still step out in support of someone’s support like that today...
—Yes, I signed in later times as well—under Yeltsin and under Putin.
—The verdict passed on the members of ‘Pussy Riot’ probably didn’t thrill you either.
—That entire story is just pure delirium. And of course I signed in support of those girls. As for the case itself?.. I do not like their aesthetics. But there was no cause to imprison them. And if there had been anything in the heads of those Church hierarchs who, in theory, are supposed to feel themselves to be Christians, the Patriarch should have invited the band members and said; “Girls! Such behavior is unbecoming. Go in peace and do not do that again”. That’s it. And that would have immediately raised the Church’s own authority. And they needed to agree with the secular powers not to touch those girls. Whereas instead we got cruel disgrace and absurdity. Now there has appeared this very dangerous law about offending the feelings of believers. It can be interpreted with almost any amount of latitude. There is something of the Inquisition about this. The Middle Ages. Back then the

120 Ibid.
Church handed heretics over to the king, and it was a completely secular executioner who lit the fire.”

Indeed, in the last two years there have been two cases of the Russian church intervening to cancel theatrical performances under the pretense that they offend the feelings of Orthodox believers. I don’t know what specifically about “Tannhauser” offends them so, but the Novosibirsk Opera had a hard time fighting off the pious.

121 Ibid.
Themes

Gordin considers himself a ‘historical publicist’ with a firm documental base rather than a historian and, as in the case of Eidelman, the distinction seems rather too finely drawn. The essential basis of his approach—just as Eidelman’s,—is to allow the sources to speak for themselves as far as possible. Citations, sometimes lengthy ones, are absolutely everywhere, they fill the pages of both authors like islands in an uncharted archipelago with a profusion that would seem almost chaotic, were it not for the pilot’s rudder of the authors’ own words—comments, interpretations, criticisms, questions, negations or judgments,—which, lightly interspersed through the text, patiently lead the reader through the treacherous shoals. The author connects the lines between his citations, weaves the thread of connection—Eidelman’s abovementioned “landmarks” which we encounter in Gordin not merely in the form of incidental human events, but also in the form of the attitudes and emotions which led to these events. Rather than guiding the reader through the material, the author sometimes takes on the role of a referee, hearing out different sources and judging upon their worth. As the topics on which he writes so frequently deal with individual human approaches to honor, decent behavior and personal integrity, the nature of his sources—their personal,
human characters—becomes paramount. And since one of the most important practical expressions of a sense of honor is a duel, it is unsurprising that Gordin should have devoted an entire book to the history of the Russian duel, particularly in St. Petersburg. Indeed, one of the central topics in his 1997 “Duels and Duelists: a panorama of life in the capital” is the vital importance of the European tradition of duels within the context of the political and personal maturing of the Russian aristocracy in their slow progress from slavery to freedom.

“The history of the Russian duel of the 18th and 19th centuries is a history of human tragedies, painful deaths, elevated impulses and moral collapses. And all of this multiform and vivid element was the result of a crushing psychological break—the transfer from Muscovite Rus to Peterburgian Russia.

Noble duels were one of the cornerstones of the new—Peterburgian—culture of behavior, regardless of the corner of the Empire in which they occurred. It is with the dueling tradition that so vital a concept to the Peterburgian period of our history as honor is inextricably bound, a concept without an investigation of which we will be unable to understand the history of the maturing, brief rise and tragic defeat of the Russian nobility.

The history of the duel concentrates the dramatic path of the Russian nobleman from a sovereign’s slave, which is how he came from Muscovite Rus to the Petrine epoch, to a man demanding freedom and ready to pay with his life for the inviolability of his personal dignity as he understood it at the highest peak of the Peterburgian period—in the days of Pushkin.”

So, as we see, Gordin does trace a firm break between the Muscovite and Petrine period, and in this, of course he is right. One is inclined, however, to argue that this break was not as total as may

122 Online via Rulit.me at http://www.rulit.me/books/dueli-i-duelyanty-panorama-stolichnoj-zhizni-read-248074-1.html
appear. Peter, for all his reforms, came directly from the Muscovite tradition and as much as he personally loathed that tradition, he never actually broke free of it in a political sense. He could dress in European clothing and learn Dutch, he could import French and Italian architects to build his palaces, he could even take precious monarchical time to hang around Europe for a couple of years, learning how to build ships in every detail while leaving Parliamentary debates in England mid-speech, complaining that it’s ‘just a lot of talk’. He remained a Moscow autocrat. Some might argue that he was less bound to the tradition of Caesaropapism, well, certainly he cared very little for religious ceremony. On the other hand he brought Byzantine Caesaropapism to a perfect conclusion—completely taking the Church into the structure of the State and personifying it within himself. He never ceased to act like an autocrat, it never occurred to him to doubt his right to issue a single one of his commands, he never parted with a single prerogative or considered, rather than occasionally, briefly and grudgingly, the actual effect of his reforms on the masses of individuals who had to pay for them and live with them. The changes he brought were many, but none of them actually changed the attitude of the state to its subjects. As in the days of Ivan IV a century earlier, Peter never lost sight of the fact that he is the greatest slave-owner in existence. However, for the purposes of the discussion let’s agree with Gordin
and allow for a break, if not a clean break then at least a complete one, between the eras. And one of the most distinguishing traits of the new era was a new attitude to the idea of dignity which, as the changing age demanded, needed to be constantly defended by the most direct means possible—the sword.

It is one of the central themes for Gordin, a theme running like a red line through many of his works, that the introduction of the duel did more than anything to spark in the Russian nobleman—accustomed to being mistreated by his superiors as much as he was accustomed to mistreating his inferiors—the idea that being beaten is wrong. This did not, for most nobles, translate into the idea that beating others is wrong, of course. But, beginning with the Petrine period a tiny percentage of the population began to carry swords and to try to deal with some new concepts of etiquette, proper behavior and social graces. Slowly, slowly they came to the idea that other people—with the one exception of the Sovereign in person—do not have the right to beat them. Or to insult them. And if anyone tries, they have a sword with which to defend…not even their persons…but for the first time so delicate a creature as a sense of dignity. They realized that they not only a right, but an

123 Let’s recall Tolstoy’s rather odious Prince Andrei Bolkonsky who, while extremely sensitive to his own dignity, can calmly discuss lashing a peasant to death while claiming that, philosophically speaking, it makes no difference to the peasant if he dies under the lash or of old age in his bed.

124 And since 1762 (other than a break from 1796-1801 and we know how that turned out) not even the Sovereign.
obligation to do so. Moreover, they realized that this obligation is precisely what makes them ‘noble’men.

A nobleman of the Muscovite era had no sense of *personal* dignity. Not to—oh hell, alright, let’s emphasize this—they were slaves in fine clothing. There was a clear sense of estate dignity, of course, a man demanded respect for his position in life, for the antiquity and accomplishments of his family, for his wealth or rank…but not, as it were, because he was a man. He was powerless to object to a challenge from above to his person. The old Muscovite tradition of “handing a man’s head over”, [выдавать головой], bloody as it may sound, is absolutely opposed to the tradition of a duel. In pre-Petrine Russia, a nobleman whom the Sovereign had judged to have over-reached himself in speaking to a superior was ordered to walk to the offended man’s house, stand at the gates, in the yard or at the foot of the stairs, *bare-headed*, and listen while the victorious party heaped insults upon him, with all the household in attendance to watch and enjoy the humiliation. No fighting. No blows exchanged with either sword or hand. Just public humiliation, a man had to stand there and hear out to the end everything his opponent wished to express on the subject of the loser’s value to the Sovereign, appearance, behavior, morality and genealogy.

The duel is based on the opposing principle entirely—let there be death and blood rather than the possibility of accepting
insult! To insult a man and then refuse his challenge was the height of dishonor, to be insulted and not to challenge—the very depths of disgrace. This was usually a Catch-22 for the unfortunate military officers who simply ended up without a choice. Fighting meant a court-martial and loss of one’s place in the regiment—at the very least and only if the Sovereign feels generous this morning… But a refusal to fight meant that one’s own brother-officers would turn against the offender and…suggest…strongly suggest that he quietly retire from the regiment of his own volition and, preferably, at once.

In this sense Gordin is right and the break between the noblemen of Michael in 1625 and the noblemen of Alexander in 1825 is complete. Both would have found each other’s methods unacceptable. The Alexandrian noblemen were horrified to think of a time when a man could not defend his dignity against insult, and their forbearers would have been shocked to imagine their descendants killing each other over a careless word when, after all, things used to be simple—when a man you judged to be your inferior was insolent you checked if he was a nobleman. If not, you had him flogged. Or humiliated him in some other fashion. If he was a nobleman you’d go to the official court registry, check out whose line is older and closer to the throne, and someone would be “handed over”. After which the incident was considered closed. One could also argue that the significant 18th century decrease in the
authority of the Church, a great fall in the intensity of religious fervor among the noble classes (especially in the two capitals), their increasing cynicism meant that they simply had less of their ancestor’s fear when it came to killing...

“The noble concept of honor and dishonor in a form Pushkin recognized appeared in the post-Petrine period. The honor of the ‘mestnichestvo’ period grew from a consciousness of the permanence of the place of one’s family and the individual in the state structure. A pre-Petrine boyar or nobleman would not have thought of washing an insult away with blood in single combat or even of demonstrating his readiness to kill or die for the sake of the purity of his reputation. There was no need of this. The state regulated relationships between its subjects. And not because it was stronger or more far-sighted than after Peter. But because noble subjects trusted more to the state and to tradition and made less of a connection between the concept of honor and their own person. If one boyar saw his enemy handed over to him ‘with his head’ he considered himself satisfied, though there was no personal achievement of his in this. Everything was done by the regularity of concepts about the estate position, of the bloodline and of the man, which was supported by the tsar. That is why the Ulozhenie of tsar Alexei Mikhailovich does not mention a punishment for duels at all, but instead proclaims something different: ‘And should any in the presence of the tsar’s majesty take out against another a saber or some other weapon, and should he wound someone with this weapon, and should the one he wounded later die of these wounds or should they be killed to death at once, then for that murder shall the murderer be put to death.”125

Let’s notice, the punishment in this case is, strictly speaking, not even for the murder itself, immediate or delayed, it is for a murder committed in the presence of the Tsar personally. One is forbidden to pull out weapons in the royal presence, unless one is a bodyguard and it’s an emergency, there’s nothing new or unique to


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Russia here. If a couple of peasants happen to go out into the field
and beat each other to death with sticks over a girl—no one cares.

Pushkin is the hero of this book, even though his final duel
does not enter the text. But from the very beginning he is described
as the quintessence of this long process—the final crystallization of
the Muscovite noble into a European aristocrat—the duelist par
excellence, the born-and-bred duelist, ready from his earliest youth
to duel, carrying a lead-filled cane as he walked and tossing it up
and down to train the hand to steadiness when aiming a pistol, a
tireless fencer and rider, aching for a fight and endlessly ready to
fight. His non-stop duels became proverbial, there was no tiny
incident, no accidental turn of phrase that he would forgive unless a
formal apology were to be made, and there was no opponent whose
challenge he would turn down. Never mind avoiding duels—he
actively sought them out at every possible opportunity! In a sense,
the man spent his entire life preparing himself for his death. One
even suspects that he might have been somehow disappointed had
he made to old age.

“In March of 1822 [so, a couple of months short of his 23rd
birthday], in a conversation with a lady in Kishinev he offered
himself to her as a dueling champion—to avenge an insult someone
had made her. When the lady, amazed at the proposition, refused in
a fairly rude form, he challenged her husband and when the latter
refused, slapped his face.

Duels were his element. Everyone who saw him at the
barrier spoke of his noble and businesslike sang-froid in those
minutes.”126

After providing several examples from eyewitnesses, Gordin asks—“What was this? The inability to value one’s own life as well as that of another? Hypertrophied vanity?”

Well…not entirely. At a young enough age Pushkin had put together a miniature code of a duelist, in the form of an angry letter to a man who should have been an opponent—but the duel did not take place. Every line of this letter is a calculated insult.

“‘For the information of M. Deguilly, formerly a French officer. It is not sufficient to be a coward, one must be so openly.

On the eve of a lousy sabre duel [a rather delicate translation of ‘A la veille d’un foutu duel au sabre’ but let’s preserve the formalities], one does not write jeremiads and one’s testament in front of one’s wife; one does not make up fairy tales for the city authorities in order to avoid a scratch; one does not compromise one’s second twice.

I had foreseen everything that has happened in advance, and I am sorry I didn’t bet on it.

Now everything is over, but beware.

Be assured of the sentiments you deserve.

June 6th, 1821. Pushkin.

Also note that in the future, in case of need, I shall know how to realize my rights as a Russian nobleman, since you understand nothing of duels.’

A nobleman has no right to avoid a duel. And a nobleman has an inalienable right to a duel. To ‘realize one’s right as a Russian nobleman’ means to force one’s opponent to fight [Hence the slap in the face to the husband of the insulted Kishinev lady a year later—an attempt to force the man to accept the challenge he

127 Unless, perhaps, we mean the Josephine Tey/Inspector Grant version of vanity. It corresponds with Pushkin’s on the point of setting a lower value on the life of another being than on one’s own arbitrary conceptions and principles, but bears little relation to it in other respects.

128 “Nor a general who deigns to receive scum in his house”—Pushkin’s note.

129 “Ni un général qui daigne recevoir un pied-plat dans sa maison.”

[!]—ILS, puisque vous n’entendez rien au droit des armes.”
had just refused by treating him as a man of no honor, until he proves he has honor by fighting.]

A nobleman has no right to involve the government—city authorities—in dueling affairs, in other words, to seeks the protection of a law which prohibits duels.

A nobleman has no right to lower himself to a non-noble level of behavior. By descending to such a level he deprives himself of the right to respectful, albeit hostile, regard on the part of his opponent and must be subjected to humiliating treatment—beating, public insult. He places himself outside the laws of honor.

And not only because he inspires contempt and revulsion on his own, but mainly because he defiles the very concept of a man of honor—a true nobleman.

Many years later, seeking a duel with D’Anthes and considering that the latter was trying to avoid it, Pushkin had planned to beat the Heeckerens at a social reception—to disgrace them as men who are outside the bounds of honor and to make them fight.

*The letter to Deguilly is an early analogy of the famous letter to Héeckeren.*”

It is a persistent motif throughout this book that the dueling codes in Russia, whether the unofficial ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ of the early part of the 19th century when duels were illegal, or the official code which came into existence once Nicholas II legalized dueling, were considerably harsher, more demanding and more focused on a fatal ending than European ones. Nowhere in Europe did men shoot at fewer than 15 paces, and usually at 25. In Russia the standard was 10. Nowhere else in Europe did the frankly ludicrous custom of shooting across a handkerchief develop—which

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130 To Gordin—who bases his personal moral viewpoint, to a very large extent, on the Alexandrian period and on Pushkin specifically. Let’s remember that he was a boxer in the army and in his university years. As an old saying goes—“Anybody can insult a boxer...but not everyone is quick enough to apologize.”


French original with Russian translation online via Russian Virtual Library at [http://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/10letters/1815_30/01text/1821/1203_20.htm](http://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/10letters/1815_30/01text/1821/1203_20.htm)
was essentially a double murder-suicide pact. Russian duels were aimed at death, not at making piece between opponents. In Europe a duel could be called off when both opponents had taken their shots and missed.¹³² Pushkin, time after time, even when shooting in the worst blizzard, demanded to approach the barrier. This sense of honor was so recent a development, with no real sense of ancient tradition behind it—a mere century or two are not enough for such a sense to be established. Europe saw duels as an increasingly useless process, a relic of the Middle Ages. In Russia they had come in as a novelty and more, as a privilege afforded to very few. The very possibility of issuing or accepting a challenge marked one’s belonging to a higher caste, to be envied… And this privilege, along with the sense of honor, that sensitive, prickly vanity, in addition to demanding the right to avenge an insult, also demanded the right to pay with one’s own blood for the privilege of delivering one.

Pushkin had spent his entire life training, preparing to pay with his life for the privilege of a particular kind of death—the only death he considered truly becoming and worthy of a gentilhomme russe.

¹³² Recall, this happens in “War and Peace” between Pierre and Dolokhov—a Guards officer. Both miss the first shot, but Dolokhov insists that Pierre continue and approach the barrier, for which insistence he pays with a heavy wound...
In one of his most famous books—the 1989 two-volume “Reformer’s Rebellion” dealing with the Decembrists, Gordin begins the first volume with a brief history of the Guard and makes it clear that this Petrine creation is the key component in producing...a century later...men of the Decembrist stamp, men whom Peter would not have accepted, whom he did not want, but for whose creation he was, in fact, responsible, and who proved to be the best generation of men his Empire ever produced.

It was only in the second half of the century that the Guard became an aristocratic preserve; in the days of Peter, Anne and Elizabeth it was a very varied body and, in early days, a body which was bound to its creator by chains of absolute, unquestionable loyalty verging on outright adoration\(^\text{133}\). To them and to them alone, his few, his trusted comrades—many of them men of low birth, the property, the powerless cattle of the state!—he gave an opportunity to work under his personal guidance in the vast project of changing the world. He gave them more than money, position or rank—he gave them a taste, for the first time, of actual, real, undiluted power, the ability to change things under his aegis, a power which they had never tasted before. Under him, mere low-ranking Sergeants, could become men of true serious influence, commanding and controlling

\(^{133}\) Upon considering the position of the Russian Church in those years this becomes even more understandable. In a certain sense—a very real sense as far as these men were concerned—Peter was much more their God than the one they saw on icons.
the actions of high-born bureaucrats and military leaders in as arbitrary a manner as they wish, as brutally or crudely as they wish, without bowing down to their former superiors—because the power of the Emperor in person stood behind each of them and a single word from a Sergeant of the Guard would carry more weight with Peter than the complaints of a hundred ministers and marshals.

“The Guard worshipped its creator. And with good cause. This was not only a question of honors and privileges. Peter gave the Semyonovtsy and Preobrazhentsy a powerful feeling of participation in building the sacred temple of the new state. The Guardsman not only perceived himself as, but was in fact a man of state. And this feeling, completely new for the little Russian man, gave the Petrine Guardsman unusual powers.

A strelets of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich’s time was a patriot too. But he stood for tradition, changelessness, or a slow evolution of statehood which, for him, would blend with domestic life, his ideal was the preservation of the life around him and of its core values. The Petrine Guardsman perceived himself as a creator of the new and unprecedented. Unlike the strelets, he was far less connected with domestic life, he was more ascetic. He was dedicated to the future. He lived with a sensation of impulse, movement, increasing improvement. He was a man for whom reforms were the principle of life.”

But there, precisely there was the difficulty, the initially still-born aim Peter had set himself and Gordin, in drawing a clear trajectory from Peter to Lenin, notes over and over again that the very basic principle on which Peter founded his new state was continued and exacerbated by Bolshevism, so that the break between the Russian Empire and the USSR is, in some respects, not as great

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134 Online via http://www.rulit.me/books/myatezh-reformatorov-kogda-reshalas-sudba-rossii-read-377153-1.html
as the break between that Empire and the preceding Muscovite Tsardom. In a very real sense, Gordin blames Peter I for the existence of the USSR. Both Peter and Lenin, in turn, took a great deal of work and human lives to prove Thomas More wrong once and for all. If one wishes to build a state based on free, capable, dedicated and loyal people—one needs to allow them the freedom to develop intellectually, socially and politically. If one wishes to build a state based on slaves—no matter how capable or dedicated or loyal (though, the loyalty of a slave always remains something of an oxymoron), one cannot allow them this freedom. One can never have both. Some things are simply incompatible.

“But this powerful sensation was also the fountainhead of the tragic split, the incompatibility of personal capacities and the conditions of their realization, which radically influenced the political behavior of the Guard from 1725-1825.

Peter tried to raise active people with initiative and a sense of personal responsibility—in the conditions of a cruel, autocratic despotism not a single prerogative of which he wished to give up.

He wanted to raise slaves with the business-like qualities of free people [business-like is, perhaps, not exactly the right term. ‘с деловыми качествами’, was the exact phrase. ‘Дело’ can take on the wider meaning of ‘affairs’. Perhaps the Anglicism ‘men of business’ or ‘men of affairs’ might be more the mot juste. In short—Peter wanted slaves who go out of their own initiative, on their own responsibility, and get things done. There’s no such animal…]

Peter awoke within the Russian man—and first of all the Russian nobleman—the thirst for responsible activity, while placing him within the rigid structure of military-bureaucratic despotism. And if during Peter’s lifetime the system still had certain internal dynamism and flexibility, which the Tsar’s superhuman will and energy gave it, then after his death it took on a determined tendency to fossilization, to an anti-reformist existence, to that which we will, henceforth, call false stability.

Naturally in the post-Petrine period, a separation and selection began among the ruling layer. Some maintained the spirit
of movement, improvement and creativity. Others speedily took on the traits of slavish submissiveness. There proved to be considerably more of the latter.

In 1718, Alexander Kikin\textsuperscript{135}, quite recently a man very close to the Tsar, and now involved in the case of Tsarevich Alexei, while hanging on the rack in the basements of the Secret Chancellery responded to Peter's question: 'How could you, a smart man, go against me?'—'That's the thing that I'm smart, and smarts are stifled with you ['То-то, что умный, а уму с тобой тесно']! Literally, there is not enough space for smarts with you or, smarts are closed in with you."

It was this 'stifling of smarts' awakened by Peter, in the conditions of an autocracy perfected and strengthened by the same Peter that became the cause of the noble avant-garde's drama for decades to come...”\textsuperscript{136}

It is one of the key points in all of Gordin’s works, one which he never tires of repeating. Initiative, responsibility, creativity...none of these things can work properly, or at all, in the conditions of a shameless dictatorship, no matter how well this dictatorship can reward or encourage these qualities. They are incompatible on the most basic level. All this system does—no matter how beneficial, no matter how right or necessary—is burdened with evil because the system doing these things is the wrong sort of system. One may plant vegetables in radioactive soil, and they might grow big and impressive...but you wouldn’t want to eat them.

The main difficulty in the tremendous resistance Peter’s reforms encountered among the population lay not so much in the

\textsuperscript{135} His Petersburg mansion, known as Kikin’s Chambers,—Kikiny Palaty—a lovely example of Petrine baroque attributed to Andreas Schlüter, has been preserved, lovingly restored and currently serves as a musical lyceum.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid http://www.rulit.me/books/myatezh-reformatorov-kogda-reshalas-sudba-rossii-read-377153-2.html
negative nature of these reforms—although there is no denying that they were a monstrously heavy burden on a population which was already living on the permanent edge of famine—but in what Gordin considers the absolute refusal of the state to even consider the possibility that the interests of the governed may at any time differ from the interests of the governing. Never for a moment did Peter consider that anyone whose wishes differed from his could be anything other than a saboteur and an enemy. Just as with his ‘descendant’137 Nicholas I—there is only one way of being loyal to the Empire and it implies absolute loyalty to the Emperor in person. His way is the one and only way the Empire can be run. His decision—the only law and due to the old Byzantine tradition, questioning it is not merely a crime, but in the nature of a sin as well. Peter’s savage destruction of the Streltsy—many of whom had been hardworking craftsmen and artisans with their own businesses, people who, under proper encouragement, might have become the nucleus of a Russian bourgeoisie in time—is a case in point. It is not merely his distrust of them that mattered at the time of their rebellion. Nor was it his childhood memories of their murder of his uncles and their bloody rampage through the Kremlin. Peter cold-bloodedly made a choice to stand for a particular political principle in which any form of disagreement with his personal will was treated

137 They share no blood, but Nicholas, of all the later Romanovs, was perhaps most loyal to Peter’s memory and legacy.
as a declaration of war. He did not destroy them because they were irredeemable, nor because he had no further use for them—he could have found such uses. He destroyed them for the sake of making an unambiguously clear statement to the rest of the country and any foreign diplomats who happen to swing by the execution grounds on their way to the Kremlin. That statement was simple. Do. Not. Challenge. Me.

“The Streltsy were left no other option but a desperate, hopeless rebellion. And the reason for this is not so much in the personal qualities of Peter or those he trusted, as in the fact that the newly born unlimited Russian autocracy took a firm stand against compromising. A stand which, being raised to a political principle, lead to a series of fatal conflicts with its own people and in the end, to the fall of the Empire.

There is information that during the investigation of the Strelts rebellion, Peter considered gathering something like a Zemsky Sobor.

‘Today the Tsar has decided to select from all his subjects: boyars princes, officers, stolniks, scribes, townsfolk and peasants to the amount of two men of each, in order to represent total power to those who gathered as an assembly, to question upon its order Sophia upon her criminal intentions. Then they were to determine the punishment she deserves and announce it to all.’ So wrote Korb, an Austrian diplomat in Moscow on October 11th, 1698.

No other news on the ‘Sobor of 1698’ have been preserved, Peter crossed out his own idea. And this is extremely symptomatic. Apparently the young Tsar [only 26 at the time] instinctively sought support from the estates, but having legitimized his actions by taking council with representatives of the estates in 17th century fashion, Peter would have thus recognized the right of the estates to participate in the running of the government. And he had no intention whatsoever of creating such a precedent. And he personally made the decision to hold mass executions, and personally took part in them.”

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Oh yes, Peter was indeed from the old Muscovite tradition, blood, bone and sinew. His gentle brother, relatively kindly father and non-descript grandfather had allowed this part of the tradition to lapse, but nonetheless, Peter’s personal participation in torture and execution, his raucous parties at which the highest noblemen in the land could easily be made figures of public humiliation for the monarch’s drunken amusement…all this has its precedent in the works of Ivan IV who—perhaps more than any other monarch of the last five centuries,—is responsible for making Russia what it is. There was a man once, of ancient and noble lineage, who refused to humor the monarch at a drunken feast by putting on a clown’s mask and dancing to please Ivan in his cups. Ivan stabbed the man to death. On the spot. Personally, with his own royal hand. And this, just like Peter’s cruelty and debauchery, had a clear political objective. The master was asserting his dominance over his slaves. Just a small reminder—and had either Ivan or Peter cared to they could have, and on occasion did use much greater reminders—that the Sovereign owns his people body and soul, no matter what their social position. When Peter chopped heads, just as when Ivan oversaw mass torture sessions in the Red Square six generations earlier and personally used his royal staff to push the burning coals closer to a former boyar’s side, a political principle was being explicitly stated. It was being explained to the people in the most
clear and absolutely unquestionable way possible, that the state, in the person of the Sovereign or any of his subordinates, has the unchallengeable right to do whatever it likes, with anyone it likes, at any time it likes. It need not bother inventing excuses or justifications—royal whim is reason enough. Eventually, by the days of Anna and Elizabeth, this was replaced by flogging, branding, slicing of the nose or, at Court, by a simple blow from the royal hand...though, mind you, given that both Anna and Elizabeth were over six feet tall and powerfully built, a blow from the royal hand was a very serious proposition.

One is instantly reminded of Eidelman’s “Revolutions from Above” “The problem was not that little was given, but the historical inflexibility of those who were doing the giving.”

Peter took the system the last Rurikids, particularly Ivans III and IV, had established, and polished it, refined, strengthened and renovated it under a European façade, but throughout Russia never ceased to be what it had been—the absolute ideal, in the most negative sense, of the predatory monarchy.

Gordin makes clear the extent to which Peter, along with all his reforms, was dependent on the Guard using the example of one Schepotev, a Sergeant of the Guard. In a way, the very first paragraph can be taken as testimony of Peter’s failure. A vast

139 Online via http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYE/REV/REV_2.HTM#25
country before him, theoretically obedient and submissive—and in reality he has nothing but 6,000 armed men with which to run and control it. Paradoxically, this situation is echoed over a century later, when Nicholas I was forced to personally lead his troops to the square on December 14th. A vast army, countless officers, an entire general staff at his side…and there was not a single person he could whole-heartedly trust to lead his men…

“When in the mid-1710’s—after the triumph of Poltava and the conquest of Finland, which made the position of St. Petersburg unassailable,—Peter turned to internal affairs and tried to fix the machinery of state and to rein in galloping corruption, it turned out that the only lever on which the Tsar can place all his weight with no risk of breaking it is the Guard.

That the Guards regiments—six thousand bodyguards—are a guarantee of Peter retaining power, was clear from the very first years of his reign. According to Bergholtz, Peter often said that ‘among the Guardsmen there was not a single one to whom he would not bravely decide to entrust his life’.

Using Guardsmen of various ranks for the most unexpected assignments had been a long-established practice. In 1706, Field Marshal Sheremetev, commander in chief of the Russian army sent to crush the Astrakhan uprising, was assigned Guards’ Sergeant Mikhailo Schepotiev as the Sovereign’s personal representative.

By Peter’s order Schepotiev received extremely broad authority. ‘What he reports to you, be pleased to carry out’, the Tsar instructed the Field Marshal. And it was not the Commander in Chief but the Sergeant of the Guards that enjoyed the Tsar’s complete trust. A Sergeant of the Guard was entrusted with the right to ‘see to it that all be done according to order, and if for some whims of their own they do it not, or do but slowly—command them, and should they not listen, tell them that you shall write of it to me.’

Let’s think: a Sergeant can not only control the actions of the Field Marshal, but rebuke him, factually—to command him.

Schepotiev is a typical figure. Not for nothing did Leo Tolstoy decide to make him one of the main heroes in his novel about Peter. Schepotiev is at the center of two large sketches in this historical epos which Tolstoy began and abandoned.

The Schepotevts are a good, noble family. And while we do not know which branch—the prosperous or the ruined—gave birth
to the Sergeant of the Guard, but everything makes it clear that he bet his life on a military and government career. Tolstoy modeled his life along the Menshikov mold—a brave, decisive, clever young man, loyal to the Tsar, from the lower levels of society (albeit a nobleman). Another such Sergeant of the Guard, Ukraintsev, Peter later sent to take charge of the state-owned factories in the Ural Mountains, despite his utter incompetence in the mining business. We are well acquainted with this method from Bolshevik times. For Peter—despite all his pragmatism,—ideological loyalty often played a primary role. A brilliant autodidact, he was certain the loyalty and forcefulness will compensate for a lack of professional experience.

That was precisely the case with Schepotev. As a military leader, obviously, he was not fit to clean Sheremetev’s boots ['в подметки не годился', or, literally, was not worthy of being made into the soles of Sheremetev’s boots] and committed many stupidities. But not a single complaint by the offended Field Marshal was taken into account by the Moscow headquarters, which was created to conduct punitive actions in Peter’s absence. Schepotev got away with anything and everything. Up to the point that, to Moscow’s amazement, it was a Sergeant of the Guard, not the Field Marshal that received deputations from rebellious Astrakhaners, without even letting the Commander in Chief know about it.”

Not only from Bolshevik times, I’m afraid. We’ll see the same principle holding true in Russia in the days of Catherine II, or most other reigns, whether Imperial or post-Imperial. Cadres, even when there did exist programs to create them as in the Alexandrian, Nicholayevan and post-serfdom periods were badly insufficient.

We see the same principle at work in today’s Russia, where the government hands out appointments to leading positions in

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140 In Menshikov’s case one should also include perfect lack of scruples, absolute shamelessness, legendary greed and a scale of corruption unrivaled in the 18th century. In fact, that goes for the majority of the ‘fledglings of Peter’s nest’, at least their older generation. Brave, decisive, clever, efficient, loyal and corrupt beyond the ability of mere man to measure.

industries and the military to those who are loyal, rather than those who are good at their jobs. An old Russian saying still has currency: “They wanted loyal people, but they’re demanding as much from them as from smart people.” “Хотели верных, а спрашивают как с умных.” There are not sufficient numbers of experts, skilled professionals. There never have been, and every time it looks as though a few generations of education have finally produced them, we go through one catastrophe or another and are back down to minimal numbers. Current Russian education—whether in the economic, military, industrial or humanitarian fields—is rapidly becoming a joke and the last fifteen years, during which Russia introduced its Single State Exam [ЕГЭ] which acts much as NCLB in the US, has seen a factual collapse of literacy. The few decent old teachers are mostly dead. The ones teaching now were brought up by later-day Soviet schools which were not a patch on their predecessors. Between the escape of professionals and the educated classes to other countries, the increasing alcoholism and the downfall in education, an educational system which had been three centuries in the building now took a mere fifteen to send down the drain.

It is traditional that, to solve a problem in Russia, one simply takes what looks like a capable, hard-working, brainy sort of chap and throws him at it. If he makes it go away—we have enough serfs
and lands to go around, we’ll make it worth his while. If it—that is, the problem—makes him ‘go away’, well, we will find another useful chap somewhere. Eventually the problem will go away and if it’s not the sort of problem one can solve by throwing capable chaps at it, it’s probably God’s will and we should leave it alone. Modern Russia, in its tireless drive to exacerbate all of its problems beyond the point of absurdity, has done so with this one as well. All the high-ranking positions in all industries and ministries have been parceled out to Putin’s cronies and their actual competence at running these industries is entirely inconsequential. They are not there to work and they know it perfectly. They are there to milk the cow while it still has a few drops to give. As a result, their activities bring far more harm than good. They know nothing of the affairs they are meant to be handling and, as a result of the years of brain-drain, neither do those who advise them. If in Soviet times the people in charge were former D students being advised by former A students, now they are former D students being advised, at best, by former C students, or not at all…

“Sergeants of the Guard copied their Sovereign. A Sergeant of the Guard felt himself to be the owner of the world. This unlimited self-confidence is what doomed Schepotey—a year later he died, storming with a handful of soldiers a Swedish military ship which, at first, he took for a merchantman. This sensation of possessing the world, the ability to bend life beneath your knee in a deciding moment, this unrestrainable impulse and force certainly brought
quick results. But to build something solid and long-lasting in this manner was impossible…”\textsuperscript{142}

Well, Gordin’s audience would have been quite likely to think—our Revolution was certainly quick, it brought results, it was a moment of unrestrainable impulse and force…but how solid, how long-lasting was the edifice it had constructed on the ruins?

Unsurprisingly, we see the conservative in Gordin. Before the Revolution one of his grandfathers had had a prosperous lumber business. After, he was lucky to survive a trial for sabotage in what had once been his former business. Gordin does not believe in the ability of the demiurge to refashion the world. Or, rather, he does not believe the game is worth the candle. No matter how personally repulsed the demiurge feels by his reality—as Peter in Moscow or Lenin (and Stalin, for that matter), under the Empire—their attempts to sweep aside the old, destroy all that had come before and begin anew with an empty place will never succeed in building more than they had destroyed. The net worth will always be a loss, not a win. Society can progress slowly, sometimes too slowly, and certainly both the late Empire and the late Tsardom were comparatively delayed in their development. But they had been developing. In a slow, perhaps an unfocused but also an unforceful way which could have taken generations more, but which was slowly leading in the right direction. Until the demiurges came. Peter and Lenin. And

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. \url{http://www.rulit.me/books/myatezh-reformatorov-kogda-reshalas-sudba-rossii-read-377153-5.html}
swept aside what had gone before with a conscious, loathing fury, not wishing for the new building of statehood to be contaminated with beams and walls from the previous edifice. All they succeeded in doing was building a weaker, in some respects a larger, in some respects an uglier structure, essentially on the model of the old one.

As it was, Gordin concludes, Peter’s desire to construct a new edifice was initially hindered by his inability to create a system which would actually take into account the interests of the population. When the interests of some part of that population were considered, this was not systematic, but due purely to one urgent problem or another. None of the parts of the mechanism would actually function smoothly in relation to one another, much less in their relations with the domineering state which had exactly one interest—namely, its own survival and to hell with the cost. Under Peter the aim of the government had been to become an Empire. After—it was to remain such.

"‘Loss of patience’, Peter’s difficult spiritual condition in his later years, of which Kliuchevsky wrote so expressively, reminds us of the deathbed drama of another great demiurge—Lenin. However, unlike the ferocious reformer of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{143} (who, perhaps without realizing it, followed in the footsteps of the first Emperor), Peter did not try to change the model—by his psychological set up he simply knew of no other way. He simply tried to stifle the internal political crisis with external political activity—the twenty-year long Northern War ends and the Persian

\textsuperscript{143} It helps to remember that this book came out in 1989. Not that the censorship laws or the worship of Lenin had been officially revoked, but a) no one was actually certain what is forbidden anymore and what is not and b) no one gave a damn at this point. People were having a hard enough time surviving to worry about who writes what about Lenin.
begins immediately.\textsuperscript{144} New space was gained at the cost of exhausting the core territories of the country. The acquisition of new spaces justified the extreme level of the government’s militarization. The militarization of the government allowed for the possibility of giving the situation a semblance of stability by using the loyalty and cruel energy of emissaries from the Guard.

The use of military force for the solution of internal-political and economic problems is always a sign not merely of a crisis in the current situation and the inorganic nature of the system of government, but also speaks to the confusion of the powers that be.\textsuperscript{145} When Cromwell came to an irreducible conflict with the British parliamentary system and did not know how to solve it, he—even with his remarkable mind and political sense—found nothing better than to introduce the famous Major-General regime, giving the country into the hands of personally loyal comrades, his Guard. Unlike Peter, however, he quickly understood the flawed nature of this principle and rejected it. Russia was given in to the hands of a militarized rule—for centuries.

One of Peter’s most important failures was that he did not succeed in creating a single structure of control which would penetrate the state apparatus, the army and the Guard, the Church and the taxable estates. He approached this grandiose task on a purely mechanical level, not wishing to take into account the vital interests of the separate groups. The interests of the bureaucratic apparatus and the army coincided only partially. By the end of the 1710’s the apparatus turned out to be purely auxiliary to the army. It existed mainly in order to supply the army with everything necessary by robbing the taxable estates. Naturally, the interests of these estates categorically did not coincide with those of the apparatus and the army. The government sought to take as much as possible from the people without giving anything in exchange. Less than anything else did it attempt to carry out its role of a defender of the citizen. The citizen was helpless before the rampages of the bureaucrat, or especially the officer, sergeant or soldier.

By the end of Peter’s reign two parallel ruling structures came to be clearly outlined in the country—the civil and the military. The elite of the second structure was the Guard, in its political-administrative persona.

The civil apparatus, compared to the Guard, was clunky, clumsy, slow, and thievish, devoid of that consciousness of its mission which was so strong in the Guard. The Guard stood high

\textsuperscript{144}Let’s not even bother going into the comparison with Ukraine and Syria. Too obvious. And frankly, too distasteful…

\textsuperscript{145}And how can one fail to remember Russia’s recently created “National Guard”, which just this week has received a large piece of suburban Moscow real estate for their permanent training camp? https://www.newstube.ru/media/v-moskve-poyavitsya-gorodok-nacionalnoj-gvardii-rossii
above the apparatus and controlled it mercilessly. A Sergeant of the Guard, as we know, could put a bureaucrat ranking high above himself ‘in chains’ or have him beaten with rods.”

Only a few years later Peter was forced to add the “Majors’ Investigative Chancelleries”. As Gordin points out, it took very little time for the bureaucracy to figure out its caste interests and to begin defending them. These chancelleries were—with significant caveats, Gordin warns—an early form of the secret committees of Nicholas I, a parallel system locked onto the figure of the Sovereign personally.

“Those special functions with which Peter had entrusted the Guard, developed in it a sensation of uniqueness, of its elevation above everything else in the country. And that sensation remained alive in the minds of the Guard for an entire century.

In counter-posing the Guard to the bureaucracy, Peter created a situation which was entirely new for Russia. The most active part of the nobility—who made up the backbone of the Guard, raised in the swift process of reforms—after the Emperor’s death were organically incapable of submitting itself to the ruling bureaucracy, of blending with it.”

And this relationship continued to echo through the entire Imperial period, through the Soviet and now a quarter of a century into the post-Soviet. The problem remains precisely the same and Gordin’s readers would have been and still are well aware of it. Two dominant power groups—the bureaucracy and the military—fighting for government resources, despising one another, and

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147 Ibid.
neither seeing the mass of the population as anything other than a source of resources, financial and otherwise.

This sense of mission with which the Guard was endowed led them, after Peter’s death, to participate in every single change of monarch for the next century. Frequently their participation is explained by caste or nationalistic reasons…as in Menshikov’s support of Catherine I as a ‘new man’ opposed by the old aristocracy, or Elizabeth’s rise to the throne as a ‘Russian’ monarch as opposed to a ‘German’ one. All this, Gordin considers is partially incorrect, partially insufficient. The part the Guards took in the struggles for the throne was based on something much more important, more conscious and serious than mere arguments between new and old or Russian and foreign. The Guard, Gordin argues, took so active a role in the changes of monarch on the throne because the active core of the Guard, the ones who after Peter’s death chose to retain more of their independence, in a certain sense saw themselves as Peter’s rightful heirs, they were entrusted, as it were, in his memory, to correct the actions of those on the throne, to guide the system. They quickly came to see themselves as a political corporation and if their unexpected appearance and somewhat theatrical participation in the selection of Catherine I for the throne had elements of Greek drama about it, their participation in the discussion which took place only two years later, when she fell ill,
was already taken for granted and majors of the Guard were invited to take part along with the presidents of the Colleges, representatives of the Senate and the Synod and members of the Supreme Privy Council.

Were there conflicts between the new and the old? Of course—and primarily this concerned Menshikov. But not so much because he was low-born. Not because he was a parvenu. Not even because the late Emperor has so obviously favored him. But because he was Menshikov, and no matter how great his wit, or how powerful the remains of his youthful charm, there was simply not a single person at court who actually liked him. People stuck to his faction because he was powerful, but it’s reasonably safe to say that besides his family\textsuperscript{148} no one felt personal attachment to him. Well…except for his own, personal Guard, the Ingermandland Regiment which he had led to victory for over 20 years and which adored him second only to Peter himself. But it is highly characteristic that once this regiment was no longer in the capital to protect him—he had dismissed them to winter quarters only the previous day!—he was helpless and alone, and his arrest, the arrest of the richest and one of the most powerful men in Europe, took place quietly, banally and with no resistance. No one lifted a finger

\textsuperscript{148} And even there, with caveats. His sister married without his permission, and to a Portuguese Jew at that. After a few arguments with his powerful brother-in-law, the man headed for Siberia, and all the sister’s pleas did not help.
to defend him. And yet, Gordin points out, in backing Catherine I for the throne in winter of 1725 Menshikov was not backed only by other new men. Alongside him, for instance, was Buturlin—a descendant of one of the most ancient noble lines, the son and grandson of boyars…but also a man who had been in Peter’s oldest Preobrazhensky Regiment from the very first days of its inception, one of his greatest supporters. True, he had big scores to settle with Menshikov, and simple estate and family loyalty should have pushed him to the side of the other great clans—the Golitsyn, the Dolgoruky—but Buturlin made a conscious, political choice to support Catherine for the throne. Just so, a split occurred within the Apraxin family—one brother standing for Catherine I, and one for Peter II.

“The composition of the politico-psychological groups, as the facts show, cannot be explained by estate or social causes. In the Petrine era and later political unions were in no lesser a degree defined by personal choice, the level of understanding one had of the historical situation, the level of perception one had of one’s duty to the country and the nature of the understanding of that duty. In the end, this was a question of Russia’s general model of development. Sometimes this choice was made clearly, sometimes not, sometimes with a high level of compromise, but the essence of a man’s position, the vector of movement defined a man’s belonging to one group or another.

Just like the high ranking groups, and on the level of average gentry, the Guard slowly sought out its vector, its understanding of the path of reforms and the development of the state.”

One can’t help but wonder—what did Peter actually think his creations would do after his death?..

A little further on Gordin has an interesting disagreement with Kliuchevsky.

“Having briefly covered, in a few phrases, the ‘coup period’, Kliuchevsky goes on to formulate his fundamental premises: ‘This participation of the Guard in state affairs had an extremely important meaning, exerting a powerful influence on its political frame of mind [‘настроение’ or mood]. Originally an obedient tool in the hands of its leaders it later became an independent mover in events, interfering in politics of its own volition. Palace coups were a preparatory political school for the Guard, developing in it certain political tastes, creating a frame of mind, getting it accustomed to a certain political form of thinking. The Guard’s barracks were a counterweight and sometimes an open opponent of the Senate and the Supreme Privy Council.’

This is a wise passage. But that being said, there is room for disagreement. First of all, the Guard passed its true political school in Peter’s lifetime. It came to the epoch of palace coups as a formed ‘political corporation’. Its claim to decide on questions which belonged in the competence of ruling establishments—the Senate and Supreme Council—was based on memories of the role Peter had assigned it in the last decade of his reign, the role of a controlling and regulating power, responsible only to the tsar.

Secondly, it’s hardly likely that in 1725 or 1727 the Guards were merely an obedient tool in the hands of Menshikov and Buturlin. It had been an ‘obedient tool—an ideal weapon’ in the hands of its creator. With his death it became a largely independent power. The Guard followed Menshikov and Buturlin then because their program at that moment coincided with the program the Guard found organically close,—Catherine seemed, to the Preobrazhentsy and the Semyonovtsy, a guarantee of the literal following of the first emperor’s bequests. The Guard was not merely choosing a reigning person—it was instinctively choosing a principle.

What’s more, the Guard was not choosing between Petrine and pre-Petrine Russia. Yes, the Golitsyns and Dolgorukys were not Peter’s absolute supporters. What’s more, they can be considered the opposition. Not for nothing were both families involved in the Tsarevich Alexei case. But neither Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn, a major administrator and notable political thinker, nor his younger brother Mikhail Mikhailovich Golitsyn, a brilliant general, hero of the battle of Lesna and Poltava, of the

150 The word ‘орудие’ can mean either tool or weapon, though ‘tool’ is the primary sense. Still, the context here admits of the double entendre.
conquest of Finland, nor Prince Vasily Vladimirovich Dolgoruky, one of the Emperor’s best military leaders, in supporting Peter’s grandson even dreamed of returning to pre-Petrine times. Their disagreements with Peter concerned not the principle necessity of pro-European reforms, but the character and tempo of those reforms.151 As it turned out five years later, both Golitsyns and Vasily Dolgoruky were in favor of limiting autocracy, and opponents of the monstrously overgrown personal and uncontrollable power of the Tsar.

Menshikov, Buturlin, Tolstoy—the leaders of the Catherinian group—professed Peter’s autocratic principles and stood for this direction of reforms. Their following, brief cooperation with the Golitsyns and Dolgorukys was a forced compromise.

And as we see, the Guard, in January of 1725, was choosing between two tendencies of political reform in the country: a moderate but undoubted movement in the direction of limiting the autocracy and the accompanying, inevitable rise of freedom in the country on the one hand, and the strengthening of a military-bureaucratic state based on total slavery on the other.152

And so we see—it was not at Peter’s intention, but during his own lifetime he personally created a small, powerful core group to which he gave unprecedentedly broad powers in order to change the world according to his will and under his protection. He gave them opportunities no Russian had ever had before. And he made it clear to them—to the men who worshipped him—that they are his favorites, his Chosen, his only truly trusted followers whom he considers reliable and worthy to aid him in grand deeds. Then he died, leaving his disciples, his creations, without a leader or a

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151 As Gordin makes clear in the first couple of chapters of “Between Slavery and Freedom” this was also the basic argument between Peter and his oldest son. All indicates that the poor boy had not been a retrograde determined on destroying his father’s accomplishments or giving up on reforms. He merely planned…and carelessly spoke about…limiting the extent and speed of these reforms in order to make them less burdensome for the population. For Peter—this was sufficient evidence of guilt.

purpose. And they, already accustomed to the idea that they have
the right, on his behalf, to interfere in state affairs, continued to do
so after his death, slowly pulling away from his absolutist principles.
Growing in them, alongside that sense of mission, was that personal
dignity backed by a sword which Peter himself had handed them and
taught them to use in his service. The dignity which could be
defended against private insult by the sword, and from despotism,
by either assassination or rebellion. A dignity which Paul and his
sons attempted to deny them and one without which they, by the
time that occurred, were incapable of imagining their lives.

“Thinking, in Siberian exile, about the results of Peter’s
reign, the Decembrist Fonvizin came to the following conviction:
‘...The genius Tsar paid attention not so much to the internal well-
being of the people, as to the development of the titanic might of his
Empire. Certainly he succeeded in this, preparing for her the
enormous significance which Russia has now attained in the
European political system. But did the Russian people become any
happier for it? Has their moral or even material condition
improved? Most of them remain in the same position as 200 years
ago. If Peter tried to introduce European civilization into Russia,
he was more tempted by its exterior. The spirit of this civilization—
the spirit of legitimate freedom and civic spirit was for him, a despot,
foreign and even repulsive. Dreaming of re-educating his subjects
he did not think of inspiring them with the elevated sense of human
dignity, without which there is neither true ethics nor true virtue.
He needed capable tools in order to make material improvements
according to examples he had seen outside the country...’

These are surprisingly accurate words. But at the same time
the Decembrist missed one significant moment—without even
wishing to do so, Peter gave the impulse to an irreversible process
which led to the appearance of such people, such citizens, as had
been General Fonvizin himself and his comrades. The paradoxical
nature of the process was in the fact that the personalities he had
engendered stepped out, on December 14th, arms in hand against its
results—unlimited despotism, serf slavery [not simply serfdom,
which would have been ‘крепостного права’, but slavery—
‘крепостного рабства’], economic small-mindedness and the political adventurism of an autocratic Empire.”\textsuperscript{153}

Peter I had personally created the ticking time bomb which, a century after his death, came within an inch of bringing his Empire down…

It is important to pause on the case of Tsarevich Alexei and its importance to the constitutional crisis of 1730. Gordin gives the affair a significant role, not in its success or failure, but in the stand the people involved took against the very sort of Empire Peter was trying to create. This was one of the first cases in which such people as Peter did not want to create began to appear and play a role. This was far more, Gordin insists, than a mere case of an ungrateful, weak-minded or retrograde young man wishing to first evade his responsibilities as heir, and then dreaming of undoing his father’s work entirely and returning to the sleepy world of pre-Petrine Muscovy.\textsuperscript{154}

“Whereas the ‘Alexei Case, for all of its unquestionable signs of a family affair, was a principally new phenomenon. It opened the succession of rebellions against the military-bureaucratic monster that by this moment had already risen to its hind paws, which gave it a deceptively human-like appearance, and was stretching its tax reform to the very throat of a tormented country [when it comes to Peter and his Empire, Gordin really doesn’t pull his punches]. While the destruction of the Tsarevich, the crushing—physical and moral—of those who were oriented

\textsuperscript{154} This is how the story is usually served up in second-rate textbooks.
toward him, were in their deepest essence a stroke not so much against Russia’s past, but against her future.”

In “Between Slavery and Freedom” Gordin presents this affair as the prologue to…and indeed, the root of the drama of 1730. The point at which those members of the quiet opposition who had hoped that the succession would have passed to Alexei naturally, and that he would have been able—not to undo—but to slow down and moderate his father’s reforms, saw their hopes crumble; and the survivors were forced into nearly a decade of waiting, until Peter’s long-desired death finally opened a way for a reasonably small number of people, some already from powerful clans, some Peter’s own lowborn creations, to limit the mad drive of the autocratic government for ever expanding personal and territorial power.

These people saw, several years earlier than Menshikov or Ostermann, that Peter, while expanding the power and international standing of the monarchy, which is to say—of his own person, was literally driving the country into exhaustion, bankruptcy, and both economic and cultural collapse. Unlike Menshikov and Ostermann, this concerned them not merely because such a collapse would threaten their personal position, but because they truly were concerned for the welfare of the country at large, and saw not mere temporary grants and remissions, but a fundamental change in the

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very nature of the pathologically greedy and despotic state, as the only means to save their country from upcoming and inevitable collapse. Peter had taught them—had forced them—to take their duty to the state and the Empire seriously, but he had always intended that this duty be focused upon himself or a clearly designated heir. It could hardly have occurred to him that there might come a time when their sense of duty finds itself focused on the country—not the monarch.

They tested their powers during the brief reigns of Catherine I and Peter II, and now, faced with a sudden succession crisis upon the latter’s unexpected death at age 14, the winter of 1730 gave a small number of men gathered in one of the Kremlin palaces, and another, rather larger group of men—the country gentry, come to Moscow for the wedding and arriving for the funeral—in the city outside, a unique chance to change the direction of the state; a chance—as it turned out, the last chance for 70 years—to pull the country back from the brink of disaster by finally limiting the powers of the monarchy which had brought it there.

Gordin sees the Alexei affair as a qualitatively new element, and, much more importantly, an element which became the start of a tradition which continues to be a part of Russian life even some 300 years later.

“All the preceding major uprisings—the Streletsky rebellion of 1698, the Astrakhan or Bulavin uprisings—were in reality a
desperate reaction of the pre-Petrine socio-psychological mode of life to its cruel displacement from life’s process, to a transfer into a new existence which frightened with its metallic, cold novelty.

The ‘Alexei Affair’ despite an external abundance of old symptoms, reveals a principally new meaning. Alexei himself did not guess of it. This was one of those paradoxical cases when both rival sides for differing reasons take part in historical mystification. It is precisely the participation of both sides that testifies first and foremost not of ill will or greedy deceitfulness, but of a predetermined break between a man’s conception of his role in history and the actual task he carries out...

The plot scheme of the “Peter and Alexei” tragedy is simple and sufficiently well-known. Difference in character and world-perception, the inability of the son to correspond to the father’s severe demands, the Tsar’s fear for his state-building legacy in case of Alexei’s rise to the throne, the Tsarevich’s resentment on behalf of his humiliated and constantly insulted mother, fear for his own life and—as a result—the reckless escape abroad, hoping to find temporary refuge and permanent support there, an even more reckless return under pressure from the strong, clever and quite amoral Peter Andreevich Tolsoy, and inevitable death in the finale.

In this case none of this presents anything of special interest to us, especially since the situation has been studied many times from this point of view by both historians and authors [‘литераторами’]. Our intent is different, to try to understand what hid in the depths, beneath the bloody ripples of this, at first glance, simple tragedy; in what force field, composed of countless individual wills, goals, interests, perceptions, did the two figures—father and son—move, how determined were their actions, to what extent were they consciously free.

Such purely human tragedies, which incarnate into historical breaks when we are talking about those who have or seek power, upon careful and unbiased analysis always turn out to be the result of attempts to spur or slow the flow of the historical process. In these cases the object of the deadly controversy is not so much the direction of the flow as its speed. Or—which is a sufficiently characteristic option for the Russian 18th century—the cause of a ruler’s individual drama proves to be his incapacity for any decisive action at all and, correspondingly, the threat of a dead pause in a country’s life.

All the explosive [‘взрывные’, so all rapid, sudden, or violent] changes of rulers on the Russian throne were in one way or another connected to the problem of reforms. The mechanism of
this interconnection was started up by Peter I and by inertia had kept moving—in starts and jumps—for nearly 300 years.\textsuperscript{156}

The deaths of Paul I, Alexander II and Nicholas II, the deathbed tragedies of Alexander I and Nicholas I are the most vivid illustrations to what has been said.

In the tragedy of Lenin, the problem of speed overlapped with the problem of direction, that is why his end was so horrible, and the results of his activity—apocalyptically destructive.

Gorbachev’s fate, with his ‘Alexander II complex’—the incapacity to internally tear oneself away from the past, hence the fear of a new reality and convulsive attempts to delay its advent—is evidence of the fact that this mechanism, though corrected, works to this day.

The ‘Peter and Alexei’ tragedy fits naturally in this lineup.”\textsuperscript{157}

In discussing the measures taken after Peter’s death by Menshikov and the Supreme Privy Council to lessen the burden on the country, Gordin used language which almost any educated Soviet citizen would have no problem transferring to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

“There is no basis whatsoever on which to suspect the pathological money-grubber Menshikov or the cold condottiero Ostermann of selfless humanitarianism. Very simply, upon carefully studying the situation of various layers of the Russian population they were horrified by the possible consequences for the government and therefor, for themselves, of this universal collapse. The report mentioned more than just the peasantry: ‘the merchants of the Russian state are nearly completely ruined...’

After protracted discussions, during which it was seriously mentioned that soon there will be no one to tax for the taxable estates are running away, it was decided to lessen the burden of the peasantry by, among other things, removing officers and soldiers from the villages.

\textsuperscript{156} One of the distinctions of Gordin’s style, again, rather like Eidelman’s but in an even more open, less Aesopian fashion—to always remind the reader of the intimate, ceaseless and living connection between the past and the present. True, in dealing with Russia’s nosferatuesque history he is dealing with a grateful subject. In Russia the past really won’t die. And they’ve tried everything. Even a chainsaw...\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid. http://www.rulit.me/books/mezh-rabstvom-i-svobodoj-prichiny-istoricheskoj-katastrofy-read-375953-2.html
But, since a decrease in taxes meant a decrease in income, it was decided to seriously downsize the bureaucratic apparatus which was consuming a mass of resources.

However, these were all half-measures. The slavery and the peasants’ lack of civic rights [literally ‘rightlessness’, ‘бесправие’] militarized-police methods of governing were the evil soil on which the political and economic crisis of the empire grew and strengthened.”

The Soviet readership would have remembered the situation after the Revolution and until Stalin’s death. There were still quite a few left in the 1980’s who remembered it all personally. Lack of civic rights. Slavery. Militarized-police methods of governing. All the fruits of an evil, blood-watered soil; a monstrous crisis, a starving country, a lack of a clear heir upon the death of a world-defining despotic demiurge…and the desperate attempts of the uncertain state to slightly lessen the burden, to release a bit of the steam before a complete collapse occurs.

Beria’s mad amnesty which (even though it provided Gordin, as we remember, with some of his best friends in the army), released criminals but not political victims, thus flooding the country with crime while continuing to destroy the cultural layer of the population. Khruschev’s shoddily built, idiotically designed but oh, so desperately needed apartment houses, his restoration of passports and the freedom to move around the country to the

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159 Russia’s recent official change of nomenclature, from “Militia” to “Police” was greeted with a storm of sardonic humor on the internet. “Russia has started on the road to progress! It has become a police state!”
peasantry... No one ever suspected either Khruschev, who oversaw the bloody years of Terror in Ukraine with enthusiastic thoroughness and bloodiness, or much less Beria, who ranks third only behind Stalin and Molotov in the “Soviet Mass Murderers of the Century” list, of selfless humanitarianism. Or, for that matter, of possessing either a sense of shame or a conscience, and there, by the by, was another perfect match of characteristics between them, and Menshikov, Ostermann and Co. (in “Between Slavery and Freedom” Gordin goes into great detail on the odious role played by the perfectly amoral Feofan Prokopovich, who united with Ostermann in seeking to bring Anna Ioannovna—one of the worst embodiments of un-Enlightened Absolutism in the history of the 18th century—to the throne).

As events showed, all the efforts of the Most Illustrious Menshikov and the Council brought little enough result, and once again—it is less the specific situation or the specific people Gordin holds responsible—but the system in which Peter had placed them.

“On the one hand the Supreme Privy Council tried energetically to reorganize the economic life of the country: to lessen the tax burden and thereby to improve the position of the ‘poor peasantry’, as was said in one of the Council documents; to lessen the number of bureaucrats feeding on the tax business; to create conditions for a growth in trade and private industrial entrepreneurship, which had been crushed by the government’s pressure, to effect which the Manufacture College was closed down, military expenses were cut and a decision was made to annually furlough two thirds of officers and soldiers of noble birth so that they might see over the affairs of their estates, which would also have brought relief to the budget.
What is very symptomatic—Ukraine was given back its autonomy, which Peter had destroyed, and the institute of Hetmanship was restored in accordance with a treaty once made by Chmielnicki. This occurred in 1727, and a year later the Council used delegates from the gentry to put together a commission for the systematization of laws—the composition of a new legal code ['составления нового уложения'].

On the other hand, all these reasonable and far-sighted plans did not bring sufficient results for they needed to be realized within an initially flawed system, which resisted any attempts at movement in the direction of increasing freedom and the deconcentrating of power, a system the flaws of which were, in this period, exacerbated by the cantankerous and uncontrollable nature of the young Emperor and his close circle.

Neither the Senate, the Supreme Privy Council nor ‘great persons’ individually were capable of counteracting this style of ruling. The system proved incapable of defending itself. It had lost its core—the despotic will of one strong personality. It turned out that the Supreme Privy Council, which had united the most influential representatives of various strong groups, had been maintained only by the will of Empress Catherine. Under an autocratic boy it risked losing its ruling significance. The structure of ruling the country did not possess the organic integrity and durability of a living organism. It did not even have the mechanical integrity of a well-made machine. Its function could be interrupted and broken by the first rude shock. It had not the supply of endurance, resistance which is characteristic of organic systems.

Again and again we see in both Gordin and Eidelman’s work this specific approach—statements about the past made with specific formulas, turns of phrase which are always addressed to the present. After citing a number of reports by foreign ambassadors present in Moscow during the mercifully brief reign of Peter II, Gordin goes on to explain their incapacity to understand the

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160 Proving once more the old truth—if you want an absolute monarchy, you need an absolute monarch, who can handle both absolute authority and an absolutely insane amount of work and responsibility. Even a hat rack can just wear a crown.

mentality of a country which had gone through the monumental
trials to which Peter I had subjected it, and which now was in the
hands of a young, to all appearances healthy and presumably long-
lived…and long-reigning, twelve year-old who ascended to his
grandfather’s throne in 1727, after severe alcoholism, possibly
mixed with venereal disease, saw the forty-three year-old
Lithuanian peasant Marta Skavronskaya to her final resting place,
beneath the rainbow-colored marble vaults of St. Peter’s and St.
Paul’s Cathedral.

It would take a saint to think of a positive note on this reign.
The only, but really, the only good things ever said about Peter II
were:

a) That he was not devoid of brains (had he cared to exercise
them).

b) That he was physically mature and well-developed
beyond his years, tall, athletic and remarkably good-looking. Looks
are an accident of genetics; the athleticism is due to a love of riding
and hunting. As for the rest,—given his bouquet of other qualities—
I’m not at all certain that the younger female staff at his palaces were
all too happy about that whole ‘physically mature and well-
developed’ part…

c) That he loved his sister.
I’ve no criticism on that score, of course. Even little Russian versions of Joffrey Baratheon *can* love their sisters and that does him all appropriate credit, I’m sure. But Russia did not just dodge a bullet. It was, let us be honest, spared a cannonball. Peter’s early death of smallpox may all too well have been the greatest piece of luck to happen to Russia since Ivan IV bashed his eldest baby boy’s brains in (that boy was very much a chip off the old block in the whole blood and violence department, but without the occasional bit of weepily pious repentance to lighten the monotony,—the prospect of his reign is not a pleasant thing to contemplate). There’s a distant possibility that little Peter (six feet tall at 14 if he was an inch, by the way), might have improved with age, but nothing visible at the time or noted by a single foreign or domestic observer augured it.

As far as the Russian Empire of 1730 was concerned, the only patriotic thing that Peter II Alexeevich—vicious, volatile, violent, vindictive, cowardly, obstinate, sly, lazy, debauched, drunken, sadistic little brat that he was,—ever did on his country’s behalf was to die…and even that he merely did *in*, rather than *for* it.

One after another the mystified foreigner—Spaniards, Frenchmen, Austrians and Holsteiners—describe their stunned confusion at a country where nothing works, nothing gets done, no one is responsible for anything and yet, somehow, despite all rules or odds—it exists. And continues to exist, what’s worse!
Practically all their descriptions would apply to the late-Soviet atmosphere of total confusion. And once again the delicate hints, calling readers to consider the present along with the past:

“Naturally they found events incomprehensible. They could not understand that horrible exhaustion which sets when a country had, for many years, been overtaxing its strength. Weariness engenders irresponsibility, a rejection of a sense of duty, which demands a new concentration of strength. They could not understand the revulsion which the most varied layers and groups of the Russian population felt toward the military-bureaucratic monster which they had been forced to create. The speedy disintegration and demise of this monster, which really could have led to catastrophic consequences for the country as well, was not perceived, by very many, as a misfortune. Disgust and resentment overpowered political rationalism.”

How could any member of the reading public not recollect the tired disgust with which the Alexandrian officers a century later looked upon the Arakcheevan Empire, an Empire serving which had, in their minds, become more shameful than overthrowing it. Or the contemptuous weariness with which intellectual liberals of 1905 predicted the victory of Japan? And how close these emotions must have seemed to those readers of 1989 before whose very eyes, in a slightly longer period of thirty-five, rather than five years after the death of their demiurge, the military-bureaucratic monster they had been forced to build was coming apart. There were many families—my own largely included—who, even knowing the difficulties of the post-Soviet period firsthand, still could not force themselves to

perceive the fall of the USSR as anything other than a triumph, and something of a personal one at that. Countless people dreamed so desperately of outliving that state at any cost, that the question of what will come after it was, somehow, less important. As long as what comes after is as radically different from the status quo as possible…

At the conclusion of Part I of this book, in describing the ‘Bandit movement’ which in the 1720’s had grown so extensive and uncontrollable as to infect even Peter I’s incorruptible Guard, Gordin makes two important points.

1) He places the long-term responsibility, not only for the banditry of the 1720’s but also the Pugachev rebellion and the frequent peasant uprisings of the Nicholayevan period squarely at the feet of Peter I.

2) He formulates with great clarity his views on the point of intersection between individual human beings and the historical vectors they channel.

“The ‘Bandit movement’, as we shall see, gradually increased until the mutual hostility of the estates, the socio-political groups, the mass of the population and the military-bureaucratic apparatus exploded in a civil war—Pugachevschina.

Over a hundred years later, during the stable 1830’s the reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs testify to yearly murders of landowners in all the provinces. There was no social peace at all in Russia. There was false stability—the forcible pacification of the

163 In 1991 my uncle, heading for the barricades in what was still…briefly…Leningrad, met a lady in her 70’s heading in the same direction. “I don’t care” she said, according to him. “I’ll rip those scum with my own teeth if I have to!”

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people with an oppressive machine. And if in 1839 Benckendorff—chief of the political police—in an official report to the Emperor called serfdom ‘a powder keg beneath the state’, we can say with certainty that the country had been living on this powder keg non-stop since Petrine times, for it was precisely then that pre-existing serfdom was exacerbated to the point of slavery, burdened by merciless tax policies, and the peasant was deprived of a direct connection with the government and a citizen’s sense of civic right.

The situation by the end of the 1720’s was such that the necessity of cardinal reforms had become clear to any thinking man.

These reforms could be realized in one of two directions. Those statesmen whose dreams were embodied in the doctrine of Ostermann and Feofan Prokopovich considered that it is necessary to restore the Petrine system of iron control, having refined and modernized it, and to control the life of the country with a strong hand. Those who understood the malignancy of the Petrine model, those who, like Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn, wished for true Europeanization, dreamed of a structure which would naturally unite all the estates and social groups, one founded on a gradual harmonization of interests. They were orienting themselves not only toward Russia’s past—the Zemsky Sobors, the Boyar Duma, the traditions of an estate government—but also toward fresh European experience.

Everyone understood that a crisis was approaching. The Dolgoruky—convulsively attempting to reinforce their position by marrying the young Emperor to the favorite’s sister—understood this too.

These were futile dreams. For the crisis to be solved one way or another, one needed people of an entirely different rank than the favorite and his father. At such moments the combination of human wills, which form the field of historical pressure falls—with all its seemingly chaotic nature—into an absolutely clear pattern and forces into conflict people who had concentrated within their programs the leading tendencies of the epoch. These tendencies might be formulated with different levels of clarity. But the vector of each can be felt with fatal determination.”

Gordin, like Eidelman, attributes a great deal of importance to the power of personality. Not merely in the sense that a

\[164\] Let us note this term—false stability—and its definition. It comes up again and again as one of the central themes in Gordin’s works.

personality can be powerful, but in the more general and important sense that historical situations are largely governed by the sort of personalities that end up controlling key events,—key knots, as it were, in the tapestry,—and the particular qualities of one individual or another determine the course of events. On that winter evening, in a hotly-heated Moscow palace, a group of terrified men in powdered wigs met, talked, and planned…

“From that night on and for the next five weeks, events occurred in Russia which, in their underlying sense, can be compared with little in our history. And it was the amazing peculiarity of that five-week drama that it was one man who pushed the avalanche, had started an action the movement of which ‘awoke eternal hopes’ and the finale of which poisoned the future for centuries in advance, an action into which thousands of men from the aristocracy and gentry were drawn… Anything at all could have happened in those days—a bloody civil war or a loving compromise. But Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn persuaded the Supreme Privy Council to give the throne to the widowed niece of Peter the Great, Anna Ioannovna and, having said the fatal phrase: ‘Be it as you will, anyone you choose, but we must make it easier for ourselves” [“Воля ваша, кого изволите, только надобно нам себе полегчить”], created an unprecedented situation in Russian history.”166

Golitsyn is the true hero of this book—the most educated aristocrat—in fact, probably the most educated person in Russia, a man infinitely better informed and more broad-minded than the autodidactic Peter, but also a man whose messianic outlook prevented him from uniting with the gentry, and thus assured the triumph of Anna’s, Ostermann’s and Prokopovich’s version of un-Enlightened, brutal absolutism...

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166 Ibid.
“In 1708 Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich was appointed Governor of Kiev, and could occupy himself with a systematization of his viewpoints, knowledge and political plans—this while taking into account the obvious results of Petrine state activity. He saw real possibilities for this appear after the battle of Poltava and the removal of military actions from Ukraine.

There, in Kiev, Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich laid the foundation of his vast library, filled mostly with historical and political compositions in many languages. Kievan—and generally Lesser-Russian clergy was closely tied with European enlightenment. The Governor’s mansion became not merely a concentration of power, but a center of enlightenment. Students of the Kievan Spiritual Academy found and translated the works of historians, politicians and philosophers for him, from Latin and Polish. Then and later he collected Russian chronicles, synopses and chronographs which gave him the opportunity to freely make his way through the political practice and theory of Russian tsars, and along with this literature he was accompanied by the works of Machiavelli, Thomasius, Hugo Grotius, Pufendorf, Locke and other pillars of European political thought. In particular, a manuscript of a translation of Locke’s tract, made on the order of Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich and written by his hand, entitled ‘Civic Rule, of its true source, authority and purpose [названием "Правление гражданское, о его истинном начале и о его власти и ради чего"]’. In this tract Locke furiously rebels against the doctrine which takes the absolute right of a monarch back to the paternal rights of forefather Adam, which made his right historically unchallengeable.

By the time he returned to Petersburg to take part in the trial over Tsarevich Alexei—whom, as we remember, Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich was in a friendly relationship, and upon whom he had placed serious hopes—he was practically the most erudite man in Russia, prepared for reforms of a far-from-Petrine style.”

This was a man—Gordin specifies—who was well-advanced in years and honors, a man who could have easily retired to a secure and prosperous old age at any change of monarch. But no. As Gordin makes clear throughout this book, it was Golitsyn’s

indomitable will, his fanatical determination to reshape the state in his image that had to triumph. This was also the quality that broke him and his plans.

Three powers came into conflict that winter in Moscow: the constitutionalist-aristocrats of the Supreme Privy Council; the gentry, partially led by Tatischev, who had come up with a flood of their own constitutionalist projects but who mistrusted the leading role Golitsyn and Co. had assumed; and the proponents of continuing, unchanging, cast-iron Petrine absolutism—people like Feofan Prokopovich, and particularly the endlessly crafty Ostermann—men who could not imagine their existence outside this absolutist system they had helped Peter create, men who had not the gift of foresight and who, even when they did finally understand that they stood on the brink of an abyss, continued to think in half-way measures, without permitting even the idea of changing the nature of the system. They could not exist outside of this system where they stood at the fountainhead of power and wealth, for them the destruction of Peter’s cruel absolutism was equivalent to a destruction of their entire career.168

168 And of course, they were perfectly right. Since in Russia of the time the end of a career could all too easily mean the end of their life as well, they had reason enough to fear. As the old saying goes—it’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you… Only Elizabeth’s clemency allowed Ostermann to end his life in Siberian exile rather than the scaffold, and only the kindness of Catherine II allowed his son to regain the father’s wealth and title.
If groups 1 and 3 were outright opponents, as were (largely) groups 2 and 3, groups 1 and 2 did have a significant number of points in common. It was not the lack of a common program that defeated them. It was their inability to trust each other long enough to work together against the absolutist party. The gentry was not eager to exchange one autocrat for an entire collection, and it was not yet in their political mindset that men may receive power without abusing it. Golitsyn and his associates did not trust the gentry—either their level of education or their level of dedication to the country. What’s more, in the case of Prince Golitsyn personally this circumstance overlapped with his devouring messianism—Russia must receive freedom from his hands, by his will, in accordance with his plans! For years he had waited, after the death of his friend Alexei made the possibility of reform distant and almost unreal, for years he had waited and schemed and desired and now, when the accident of that wretched boy’s death finally threw this miraculous chance right at his feet, it was absolutely beyond his strength to stand aside and let others take the country to the freedom he had planned for it for so long! It was not absolute power for themselves that the Supreme Privy Council wanted—but it was absolutely beyond their power to convince the gentry of this, a fact which the absolutist party played like a violin.
There were more than people at work—there were historical vectors. Golitsyn stood for a slow liberation on the European model, for giving people freedom—not the wild freedom of lawlessness but a regulated and reasonable freedom which would be reined in and limited by firm laws. Laws—not men. Tatischev—a military man who worshipped Peter I and adored discipline and regularity, still stood some midway between Peter and Golitsyn. Tatischev respected military principles, but unlike Peter, who wanted to make the Russia he loathed into a larger version of Holland, he respected Russia’s particular nature and traditions as well. Not a Gediminovich aristocrat like Golitsyn—Tatischev was, nonetheless, a Rurikid, he too saw Russia as something his ancestors had created, as something he had not merely the right but the duty to defend against ‘incidental’ people on and around the throne.

“I go into such detail about the fate and personality of Tatischev not merely because he played one of the leading roles in the events of 1730, but also because it was specifically Vasily Nikitich that represented the type of Russian people to whom the future belonged, if the people of this type had made the right choice. It was this ‘pleiade’ of younger Petrine ‘fledglings’—energetic, educated, people who had breathed European air in their youth, people untied by either personal or clan memory with the pre-Petrine past, knowing the value of independence as the basis of productive activity—this was the pleiade that might have become the backbone of a new Russian society, in a constitutional state. There was only a little they lacked—the sensation of freedom as a condition of self-respect and the perception of self-respect as a mandatory condition of existence.”

Let us pause on that phrase for, in a sense, it sums up Gordin’s works in toto. The sensation of freedom as a condition of self-respect, and the perception of self-respect as a mandatory condition of existence. The freedom and self-respect which a Moscow boyarin a century before Tatischev was incapable of imagining, and which Pushkin, a century later, possessed in the most clear, perfect form that Russia was ever to know.

And in the meantime, as agents sped through the snowy Moscow streets, as plans were discussed, as future grandeur was contemplated…time was running out. Slow of wit, heavy of hand, and with a lifetime of grudges carefully packed in her luggage, the widowed Duchess of Courland was making her way back home…and while Prince Vasily Lukich Dolgoruky of the Supreme Privy Council—the one who had brought her the Conditions—did his best to limit and control all access to her person, unbeknownst to the constitutionalists (but knownst to us\textsuperscript{170}), she was accompanied the whole time by messengers from the absolutist party, who got in touch with her through her sister, the Duchess of Mecklenburg\textsuperscript{171}.

\textsuperscript{170} Thank you Mel Brooks. Yes, that was from “Spaceballs”. I will stop. But I will not apologize…
\textsuperscript{171} Strictly speaking, there had been talk of putting her, the older sister, on the throne instead of Anna. However, this would have required bringing over her husband, the Duke of Mecklenburg, and no one in Russia actually liked the man or wanted to see him in power at court. Besides, hard though this may be to believe, but even against the background of her age and country, Catherine of Mecklenburg drank so much and so frequently that even the Russian Court (!!) considered her an out-and-out alcoholic.
practically the only woman who could carry notes in her dresses and was allowed to enter Anna’s presence unsearched and unsuspected.

“This dedication to the idea of a complete rearrangement of the government, difficult and dangerous to carry out, testifies to so rare a quality in political practice as altruism. It was not for ambition, nor a lust for power, nor any other personal motivation that motivated Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich. Despite the fact that he, being in his later years one of the most influential members of the Supreme Council, turned out to be one among the few who decided the fates of the country. He was very old according to the standards of the time—67 years old. With the change of a monarch he could have retained his position with honor, or retired peacefully. Had he been motivated by power-lust, he would have followed (as was frequent in Russia at the time) the path of striking a close alliance with grandees close to that same Anna. He chose a different path—conscious of the possible doom it carried.”

Was the Prince an idle theoretician? No. Of course not. Was there a great deal of theory and idealization in his project? Undoubtedly. It could hardly have been otherwise for a man of his education and era. Any attempt to transfer his enormous erudition in European governmental traditions to Russian soil was idealistic in itself, but this does not mean that it was impossible. In discussing this Gordin frequently cites Miliukov, almost a secondary hero of the book.

“One may state that Golitsyn’s project not only was devoid of personal egoism, but lacked even the egoism of his estate. The entire project was stamped by a theorizing and idealizing political thought.’

All this is true if one does not consider as a form of egoism the desire of a strong personality to self-realize, and to realize the idea which for many long years had illuminated all its deeds and positions in life—down to the humiliating ones, an idea which—once realized—was to give its bearer the sensation of a completed grand

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duty before God and the people of his state, before his ancestors who had not built that state in order to see it destroyed by ‘unrestrained’ incidental men—whether on the throne or around it.

Naturally, Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich, as a perceptive man, having breathed deeply of the air of an unthinkable epoch, must have been primarily a theoretician. His excellent knowledge of Russia—of its statehood, its political and economic life,—was no hindrance to this. From Peter I to Lenin, such knowledge in radical reformers was frequently accompanied by a misunderstanding of the socio-psychological reality, by an inadequate understanding of the behavior of living people in various situations. Far more carefully prepared reforms than Golitsyn’s brave plan have been broken by this. It is for the same reason that the great Schematician, Speransky, shared Golitsyn’s fate.

However, let us not follow a view, deeply rooted in historiography, that that which did not succeed must have been impossible and unnatural. This is a flawed view both historiosophically and methodologically. If a break in our history was possible at that moment, then it would have been only on the basis Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich had prepared.”

As Gordin makes clear, individual human qualities are of decisive importance in moments of historical crisis. The personal abilities or flaws of the specific individuals who, historically, happen to have ended up somewhere where something important is going on. In comparing the competing parties, Gordin mercilessly notes over and over that while Golitsyn and his associates, as well as Tatischev and his followers, all were personally much better patriots and simply better human beings…there was one specific quality which they all but lacked, and which Prokopovich and especially Ostermann possessed in extreme abundance.

The gift of politics. The gift of scheming and intriguing. It is its own, entirely separate sphere of human activity, and the fact is that a man may be an excellent administrator, tireless military leader, capable diplomat or anything else—but if he lacks this gift, his opponents will outplay him like a child. Ostermann and his group split up the Constitutionalist groups, played them off against each other, and easily outplayed both.

The difficulty of 1730 was that the three vectors of historical development came into irreducible conflict, a conflict for which, alas, we must blame poor Tatischev to at least some extent.

“For no fewer than ten years before the death of Peter II and the fatal weeks of January-February of 1730, Tatischev stubbornly collected sources on Russian history, he gathered and studied books on world history, as well as historiosophical and political tractates. He too, like Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich, was a principally dual figure, but in a different way. Knowledge of history and philosophy, information on the arrangement of European states and Sweden were, first of all, systematized and digested by the brain of a mathematician and a mechanic. Unlike Golitsyn Tatischev knew precisely the bounds of the possible in politics and watched warily not to overstep these bounds in practical activity. Despite the clarity and rigidity of his mind—or perhaps thanks to these qualities—he ended up a prisoner of illusions, for the Enlightened Age, the age of formal logic and haughty pragmatism beget illusions even more wild and absurd than the dark centuries of the early Medieval period. Despite all his political cleverness, he fell victim to his own rationalism.

Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn, having made many tactical errors, having mistaken his evaluation of the general situation, plowed on ahead we may say, and was close to victory. Vasily Nikitich acted with absolute certainty, thought through every step, realistically calculated his possibilities as well as those of others, showed—as we shall see—amazing powers of persuasion and not only lost his match, but mixed up Golitsyn’s pieces as well.
He was doomed by his belief in mathematical calculation. He started playing politics according to the rules of his own plane geometry textbook. He copied his idol—Peter—in a deed the sense of which ran counter to the Petrine doctrine. And he lost, just as the first emperor lost his great game.”

In “The Reformers’ Rebellion” Gordin sums up events quickly, and reiterates that it was Peter’s creation—the Guard, that said the decisive word in 1730, a word for which they later paid with a very difficult decade.

“In 1730 when Peter II suddenly died and no direct heirs were left to the Russian throne, the future of the throne ended up in the hands of the Supreme Privy Council. And that is when it turned out that the leader of the Council, Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn had long since thought up and worked out a plan of limiting the autocracy which took into account European, particularly Swedish experience. The widowed duchess of Courland, Anna Ioannovna, whom the Privy Council had chosen to be Russian Empress was offered ‘Conditions’ which deprived her of the right to single-handedly dispose of state finances, questions of war and peace, the life and property of her subjects. Anna Ioannovna accepted these conditions. Everyone who knew their history, including Prince Golitsyn, associated these ‘Conditions’ with the vow given by Shuisky in 1606.

After the ‘Conditions’, which had been a preliminary, ‘working’ document, Golitsyn presented to the Council, and to the Moscow and provincial gentry gathered in the city, with a detailed constitutional project which included a creation of representative bodies with deputies from all the estates, except the serfs.

What’s even more surprising—the gentry, united under the formal leadership of Prince Cherkassky and the factual leadership of the historian and intellectual Vasily Nikitich Tatischev, responded with an entire lineup of their own constitutional projects which, in many respects, resembled that of Golitsyn.

For a few weeks Russian nobility lived an intense political life. For a few weeks Russia was a constitutional monarchy. And then the Guard had its say.

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174 Ibid. http://www.rulit.me/books/mezh-rabstvom-i-svobodoj-prichiny-istoricheskoi-katastrofy-read-375953-52.html So, as we see, Peter’s grand accomplishment was—in Gordin’s view—not a victory but a defeat, both for Peter and for his unfortunate country.
Anna Ioannovna and her circle had no means of exerting pressure on the Guard. Moreover, the Empress and those who were on the side of unlimited autocracy were in an unfavorable position—the Guard was commanded by Field Marshals Vasily Vladimirovich Dolgoruky and Mikhail Mikhailovich Golitsyn, members of the Privy Council who supported Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich’s plans.

But in February of 1730 the Guard made its choice independently. It already perceived itself as a political force responsible for the fate of the country. It did not so much support Anna, as reject the constitutionalists.

The Guards officers who filled the room in which the fate of constitutional projects were being decided, just like in January of 1725 paralyzed the resistance of the constitutionalists and of their rivals, the Cherkassky-Tatischev group by threat of physical force, and aided the coup d’état which restored unlimited power to Anna Ioannovna.¹⁷⁵

A Guardsman was not yet capable of perceiving the idea of a constitutional reform. These were the students of Petrine autocracy.

And here we are not so much interested in the ideology of the guardsmen, but in their perception of themselves as of a responsible force which controls the actions of the government. For, at that moment, the Supreme Privy Council was the government of the country.

The events which followed the coup proved to be a good political school for the active, thinking part of the Guard. Having restored unlimited power to Anna, they received in return a squall of lawlessness, terror, and consistent national humiliation.¹⁷⁶

Many researchers, in the 19th century and later, have focused the actions of the Guards on two points—nationalism and caste

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¹⁷⁵ Gordin notes that it was probably Ostermann’s idea to have Anna respond to the arrogant welcoming speech of the Privy Council—a speech in which they hinted broadly at the Conditions and her newly limited powers—by thanking them for ‘accrediting her the welcome due to her father’s daughter’. As an intriguer, the old Westphalian was truly irreplaceable, probably close to a genius. In a single moment a short phrase by the new Empress changed everything. They were no longer omnipotent rulers, presenting a crown with limited powers to a submissive duchess of Courland. They were now—in the eyes of all present, properly and traditionally obedient slaves, loyally returning the fullness of unlimited royal authority to the legitimately-born, 100% Russian daughter of the older, senior branch of the royal house, from which her uncle Peter I had factually usurped that authority years ago. In purely political terms—it was a brilliant…perhaps just a bit dirty…but nonetheless an absolutely brilliant piece of maneuvering…

¹⁷⁶ “Reformers’ Rebellion”, online via http://www.rulit.me/books/myatezh-reformatorov-kogda-reshalas-sudba-rossii-read-377153-14.html
interest. Either, they argue, the Guard entered politics to prevent German blood on the throne or in order to defend their interests as noblemen. Gordin does not fully agree with either. He sees the vital nature of the Guard during the century leading up to the Decembrist Rebellion precisely in their supra-national and supra-caste behavior. They saw their role as the correctors and guides of the state in its path to reform—reform which Peter had made an irrevocable condition of their very existence.

“It was not offended nationalist sentiment that motivated Pustoshkin, Khanykov and those Preobrazhentsy and Semyonovtsy who followed them [to arrest Biron in November of 1740]. Instead of the German Biron they wanted to see the German Anton of Braunschweig and the half-German Anna Leopoldovna in power. And certainly no one saw anything to doubt in the three-quarters German Emperor Ioann Antonovich. Running ahead let us say that the next coup, removing the half-German Anna Leopoldovna, brought the half-German Elizaveta Petrovna to the top, and in 1762 the Guard preferred the fully-German Catherine II to the half-German Peter III.

The Guard chose that candidate who could rule the country more effectively.

The Guard, to use modern terminology, had been programmed to reforms back in Petrine times, programmed for a continuing improvement of the state structure. The Petrine period, for all its misfortunes, was a dynamic time, a time of a constant search for better options. The Guard could not realize the flaw in the principle of unlimited autocracy and a serfdom yearning to become unbounded. That will come later.

A Guard raised in the spirit of reform, which had soaked up Petrine dynamism, could not accept the principle of external—false—stability, which Anna’s regime strove to achieve and the heir to which Biron naturally became.

The Guard rejected Biron not merely as a German—as a favorite guilty of many deaths. Biron was unsuitable, he could not continue the Petrine reforms.”178

177 Lithuanian really, but who’s counting, right?
And as for caste interests—Gordin cites the work of E.S. Anisimov, who proved that the group of Guards who brought Elizabeth to the throne were only 17% (!) noblemen. The rest had come from all classes and layers of Russian society, as well as including some foreigners. In a sense, we could argue that the coup of 1742 was the only truly ‘democratic’ coup in Russian history; Elizabeth had been given the throne by representatives of all the estates. And yet of course, the men who marched with her into the old Winter Palace no longer represented any estate at all. They were no longer Cossacks, soldier’s sons, clergymen, monastic servants, free peasants, tradesmen, artisans, merchants, serfs or nobles. Separately none of these groups had any particular interest in bringing Elizabeth to the throne.¹⁷⁹

But they were now the Guard. And the Guard saw Elizabeth as a guarantee of continuing reforms.

“It is curious and important, that unlike the coup of 1740, where the slogan was a change of persons, the coup of 1741 took place under a principally different slogan: ‘Onwards, and let us only think of how to make our Fatherland happy, whatever the cost!’ These were Elizabeth’s words, but she knew what the Guard expected from her. And this was not just a question of returning to Petrine terminology, but in the deepening sense of events. From the narrow sphere of dynastic struggles, the Guard and its leaders were heading for the open spaces of state-wide programs.

When Peter determined for the Preobrazhentsy and the Semyonovtsy so unique a role of an autonomous, controlling and regulating power, he did not think of such consequences. But the

¹⁷⁹ Particularly those who used to represent the Church. Let’s recall, Elizabeth was illegitimate on two levels.
logic of the process placed the Guard in the place which remained vacant after the destruction of the Zemsky Sobors and any sort of representative institutions which would have limited, in one way or another, the arbitrary autocracy when its actions clearly harmed the interests of the country. This ‘Guard Parliament’, which personally made decisions and personally carried them out was, perhaps, a unique phenomenon in European political history.”

It is this past that drove the Decembrists. This century-long history during which the Guard participated in every single change of person on the throne, inevitably choosing not a person, but a principle, a vector of development. Between this century of experience, and their sense of personal dignity, defended with a sword and held to be far more sacred than their life (or anyone else’s, for that matter), one had a generation of young men who were not prepared any longer to tolerate the abuses or incompetence of supreme power. It was no longer merely a question of Paul beating people or Arakcheev insulting them. They were standing up for their country in what they saw as an attempt to save the Empire from the royal family which was leading it deeper and deeper into a crisis. They saw themselves as the last line of defense—the only ones who can save the country from those who rule it, not merely because this is their inherited right, but because it is their sworn duty and, in a sense, the very reason for their existence. Their failure—due, Gordin explains, primarily to the sudden betrayal of two men who

refused to carry out their roles and reduced what had been a tightly planned military operation to chaos—led to the final fall of their position as a correcting power over the state. Russia never fully recovered from that failure, from the failure of the last attempt on the part of the noble avant-garde to protect the country from its own government and when, after the death of Nicholas I, the government once again began to receive ‘corrections’, they came not in the form of palace coups, but in the form of bombs.

From the 2008 interview with Svetlana Bunina:

“—What did Decembrism finally become for Russia? Our compatriots, time and time again are ready to give up on attempts to reform, democratic changes—and against this background the Decembrists look like Russia’s stepsons, the stepsons of our history. —They are not at all the stepsons of our history! Although we should consider, of course, that the term ‘Decembrists’ is very vague—there were about 500 people under investigation and their motivations varied greatly. There were ambitious people, simply blood-thirsty people, but there were also people who were truly noble, who were concerned not with themselves but with, as they used to say, the fate of the Fatherland. And that is the main link in Decembrism. In “The Star”[181] there is a column devoted to the history of terrorism, and it’s about to see an article on the Decembrists. They had terroristic aims as well, ideas of regicide, some even had the idea of exterminating the royal family. It’s quite another point that no one tried to realize a single one of these projects. Those were, rather, words founded on the tyrannicidic tradition. And still, the Decembrist were military men, leaning on the experience of 18th century palace coups—after all, by that point three emperors had been killed. So there was a certain consistency to it. Decembrism is an exceptionally important factor in our history. My book is entitled “The Reformers’ Rebellion” precisely because initially and essentially the Decembrists were reformers, not revolutionaries. They understood—and right now it is very important to know and understand this—that without constant changes the country cannot exist. That reforms are the antithesis of a revolution, an uprising. And they only went for their weapons

[181] Russia’s oldest extant ‘thick’ literary journal which Gordin has co-edited since 1991.
when they saw that there will be no reforming activity for them. Decembrism is a wonderful example of how a power, locked in on itself, leads to an explosion, a conflict with society and in the final count—to catastrophe. And they were not so very wrong.”

182 Interview online via http://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/200/LKL.htm
The Ethical Historian

As the epigraph to the chapter shows, Gordin never sees the historical process as free from ethical considerations. In the same interview he angrily denounces modern attempts to separate them in education.

“Although political ethics and the ethics of regular existence [политическая и бытовая этика] are somewhat different things, and a politician cannot always hold to a moral ideal, he is within his rights in knowing that such an ideal exists and in attempting to be as close as possible to it. In excluding the moral principle from the political, social and—thereby—the historical process, we are rushing for the abyss. Just take the concept of the new history textbook for instance, in which it is explained that Stain acted rationally and that mass collectivization was the only means to attain the goals he had set. There’s a handbook for future cannibals. Because according to this logic you’ll be able to kill your neighbor in order to seize his room—after all, it’s expedient, absolutely rational!”\(^{183}\)

In his interview with Gennady Katsov, Gordin returns to a point he makes frequently—on the power of individual and collective emotion, particularly resentment, in the movement of human events.

“Katsov: What is history? I share the viewpoint of the Byzantine scholar Sergei Ivanov who noted; ‘Asking a historian about the future is the same as asking a coroner about the immortality of the soul’. This, of course, contradicts Orwell’s famous saying ‘Who controls the past—controls the future’. But if the cognitive experience of the historian is tied with the past and is realized in the present, then is there at least some kind of answer to the question—what moves the historical events into which we are all drawn? Today’s specific events: the battle with radical Islamism; the war in Eastern Ukraine; the degradation of the relationship between Russia and the West to practically Cold-War levels, a historic minimum of trust for politicians and political institutes, and so on.

\(^{183}\) http://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/200/LKL.htm
Gordin: What is history? There can be many versions. But the main thing, on which I have insisted for many years, history is the complex combination of human deeds. History is people. There is no such thing as an abstract historical process. Only, I repeat, human actions. Hence a possible approach to what might be called a historian’s ‘prophet’ function. A historian can presuppose—precisely, presuppose!—what will ‘come true in life’ as solidly as he is capable of understanding on the basis of former experience, on the basis of analyzing human actions and motivations which lie in the foundation of the possible deeds of future generations.

From this, once again, a possible answer to a fatal question—what moves historical events? An example—a squall of Islamic terrorism. What is the cause?

There is such a fundamental phenomenon as historical resentment. It is a most powerful stimulus to activity. Let’s remember that for centuries Islam had dominated enormous territories, created great cultures, and in particular preserved antique philosophical heritage during the ‘Dark Ages’ of barbarian Europe, it built great powers: the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empire—two giants. Let’s remember the speedy Arab conquests. The Ottomans destroyed Byzantium, finally putting an end to the Roman Empire. As late as the 17th century Turkey was a serious threat to Europe. The Turks besieged Vienna. Before that—the brilliant Caliphates. The grand Moorish culture of Spain and so on...


Today the era of revanche has come. The madness of Islamist radicals is the result of unexpunged, half-felt or deeply, consciously perceived historical resentment. Resentment is not a scientific term, but a purely human quality. And it moves millions of people today, who are ready to die in order to get rid of the feeling of centuries’ worth of insult that nests deep within their consciousness.

That, by the way, explains a great deal about the fates of Russia and Serbia. The Mongols, those same Ottomans...

Try to look at the Ukrainian events from this viewpoint. A great deal becomes clearer, both from Kiev’s side (conditionally speaking) and from the side of the Ukrainian East. And from the side of those powers in Russia which were sincerely insulted by the demise of the USSR. And since world politics are becoming more and more mechanized, less and less oriented toward the
fundamental qualities of human nature, people lose trust in it. Hence the yearning for a Leader, the desire of men for a Man.

To return to radical Islam, its leaders are not turning to economic rationality, but to very simple human feelings, including those of resentment and insult, which would justify any cruelty.”

And again the reader is forced into his own past and present. What incredible power of resentment moved those Revolutionaries who gleefully ransacked the Winter Palace, shot noblemen, burned down estates and despised the overly-literate? How many centuries of insult had to be born, how many generations of cruelty endured before the Empire the Decembrists had tried so hard to save from its own royal family finally went under, destroying that family among with so many millions who deserved it less. Those who went to the barricades in 1991—how many years of hatred to the Soviet way of life did they bear? They were born within that system, raised by it—and the moment they felt its weakness, there they were, ready to tear at its near-corpse with tooth and claw just for the sake of the exhilaration which would come with its death.

Gordin’s great power, as mentioned earlier, is his ability to connect the events of two or three centuries ago with the current life of his readers. Readers who would always have had a lot to compare with. Those who read, for instance, the ‘Reformers’ Rebellion’ in 1989—when the coming demise of the country was clear even to those who did not want to see it, when the store shelves were empty,

184 http://www.runyweb.com/articles/culture/literature/yakov-gordin-interview-1.html
vodka was currency (well ok, that’s not fair, in Russia it’s *always* been currency), and a roll of toilet paper was considered a royal birthday gift,—reading about a militarized system of education, brutal authoritarian methods of governing, the final conversion of nominal ‘serfdom’ to out-and-out slavery\(^\text{185}\) and of the growth of a ‘military-bureaucratic monster’ of a government, rising to dominate the country for generations… Was there anything left to check off on the comparison list?

In three generations they had seen their country broken and remade into something new. They, as a people, had gone through generations of negative selection when the best, bravest, kindest and noblest people were either driven from the land in fear of their lives, brutally destroyed, or powerless, living out their post-GULAG lives in penniless and starving communal obscurity, while the cowards, snitches and boot-lickers rose to enjoy comfortable private apartments and access to the Kremlin cafeteria. Their culture—whether High or Low, had been insulted, brutalized and nearly stamped out. Their heroes, downtrodden and the new ones they had been ordered to celebrate were undeserving of such praise. Their families has been torn apart. Their religions had been smashed. Their temples—blown up. They had gone through the worst tyranny

\(^{185}\) It was not until the later years of Catherine’s rule that the word ‘slave’ ceased to be used in official documents and newspaper advertisements. The former ‘slave for sale’ was replaced by the more tactful ‘laborer for lease’.
in history and some of them even survived it. They had seen collective farms that would make 18th century peasants look rich, fat and prosperous...hell, some of them even remembered how their own recent ancestors had been rich, fat and prosperous—until the Revolution came. They had seen experiences in the Siberian camps which made the ‘suffering’ of the Decembrists look like a vacation. They had made monstrous sacrifices and in their standard of living had been thrown back by decades—it was not until the late 1950’s that at least 10% of Russia’s laboring class was back to eating the same amount of calories as nearly 50% of it had enjoyed before the Revolution. The vast family houses built by Stolypin’s peasants stood empty and rotting—while the majority of the country was crammed into communal apartments with no hope for anything better during their lifetime. They had been refashioned, body and soul. They had been—as a nation and as individuals—culturally, emotionally, intellectually, economically maimed for 72 years...

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186 And many of them live there still. If anyone feels like assuring themselves a week of solid insomnia, photographs of the life enjoyed by veterans of WWII and other retired pensioners in today’s small Russian cities and rural villages—you know, the sort where the barrack hospital was built with slave labor back in the 1930’s and the last repairs to the apartment buildings or the infrastructure were made in the 1960’s—are easily available. I do not judge. To each their own form of masochism.

187 Let’s recall the powerful dialogue between Lancelot the Dragon Slayer and the Dragon, from whose 300 year-old reign he has come to rescue a city, in Act II of Eugene Schwartz’s remarkably prophetic “Dragon”. English translation by Yuri Machkasov. Online via [http://a7sharp9.com/dragon.htm](http://a7sharp9.com/dragon.htm) Dragon. … My people are very scary. Won’t find any like them anywhere. Solid piece of work. Hewn them myself.
Lancelot. They’re still human.
Dragon. That’s from the outside.
Lancelot. No.
Dragon. If you could see their souls, that would give you a fright.
Lancelot. No.
And for what?! Where had all of this brought them? To international humiliation, internal degradation and famine? Collapsing industries in countless towns where the one tank—sorry, that is to say ‘tractor’-building factory had closed? A broken healthcare system, locked in on its own publications and separated from the global medical community, with dentists working with post-WWII German drills from the late 1940’s and the non-existence of painkillers a fact of life?\(^{188}\) Was this really all that the great dream had brought them, that and a small, very small number of very well-fed people in fine suits sitting in comfortable Moscow offices while possessing official passes to stores with food and clothes in them? Had their grandfathers raised a Revolution and gone through a Civil War and two World Wars—for this? For the utterly pathetic spectacle of the recently mighty USSR—a factually powerless shadow, a shamed beggar? It is unsurprising that now, over a quarter of a century later, a new generation yearns for a

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\(^{188}\) The works of a popular Russian feminist, Maria Arbatova, give a disturbingly and painfully clear idea of what giving birth, or having an abortion, was like under this medical system. Not for the weak of heart either.
restoration of the USSR without having a clear idea of what they wish for. It is not knowledge of history that drives them now to support Putin and his neo-fascist regime. It is the power of resentment; that which Gordin calls the desire of men for a Man, of a wish for a leader who will help them outlive that sense of powerless humiliation they acquired in early life. Today, as he says, a form of restoration has started, the inevitable thing to expect after a collapse. But there is some room for optimism when you compare to last time. At least this time the collapse was not accompanied by a civil war. There is private property—of sorts. There is a law—of sorts. Hell, there’s even a police force.

There’s Russia for you.

Two steps forward, three steps back. A generation at a time.

But there is progress…

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189 Interview with Eugene Zinkler, from 12/13/2010 with the Russian Gazette, online via https://rg.ru/2010/12/22/gordin-poln.html
“As a historian I prefer the study of the past to improbable prognoses of the future. At the base of such prognoses (especially in the form in which they are offered to the mass reader), there lies a premise of unconditional or very probable predictability. The premise has never been proven by anyone. As a man I am, by nature,
an optimist, but as a relatively informed historian I all too often encounter the necessity of limiting this inclination.”\footnote{Lotman’s last letter to the editor of “Ман” [“Человек”] Magazine, October of 1993. Online via http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/Literat/Lotm/na_porog.php}

Biography

Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman was born the fourth child and only son to a Jewish family, in what was then Petrograd\footnote{In the very same house, at the crossing of Nevsky Prospect and the Moika river, the bottom floor of which had once housed (and in post-Soviet times houses once more) the famous Wolff and Beranger Café, where Pushkin had enjoyed his very last cup of coffee.}, on February 28\textsuperscript{th} of 1922. He died in Tartu, on October 28\textsuperscript{th} of 1993, at the age of 71.

It seems almost odd, in so pessimistic a setting as almost any discussion of the Soviet Union seems nearly doomed to be, to discuss a relatively happy destiny. And yet, when thinking on the life of this, the third and last of our “ethical historians”, one must admit that, as far as his location and era made it possible, Lotman’s life was relatively fortunate. At the very least we can acknowledge that he survived comfortably to what the USSR considered relatively advanced age, and was spared most—though certainly not all—of the horrors of his era. Indeed, as far as his starting point, he may well be considered as having won a lottery…

Lotman was born into a family of highly educated Petrograd Jews. In Soviet and post-Soviet times a saying had currency, according to which no one, not a single person in all of Russia, was capable of speaking such perfect, clear, educated and academic
Russian as a Jew born in Leningrad. As simplistic as that seems, there is, as in many old sayings, a tiny kernel of truth to this. St. Petersburg—Petrograd—Leningrad was the home of the Academy, the birthplace of the first Russian dictionary, for two centuries the greatest intellectual and cultural center of the empire. Not a single great artist failed to draw, paint or sculpt along the granite-bound banks of the Neva. Not a single great poet in nearly three centuries failed to depicts the legendary beauty of this city. And of course, this unique distinction applied to education. There were other schools and universities in the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union. Many were decent, some were excellent…but only in Soviet times did Moscow’s educational framework outdo that of its loathed Northern rival and even then, one may wonder as to the extent. For two imperial centuries…and the first decade or two of Soviet rule…Petersburg was the one and only place where a person truly dedicated to acquiring a good education had to go. Here—the Academy of Sciences. Here—the Academy of Arts. Here—the University, since the Alexandrian period lovingly housed in Trezzini’s graceful Petrine baroque of the Twelve Colleges. To be born in this city was in itself an enormous piece of good luck, a golden ticket which would have made Willy Wonka cry tears of

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192 To the extent that Anna Akhmatova has been and is still considered in many respects not a Russian, but a particularly “Petersburgian” poet, just as Chaikovsky’s “Queen of Spades” is not a Russian, but a uniquely Petersburgian opera. Capital of Russia it might have been—but never a Russian city…
bitter jealousy\textsuperscript{193}. To receive an education there was to stand in the ranks of a tiny elite, particularly when it came to the humanities. What had been a bane in the imperial period turned to a boon in the Soviet one, for the tight ideological control over the humanities, which Daniil Al’ depicted with such horror, was still marginally weaker than that imposed in the educational institutions of Moscow, while the treasure-trove of materials still available to curious students [many archives were moved to Moscow, naturally] was immeasurable.

As has already been mentioned in the chapter on Eidelman, a Jew who attempted to receive a higher education in the late-Imperial period faced significant challenges. A ten-percent quota in elementary schools, a six-percent quota in secondary schools and a three-percent quota in universities, coupled with the frequent, personal, anti-Semitism of the testing committees meant that a Jew who fought his way to a higher education was guaranteed to have a much harder time of it than his Slavic/Orthodox peers. It also means that in order to achieve the same diploma as those peers, the Jew actually had to raise himself to a much, much higher actual level of education than theirs. We’ll recall that Eidelman’s father—having finally made his way to secondary school—was forced to flee after

\textsuperscript{193} Yes, I was born there. No, I will not even bother pretending to be un-biased. I was unbelievably lucky, and though I hold Russia’s government (and quite a large chunk of its society) today in a depth of contempt unplummable by any line, that city is the one and only part of that country that I continue to miss.
striking his teacher in response to an anti-Semitic comment. It would appear that Lotman’s father was either more fortunate in his teachers, or possessed of a better sense of self-control.

He was born in 1882—only a year after the assassination of Alexander II by a Jewish conspirator opened to floodgates to pogroms all across the Pale of Settlement. Mikhail L’vovich Lotman controlled his temper and graduated from the St. Petersburg University with a double major in Mathematics and Jurisprudence, something which served him well in the future when he served as a legal consultant for publishing houses. The worst years of Terror left him—though not his friends,—unharmed. He prospered, married, had four children, saw them grow into highly educated people, and died of pneumonia during the Siege of Leningrad at the age of 60, when his son was away at the front.

Lotman’s mother, Sarah (later “Russified” to Alexandra) Samuilovna Nudel’man, born in 1889, began as a needle-worker and seamstress, eventually went on to a successful education in France and became a reputable dentist194. She survived the worst that the 20th century could throw against a Jewish woman in Russia, saw all her children—alive and well—reach success in their chosen fields, and died at the not-unreasonable age of 74, in 1963. By the

194 Well…if you’ve gone through a lot of work to acquire skill with a needle, it shouldn’t go to waste.
standards of the time and place—these were fortunate fates, if not altogether happy ones.

Lotman’s older sisters all lived long lives, and made solid careers in respected fields. Inna Obraztsova née Lotman (1915-99) graduated from the Leningrad Conservatory and became a composer, professor of musical theory, and the author of a monograph on the life and work of Mussorgsky. Lidia Lotman (1917-2011) became a famous literary expert,—one of the leading scholars of the revered Pushkin House institute, the author of multiple books and hundreds of articles; her contribution to Soviet and Russian literary studies is, if less famous, no less valuable than that of her brother. Indeed, Lotman’s longtime friend and colleague—famed literary scholar, philologist, historian and culturologist Boris Fedorovich Egorov [ninety years old and still alive as of the time of this writing]—mentioned in a memorial article that it was Lidia and her circle of friends that had a decisive effect on her brother’s choice of profession.195 Victoria Lotman (1919-2003) became a doctor of medicine, whose letters to family were always full of medical advice, in addition to discussions of artistic exhibitions, theatrical performances and modern literature.

As we see, with the single exception of Mikhail Lotman’s death during the Blockade—which, pray forgive the cynicism, by Soviet standards does pass for a death of natural causes—\textsuperscript{196}—we see a family almost every member of which, miraculously, managed to live to a respectable age, never arrested, never exiled. No public denunciations. No executions. A Jewish family which—despite both Imperial and Soviet anti-Semitism,—managed to rise to a high level of education and which contributed more to Russian culture than many a Russian then or now would be capable of willingly admitting. So far, so good.

In his early education Lotman was no less fortunate than in his choice of birthplace. Between 1930 and 1939 he studied at the [still-extant and flourishing!] Petrischule, Russia’s oldest and—in those days—best public school, founded in 1709. It is curious, and perhaps significant, to note that among its many other distinguished graduates, such as the author Pavel Vyazemsky, the composer Modest Mussorgsky and imperial Petersburg’s most beloved architect Carlo Rossi, the school also counted a Decembrist—Major-General Mikhail Fonvizin, nephew to the famous Catherinian playwright.

\textsuperscript{196} As a charmingly cynical animated show entitled “Tripping the Rift” had it [2009, Season 3, Episode 2]:
“Mein Gott! What haz happened to ze Princess?!!”
“Ah…after a battery of sophisticated scientific tests I have determined that the princess died of natural causes.”
“But…but, she’s been chopped to pieces!!!”
“After which, naturally, she died.”
In 1939 Lotman enrolled at the Philological Department of the Leningrad State University (in that lovely green palace Trezzini had built over two centuries earlier for Peter II), there to give his first lecture in the Russian Folklore seminar of the legendary Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp. In his reluctantly written and unfinished “Not-Memoirs” Lotman recalled this as one of the highest peaks of his academic career.

“In my freshman year I was interested in folklore, attended the additional courses of Mark Konstantinovich Azadovsky and wrote a very successful report in the seminar of Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp. (Propp only gave seminars, Azadovsky read the lectures—both were frightfully interesting.) The theme of the report was “The Battle between Father and Son in Russian Folklore (with parallels in German folklore). I think Propp liked it very much.

At any rate, when I, after the war, in a soldier’s overcoat and German boots came to the university, I met V.Ya. Propp in the hallways before the dean’s office and said hello. He looked at me (in my long overcoat I think I had a very non-martial aspect, to borrow a phrase from Peter I), said hello and added: ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute. You’re Lida Lotman’s brother. No—you’re Lotman yourself.’ This is not only my merit, of course—Propp had an amazing memory and remembered, it seems, most of his students. Among the many awards and encouragements with which life has been, I’m afraid not always deservedly, generous, I have remembered Propp’s words as one of the most valuable.”

Lidia Lotman remembered this incident as well, and mentioned it in her memoirs about her brother.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{197} These non-memoirs, edited after the author’s death by his eldest son Mikhail and sister Lidia, were first published in the introduction to volume 1 of the Collected Lotman in 1995. Online via http://www.ruthenia.ru/lotman/mem1/Lotmanne-memuary.html#T8

\textsuperscript{198} Lotman, L.M. “My memories of my brother, Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman: Childhood and Adolescence”, pp. 128-150, online via http://www.ruthenia.ru/lotman/mem/lidia95.html
I.I. Tolstoy read a course on antique literature. A.S. Orlov\textsuperscript{199}—ancient Russian texts. Lotman studied pre-Revolutionary Russian literature with Georgiy Panteleimonovich Makogonenko (a young professor back then, only ten years older than his student), and with Grigori Alexandrovich Gukovsky—who tragically fell victim to the “Cosmopolitan” campaign of the late 1940’s and died of heart failure in Moscow’s Lefortovo prison in 1950, only forty-eight years old. Lotman visited his professor at a time when no one else dared, brought his sister Victoria,—a doctor—to treat his heart condition and later, after his death, became good friends with Gukovsky’s daughter and did much to help her in the hard times she was suddenly forced to face.

A sophomore in 1940, Lotman was drafted into the army, rose to the rank of Sergeant in the artillery and served all through the War, reaching Berlin. He received one concussion, but no more serious injuries. It may well be, Egorov notes\textsuperscript{200} that the draft of 1940 saved his life later, as he had had nearly a year of actual military training prior to the War breaking out. Let us bear in mind that we’re speaking of a generation 97% of which did not come back from that war, and that of every three boys out of a hundred that did return, between one and two returned permanently mutilated. In this

\textsuperscript{199} One can almost hear Chaikovsky’s Queen of Spades, sitting by the fireplace. Names of a bygone era. Tolstoy, Orlov...”La Comtesse d’Estrades, la Duchesse de Brancard, such names...And even, now and then, herself! Herself, Marquise de Pompadour!”

\textsuperscript{200} Egorov, \url{http://feb-web.ru/feb/pushkin/critics/lot/lot-005.htm}
alone Lotman’s share of good fortune seems almost incredible. He returned home with eight medals and two orders. It tells us a great deal about the man that his permanent companion at the front during those years was a textbook of French… A large part of his memoirs is dedicated to the war: by and large written in positive tones. He was demobilized in 1946 and returned to school, finally completing his University studies after nine years, in 1950. Lidia Lotman recalled:

“Just a year after returning from the army he made a significant scholarly discovery. Among the masonic papers he found a document which had been sought first by agents of the Third Department and then for more than a century by scholars—the code of rules of the first Decembrist society, “Brief Instructions for Russian Knights”. The document was in French, the title was coded. Yuri translated it, decoded it, commented and published it in 1949 in “The Leningrad University Herald” (#7). Upon reading this publication by a young student, V.G. Bazanov, a researcher of the Decembrist movement who valued archival studies said: ‘This boy has already assured himself an honorable place in scholarship’.”

A year later he—having overcome a rocky start and her reluctance to take part in a ‘bourgeois’ ceremony, Lotman married Zara Grigorievna Minz, a fellow literary scholar born in 1927. She, who focused on the Silver Age, on Alexander Blok and Russian Symbolism, became a professor of the University of Tartu alongside her husband (although it took him quite a bit of effort to convince

\[201\text{ Lotman, L.M. } \text{http://www.ruthenia.ru/lotman/mem/ridia95.html}\]
\[202\text{ Having learned that Lotman drew posters in the Army, the ‘Komsomol Goddess’ came to him with a request to participate in the school newspaper. Lotman (protecting his very busy schedule) responded that he only draws for money. When the angered Minz turned away he heard her mutter “Mustached bastard!” [“Сволочь усатая!”]}

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her to abandon all the advantages of Leningrad). Together they had three sons of whom the senior, named Mikhail after his late grandfather, followed in his parents’ footsteps and became a literary scholar and professor of Tallinn University, the second, Grigori, an artist, and the third, Alexei, a biologist. Zara Grigorievna predeceased her husband by three years, dying in 1990. All three of Lotman’s sons—born in 1952, 1953 and 1960, are currently alive and practicing in their respective fields.

As we recall, the early 1950’s were not the best time to be a Jew who wished to study the humanities on a post-graduate level. In his memoirs Lotman wrote later of what he termed either his naiveté or stupidity, which for a long time prevented him from understand the reason for his difficulties in finding a job. A friend informed him of a vacant post in Tartu’s pedagogical college and—overcoming the immense reluctance of his wife,—he decided to move to quiet, beautiful Estonia which, in addition to enjoying a somewhat milder climate, remembered its European heritage and was under less severe ideological control than the former Imperial capital—a city Stalin personally despised. Egorov mentions that the Communist officials in Tartu were too busy firing and arresting the local “bourgeoisie” to have time left over for “cosmopolitans”.

Here, in 1950, Lotman became a Senior Instructor at the Tartu

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203 Egorov, ibid. It tells us something about Estonia that, though seized by the USSR at the end of the 1930’s, by 1950 there were still some bourgeoisie left to fire and arrest!
Pedagogical Institute. At the age of thirty he defended his Candidate dissertation on Radischev and Karamzin, and two years later, after the Mustached One finally breathed his last and the USSR took its first deep breath in thirty years, Lotman moved on to the University of Tartu. In 1960 he became Chair of the Russian Literature department, and occupied that position until 1977. In 1961 he defended his Doctoral dissertation on the development of Russian literature in the pre-Decembrist period. His old teacher—Makogonenko—served as his official opponent. Finally, at the age of forty-one, in 1963, Lotman became a full-fledged professor of the University of Tartu—where he remained for the last thirty years of his life.

In January of 1970 Lotman had his only close brush-in with the Soviet system, when the KGB, suspecting him of involvement in the case of Natalia Gorbanevskaya, searched his apartment. She did, in fact, use the dacha she rented from him for meetings; not—as he recalled—that there was anything conspiratorial about them. He was not arrested, but neither was he officially cleared, which led to a prohibition on leaving the country for the duration of the Soviet period. He became a full-fledged member of the Estonian Academy.

204 Let us note that even then Lotman was firm on making the Decembrist Rebellion a distinguishing moment, a clear break between two vastly different historical periods which were separated by much more than just a change of person on the throne.
but his eventual admission to the Academies of Great Britain, Norway and Sweden took place without his presence.

Lotman became a strong supporter of Gorbachev’s reforms, as well as of the liberation movement in Estonia. In 1988 he became a council member of the Estonian National Front [“Eestimaa Rahvarinne”]. In 1993 he received his last and, perhaps, most important distinction, becoming the first post-Soviet Laureate of the prestigious Pushkin Prize for two works at once—his biography of Pushkin himself, and for his exhaustive and endlessly fascinating volume of commentary on “Eugene Onegin”. On October 28th of that year he died, four months away from what would have been his seventy-second birthday. The funeral took place in Tartu, and—as the border situation between Russia and newly-independent Estonia was still altogether too tense,—his students from Russia, my late, beloved aunt Inna Feliksovna Gurvits (1958-2016) among them, had to sneak across the border at night, illegally and at a rather high risk, to bid farewell to their teacher…

Lotman’s memory remains luminous to this day. His series of lectures—derived from his book, “Conversations on Russian Culture” and originally televised in the late 1980’s,—has been preserved and presented for general consumption on YouTube. A scholar and professional translator who knew 13 languages, including Ancient Greek, editor of the Hermitage Museum Publishing House…one of the best, bravest, most honorable people I had ever known. I shall always remember her words about Lotman when I told her the theme of my dissertation: “He did not imitate old values, he lived them.” She died this winter, as I was working on this dissertation. 205
monument to him has been erected at the entrance to the Tartu University Library in 2007. Two years later a memorial board was put up on the house where he lived the last years of his life. Only recently, in 2012, Heinrich Zdanevich directed a documental film, “The Space of Yuri Lotman”, to commemorate what would have been Lotman’s 90th birthday; and a year later Alyona Surzhikova scripted and directed “Happy Confederates [“единомышленники”, literally “one-thoughters”, co-conspirators, those of single mind]: Yuri Lotman and Zara Minz”. Both were aired in Russia on the “Culture” channel.

To this day, on his birthday which the Tartu University faculty had been accustomed to collectively celebrate, the professors (and former students) make a collective pilgrimage to the cemetery. Since 1997 an annual Lotman seminar has been arranged around this date. The trip to visit Lotman’s grave is always marked as part of the program. Massive Lotman Congresses were held on what would have been his 80th and 90th birthdays in 2002 and 2012. A Lotman Stipend has been founded with two purses; one for Russian and Slavic Philology, one for Semiotics and Culturology. The

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206 A rather complicated, tres modern mix of sculpture, lighting and a fountain, this construction—made of five fifteen-meter long steel tubes,—is actually based on a sketch, Lotman’s self-portrait. Not to my taste, which rather inclines to Mikeshin, Antokolsky and Canova but, I am old-fashioned and this is, unquestionably, an excellent work in its own right.

207 The history of these seminars and their programs may be seen at the touchingly named Lotmaniana Tartuensia website. http://www.ruthenia.ru/lotman/seminary.html

208 Note to self—try to make it out to Tartu in 2022. It should be very interesting…
names of the winners are announced, of course, on Lotman’s birthday.

And so, as we can see—all angles considered and what with one thing and another and taking the long view while bearing in mind the Soviet-era context—Lotman’s life presents an example of almost flawlessly smooth professional progress and magnificent achievement, practically unhindered by all that could have hindered it, or at least, hindered considerably less than could have been the case. As far as a life spent in the USSR can be considered lucky—his was.
Style

If ever a man attempted to prove the accuracy of the popular saying mentioned earlier, Lotman did so. His language reminds us that in his childhood he was fortunate to study with those Petrischule teachers of the old Imperial school who had willingly chosen to remain in Russia, in the days before many of them vanished from the professional scene, as well as from life. Even though he was born five years after the old world had passed away, his language is essentially pre-Revolutionary in its simple and serene dignity which owes nothing to excessive exhibition. His language is distinguished by clarity, precision, and an unstudied, almost casual grace; a natural elegance of spare form and rich content which permeates his writing without claiming precedence over the actual information it carries, and is due less to art than to a strict understanding of the meaning of every specific word. This is very much the lecture of the classical University professor who, in addition to teaching content, presents style as a free bonus.

And yet it is far from dry, it is a vibrant, lively and almost-conversational style, as lectural styles go. Lotman writes very closely to the way he speaks—calmly, flowingly and lucidly,

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209 The Russian language continues to change and, by and large, this is not a change for the better. Some ninety years ago people complained that the new, Soviet language was terribly crude and rude in comparison to the pre-Revolutionary period. Modern, 21st century Russian makes people who received (even briefly) a Soviet upbringing feel like the first wave of White immigration.

210 Lotman’s interviews, as we have seen, could sometimes be rambling. However, his cycle of lectures on Russian culture, televised in the 1980’s and now available on YouTube, fortunately give us an easy way to compare his lecturing style and his writing.
making no allowances for Soviet “Newspeak”. This is relatively close to Kliuchevsky’s model—with the vital difference, of course, that Kliuchevsky’s lectures were delivered to us second hand, through the memories of his students who collected and compiled them after the maître had died. Lotman wrote his own.211 This is not to say that the flow of his text goes as far as Gordin or especially Eidelman in establishing an informal, easy atmosphere between the writer and his audience. It is firmly the manner of a lecturer who will not deviate from his point. It is not that Lotman takes himself excessively seriously—but he takes his subject so and deals with it in a businesslike manner, allowing himself few frivolities of the likes of artistic embellishment, heightened emotion or humorous diversion. But neither does he rush the process—its importance warrants a methodical approach and such things will tolerate no needless haste. He allows his phrases an easy, almost leisurely pace which has, however, nothing to do with laziness.

Bien sur, lecturing and conversational styles must, of necessity, differ, and preferably quite widely. Lotman’s writing reflects his style at the lectern, but this is not meant to suggest that he was the same in personal communication—that would, in fact, have been quite unnatural. Certainly, with his students he

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211 We’ve an example closer to home at UCSC, where the wise and good Dr. Bruce Thompson has for many years supplied his students with written versions of his lectures on European history,—which, if compiled, would make a wonderful book with practically no need for editing.
sometimes allowed himself to depart from the boundaries of philoso-historical serenity and indeed, sometimes delved into outright anger (in fact, as Inna Gurvits once mentioned, he tended to be tougher on the more gifted students—which can be interpreted as a form of demonstrated affection).

There is nothing hurried or decorative in Lotman’s writing, but neither does he allow himself to lose track of his point for a single instant. His phrases are full and rounded; there is nothing extraneous to them, no attempt to grab the readers’ attention through tricks of eloquence—but neither does he restrain himself to a studied laconism which would have forced his students and readers to seek explanations elsewhere. His phrases have everything they need, but not a single syllable more than is necessary. To sum up—Lotman’s writing is entirely devoid of a particular quality which both Eidelman and Gordin were forced, volens nolens, to utilize in theirs.

I will gladly pay homage to any who find a more precise definition, but the closest word I have found for this quality is “showmanship”.

It is sometimes said that great genius develops in the times of great oppression. While I would prefer not to touch that particular question—not with a ten-foot pole nor with a nine-foot Serbian!—I must grant at the very least one thing. In comparison to our two other authors Lotman had a significant advantage. As a respected professor at Tartu he was not, strictly speaking, dependent entirely
upon his writing and the quality thereof for his daily bread. Eidelman and Gordin were. Neither possessed Lotman’s somewhat privileged status, however damaged his dissident connections might have made it. Lotman, in other words, does not need to weave the web of illusion and time-blending narrative Eidelman weaves so capably. Nor was he, like Gordin, forced to resort to a Holmes’ian intermeshing of cold reasoning and occasional bits of thunder-and-lightning to attract the attention of the reader. He could afford—within obvious limits—the luxury of writing with simple and honest clarity.

We shall not find in Lotman’s works the time-defying mirages spun with such skill by Eidelman in order to transport his readers to the past\textsuperscript{212}, nor the powerful vituperations which occasionally flare up in the pages of Gordin and force his readers to confront the past within their own present. Whether Lotman writes of the Decembrist Rebellion\textsuperscript{213}, of card-games, of female education, of duels or of marriages, he does so always with the same calm. It is not the calm of indifference however, it is the calm on the one hand of repose, and on the other of attentive care given to each subject equally. Within his worldview, all these aspects, as well as many others, play vital—though not equally vital,—roles in defining

\textsuperscript{212} Though I should note, Lotman knew Eidelman, respected him enormously and greatly admired his writing style.

\textsuperscript{213} For him, just as for Gordin and Eidelman, this is one of the most important topics in all his works.
and forming the human beings of their period. One must discuss people within their context and it is impossible to understand the Decembrist period without understanding the unique generation of people who made it. For that—one must discuss everything. Their upbringing, their education, their views on life, love and duty, the rules their society imposed upon them before the altar, in the drawing room, in the wheat field or on the field of battle—all are equally necessary to understand. It is, in fact, properly academic writing *par excellence*; educated without being pedantic, graceful without being artistic, informative without being excessive, knowledgeable without being complacent. It would be almost easy to feel that the actual human being hides behind this screen of perfect academic writing did we not realize that, in fact, it is the personality of the man himself that makes such writing possible.

This does not mean that Lotman altogether avoids eloquence. But he does not use it as a deliberate, theatrical touch,—meant to produce an emotional effect or to mentally forge a connection, create a “signpost”,—which Eidelman does with so much seeming care and Gordin with so much seeming carelessness; rather, for Lotman eloquence comes in the form of simple common phrases, practically clichés which he brings in almost automatically, as though for the sake of saving time. For

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214 And both with so much un-seeming power!
instance, let’s look at his opening paragraph in his chapter on “The Fledglings of Peter’s Nest” in chapter 11 of “Conversations on Russian Culture”:\textsuperscript{215}

“\textit{The history of 18th century Russian culture begins with the Petrine epoch. Leo Tolstoy, in a letter to A.A. Tolstaya confirmed that in ‘untangling the flow’ [in itself a remarkable phrase. ILS], it was specifically in this epoch that he found ‘the beginning of everything’. Everyone has crossed swords in evaluating the Petrine period, everyone who has thought on the fates of Russian history. The spectre of evaluations has ranged from Yazykov’s lines ‘Russia, by Peter’s iron will transformed’, which Pushkin chose as his epigraph to the novel “Peter the Great’s Moor” to the assertion that the Petrine reform slid along the surface of Russian life, only to lose itself in Finnish swamps and forests (D.S. Merezhkovsky). To go into the essence of this argument would lead us away from our theme. We shall touch it from one side only, in showing the fates of two men from this epoch. Moreover, in accordance with the aim of our book we shall not choose so-called ‘great people’, but we shall consider the ordinary [“дюжинные”, from the term “diuzhina”—dozen. People who are to be found by the dozen, in other words], typical characters. Our heroes may be termed the ‘common men’ of the noble world of this epoch. However, their ‘typical’ nature shall be shown, partially, in that these will be active people, rather than the faceless ones who drift with the current.”

As we can see, it is the active people who interest Lotman. But he makes no special effort to entice the reader with magniloquence. The mention of crossed swords, the use of the expression ‘drifting with the current’—these are not utilized as conscious aids to \textit{les belles lettres}, but merely as useful stand-ins. Common phrase blocks which can be used anywhere. Lotman uses such phrases simply because he is not inclined to waste time on creating new images where old ones will do. Eloquence is not what

\textsuperscript{215} Online via \url{http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/Lotman/11.php}
he wants the listener or reader to carry away from the encounter. It is not that he disdains it or undervalues its power—it is simply that he sees no personal need of it.

Yet, in the introduction to the next chapter, “The Age of Heroes”, we see something more personal. A clear distinction between the endless sense of possibility inherent in Russia’s 18th century, a sense which required the maximum possible output of individuality and—as the counterbalance,—the intensified regularity of the Pauline state which had raised severe militarized routine to practically a form of art. A form which not only claimed but positively demanded worship and was elevated by Paul’s sons to a pinnacle of useless magnificence, to an end in itself which sought to justify all the irregularity and insanity of actual life in the Empire by the extreme regularity and mindlessness of the military parade.

“By the end of the 18th century an entirely new generation of people had come to exist in Russia. The change of character developed with such speed that within a century we can clearly distinguish several generations, a certain staircase of human types. The people of the last third of the 18th century, with all their inevitable diversity, are marked by one common trait: a determination to find a special, individual way, a specific personal behavior. The men of the early 18th century sought to blend in with some group: to become the ‘fledglings of Peter’s nest or defenders of Orthodoxy, to go to an Old Believers’ commune [‘скит’] or become refugees to Europe. But always they were motivated by a desire to become a part of a single whole, to make its laws into their personal rules.

For a man of the end of the 18th century, if one may permit oneself such a generalization, it is characteristic to attempt to find one’s fate, to leave the ranks, to realize one’s own personality. Such
determination will be the psychological basis of the variety of methods of behavior. The desire to accomplish that which is unheard of will sometimes prove stronger than religious or ethical stimuli: it will push both toward heroic deeds and toward a hope of ending up ‘in fortune’;—having overcome all obstacles to take first place beside the throne of power. The movement of the century was torn apart by contradictions: the ‘regular state’ needed executives, not initiators, and it valued the ability to execute [orders] more than it valued initiative. This part of the epoch had already been a part of the foundation of the Petrine ‘regular’ state. However, this contradicted that same state’s demand for conscious initiative. Its ideal the “apology of execution” found in the Prussian idea of discipline, and its utopian incarnation, in the governmental fantasy of Paul I.

Paul considered himself to be the continuation of Peter, but of the contradictory Petrine age he chose only ‘regularity’. Another side of the age’s demands was built on a principally different basis and engendered a completely different human type. The thirst to express oneself, to show the personality in its full measure, created both heroes and oddities, frequently savage but always bright characters. Pushkin, in denouncing the rationalized despotism of Catherine II saw in her actions, not unfoundedly, a dry calculation—the scale and fantasy of G. Potemkin, his constant urge to outdo the narrow framework of the possible complemented the realism of the Empress. The wide-ranging ‘Potemkian folklore’ was permeated with the poetry of limitlessness.

In one of his last articles, published in a special edition of Tartu’s “Russian Gazette” on November 1st of 1993, Lotman writes of Pushkin. And here perhaps, at the end of his life, he becomes truly poetic; not through a deliberate and conscious game with words, but with a passion of wisdom which age has finally cleared of all that is extraneous. No attempts now at academic repose, nor at a kindly smile beneath the heavy mustache—here Lotman speaks,

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216 “попасть в случай”, i.e. to become a quasi-omnipotent royal favorite.
217 Ibid, online via http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/Lotman/12.php
as they say, from the heart—and yet with all his characteristic serenity which had become not second, but first nature.

“Here is the answer to the question: “Does one’s attitude to Pushkin change throughout one’s lifetime?”

The world changes, and man changes with it. It is not merely our outlook that changes, so do we, and so does Pushkin. His multifaceted, complex and three-dimensional world does not fit into words, or even into many words. I shall use an example. Those who had visited the Hermitage and have seen Houdon’s statue of Voltaire know of its remarkable quality. When you walk around it, the facial expression of the statue changes. You see Voltaire weeping, mocking, viewing our world tragically and choking with laughter. One would think that marble is immobile, but our viewpoint changes, and so does the face of the sculpture. Just so, when we go around the world, it changes. Not only do we change before the face of the world, but the world changes before ours.

One of Pushkin’s marvelous specialities is the capacity to remain in a state of dialogue with us. You might say: how so? His books are printed, the pages fixed, one cannot move the letters from their place. Whereas the system which Pushkin created and launched into the world is a dynamic structure, it accumulates meaning, it grows more intelligent and forces us to do the same, it answers for us the questions of which Pushkin could not have known. This system is the poet himself. Therefore there is nothing surprising in that he changes before our very eyes; that is his vitality. Any complicated, rich work of art is precisely so distinguished from other creations wrought by human hands, in that it possesses an inner dynamism.”

On December 29th of 1992, in Tartu, Ljubava Moreva conducted an interview with Lotman, his son Mikhail Lotman and Igor Evlampiev, dealing primarily with the complicated position of St. Petersburg and its place as a ‘Russian’ city. Let us note the line

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For a less distant example; one sees a similar effect when walking—slowly—around the marvelous 18th century terracotta bust of Pope Clement XII by Edmé Bouchardon in San Francisco’s Legion of Honor Museum [back wall in the last room in the left-hand enfilade]. In fact, strictly speaking, any realistic statue that does not produce a similar effect upon being viewed from all sides is likely to be a fairly poor statue.

Lotman draws between the city as it was conceived to be, as it was actually made to be, as it became in reality, and as reality made it against the will of the founders or residents. Here, as with our previous historians, the emphasis is always on the endless and unbreakable tie between the past and the present, a tie which is powerful enough—practically speaking,—to make the actual temporal distinction something along the lines of a mere formality. Moreover, when speaking of this city, when walking its streets, we find ourselves drifting through time as well as space, through literature as well as reality.

One could argue, quite justifiably, that this is the fate of practically any culturally important city. There exists the general, historical London of George III, the Belgravia London of Becky Sharpe, and the Cheapside London visited by Miss Jane Bennett; the London of Victoria and the London of Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde, behind which hide the Londons of Sherlock Holmes and the indomitable Lady Bracknell. The Paris of Flaubert co-exists quite peacefully alongside the Paris of Dumas, even though more than two centuries separate the city of Frédéric Moreau and that of poor Milady Winter, while the city of the magnificent and tragic Marquise de Merteuil finds its space in-between without a blink, quite comfortable beside the Paris of M. de Sartine and Fragonard.
And yet, Petersburg, in that oddly operatic quality which Akhmatova considered one of its main traits, seems exceptional. The other cities simply grew as cities and literature grew within them, almost as a favorable side-effect, a beneficial fungus... In Petersburg it became not even ‘a’ but ‘the’ dominant factor right from the start. The city of Pushkin’s Queen of Spades and the city of her prototype, the domineering Grande-Dame Princess Golitsyna are cities within two different worlds...yet permanently and firmly joined into a single whole by a simple, laconic story of fewer than 100 pages\textsuperscript{220}. In later, Soviet times, Kaverin’s brilliant novel “Two Captains” [there is quite a decent English translation available online, by the way], shows us a beautiful city where a happy young couple walks on the banks of the Neva and enjoys the White Nights-in 1935, when the vans marked “Bread” and “Milk” which, tactfully unmentioned by the author, drive past the young lovers on the street, contain, as we are now only too grimly aware, neither bread nor milk...

Petrine, Elizabethan, Catherinian, Alexandrian, Nicholayevan, even Soviet and post-Soviet\textsuperscript{221}...all these

\textsuperscript{220} I remember that when I returned to St. Petersburg in 2000, for the first time since immigration and, having since read Pushkin and listened to Chaikovsky, I experienced a particular thrill when I saw her enormous city mansion. It still exists—along with all the domestic arrangements Pushkin described, including the little staircase leading up from the old Countess’ bedchamber—on the corner of Malaya Morskaya and Gorokhovaya (#10 on both streets), just a few blocks from the Winter Palace, and a few doors down from Pushkin’s own apartment.

\textsuperscript{221} In 2000 Natalia Galkina published a novel entitled “St. Peter’s Archipelago” [‘Архипелаг Святого Петра’]—an absolutely remarkable, brilliantly written, haunting book about a haunted city, and also
Petersburgs are real, alive and vital despite the temporal distance that separates us from them; and as we walk those streets and flow from century to century we find ourselves in a literary space as well as a historical one;—sharing the same space and time, but not the same reality are the absolutely different—indeed, mutually hostile,—cities of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Blok, Akhmatova…all real, all distinguished by specific and notable traits.

“L.M. Yuri Mikhailovich, in your articles you examine such questions as; the city as a name, the city as space…I would like to offer you another theme, the city as time. And to regard time, in this theme, along the Augustinian hypothesis as at a unity of the three ingredients: the real past, the real present, and the real future. It is from the present that I suggest regarding the ‘time of Petersburg’.

And another theme, connected with time—those models of the city which you have mentioned. Petersburg in real historical time, Petersburg as a new Holland, as an idea of entering historical time, that’s one model; a second model—Petersburg as an eternal city, as a city included in sacral time; and a third model—the model of Petersburg as an ephemeral, non-existent, extra-temporal city.

How do these theme interact through time? And if we speak about the present of the future [“о настоящем будущего”] how do you see the interweaving of these models in the present of the future?

Y.M. It has been some years since I have been in Petersburg, and I cannot really imagine what it has become in the interval…

You understand, we need to ask the question: how does a built city differ from a blueprint or from an archeological dig? In being a living organism. When we try to understand it we compose some single dominant structure in our consciousness—say the Petersburg of Pushkin, the Petersburg of “The Bronze Horseman”, the Petersburg of Dostoyevsky or that of our own time. We take a certain stopped temporal point. But this is, in principle, inadequate to reality. Because a city, even if it is built according to some strictly military and seemingly frozen plan, comes to life the moment it has become a reality, and since it has come to life it is constantly unequal to itself. It changes in accordance with the point of view from which we view it.
Even in the simplest sense: for instance, right now we can view Petersburg from an airplane. Pushkin could not view Petersburg from an airplane, he could only imagine such a viewpoint. We cannot see Petersburg as it looks, for instance, from Paris.

This multiplicity of viewpoints gives a diversity of real potentials for the meaning of the word “Petersburg”, of that which the image of Petersburg includes. Because it [in the original—“he”] is alive, unequal to itself. We create a certain rigid, self-equivalent model which is very comfortable for the sake of stylization, for research constructions. But one cannot live in a model, one cannot live in a film, one cannot live in a single one of our researches. They were not created for that purpose. One can only live in that which is not equivalent to itself. That which constantly speaks of itself in different languages.

After all, Petersburg—this is very interesting—was planned as a military capital, remember: “I love, o military capital, the smoke and thunder of your fort”222. And what is a military capital, a military settlement? It is a plan which had once been drawn by someone. And this city must be precisely the same as the plan. But one cannot live in such a city. Not only can one not live there, it is impossible to die there. There will be no residents. Initially there will be only soldiers. But if there are only soldiers, then with time there will appear, forgive me, ladies. Life will appear. [The specific word Lotman uses here is ‘быт’. As he himself states a moment later, this is nearly untranslatable. It can mean ‘life’ in the sense of a mode of life, a way of living. The closest translation that comes to mind here is ‘habitus’. The sum total of the ways, modes, techniques, traditions and methods of living—ranging literally from the A to the Z of all human activities.] Whereas life, in principle, cannot be reduced to one meaning [‘А быт в принципе неоднозначен.’] One of the distinguishing traits of ‘быт’ is that it cannot be translated to a single language, just as a living creature cannot be translated to a single language.

One can translate the model of a living creature to a single language, one may translate a film about that which lives, all that which is manually created [‘рукотворно’, literally, created by hand, man-made.] But one cannot so translate that which is not man-made. It is necessary that life must not understand itself, that it must come into conflict with itself all the time. Since alongside Pushkin’s Petersburg the Petersburg of Dostoyevsky appears, that means the city is alive. Even the Petersburg of “The Bronze Horseman” was not a single whole, which means there was already some form of life...

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222 Pushkin’s introductory verses to “The Bronze Horseman”.

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What is the distinction between life and an idea? An idea is always monotemporal ['одновременна'] and therefore dead. All of human history consists of us trying to realize an idea, even the best idea; but an idea cannot in principle be realize, it is monotemporal. Whereas life is polytemporal. And so, Petersburg was always busy fighting itself, remaking itself, all the time it seemed to stop being Petersburg. How many texts could we cite in which it was asserted that this is no longer Petersburg? Since it crossed beyond the Neva turnpike it is no longer Petersburg, it’s become something else.

I.E. But something eternal still remains?

Y.L. Of course, but that’s the very thing, in order to remain it is necessary to change. He who does not change does not remain. For instance, if you are not acquainted with antique sculpture and come to the Hermitage, a statue is nothing more than a statue to you, it’s merely a place. It tells you nothing. On the other hand, when you walk around the famous Petersburg statue of Voltaire, you will see how his face changes. The more immobile, the more visible the changes.

It is profoundly illusionary to think that the mobile changes and that which is in stone commemorates. Stone is the face of this city. Because it is stone, because it is immobile, because it is nailed down to geography with an iron nail—it has become dynamic. It is like a wave stone, it throws into culture and receives from culture. And finally it intrudes from without.

When a certain organism ends up in a certain habitat, on the one hand it seeks to reform this habitat according to itself, to remake it to suit itself, on the other hand the habitat seeks to subordinate the organism to itself. This constantly creates a complicated dynamic of interaction. That is the problem of Petersburg. And Petersburg is Russia...

This, by the way, is particularly noticeable in cities which stand on water. Generally—I’ve had cause to write about this before,—cities can be roughly divided into two groups: cities which are on a mountain, on continental soil, and cities which are on the shore of a river or in a river delta. These are principally different cities. Now Moscow—that’s a city on seven hills, a city which is always in the center. A city which, like Moscow, is in the center, inclines to concentricity and insularity; whereas a city which is on the edge or outside the border, it is aggressive (and not only in the military sense), it tries to go outside itself, it still needs to find a space in which it would be the center. And that is why Leningrad-Petersburg is now, as it were, ‘chopped-off’, because it needs to be a new center, otherwise it is devoid of meaning. Just so many cities of the Baltic now, because the Baltic has lost its historical meaning, must find themselves anew, like Konigsberg for instance. Imagine a Venice which has lost its water and stands on clay...
M.L. Well, if we’re speaking about Konigsberg, it is not only the water that went missing, there is a different historical situation, it has become Soviet Kaliningrad.

Y.L. I vouch that all of you (unlike myself, probably) will live to see it become Konigsberg again.”

Without Gordin’s biting passion, without Eidelman’s hypnotic web of illusion, but nonetheless clearly, powerfully and inescapably—the past is seamlessly tied to the present through temporal and mental cultural ties which are present on a nearly-instinctual level. An idea cannot be realized in principle because it is always tied to a single temporal moment and set of conditions…but then, what did the country in which Lotman and his readers lived their lives try to do, first with monstrous fervor and uncounted victims, and then with decreasing interest and increasing self-contempt, for nearly seventy years?.. If for two centuries the State tried to realize the mad dream of Peter I—for whose fantasies had their lives been spent?

For that matter, Lotman rather neatly shoots down the very idea on which Petersburg was founded to begin with. A cast-iron military encampment, meant as nothing more than as a defense against the Swedes (a purpose it was never called upon to fulfill in any case; even in the short-lived Russo-Swedish War of the 1790’s when the aging Empress Catherine proudly claimed that she would personally lead the last battalion of the Preobrazhensky Guard in

http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/LOTMAN/TOWN.HTM Given the current international situation this prediction becomes more and more likely by the day…
defense of the Winter Palace, Swedish troops still never came anywhere near the city). And as much as Paul I and his sons, during their combined sixty brilliant and fatal regnal years, attempted to resurrect that idea, trying to make the entire city march on parade (let’s remember, in the days of Nicholas I young clerks ran to their departments in the morning in answer to a drumroll!), life itself never allowed the idea to be realized. Whether the tragedy of poor Evgeniy in “The Bronze Horseman”, the phantasmagorical nightmares of Gogol’s tales of Nevsky Prospect, or the nauseating fog of Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment” (in which the city Pushkin adored and Gogol feared becomes the oppressive monster which Dostoyevsky loathed so bitterly as to make it not merely the main character, but the outright villain of his novel)…they all capture this dichotomy. The grand, overwhelming showroom of power reduced to nothing more than a background for the tiny lives of tiny people who, in their audacious, illegitimate and unjustifiable attempt to simply live, undermine and deconstruct that vision of itself that the city tries to maintain at any cost. Akaky Akakievich is, in his petty and unimportant person, a complete deconstruction of the image Peter I wished to create, and Nicholas I to embody and perpetuate.

Later in the same interview Lotman reminds that the city was never meant to be a home for real, living people. It was a display, a
showpiece of imperial authority, a vast parade ground meant to show all the magnificent of Imperial power, and without this power, without the status of a capital, it literally lost its very raison d’être.\textsuperscript{224}

One cannot but think back to Astolphe de Custine’s caustic query—what will happen if, someday, this illusionary city bursts like a soap-bubble?

Lotman’s way of writing about Petersburg and its culture—which is to say, of what we now perceive as “High Culture” in the Russian context, inextricably tied with the city,—depends greatly on this perception of the distance between the idea…no, the IDEA the state had constructed of itself, and the living people whose very existence made impossible the basis on which the idea sought to function. The fantasy Peter I and his descendants attempted to create was elegant, magnificent, overwhelmingly grand and painfully beautiful…and its only flaw was that its very existence depended on those terribly inelegant, underwhelmingly non-magnificent creatures known as human beings. How wonderful, how beautiful and orderly, how perfectly arranged this concept would be—had not human beings been necessary to make it into

\textsuperscript{224} Naum Korzhavin, one of the best Russian poets of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, wrote a poem in 1960 which captures this feeling precisely. “And Leningrad dreams of the imperial scepter, as an abandoned woman dreams of love.” Online via http://www.300.years.spb.ru/3_spb_3.html?id=99
reality, thereby destroying it from within in the very process of attempting to construct it.\textsuperscript{225}

It seems almost too obvious to say that the late-Soviet era readers, as well as Lotman’s students, would have had altogether too much material for comparison.

\textsuperscript{225} In a way we could compare this to James Joyce’s “Dubliners”. In reading, it becomes clear that Joyce would have loved to love Dublin…its peaceful river, its serene walks and green parks, its ineffable, timeless beauty…if only those damned Dubliners weren’t in the way!
The Ethical Historian

It is, I think, with Lotman, somewhat more perhaps than with the teacher-turned-writer Eidelman or geologist-turned-writer Gordin, that we may feel compelled to inquire more closely into that which the author himself considers to be the most significant peculiarities of the historical profession, as well as its connection to the significance of the individual human being. In one of a collection of articles originally published between the ‘60’s and ‘80’s, republished in London and New York in 1990 in an English translation by Ann Shukman under the title “Universe of the Mind: a semiotic theory of culture”, and republished in Moscow after additional editing (involving the involvement of Lotman’s rough drafts), under the title “Within Thinking Worlds: Man, Text, Semiosphere, History” (“Внутри Мыслящих Миров: Человек, Текст, Семиосфера, История”) in 1996, he approaches the question head-on.

“What are the tasks of the science of history? Is history a science? These questions have been posited many times and many answers have been given for them. A historian not inclined to theorizing, but occupied with research into specific material is usually inclined to be satisfied with Ranke’s formula: to restore the past ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’—as it really happened. The concept “to restore the past” [“восстановить”, literally to resurrect, to restore or to build anew] presupposes the ascertainment of facts and the determination of connections between them. The ascertainment of facts if the collection and comparison of documents as well as their scientific criticism. The criticism of a document, from Scaliger to Francis Bradley and his followers, has been understood as the exposure of non-genuine documents,
untrustworthy interpolations, tendentious versions. An important part of a historian’s preliminary work is the ability to read a document, the ability to understand its historical meaning, relying on textual skills and a researcher’s intuition.

However, even if we suppose that the reader possesses multifaceted erudition, experience and wit, his position will turn out to be, in principle, different than that of his colleague in any other scientific field. The problem is that by the very word ‘fact’ the historian means something extremely specific—‘своеобразное’—‘self-imaged’—as in, something unusual or unique, ‘imaged’ or ‘resembling’ nothing but itself. Another way of saying ‘indescribable’ really, for detailed descriptions must, almost always, involve comparisons (for instance, someone attempting to describe a person by saying that they have ‘blue eyes’ might, if lyrically inclined, be tempted to use something more specific such as ‘slate-blue’, cornflower-blue’, ‘navy-blue’ ‘sapphire-blue’, ‘midnight-blue’, ‘Donald-Duck’s-wet-shirt-blue’, ‘Stan-from-South-Park’s-hat-blue’, ‘North-Atlantic-blue’, ‘Swan-Pond’-in-the-Summer-Garden-in-St.-Petersburg-in-mid-June-at-three-forty-five-in-the-morning-when-viewed-from-the-North-Western-windows-on-the-second-floor-of-St.-Michael’s-Castle-blue’ &c, &c, &c...]. Unlike deductive sciences, which logically construct their basic premises, or experimental sciences which are capable of observing them, a historian is doomed [‘обречен’—‘doomed’, or ‘condemned’, which would carry much the same intonation here. There are no positive overtones in this word], to deal with texts. The conditions of experimental sciences allow, at the very least in the initial approach, to view the fact as something primary, initially given, something that antedates interpretation. A fact is observed in laboratory conditions, it possesses repeatability, it can be subjected to statistical analysis.

A historian is doomed to deal with texts [emphasis—Lotman’s]. Between the event ‘as it happened’ and the historian there stands the text, and this fundamentally changes the scientific situation. The text is always created by someone and with a certain aim, the event is presented within it in a ciphered fashion. The historian must, first of all, work as a decipherer. A fact, for him, is not an initial point, but the result of difficult effort. He himself creates facts, trying to draw an extra-textual reality from the text, the

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226 It seems worthwhile, purely for illustrative purposes, to note an example of the conversational writing style at the end of that sentence. Whether in Russian or English, it would have been more proper, in written terms, to end it with “—and tendentious versions”, but in terms of verbal delivery it makes perfect sense to spare one’s breath and continue or even emphasize the momentum of the list by deliberately leaving the sentence imperfect, incomplete, hanging with an unspoken ellipsis of that sort Eidelman loved using for much—a tiny hint for the reader to think beyond the limits of what the sentence has actually given... A characteristic motif for all three of our authors, though to widely varying extents.

227 See previous footnote.
event from a narration about it [emphasis—mine]. […] Deciphering is always reconstruction. In essence a researcher uses the same method in restoring a lost part of a document as he does in reading the preserved one. In both cases he is working on the premise that the document is written in another language [emphasis—Lotman’s] the grammar of which he has yet to compose.

Therefore, prior to ascertaining the facts ‘for himself’, a researcher ascertains the facts for the one who left the document to be researched. He encounters the fact that any document is incomplete in its reflection of reality, that there are enormous layers of reality which are not considered facts and are not subject to fixation. This area of the ‘excluded’ is not only enormous, but mobile. One could put together an interesting catalogue of ‘non-facts’ for different epochs.

However, knowledge of a certain general ‘worldview of an epoch’ does not save the case yet. Within the confines of the same epoch there exist different genres of texts, and each of them as a rule, has a specific code: that which is permitted in one genre—is forbidden in the other.

[…] There appears a complex and heterogeneous image of ‘the facts of the epoch’. Every genre, every culturally-meaningful variety of text chooses its own [emphasis—Lotman’s] facts. That which is fact for a myth is not fact for a chronicle, a fact for page 15 of a newspaper is not always a fact for page 1. Thus, from the viewpoint of the transmitter, a fact is always the result of choosing an event which according to his conception has meaning [emphasis—Lotman’s].

However, a fact is not a concept, it is text, that is, it always has a real, material incarnation, it is an event to which meaning is given, rather than meaning which, as in a fable, is given the appearance of an event. As a result, the fact—chosen by the sender—turns out to be broader than the meaning it is assigned in the code and therefore, possessing but one meaning for the sender,

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228 Such as the remnants of ritual cannibalism among the Teidzing people of North-Eastern Siberia… You didn’t know about that, did you? Did you, you lucky people? It’s ok, you still don’t. I made it up. But admit it…for a teensy-tiny fraction of a second, you wondered. It might be just between you, me, and this computer screen—but you wondered. I know you wondered, and you know I know you know that I know you wondered. Aren’t we…knowledgeable? [Ilia pets Mr. Bigglesworth and meaningfully elevates his pinky to corner of his mouth, with the brave air of one dancing in the light of his burning bridges.][Five points to those who catch the reference…]

229 Alternative facts, one might say…

230 Compare, for instance, with Italian 17th–18th century theater, in which tragedy demanded [poetically] elevated subjects described by [socially] elevated people in a [pompously] elevated style while the comedies were ‘doomed’ to deal with low people doing low things in terms of low humor. Think Voltaire vs. Shakespeare. Or consider the unbearably self-satisfied film “Mindwalk” vs. “Blazing Saddles” upon the making of which Mel Brooks famously declared “My movies rise below vulgarity!” It is curious to note that Carlo Gozzi’s 1762 ‘Turandot’ unblushingly blends the two styles and has the aristocrats recite elevated verse at each other while the plebs cheerfully mug in the very vernaculariest of vernacular.
for the received (including the historian) it is subject to interpretation [emphasis—Lotman’s]. A historian not only reconstructs the code of the sender of the document with the aim of finding out his view of the communicated facts, but is also forced to reconstruct the entire spectre of possible interpretations of that which contemporaries—receivers of the text—considered to be facts in this case, and of what value they assigned to them. Finally, that fact that the fact, being a text, inevitably includes extra-systemic elements, insignificant from the viewpoint of the codes of the epoch which created it, allows the historian to separate out that which from his point of view [emphasis—Lotman’s] appears meaningful.”

So, the main element here seems to be that a historian creates his own reality according to his own view of what appears meaningful. There seems to be nothing particularly shocking to this. As Lotman pointed out himself, that which is meaningful for page 15 of the “Home and Garden Sales” section of the “Chipping-Cleghorn and Much Bentham Gazette” is not meaningful for the front page of the “New York Times”. But the second part of the conjunction is by far the less significant. Let’s consider for a moment. In a simple little observation Lotman essentially goes on to turn historical science on its head. Historians do not research reality. They do not record reality. They do not even observe reality. They create it. Of course they create it. But not according to that which was actually meaningful. According to that which they consider meaningful. And that’s where all hell breaks loose. And on a far more terrifying scale than might appear plausible at first.

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History turns out to be—in the long run,—not that which actually occurred, but that which people believe occurred, and that is determined to a very large extent, by the people who write that which others read and believe. And so, the position of authority, of actual power when one thinks about it, is increased a thousand-fold, the moral responsibility which falls upon representatives of the profession becomes awestriking. Historians create that which the vast masses of people believe to have been real. History becomes that which historians believe to have happened. Every bit of knowledge—whether factual or not when you think about it, and that is even scarier,—becomes the mortar in the wall built with the bricks of belief… What’s worse, a historian is not proof against this effect upon himself.

“*It was said earlier that a historian is doomed to deal with texts. This circumstance has had a decisive effect not merely on the structure of a historical fact but also on its comprehension, on the idea of historical legitimacy. A historian does not observe events but receives their retelling in the form of narrative sources. But even when he is an observer of that which he describes (Herodotus and Caesar may be examples of this rare occasion), in his mind he still turns his observations into verbal text, since he conveys not that which he saw but his reflections over that which he saw, in retelling that which was seen. In former years historians have sometimes counter-posed the information received from verbal sources—as being ambivalent and demanding interpretation,—to those inarguable proofs from monuments of material culture given to archeology, the world of iconic images. However, since from the*

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232 One recalls the example made by Josephine Tey’s Brent Carradine III to the wise Inspector Alan Grant in her classic 1951 detective novel “Daughter of Time. “Truth isn’t in accounts, but in account books… The real history is written in forms not meant as history. In Wardrobe accounts, in Privy Purse expenses, in personal letters, in estate books. If someone, say, insists that Lady Whoosit never had a child and you find in the account book the entry: ‘For the son born to my lady on Michaelmas Eve, five yards of blue ribbon, fourpence halfpenny’ it’s a reasonably fair deduction that my lady had a son on Michaelmas Eve.”
viewpoint of semiotics all forms of communication are text and share all the consequences of the use of text as an intermediary, the question as to the significance the use of texts has to historical knowledge receives the most general meaning.”

The next section’s title is somewhat difficult. “Закономерность и Структура Текста”. “Закономерность” is approximately translatable as “consistency” or “regularity”; or (even more approximately), as “legitimacy”. None of these quite suit the case. “Закономерность” is composed of two roots. “Закон” is “law”. “Мера” is “measure”. Hence, “Закономерность” is tied to a sense of justice, balance and reasonable action vs. counteraction, somewhat compatible to the ancient Egyptian Maat. That which is “закономерно” is essentially that which can be reasonably expected. Fairness, if one can so express it. For instance, if you decide to rob the house of a Mafia kingpin, it is “закономерно” that you find yourself heading out for a trip to the woods in the trunks of two or three different cars... It is here that Lotman clashes slightly with the Annales School. The passage is worth quoting in full.

“The meaningful connection of narrative segments forms a plot, which is as much a law of narrative text as syntactic ties are the law of building a correct phrase. However, if a narration about reality demands a plot or plots, it does not necessarily follow that plots are an inherent trait of reality. Narrative text drags the events of real life, which fill a certain space-time continuum, into a linear-plot construction.

233 Within Thinking Worlds, p. 307.
Consequently, the very necessity for a historian to rely upon texts, and for texts to retell events in accordance the laws of linguistic, logical, rhetorical and narrative constructions is connected with the fact that historical reality is already deformed when it winds up in the researcher’s hands. One should add to this the ideological coding, of which consists the higher hierarchic level in the construction of narrative text and which presupposes genre codes, as well as ideopolitical ones, social, religious, philosophical ones and so on.

A desire to overwhelm the abovementioned difficulties of the science of history has, in a certain measure, determined the appearance, in French historiography over the last fifty years, of that movement which has nowadays formed into the school of l’histoire nouvelle, l’histoire de la longue durée.

A direct impulse to the appearance of scientific research in this direction was the obvious crisis of political history of the positivist sort, which by the second half of the 19th century was going through a stage of compilation-ship and theoretical impoverishment. A yearning to rid history of the deeds of rulers and the biographies of great people engendered an interest in the life of the masses and anonymous processes. In numbering the forerunners to this view on history Jacques le Goff recalls Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Guizot and Michelet. We, on our part, would enrich the list with Leo Tolstoy who persistently repeated that true history is achieved in private life and in mass, unconscious movements, and who did not cease to mock apologies of ‘great people’.

However, the l’histoire nouvelle movement had a more serious meaning than a desire to disassociate itself from a scientific eclecticism which had already discredited itself. One of the basic impulses was a desire to leave the boundaries of the charmed circle we mentioned earlier. This led to the criticism of the very notion ‘historical fact’ and to a desire to rid history of ‘historic personalities’. It is in this connection that we know the famous slogan of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch: ‘L’histoire des hommes, non de l’Homme’. The demand to study faceless, collective historical impulses which determine the actions of masses which are unconscious of the forces acting upon them has engendered the innovational thematic of this school which leads the historian far beyond the limits of routine research themes. Here we might recall the works of J. Le Goff himself, J. Delumeau, M. Vovelle, P. Aries, from the Italian historians—C. Ginzburg.

No less notable is the desire to evade the customary plotness ['сюжетность’ from ‘сюжет’ or ‘plot] of historical narrative. Factually, it is precisely this that is connected with the yearning for ‘long term’ history or, as Fernand Braudel was to say with greater boldness, ‘l’histoire presqu’immobile’, or even more decisively,
‘l’histoire immobile.’ True, such an extreme did not find favor. However, the tendency to bring history closer to anthropology, to focus attention on the slowest processes clearly reveals a desire to avoid the dangers of narrative history. In the end, history is likened to a sort of geological process which acts upon people but not with the help of people.

The direction taken by the school of ‘long-term’ history (or ‘long-breath’ as it is also called) has brought a breath of fresh air to the science of history and has enriched it with a selection of researches which have already become classical.

However, not all the principles of this school can be accepted without objection. History is not only a conscious process, but it is also not only an unconscious process. It is the mutual tension between the one and the other. Histoire de la longue durée developed under the flag of broad scientific synthesis. This was demonstratively indicated in the title of the journal ‘Revue de Synthese Historique’ and the title of H. Berr’s 1921 work ‘L’histoire traditionnelle et la synthese historique’. This was also emphasized by Marc Bloch. However, it leaps to attention that the synthesis, mainly conducted on the basis of economics and sociology, had completely bypassed linguistics, even though that was precisely where the most revolutionary changes were happening at the time.

On the other hand when, after the historic contact between R.O. Jacobson and Claude Levi-Strauss, in the works of the latter anthropology and ethnology relied on linguistics, which became one of the most significant scientific events of the ending century, the French historical school practically ‘didn’t notice’ it. At the same time, French structuralism developed under the flag of synchronous analysis and did not intrude on the territory of ‘foreign’ historians. [...With the aid of a few citations from his old friend Boris Uspensky, whom Lotman thanks for aid with this section in a preliminary footnote, the author then goes on to briefly remind the reader that the history of language, at least in cultures based on literacy, develops ‘in the tension of two poles: living, verbal speech and the written tradition of books’. Then:]

The history of language is a mass and anonymous objet—a process la longue durée. But the history of literary language is a history of creation, a process connected with individual activity and a heightened degree of unpredictability. If political history had disregarded one side in the bi-unity of the historical process, the ‘new history’ does the same in regard to the other side. Just like the history of language, any dynamic process which takes place with the participation of a human being wavers between the pole of ceaseless slow changes that characterize processes upon which the consciousness and will of man has no influence, and which frequently are not even noticed by contemporaries because their
periodicity is longer than the life of a generation, and the pole of conscious human activity which takes place as a result of personal efforts of will and intellect. To tear the two sides apart is as impossible as to separate North from South. Their counter-position is a condition of their existence. Moreover, these are tendencies which are realized on all levels. And just as in Byron’s brilliant individuality one can isolate blocks of anonymous mass processes, so in the creativity and personality of any ‘mass culture’ actor of European Byronism in the early 19th century one can find moments of creative unrepeatability. All that is done by people and with the participation of people cannot, in one measure or another, not belong to the anonymous processes of history, nor can it not belong, in one measure or another, to personal incipience. This is defined by the very meaning of the man’s relationship with culture—the one-time isomorphism of the personality to its universe and the necessity of being merely a part of it. Moreover which of these two incarnations one or another element of history takes in a given case is determined not by its inborn essence but from the position taken by the describing historian. Is [Beau] Brummel a fact of mass culture, to which we can willingly assign him, following a habitual disdain for such elements as fashion, or is he an individuality which left an imprint on the anonymous, ‘slow’ history of his time? The simple transfer of a fact from one line of connections to another can make the traditional into the individual.

A differing degree of participation by conscious human effort in different levels of a single historical process simultaneously concerns both differences in evaluating the role of accident on the one side, and the creative possibilities of the individuality on the other. The task to ‘liberate history from great men’ may turn into history without creativity and history without thought and freedom: freedom of thought freedom of will, that is, a possibility of a choice of paths.²³⁴

And so, as we see, Lotman’s primary source of disagreement with the Annalists was their tendency to isolationism, the exclusion of linguistics from their synthesis of economics and sociology, and their desire to focus more on anonymous, long-term processes from which they practically excluded the element of individual human

contribution—history became that which acts upon people but is not acted upon by them. And with this Lotman disagrees in principle. He does not go to the extreme of Gordin who considers history nothing more (though nothing less), than the actions and interactions of individual human beings, Lotman will admit the existence and role played by large, anonymous, slow processes, certainly. But key moments in history—moments which Lotman calls ‘moments of bifurcation’,—occur when individual human beings end up in a time and place when their decisions and actions matter—key stitches in the vast tapestry from which the strings lead to countless other knots and twists. History without ‘great men’ risks becoming a history purely of long-term processes, in which case the actions of individual human beings practically lose importance. Lotman—who lived his entire life in a country where the choices made by ordinary individuals carried the significance of life and death on a far greater scale than ordinary—is not inclined to accept this position. Certainly long-term processes of the sort traced by economics and sociology are important for understanding the species’ status quo, but only the history of individuals can help understand how this species managed to achieve this status quo and what attempts it might make to change it.

"The documental history of mankind has already lasted thousands of years. If the historical process did not have a mechanism of unpredictability, that is if it did not turn on accidents, not as embroidery which illuminates from above the background of
constantly-acting factors (as Lefebvre phrased in his review of F. Braudel's book), but in the quality of an important functioning mechanism, history would long since have become excessive and we would be able to foretell its development in advance. As we know—this has not occurred. Even where the role of the individual personality is negligible and the preceding condition of the system sufficiently well known (as, for instance, in the history of economics over the last three centuries, in the history of specific languages, in the history of technical inventions or habitual rituals), attempts at foretelling have been marked not by success but by magnificent failures. All the more this applies to the history of Man's creative endeavors which l’histoire nouvelle lost along with the cult of great people.

Let the reader not misunderstand me. The works of the school l’histoire nouvelle are perceived in modern historiography as a breath of fresh aid, and reading the works of Braudel, J. Le Goff, J. Delumeau, M. Vovelle, etc. brings the specialist not only professional, but also aesthetic delight, for the beauty of clear thought is also beauty. The criticism of certain aspects of the methodology of these researches is merely called upon to point out the necessity of further movement, and certainly not to cross out the path that has already been trodden.

Behind the methodology of this school one can see that age-old scientific psychology which was based on the conviction that where determinacy ends, so does science."

The variety and unpredictability of human beings attracted Lotman, and as interested as he is in the larger patterns forming the tapestry, he is by no means willing to forget the small stitches.

He was not willing to allow history to be reduced to the clockwork predictability of long-term patterns—it is the unpredictable, the possible-but-not-yet-(or-ever)-achieved that fascinated and drew him. And it is no wonder that, like our other

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235 Ibid. p. 317
236 Consider, for instance, the vast 1420’s-1430’s Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers. 11’X15’ in size, a vast landscape, countless multitudes of people—but is the eye drawn more to the over-all magnificence or to the skill of the miniaturist which, on so large a scale, allowed us to delight in the gleam of the tiniest pearls and gems, the shimmer of golden embroidery and the rich texture of the silk mantles, the Gothic tracery on the spire of the cathedral in the background…?
authors, he was drawn to the Alexandrian period and to the Decembrist Rebellion. It was the best opportunity to study the dilemma of man vs. State at a safer distance than the still-too-green memories of the 20th century. The problems presented by this period in Russian history were, understandably, particularly tempting, for they showed in a magnificently lucid light, the intersection of l’histoire de longue durée and the individual human element: the struggle between long-term processes and individual consciences. The anonymous, slow historical development of the Russian State came into contact with thinking people, capable of making a conscious choice—who sincerely considered that they are personally responsible for that State and its wellbeing...

“At the same time, to imagine anonymous processes as being the domain of determinacy and individual activity as the realm of accident would be an unpardonable oversimplification. First of all, there are no elements in history which would be either fully anonymous, or 100% determined by personal effort. In each of them it is easy to separate out both. The question is merely one of their proportion. Secondly: both of these tendency have known their periods of calm, predictable flow and sharp explosions, when determinacy and clear predictability take the back seat. More important is that which makes up the specificity of historical development—development the elements of which are thinking units possessed of will. As far back as 1929 L. Szilard published a work declaratively entitled ‘On the decline of entropy in a thermodynamic system with the interference of a thinking creature’. History is a process which takes place ‘with the interference of a thinking creature’. This means that in points of bifurcation there comes into action not only the mechanism of accident but also the mechanism of conscious choice which becomes the most important objective element of the historical process. An understanding of this in a new light brings out the necessity of historical semiotics—an analysis of how the world is perceived by that human unit that is to make the choice. In a certain sense, this is close to that which the ‘new
history’ terms ‘mentality’. However, the results of research in this area as well as the comparison of that which has been done by V.N. Toporov, B.A. Uspensky, Vyach.Vs. Ivanov, A.A Zaliznyakov, A.M. Pyatigorsky and many others in the reconstruction of various ethnocultural types of consciousness, convincingly shows that it is precisely the historical semiotics of culture which present a most perspective-rich path in this direction.

In examining the historical process in the direction time’s arrow points, the bifurcation points prove to be historical moments when the pressure of contradictory structural poles reaches of a moment of the highest tension and the entire system comes out of a balanced condition. At that moment the behavior of individual people as well as masses stops being automatically predictable, determinacy retreats into the background. Historical movement in these moments should be perceived not as a trajectory but as a continuum, which can potentially be resolved by a number of variants. These knots, with lowered predictability, are the moments of revolution of sudden historical shifts. The choice of the path which will actually be realized depends on a complex of accidental conditions but, to an even greater extent, on the self-sensation of the actors. It is not accidental that in such moments, a word, a speech, propaganda take on a particularly important, historical significance. At the same time, if prior to the choice being made there had existed an undetermined situation, then after its realization there comes into existence a principally new situation for which it is already a necessity, a situation which becomes a given for the next movement. Accidental prior to realization, a choice become determined after. Retrospectivity increases determinacy. For further movement it is the first link in the new legitimacy [‘закономерность’, in other words, the new norm].”

The Alexandrian period attracts Lotman not merely because it is the Golden Age of poetry, nor because it is the age of grand victories and achievements (let’s not deny Alexander—or even poor, poor Paul—what is due, a good deal was done), but because he views this as the period when Russia produced the best people it was ever going to produce...at least thus far. Pushkin and the Decembrists hold an unequalled place in Russian history. Their

237 Ibid. p. 324-25
dedication to the welfare of the country—as they saw it bien sur; their selflessness, their willingness to lose all they had for the sake of what they considered their duty...

This is a unique moment in Russian history, and whether or not one agrees with any one or all of their multiplicity of programs for the future, it is almost impossible to avoid a sense of admiration for the sheer courage that had been necessary for them to go against the entirety of their world. I must admit that, personally, I find many of their programs not merely unacceptable but—from the viewpoint of later history,—downright loathsome. I must admit also that, for all his endless flaws, I do not consider Nicholas I to have been the worst (yes, Constantine was likely to have been worse, by far!) nor the most incapable person ever to occupy the Russian throne, indeed, I must admit that in many things he is deserving of respect. I cannot consider, in all conscience, that their victory would have been, overall, a win for the country—but their defeat, alas, proved to be its defeat as well as their own, in the long run.

I really wish I could say that there had been a win-win scenario in all this...

In another article from the same anthology—“On the Role of Typological Symbols”,—Lotman discusses several interesting

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238 “Cough...Pestel!...Cough!
distinctions between European and Russian historical development. One of the key points on which he focuses his attention is the concept of agreement [“договорность” from “договор”—“agreement” or “contract”, although under certain conditions “negotiation” might fit. “Agreementism”? “Contractism”? Etymologically the meaning is curious. The root “говорить” means “to talk”. Thus in Russian “договориться”—to come to terms, to achieve an agreement between two or more parties is literally “to talk [one’s way to a settlement]"], in the sense of a legal, binding pact, and the entirely different ways this was perceived in Western and Russian societies. His reasoning on the matter does a great deal to illuminate this cardinal distinction which, we could easily argue, has been largely responsible for the curious situation in which Russia, over many centuries has failed and today is still failing to develop a viable middle class.

He begins by outlining the four basic characteristics of magical as opposed to religious systems. In brief.

Magical systems are marked by the following characteristics:

1) They are mutual. Both parties are active participants—for instance a sorcerer commits a certain actions in return for which the invoked power commits its own. There are no unilateral arrangements in magic.
2) They are mandatory. Certain actions on the part of one side lead to mandatory and precisely foreseen actions on the part of the other.

3) They are equivalent. The relations of counteragents in a magical system are those of an equivalent exchange, to which they can be subject just as well as other signs.

4) They are based on a contract [“договорность”]. The sides enter into a sort of pact, which can be either implied or marked by external manifestations (contracts, vows, signing with your own blood, that sort of thing). However, the presence of a contract presupposes the possibility of breaking it no less than in real life. Hence the inevitable possibility of various interpretations of the contract, and the desire of both sides to invest the formulas with a favorable meaning.

Religious systems, on the other hand, are based not a model of exchange, but on a model of surrender. One side recognizes the other as a carrier of a higher power (as Lotman himself notes in a footnote, this does not mean this power must be good, it is perfectly possible to bow down to an evil power), and surrenders itself completely and unconditionally.

Religious systems are marked by the following four characteristics:

1) They are unilateral: the subject who gives himself into the hands of a higher power counts on patronage but there is not necessarily a
connection between his action and the reaction of this higher power. Failure to receive the patronage or reward requested is not a sufficient basis to break the agreement.

2) From this it follows that the relationship is of a non-mandatory nature: one side gives all and the other may give or not, it is as free to give to the unworthy as to leave the worthy unrewarded.

3) The relationship is not equivalent, it excludes the psychology of exchange. There can be no possibility of deceit or interpretation, therefore instead of signs, symbols are used, the nature of which excludes the possibility of alienating expression from content.

4) As a result—relations of this type are not, in their nature, a form of a contract, they are an unconditional gift.

Naturally, Lotman adds,—he is discussing a model. Real world religions always needed one degree or another of magical psychology. For instance, giving up on the idea of a relationship between man and God which could be based on a level of equivalent exchange, people compensated by resorting to an idea of posthumous retribution, in other words a mandatory, unquestionably determined and consequently justified relationship between this earth and the otherworldly realm.

“The official church of the pagan Roman Empire in its later centuries, the façade of which concealed deeply hidden cults of a religious character, was a magical one. A system of sacrifices made to the gods was the foundation for a contract-based relationship with them, and official veneration of the Emperor had the nature of a pact with the state. It was precisely due to the traits of magism
[sic.] listed above that a Roman’s ‘religion’ contradicted neither his developed juridical thinking—rooted in the very depth of his cultural psychology,—nor the structure of a developed legalistic state. [...] 

Pagan cults in Russia seem to have been of a shamanic, which is to say of a magical character. The coincidence of Russia accepting Christianity and the formation of the Kievan state led to a number of significant consequences in the aspect which interests us. The dual faith [“двоеверие”] which came into existence gave two opposite models of public relations. The relationship between the Prince and his druzhina needed to be formalized and inclined to a contract-based model [“договорность”]. Such a model most adequately reflected the existing system of feudal ties based upon patronage—vassalage, the entire structure of mutual rights and responsibilities and the etiquette-sign exchange upon which rested the ideological décor of chivalric society. The tradition of Russian magical paganism here organically entered that order which was formed as a result of the European synthesis of the tribal rules of barbarian peoples and the Roman juridical tradition, which held on firmly in the old cities of the Empire, with their communes which stood up for their rights, with their complex system of legal relationships and with their abundance of lawyers. 

However, if in the West contract-based consciousness [“договорное сознание”], magical in its distant origins, was surrounded by the authority of the imperial tradition of statehood, and took an equivalent place alongside its religiously-authoritative counterpart, in Russia it was perceived as pagan in its very nature. This put the seal on its public evaluation. It is demonstrative that in the Western tradition a contract is neutral; it can be sealed with the devil [...] but a contract is also possible with the forces of holiness and goodness. [...]Lotman goes on to recall an agreement between St. Francis of Assisi and a ferocious wolf that lived near Gubbio.] 

Neither in the popular nor in the medieval-literary tradition in Russia do we find such texts: a contract is possible only with an infernal power or its pagan equivalents (the contract between the peasant and the bear). First of all, that throws an emotional reflection on the contract as such—it is devoid of the aura of a cultural value [emphasis—mine. ILS]. In the chivalric habitus of the West, where the relationship between God and the Saints could be modeled on the Suzerain—Vassal system and obey a conditional ritual, along the lines of a conference of knighthood and the service to a Lady, a contract, a binding ritual, a gesture, parchment and seals are given an aura of sanctity and receive the highest authority in terms of values [“ценностью авторитет”]239. In Russia a

239 We can recall the Roman custom of striking legal agreements in a basilica—which was decorated with an enormous statue of the Emperor, located in far end from the entrance, in the apse in front of which
contract is perceived as a purely human affair (meaning: ‘human’ as opposed to ‘divine’). The introduction of the rite of kissing the cross when it is necessary to seal a bargain bears witness precisely to the fact that without an unconditional and extra-contractual authority it is not considered sufficiently guaranteed. Secondly, in all cases when a contract is made with an evil power [in Russian literally “нечистая сила”, an “unclean power”, a power of darkness or at the very least a seriously non-Christian one. It is telling that in common parlance the words “нечисть”—“unclean power”, and “нечристь”—“un-Christened person” are phonetically similar and can be used by the uneducated nearly as synonyms. For your average, 19th century Russian peasant there was very little difference, spiritually speaking, between the forest witch Baba Yaga and a Zoroastrian,—both were equally real and equally damned], keeping to it is sinful, while breaking it leads to salvation. It is precisely in dealing with the unclean powers that the conditional nature of word-sign communication comes into play, allowing one to use words for the purpose of deceit. […]

In connection with this, the system of relations founded in medieval society—a system of mutual obligations between the superior power and the feudal lords—very early on receives a negative assessment. So, Daniel the Prisoner,240 in persuading the Prince that the members of the Duma (“думцы”) are ‘sly’ servants and lead their sovereign into sorrow, counter-poses them to an ideal of fidelity: he himself is not ashamed to be likened to a dog. […] Service by contract is bad service. Even Peter I, in irritation, wrote to Prince B. Sheremetev, whom he suspected in secret sympathy to old Boyar rights.

‘It is as though a servant, seeing his master drowning, wishes not to save him until he checks—is it written in his contract that he should take him out of the water.’

One can compare those words with Kurbatov’s letter to Peter:

‘Truly I wish to work for you, Sovereign, without any pretense, as for God.’

This is not an accidental comparison—it is deeply rooted. Centralized power—in a far more direct form than in the West—was built on a model of religious relationships. The isomorphic model Christian churches would later place the altar. Thus every business deal took place under the Emperor’s own [marble] eyes and was possessed of additional authority. An agreement struck in a basilica was more than an agreement struck anywhere else, for the mortal embodiment of the State (in its present marble incarnation), had sanctified it by his very presence. One might compare this to some twenty statuettes of Gudea, Governor of the city of Lagash in Southern Mesopotamia who ruled between approximately 2144-2124 BC. His stone image (made, as the inscription on one statuette proudly proclaims, not of base bronze, nor of common gold or silver—but of the most expensive, imported diorite!) was present in every major and most minor temples in the city, as a sign of his unspoken presence at the temple rites.

240 “Даниил Заточник”, Russian author, 12th—13th centuries.
shown in ‘Domostroi’—God to the Universe, the Tsar to the realm, the father to the family, reflected three levels of unconditional surrender of man, and copied the religious system of relationships on other levels. The concept of ‘the Sovereign’s service’ [“государева служба”] which appeared under these conditions presupposed the absence of conditions between the two sides: from the one there was expected an unconditional and total surrender of self; and from the other—mercy [“милость”], which in Russian can mean “mercy”, “generosity” or “favor”. A royal favorite can be said to have fallen into favor with the phrase “впал в милость”. [The concept of ‘service’ genetically hailed back to the psychology of the unfree members of the prince’s ‘votchina’ apparatus. As the role of this bureaucracy, personally dependent on the prince, grew, turning it into a government bureaucracy, as well as the role of the prince’s hired troops, the ‘voinniks’, the psychology of the princely court became the state psychology of the service folk [“—служивого люда”]. Religious feelings were transferred to the sovereign—service turned into serving. [An extremely difficult phrase. “Служба превращалась в служение”. “Служба” is “service” in the military or bureaucratic sense of the word (hence “слуга”—“service” and “служить” is “to be of service. “Служение” carries religious overtones—it refers to the sort of service rendered as a ritual, service through devotion—not merely service (i.e. work) for money. A person who sweeps a monastery courtyard does it as a “служба”, whereas the nun who meditates while pacing the cloister around that courtyard does so as a form of “служение”.] Worthiness [“Достоинство”—worthiness or dignity] was defined by mercy [“милость”].

This is a key moment for us for several reasons. First of all, it brings to mind the first chapter and Eidelman’s arguments about Russia’s problem with a financial, contractual approach to business and law. Lotman has found the ideological basis which has stood behind this massive problem, or at least he outlines it with sufficient clarity. A country which views the role of a contract as negative will always suffer from a misunderstanding and mistrust of finances and business. But what is far more significant is that the State,—

241 Ibid. pp. 359-64
“Власть” or “the Power [that be]”—perceives itself as something that is served, not something which makes contracts or equivalent exchanges of any variety. It exists to be served—it has the right to dole out its mercies and generosity as it sees fit, regardless of any questions of morality, propriety or legality. We recall the famous phrase of Ivan IV: “For we are free to be merciful unto our slaves, as we are also free to execute them.” In Ivan’s first letter to Kurbsky—that phenomenal monument of furious vituperation where Ivan does the most he has ever done for historical science to lay himself bare as an individual—he blames his former friend and trusted supporter for having, besides many lesser crimes, dared escape his royal judgment. And it is not the rightness or wrongness of that judgment that concerns Ivan—no, no. It is the fact that a slave of his dared escape the death he had prepared—and it is in that very offense against his sovereign right to do as he desires with his property that the mad Tsar sees his former associate’s most terrible and unforgivable crime.

This helps us understand why the Decembrist generation was willing to go to the extent that they were. They had understood, within their small, human, short-term process that the long-term, anonymous process of Russian state development had turned against them. They had understood that there is no chance to persuade the state to view its relationship with them as a contract. From their
viewpoint—illuminated by a century of European education and contact—their service to the state had been, as it were, a down payment for the benefit of future generations, just as their own privileged position was the result of a similar down payment made by their ancestors. Peter I had raised their ancestors—in some cases from very low places indeed—in return for absolute loyalty and a guaranteed drive for reform. From their point of view, in other words, there had been a form of a contract between their estate and the Imperial government led and personified (at the moment) by Alexander I. And it was only when they realized that he has no intention of perceiving things in the same light, only when they realized that they, as it were, were approaching the question from the viewpoint of magic rather than from his viewpoint of religion that they decided to act desperately.

“Power—from the perspective of Russian medievalism’s symbolic consciousness, is endowed with traits of holiness and truth. Its value is unconditional—it is the image of heavenly power and embodies eternal truth. The rituals with which it surrounds itself are a semblance of heavenly order. Before its face, an individual man appears not as one side of a contract, but as a drop flowing into the sea. In giving himself he asks for nothing in return but for the right to give himself.”

Thus, even a man who served the state was, de facto, ordered to accept his place within it unconditionally and uncomplainingly. That is what Ivan IV had demanded of Kurbsky. The only thing the state demanded of its subject, Lotman says on page 368, was

\[^{242}\text{Ibid, p. 366.}\]
practical service which brings real results. Their concern about the social side of their life and activity is perceived by the state as ‘laziness’, ‘slyness’, or even ‘treason’.

Of course, we would be justified in arguing that the Petrine reforms brought a change from the old pattern. Life was ‘de-symbolized’, practical work was raised to the very height of the hierarchy of values when previously it had been at the bottom, the symbols of the previous world were torn down, trampled, mocked and degraded, to be replaced with “The poetry of craft, of useful skills, of actions which are neither signs nor symbols but are valuable in and of themselves...”\textsuperscript{243} However, here Lotman [gratifyingly] agrees with us in considering that:

\begin{quote}
“The 18\textsuperscript{th} century brought deep changes to the entire system of Russian culture. However, the new step of public psychology and the semiotics of culture was a transformation of that preceding one, not a complete break with it. […] 

The image of the worker-Tsar had been frequently repeated from Simeon Polotsky’s ‘Delati’ from the ‘Vetrograd Mnogotsvetny’ anthology to Pushkin’s ‘Stanzas’. However, the overturned system not only differed from but also resembled its original form: Petrine statehood was not an embodied statehood because in itself it presented a final truth and, having no authority above itself, was no one’s representative and image. Hover it, just like the pre-Petrine centralized statehood demanded faith in itself and complete dissolution within itself. A man entrusted himself to it. A secular religion of statehood was created and ‘practicality’ ceased to be an extra-semiotic area.”\textsuperscript{244}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid. p. 369
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid. p. 369-70
However, whether the state wished it or not, a change had also been wrought in its perceived nature and in the nature of its perceived responsibilities.

“The pound-for-pound weight of contractual semiotics changes radically in the general structure of the culture of the epoch. Almost fully destroyed along with the entire cultural heritage of the early Russian Middle Ages is received a powerful support from Western cultural influence. In the speeches of Feofan Prokopovich and other publicists of the Petrine camp the political concept of Puffendorf and Hugo Grotius, uniquely passed through the Russian tradition, received a chance to develop. The Tsar’s power is perceived as given by God and is justified by a reference to the Apostle Paul (Letter to the Ephesians). However, at the same time it is maintained that the Tsar, having taken power, enters into an unspoken contract, taking on the responsibility of ruling for the good of his subjects. In ceasing to be a symbol, the Tsar is just as bound to practically serve his subjects as they are to serve him.”

But of course, this is precisely what the post-Catherinian Romanovs proved tragically unable to understand...

As did the Soviet rulers who demanded so stubbornly and so foolishly that the Soviet State be served with absolute, religious loyalty, that human beings devote themselves upon its altar unconditionally, that the question of the price it demands for its miracles never be asked aloud...

The greatest, most vital distinguishing mark that all three of our historians—as well as many others before them,—have noted was the overwhelming, dominant, vital sense of personal honor and

245 Ibid. p. 370
dignity which not only refused to submit before the state, but indeed sought to deconstruct the idea the state had of itself, by arguing that only in backing men of honor could the state possibly hope to hold high that which it perceived as its own. We remember from Eidelman the simple, commonplace disagreement between the mid-ranking diplomat Gorchakov and the nearly-omnipotent favorite Benckendorff in a Vienna inn, which nearly killed the future Chancellor’s career. It was that tragic inability of the state to come to terms with the best men it had available, the very men it had raised to aid it, which led to the monstrous failure of December 14th. The following ninety-two years became, in hindsight, an attempt by the state to make up for that mistake on its own terms, to do on its own, even against significant resistance, that which it once could have done so easily, with so much popular support...had it only done so in time. Not for nothing does Gordin see the Alexandrian era as a time not merely of achievement, but of the greatest, most terrible failure of the century. He sees it as the time when the omnipotent state had a chance to work side by side with the men it had raised, had educated to aid in the tiresome work of statecraft...a chance the state—or rather, Alexander I personally—had been (frankly), too cowardly to use. This is not to say that Lotman inclined wholly to the “great men” school. It’s not the school he objected to, it’s the ‘greatness’ of the figures the school used. They didn’t have to be
great—they just had to be *men* with all that implies; it is their humanity, their weaknesses and failures that fascinate him as much as their successes and triumphs. As Neil Gaiman and the late Sir Terry Pratchett so wisely noted in “Good Omens”:

“It may help to understand human affairs to be clear that most of the great triumphs and tragedies of history are caused, not by people being fundamentally good, or fundamentally bad, but by people being fundamentally people.”

Honor and dignity. Again and again we encounter those words, and again and again we are forced into the realization that our three historians were bound in an impossible trap: they took these words as seriously as did the men of whom they wrote—and they were writing for a country full of people most of whom had simply forgotten that these words existed, let alone that there had once been a time when they had had a more than rhetorical meaning. What is worse, they wrote in a context within which these ideas were not easy or safe to use. The older generation—the generation of the authors themselves, or their parents,—personally remembered a time when an attempt to act in accordance with the concepts those words carried could cost a person everything, up to and including their life. Lotman, like his younger contemporaries Eidelman and Gordin, quite literally lived in a country which, while praising honor, decency, loyalty and dignity, made any real attempt to incorporate these into one’s daily life into a case of high treason.
From Lotman’s position it was precisely the timely possibility of efflorescence that allowed these qualities to play so vital a part in the development of the men he viewed not merely as his personal heroes, but as the heroes of his country and culture par excellence. For a brief time—a decade or so—these men flourished, made plans, dreamed…

In chapter 8 of Lotman’s biography of Pushkin, where Lotman describes the poet’s short-lived attempt to start up an official, political newspaper with the aid of the Powers That Be, we encounter the following passage:

“The poem “To Russia’s Slanderers” was benevolently viewed by Nicholas I (though, Chaadayev also greeted it ecstatically, naming Pushkin a ‘national poet’ in this regard: Pushkin’s friends such as A.I. Turgenev or Viazemsky viewed the poem coldly, or even with direct dislike). Pushkin had an illusory thought ['У Пушкина мелькнула иллюзорная мысль': meaning “an illusory thought flashed/blinking/winked chez Pushkin’] about having possibility of having influence on the government, of standing against Bulgarin’s tall-bearing. The possibility to unite the historical might of power and the incorruptibility of honest Russian writers seemed too tempting. Through Benckendorff Pushkin appealed to Nicholas I with a request to permit him to publish an official political gazette. Ruling circles showed an interest in Pushkin’s project: former members of the Arzamas group, now quickly rising—the renegades Bludov and Uvarov—inclined to this idea. After some formal delays permission was given. However, Pushkin soon realized with whom [emphasis—Lotman’s] he would have to cooperate and cooled to his idea, put off its execution by a year, and then, quietly, gave it up altogether. The hopes that the government of Nicholas I would learn a lesson from the shock of 1830-1831 and would turn to the realization of needed ['назревших’—literally ripened, matured. In other words, reforms for which the time had come] reforms were not meant to come true. The political incapacity of those who stood at the helm of government was shown in that the question of social contradictions concerned them less than a yearning to oppose their
Practically everything is significant in this passage. As Eidelman had phrased it in his “Revolutions from Above”:—the problem lay not in that little was given, but in the historical inflexibility of those who were doing the giving. The prohibition of the discussion of social ills—precisely that which Gordin termed ‘false stability’. Can we even imagine Russian history turning aside here? The State of Nicholas I—heeding the warnings his brother had deliberately chosen to ignore, choosing the slow and difficult path of reform over the maintenance of the status quo, bringing the remaining Decembrist sympathizers into the circles of the ruling elite…and Pushkin, defended and patronized by the state, official editor of the state’s political gazette, living long, rich in honors and titles…

But that was impossible. And not only because of the state. Because of Pushkin’s own personality. He saw that he would have had to deal, on a daily basis, with people he held in overwhelming contempt—and gave up on the project which could have brought him, as well as Russia perhaps, a great deal of benefit.

One should note by the way, that it is not as though these were particularly contemptible people. Bludov—one of the

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246 http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/LOTMAN/PUSHKIN/CHAPT08.HTM
founders of the Arzamas group, friend to Karamzin and Zhukovsky; Uvarov, a talented antiquarian with a true passion for history, who did a great deal during his tenure as Minister of Popular Enlightenment to improve the educational system of the Empire…these were capable and intelligent people with very real achievements to their credit, and the careers they made speak of far more than an ability to flatter and please. After all, let us say what we will of Nicholas I but to give credit where it is due, he possessed a capable manager’s ability to surround himself with able and hard-working people, he knew how to value them and reward them for their work, how to be as generous as he had been demanding. It is not that these were foolish or dishonorable people,—but they were people who were, in principle, willing to work for and with the State and there Pushkin, after some hesitation, drew, perhaps a rather arbitrary, but nonetheless a very firm line. A line which, neither immediately nor very directly but nonetheless, led to his death—but that was not too high a price to pay for the maintenance of dignity which was, for him, a purely personal concept.

“Pushkin liked to underline his 600 year-old noble status, but inwardly he was devoid of aristocracy. In dealing with people of Vorontsov’s or Uvarov’s type he had had many an occasion to become convinced that in Russia, ‘aristocracy’ is fatally joined to slavishness and that personal dignity exists only among those who are never, not for a single moment in life, guaranteed against insult.”247 Only in those who are incapable of tolerating insult

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247 And once again, let’s consider these lines from the viewpoint of the average Soviet reader who, not belonging to Eidelman’s ‘two unflogged generations’, was never, for a single moment in life, guaranteed
‘without raising a furious noise about it’ does there live a true aristocracy of the spirit, a respect for ‘the thought and dignity of man’. Friends saw an unjustified jealousy in Pushkin’s behavior, even a lack of upbringing, and blamed the African blood that flowed in his veins. In reality this was the stored-up pain of human dignity which was defended by nothing but pride and a willingness to die.”

Once again (and not to seem petty), there really does seem to be a definite injustice here. Not even so much on Lotman’s part—whether it be under the influence of too close a personal acquaintance with his subject upon years of studying Pushkin, or under that of more than five generations of cultural veneration for him, but he seems to be reluctant to criticize the poet unless absolutely necessary, but rather on the part of Pushkin. What he considered slavishness, an unbecoming desire to please social superiors, had been for people like Vorontsov and Uvarov (Bludov as well), merely etiquette. Akin to clipping your nails or refraining from blowing your nose in the tablecloth. They too were not guaranteed against insult (for that matter they—unlike Pushkin—personally remembered Paul’s reign when they had not been

against insult from any person—from teachers, to managers, to salesmen in grocery stores, all of whom possessed and daily utilized their sovereign right to absolute rudeness.

http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/LOTMAN/PUSHKIN/CHAPT09.HTM

Let’s admit that Pushkin’s personal conduct [no-no, I do not mean the parties, drinking or brothels, that was normal enough for his circle], especially in his early years, does not always seem to speak so much of an excessively prickly sense of honor as it rather seems to of an overabundance of insecurity, outward arrogance and overinflated machismo, conflated with a rather doubtful sense of the appropriate and highly questionable manners. My personal sympathies lie entirely with that poor husband of the lady from Kishinev—publicly insulted and slapped in the face by a 21 year-old little snot from the capital who, with no sense of propriety or courtesy whatsoever, ignored the lady’s request to leave her alone, intruded shamelessly into personal family affairs and callously hauled them out into public, in addition to insisting on a perfectly illegal duel.
guaranteed against corporal punishment either!). They were older than Pushkin by more than a decade and for them—having received their first introduction to the rules of *le Monde* in the final, glorious years of the Catherinian period, this courtly obsequiousness had been a part of aristocratic upbringing, a mandatory part of good manners, so automatic as to be nothing more than a casual gesture, nearly devoid of personal—though, of course, laden with symbolic,—meaning. That which Pushkin, with his fiery pride, prickly vanity and frequently un-objective youthful maximalism had considered a personal quality, had really been no more than a social mechanism. In reality it would be hard to find traces of real, personal slavishness in the characters of these men all of whom, as I mentioned, had serious and considerable achievements to their credit in administrative and cultural fields, as well as on the field of battle.

Still, we may speak of something a bit more delicate, less tangible and yet, something much more basic and elemental, than a proclaimed sense of honor. Something civilization developed long before it developed formal codes of honorable behavior or had thought to clad decent impulses under a high-sounding name. It was honor that forced Pushkin to abandon the gazette project of course or, at least, that was the outer shell of his motivation…but within it was something much more fundamental—almost primal. A sense
of *fastidiousness*. Pushkin simply could not force himself to deal with the disgust which working with those people would have engendered in him.

True, a generation earlier, in the days of Paul or the early Alexander, such a detail did not and was not likely to stop anyone—the crafty and cynical von Pahlen was, as we know, perfectly willing to break as many eggs as the omelet required while still finding time to pass by his house and reassure his frightened wife during the confused and terrible night following Paul’s assassination,—but Pushkin had been the friend and peer of many of the Decembrists, for whom dealing with *this* government in any detail whatsoever eventually became more distasteful than an attempt to overthrow it. Human emotion, as history proves over and over again, is a vital key to world affairs, and at least some of the key emotions involved in this particular case can probably be resolved down to a mix of bitter, weary exasperation and contemptuous fastidiousness. To put it bluntly—they were tired. Tired, desperate, discouraged and disgusted.

They had made many a previous attempt to make the domineering state understand. They had had a century during which their forbearers—Peter’s most desired and most unexpectedly-unwanted creations—had been forced to be the last cordon between the country at large and that winged, double-crowned mechanical
monstrosity. The clumsily-clanging cyborg state; that mixture of flesh and iron forced into unwilling existence by Peter’s demiurgic will. The Empire. That corrupt, unwieldly, avaricious, seemingly-unstoppable, ferociously ravaging, anthropophagous, military-bureaucratic chimera, the unholy amalgam that Peter the Calamitously Great—in a move which history will, I suspect, continue to find harder and harder to forgive,–had forged out of Prussian discipline, Italian architecture, Dutch shipbuilding, French clothing, Russian slavery, Byzantine Caesaropapism, a sea of vodka and an ocean of blood. Eventually, with their youthful enthusiasm crushed by the Arakcheevan darkness of the last Alexandrian decade, fastidiousness won out. Better Siberian mines or the all-too-real spectre of the gallows than to bow and salute in the formal offices of #16, Fontanka Embankment.\footnote{Right across the Fontanka River from Paul’s Mikhailovsky Castle—originally Kochubey’s mansion, this cream-colored neo-classical gem was rebuilt by Montferrand between 1817 and 1819, and from 1838 to 1880 housed the Third Department of H.I.M. Personal Chancellery and the Special Corps of the Gendarmes. Eventually the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ personal police department moved in and remained there until the Revolution. Benckendorff was the first of his tribe to reign in this building, where he remained for the last six years of his life. Since 1917 it has been—somewhat appropriately—a courthouse.}

Once again, not to harp too much on the resemblance,—but really, this is an attitude which Lotman himself and many of his peers would have found perfectly understandable. It is just possible—somewhere in the multiverse,—that the Soviet State might have become better if better people had worked with and for it—but that is precisely the point, those few of the best people who
remained alive and at liberty were unwilling to do so on a basic, instinctual level. It was not only a mistrust of the state and a reasonable fear of being too close to its center, it was a question of fastidiousness, of what might be termed elementary moral hygiene. One simply did not seek close contact—no matter how remunerative—with *those* people. Better a quiet life of an academician in Tartu than a public role in the Kremlin. Regardless of whether or not such a role had been offered, even to attempt to seek it was supposed to leave a bad taste in one’s mouth, and it certainly left on in the collective mouths of one’s circle. Lotman did have a choice, after all. Many Jewish professors (and students) “corrected” their passports and became Russians, and as for ‘not suiting the profile’…well, many nationalities in the USSR had prominent noses, invent yourself a Georgian grandfather or an Armenian grandmother and the problem is solved\textsuperscript{251}.

Many signed the right letters, denounced and accused, spied on their students, toed the Party line and made excellent careers to die eventually in their comfortable Moscow apartments, rich in years and honors if not honor. I am even willing to stretch both generosity and credibility far enough to allow for the possibility that

\textsuperscript{251} When I was in first and second grade in Leningrad, between 1987 and 1989, I was one of two officially registered Jews in my school. The other one was my sister. Not that we were the only Jews, naturally, but all the others were registered as Russians… My mother insisted on that out of principle, as well as out of pedagogical motives. She reasoned—correctly, as it turned out—that a child who gets called “kike” on a daily basis will not grow up to call anyone else anything of the sort. It worked.
some of them might have been good teachers. It was not only honor, but a much more elemental sense of moral…verging on the physical…distaste that pushed Pushkin away from his initial plan of collaboration with the state.

Yes, there exists the possibility—how great we shall never know—that he might have been able to accomplish a great deal as the editor of a political gazette with a voice in government, enjoying the Emperor’s affection and trust, rising eventually to a minister’s rank and—who knows—perhaps participating, like other old ministers, in the reforms of Alexander II which—had all this happened, perhaps would never have been necessary. But then he would not have been the Pushkin over whose fate the world has wept for nearly 180 years. In the words of Lotman’s friend Egorov:

“He [Lotman] loved writers who, as it seemed to him, ‘built’ their lives (Karamzin, Pushkin), who withstood any attempt to interfere into their personal existence, who fought a manly and courageous battle for the aims they had set themselves. He loved them because he was the same himself—he withstood and he fought.”

In the last chapter of the biography Lotman deals with Pushkin’s duel and we can see the passionate intensity in which he describes, for what was basically a cowed population, raised in

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252 And Cleopatra might have collaborated, marched in Octavian’s triumphal parade and then lived a long and prosperous life as his viceroy in Egypt. But then, where would poor Shakespeare have looked for a plotline?

253 http://feb-web.ru/feb/pushkin/critics/lot/lot-005-.htm
perpetual fear, that encounter which he perceives as a magnificent, royal end.

“Around four in the afternoon Pushkin, along with his second, Danzas254, a Lyceum friend, left the café on the corner of Nevsky and Moika [the same house where Lotman had been born] for the dueling place. Two hours later he was brought home, fatally wounded.

On January 29th, 1837, at 2:45 AM Pushkin died.

In “A Voyage to Arzrum” Pushkin wrote of the death of Griboedov, whose end in many ways fatally resembles Pushkin’s own: ‘The death which took him amidst a brave, unequal battle, had nothing fearful or tormenting for Griboedov. It was instant and beautiful.’ […] A line earlier Pushkin wrote that the death of Griboedov who ‘married the one he loved’ and found death in battle causes him to feel envy. Those words are applicable to Pushkin himself.

A man for whom life means more than honor sees death as nothing but a misfortune ['несчастье', ' unhappiness' in the most direct translation, 'misfortune', but possibly 'sorrow' or 'misery' as well]. The preservation of life becomes the highest value. One cannot understand Pushkin from this position. Pushkin, for whom the 'first science' was to 'honor one's self' [...], who founded both his 'love for home’s ashes' ['любовь к родному пепелищу'—‘pepelische’, from ‘pepel’—ashes—refers to what is left after the burning of a house, hence Pushkin’s love for a home, or homeland which simply wasn’t there anymore; and one may understand that he viewed the gray, impersonal and routine Nicholayevan Russia of the 1830’s as the ashes of his cheerful Alexandrian youth] and his right to a place in the history of his people on a sense of proud self-respect, had higher aims than the preservation of life, even though less than anything did he seek death; he sought victory and freedom. He received victory in defending his honor, in dishonoring and branding D’Anthes and Heckeeren who, surrounded by universal contempt, were forced to leave Russia, and the moment of highest freedom was given to him by ‘death which took him amidst a brave, unequal battle’

Pushkin died, not vanquished, but a victor.”255

254 Danzas, by the way, was sentenced to death for participating in the duel as a second. Upon the appeal of his commanders, however, Nicholas agreed to a commonly used method of commuting the sentence to a couple of months in the fortress. This would not have been the case for everybody, but Danzas really was a highly capable officer and his superiors really did speak very highly of him.
255 http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/LOTMAN/PUSHKIN/CHAPT09.HTM
Lotman’s sympathies are unquestionably with Pushkin. A man for whom life means more than honor sees death as nothing but a misfortune…and I would consider it at least possible that Lotman, perhaps not without a note of internal pride, places himself in Pushkin’s category. It is true that Pushkin did not wish or plan to die, but he so actively sought to confront death for so many years that to die young seems less a surprise than a legitimate and somewhat predictable end to his existence. He found in death a victory which a long life would scarcely have assured him, whereas Lotman lived a relatively long and, for the most part, peaceful term, successful on a level he could hardly have expected upon starting out. And it is true—as Agatha Christie had so often said,—that the old, who know the value of every moment, prize life so much more than the young who are capable of throwing it away upon encountering their first disappointments. But I strongly suspect that a man who had survived six years in the Russian army and marched from Leningrad to Berlin had lost the ability to fear for himself. Lotman might have feared for his wife, sons, sisters, friends or students. But not for himself.

“Lotman never proclaimed himself a Marxist or an anti-Marxist—he was a scientist.”

-- Gasparov, M.L. “Lotman and Marxism”, in “Within Thinking Worlds”, p. 425
Mikhail Leonovich Gasparov (1935-2005), a philologist, classical scholar and translator, as well as a literary historian, wrote an article on one of Lotman’s most famous works, “The Analysis of Poetic Text”, in which he reviewed the curious relationship between Lotman’s Marxist analysis and the official Marxist ideology which he subtly challenged.

“Official Soviet literary scholarship greeted the book with dislike. Discussions about the selection of phonemes, exchange of rhythms, the antitheses of verb tenses, the tiniest nuances in the meaning of words, intersecting semantic fields—all this was too unaccustomed, especially when applied to the classical poetry of Pushkin, Tютчев or Nekrasov, in which one was traditionally supposed to reflect only on elevated thoughts and feelings. At the same time, there seemed to be no legitimate reasons to attack Lotman’s methodology. That irritated the critics most of all.

Soviet literary scholarship was built on Marxism. In Marxism there coexisted method, and ideology. The method of Marxism was dialectic and historical materialism. Materialism was the axiom—‘being determines consciousness’, including that of a carrier of culture, a poet and a reader. Historism meant that culture is the result of the socio-economic phenomena of its time. Dialectic meant that the development of culture, as of everything in the world, is accomplished as a result of the struggle between its internal contradictions.

But ideology taught differently. History is finished, and the eternity of idea, classless society has begun, for which all of the past had been merely an approach. All internal contradictions had already played their part and only external ones were left, between good and bad phenomena; one must separate cultural phenomena into good and bad ones, and seek to assure that the good ones are comprehensively good, and vice versa. Absolute truth has been reached and the consciousness that possesses it now creates a new existence.

The ideology of victorious Marxism decisively did not correspond to the method of struggling Marxism, but this was carefully hidden. Lotman treated Marxist method seriously and

Not just carefully, but aggressively. In 1975 a group of students, friends of my mother, were expelled from Leningrad State University after they formed an unofficial circle to…study Marxism. They simply wanted to read the actual texts and come to terms with them, but watchful authorities would have none of that! Arrested, expelled and imprisoned—all six.
he treated the ideology as it deserved. And it is well known that the most dangerous man for dogma is the one who takes it seriously. Officialdom felt that.

When Lotman started the analysis of poetry with a description of its language, rhythm and phonics, he abided strictly by the rules of materialism: being determined consciousness—in the beginning there are the words of an author, written on paper, from their perception (conscious when dealing with the meaning of words, subconscious when dealing with stylistic nuances or auditory associations) we compose our understanding of the poem. Not even the most elevated meaning of Pushkin’s freedom-loving or amorous verse can be attained by going around the meaning of the words. (That is why it is methodologically unsound to begin the analysis with the content and then to descend to ‘mastery’.) The poet’s thought is what must be reconstructed and the way between the thought and the text, formalized. The problem was not even that this cooled the ‘lively, direct perception’ of poetry. The problem was that this demanded proof for what had seemed obvious. Marxist methodology really did demand proof from the researcher (Marx’s slogan was to ‘Doubt everything’). But ideology preferred to work with the obvious: otherwise it would have been faced with the necessity to prove its own right to exist.”

So, as we see, Lotman (who was a CPSU Party member), dared analyze that holiest of holies, Pushkin, Russia’s proverbial “Everything!” with an approach which, while corresponding to the demands of Marxist dialectic, went counter to the official state ideology in a most direct manner. What’s worse, he did so in a practically unchallengeable way—after all, the contradiction between ideology and method is hardly his fault. And—most irritating of all for official criticism—it was all-but impossible to call him out on this because, officially speaking, this contradiction

258 Gasparov, M.L. “Yu. M. Lotman: Scholarship and Ideology”. “Selected Works”, Moscow, 1997, pp.485-493, online via Vivos Voco at http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/LOTMAN/_GASPAROV_2.HTM. An expanded version of this article under the title “Lotman and Marxism” was included as the last entry in “Within Thinking Worlds”.

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did not exist to begin with! Where Gordin and Eidelman worked with hints, insinuations, and deliberately evocative comparisons, Lotman, in an unimpeachably correct, perfectly scholarly and very courteous manner, carpe’d the jugulum. Not so much for the throat of Marxism itself, but for that perception of it which the Soviet State proclaimed to be the only possible version. And naturally, critics felt threatened as well as irritated. Once you get to the point of demanding that the reigning dogma prove its right to exist, the next logical step is to ask those determining and enforcing said dogma (Suslov and co.) to provide proof that they have a right and a purpose in occupying their large offices and comfortable apartments…not to mention their right to possess passes to the Kremlin cafeteria.

Gasparov notes later that Lotman’s historism, his absolute determination to see each era and individual from within, as they saw themselves, runs absolutely counter to Marxist ideology which is, in principle, anti-historical.

“An ideological scheme forces all epochs into one system of values—ours. That which does not fit into the system is pronounced to be a troublesome contradiction, the result of historical immaturity. For Marxist method, contradictions were the motive power of history, for Marxist ideology they are, on the contrary, a hindrance to it. It is this static egocentrism that Lotman rejects in the name of historism.

For each culture he reconstructs its own system of values, and that which from the side appeared as an eclectic mosaic, from the inside turns out to be graceful and non-contradictory—even such exaggerated cases as when Radischev denies the immortality

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259 Not Mel Brooks this time. Terry Pratchett of blessed memory.
of the soul in the beginning of a composition and concludes by affirming it.

Of course, this non-contradictory nature is temporary: with time the unnoticed contradictions come to be felt, and the tangible one to lose significance, a break occurs in the system and, for instance, the culture of ‘raznochintsy’ replaced ‘noble’ culture. The existence of potential contradictions within a cultural system turns out to be the motor power of its development—precisely as Marxist dialectic demands. Whereas the demonstratively non-contradictory ideology, which every culture had always tried to compose for itself an others, turns out to be a fiction, a mystification of real-life behavior. For Soviet official culture—permeated with ideology—this view on the ideologies of past cultures was very unpleasant.

Moved either by a softening or sharpening of internal contradictions, history moves in jumps: either gentle development or an explosion, evolution or revolution. This too is a commonplace in Marxism and it too is perceived by Lotman. But he remembers another position from the Marxist alphabet—so elemental that it was rarely thought about: “The truth is always specific”. This means: being a historian he thinks not so much of how these epochs are seen by us, as of how they saw themselves. Or, to use his expression, he imagines them with their own names, not given ones.”

As Gasparov has it:

“Every epoch reviews the classics from its own point of view, applicable to its own questions and demands; every reader creates ‘his own’ Pushkin for himself, according to his image, that is his individual creativity against the background of the common creativity of humanity—both that of writers and that of readers. Lotman was more interested in the opposite: to recreate a true, unique Pushkin and to look at the world through his eyes. When you read Lotman’s historical-cultural portraits, there is no sensation that you are evaluating history—on the contrary, history is evaluating you, and severely. The ability to stand on a strange, historically distant viewpoint—that is the humanistic enrichment of culture, that is the moral sense of humanitarian sciences. Not to view history from modernity but to view modernity through history—that means that you consider yourself and your circle to be not the final aim of history but just one of its many potential variants. The thought about unrealized possibilities was more than just a game of a dialectic mind for Lotman. It was also the experience of the two previous generations of our century: those who in the 1930’s parted with the unrealized potential of the 1920’s, and in the post-

260 Ibid. pp. 420-421
war years with the unfulfilled hopes of the wartime years. Lotman did not encourage young colleagues inclined to notice hints at the unpleasantness of the present in the Russian culture of the past. But he finished his last book, ‘Culture and Explosion’ with considerations about the Perestroika present—about the possibility of passing from the binary flow of Russian culture to a ternary, European one. ‘To miss this possibility would be a historical catastrophe.’

Lotman’s approach was thus doubly dangerous for the status quo—both in the challenge it presented for ideology, and in the inescapable, unanswerable nature of the charges he brings against the system, in the proof he gives of the fatal contradiction which, according to the ideology is completely non-existent but which, once he brought it up, became so obvious that even an attempt to answer it would unquestionably lead to a mass of new, even more uncomfortable questions.

Lotman brought it home to the ideologized system that it was, in fact, not unique. Not special. Not permanent. That there had been other ideological systems, and no, they were not merely troublesome mishaps on the road to modern perfection. Lotman did worse than challenge the system: elegantly, politely… and mortally—he insulted it. In insisting on the primary importance of individual human beings over opposed to the anonymous, large-scale processes espoused by the Annalist school he turned back; though respectfully but with reservations, to the concept of history which was, most emphatically and briefly, expressed by Gordin.

261 Ibid. p. 425
History, even on a large scale, is essentially human beings and their interactions. Sure, we can place them in different categories for the sake of convenience, but in the end there are individuals, looking out for their individual interests, real human beings with real, non-theoretical human concerns. Nothing less, but nothing more…
Conclusion

We have already had cause to mention Lotman’s views on Russia’s ‘religious’—as opposed to ‘magical’—approach to secular power, on the way the Russian State gradually raised the concept of Statehood to a level of secular religion. As we see, this is a view similar to—although expressed in a stricter academic form than,—those which Eidelman and Gordin have shown in their works. One of the most severe problems from which Russia has suffered over the centuries—worse in some ways than the perpetual, self-destructive and State-encouraged alcoholism; the consistent refusal to build anything approaching proper roads even in the European part of the country; the dying system of medical services which in many parts of the country is so scarce as to be non-existent262,—was the unending demand of the State vis-à-vis its subjects for a religious attitude of ‘service’ in the sense of ‘служение’, a profound, inner dedication of Self to a Greater Whole—one which, in allowing the tiny and insignificant drop to flow into the sea, promises nothing, owes nothing, guarantees nothing…but can grant or take anything.

The Russian state did not form a social contract—much less a Social

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262 In the 1980’s, while leading a geological team in Kamchatka, my mother, out of curiosity, visited the local cemetery and calculated the average lifespan of the locals. She came to the conclusion that people living in that village (no electricity, no plumbing, practically no roads, nearest hospital well over 100 km away, no public transport), in the second half of the 20th century still lived, on average, to the same age as most peasants in the 18th and 19th centuries—between forty and forty-five for men, between forty-five and fifty for women.
Contract—with its people, and it is absolutely vital to realize that this attitude has persisted from the late 1400’s to modernity, that it still informs Russian politics today, whether internal or external. If one may compare countries freely—Great Britain has found the ideal balance between preserving the past and working with the present, the United States seeks to free itself from the past with each successive generation, and Russia is helplessly trapped by it.

The State raised itself to divine status and formed a new secular religion in Romanov times. The Communists changed the names and faces on the iconostasis of State power, but did not change the essence of the premise on which the State based its right to rule. The raw, unchallengeable power of the autocrat, sheer brute force commanding the possibility of condemning to imprisonment, exile, agony or death with the one hand, and the possibility of endless enrichment, royal favor, position, luxury, authority and connections with the other. The actions of the individual in question are not particularly important—this is not a question of merit. The State chooses to give, or to take. It may favor, or condemn. It chooses. Not you…

Compare, for instance, the slaughter of the highborn at the Sovereign’s own hand in the days of Ivan IV (or the unpredictable ‘mortality’ of the elite in Stalin’s time), to the attitude of the Petrine Guard described by Gordin. Men raised either from obscure nobility
or from low-ranked nothingness who were granted the sacred gift of
the semi-divine Sovereign’s trust and protection, who were
entrusted with his tasks and orders, who were given authority over
Field Marshals and Princes of ancient blood all the way to the point
of being able to chain or even [moment of respectful silence
followed by drumroll!!!] whip them—what an endlessly,
unbelievably exhilarating prospect for those who only yesterday
were forced to genuflect when the carriages of these mighties passed
down the muddy Moscow street! Now they could rise in rank. Now
they—the nobodies with not a drop of Rurikid or Gediminovich
blood in their veins!—could receive titles! Hell, if Shafirov—who
was known to all to really be a Shapiro, a baptized Jew from
Smolensk!—could become a Baron and Vice-Chancellor of the
Empire,—what perspectives were open to them?

What magnificent opportunities! What endless possibilities!
All this incredible potentiality in exchange for one simple, little
Faustinian thing—an agreement to forget the ties of kin and locality,
an agreement to forget one’s religious upbringing in all but the most
common and ritualistic points. An agreement raise the State, and
even more than that—the concept of Statehood itself!—to the rank
of a Religion formally and officially; to agree to absolute,
unquestioning and unconditional devotion; to sign up for a
willingness to spend one’s life in Service to the State and to carry out its will anywhere and at any cost.

And it’s not as though the possible rewards were abstract or hard to prove. It suffices to look at the potential results which were before their very eyes, results which spurred every Guardsman on with the hope of achieving and rising still higher—there was omnipotent Menshikov! A nothing, a nobody, with no connections, money, position, background, education… A man of parts, certainly, no one denied his ability, but factually one who originally rose to favor because in addition to being nearly as tall as the first Emperor [no mean feat], Menshikov was one of the few who could equal Peter in drinking, eating, fighting and…well, you understand what else… And he rose to be an Illustrious Prince [“Светлейший Князь”], lord of enormous territories, richer than most European monarchs and endlessly powerful…

263 It is curious to compare this with the attitude of the main heroes described in the epic trilogy of Henryk Sienkiewicz. From Zagłoba—a grander Polish Falstaff; to the magnificent and tragic Podbipięta; to Skrzetuski, the hero of Zbaraż who forsoaks his search for his missing beloved in war-torn Poland to fight for the Fatherland. Not to mention Kmiec, a pious patriot—for all his ferocious wildness—who forsoaks his search for his missing beloved in war-torn Poland to fight for the Fatherland; and above all the great Jerzy Michał Wołodyjowski—the Knight of the Republic par excellence, through all the wars of the 1640’s—70’s, until his self-sacrifice at the surrender of a key fortress to Ottoman troops… And yes, he also forsook his search for his missing beloved in war-torn Poland to go fight for the Fatherland! All of them are portrayed as loyal unto death not so much to the King (!), though he certainly represents the State at the moment, as to the Rzesz Pospolita herself, to her strength and unity. The State comes before personal causes. A similar motif comes up earlier in Mickiewicz’s grand “Pan Tadeusz”—in the face of a serious threat, extortion and what’s worse, in the face of boorish insolence and deliberate rudeness from a Russian, two warring Polish-Lithuanian aristocratic clans instantly put aside old wrongs and unite to fight together. 264 Yes…until he wasn’t. Nobody’s perfect, and we have to give the man his due—Menshikov faced his final two years of life in Siberian exile with admirable fortitude, courage, piety and humility. As James Goldman said through the mouths of the Plantagenet princes in The Lion in Winter: Richard [Lionheart]: “—He’ll get no satisfaction out of me! He isn’t going to see me beg!” Geoffrey: “Why, you chivalric fool? As if the way one fell down mattered?” Richard: “When the fall is all there is—it matters.”
These were the people the State wanted, the people it constantly sought to create. Menshikov had been the original model because he, as a personal friend, had been willing to be Peter’s loyal slave unconditionally whether it be in war, diplomacy, shipbuilding or giving up unto his master a pretty Lithuanian war captive whom he had taken into his household to wash his shirts and warm his bed. We must do Alexander Danilovich justice; for all his endless flaws there were many admirable qualities to the man,—but this mold was broken in the making and no one could ever equal it again. Potemkin came closest, but he was the first and last to do so.

Again and again the State dreamed the Frankensteinian dream of creating a slave who would forget about the slavery and all its effects, and would act with the initiative, responsibility and courage of a free person. Again and again it sought a White Knight who would serve with utter devotion and rescue the State from the pit of mismanagement and despair into which it had…once more…succeed in driving itself. The dream, which even during the lifetime of Peter I, the man who tried harder than anyone until Stalin

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265 Evil tongues said that there was more between the two than friendship, but no documental proof has been found. Still, there were three cases of people being condemned to hard labor in Siberia for spreading this rumor.

266 It is an odd thought, but in Soviet times it seems to V.M. Molotov who came closest to this ideal.

267 Consider the case of that same Molotov who, after many years of work on the highest level of the Soviet government saw his own wife arrested. She survived the camps and lived to 1970. Neither Molotov nor his wife would ever hear a word spoken against Stalin to the end of their lives.
to bring it to fruition, was unconvincing and illogical, never worked nor could ever work\textsuperscript{268}. And not least because it never took that great a care to hide its methods in creating the sort of person it wanted, and those methods were simply not capable of creating anything other than slaves. The rare exceptions died, drank themselves to death, fled the country or shut themselves up in monasteries—like fish brought from the depths they could not survive under the wrong pressure. We recall that all three of our historians shared an almost identical judgment on Pushkin—a man who could not survive in the society he had been given, a man who was asphyxiated by the atmosphere in which he was forced to live. Lotman, Gordin and Eidelman were contemporaries to many people, nearly as famous, who were also forced to find ways to accommodate, to survive in a changed world, one which changed far more radically as compared to its former self than the change between Pushkin’s Alexandrian youth and his Nicholayevan maturity\textsuperscript{269}.

They could hardly (and rarely) do otherwise, given their surroundings. What can Chatsky accomplish in the presence of Princess Maria Alexeevna? Whatever will Mrs. Grundy say?!...

\textsuperscript{268} I must specify that this dislike of St. Thomas More, Karl Marx, and the Utopian ideas they brought into the world etc. is my personal attitude.

\textsuperscript{269} Although, being now within fewer than 24 months of Pushkin’s age at death, I am forced to grudgingly recognize in practice a fact I had theoretically acknowledged long ago—the age of 37 is not maturity in any real sense of the word.
High-born, wealthy, privileged, aristocratic men and women attended court for generations, learned to bear the Sovereign’s fist (or worse) with a pious bow and gratitude…after which they returned home, to the country estates where their word was law—and took out all their resentment, all their brooding bitterness and thirst for authoritative self-affirmation on their own household serfs and peasants. Even the 18th and 19th centuries did not do as much as it might seem to change this, not until the last two or three generations which were subject to two healthy influences: the unbearable shame of the Crimean War and the Alexandrian Reforms. Here, for the first time, although as Eidelman has shown, insufficiently, the State demonstrated—for the first and, thus far, last time in its existence—a nearly ‘Western’—‘Roman’—‘Magical’ inclination to talk with the people on a serious level, acknowledge that great wrongs had been done for a long time and to make an attempt, however tragically mishandled, to right them. Hryniewiecki, that poor, tragic little fool, had put an end to that and ever since Russia has returned to the religious model—all for nothing...

The 1930’s returned the country to a more profound slavery than it had experienced in the days of Nicholas I and all three of our historians were perfectly conscious of living in what was, essentially, a slave-owning society in which the State was the sole
owner and perceived its power not in the sense of a social contract—for there can be no such thing as a contract between a master and slaves, but in the form of religiously-based service, a mandatorily ‘voluntary’ dedication to the dogma.

Putin’s behavior today, in that sense, is nothing out of the ordinary, and that is precisely the question with which Western diplomats have a problem. Western diplomacy is built on the Roman, magical, quid-pro-quo model which respects the idea of negotiation, of contract—of “договор”. A formal agreement between two officially appointed representatives of two officially recognized sides is sanctified, and even though in modern times the sanctifying force is not specified, the actual effect of the sanctification remains as real and as vital as it had before.

In Russian diplomacy, quite simply, it does not. Russian diplomatic tradition views diplomacy as a short-term method of achieving ends it will achieve anyway if other means are needed. If making a promise is convenient at the moment, the State will make it. But this is meaningless. There is no sacred significance to the words or the gestures. As a popular Russian saying has it—“I am master of my word. I can give it, and I can take it back”. Russia simply does not takes its treaties seriously because in reality it never perceives its diplomatic partners as equals whose demands have an equal right to be heard and whose desires have an equal right to be
accommodated. The Russian State is incapable of seeing things in this way—the tradition does not allow for it. Thus, any attempt on the part of slaves to improve their lot is seen as sabotage, slyness, laziness, or treason. The country exists for the sake of serving the State. The State exists for the sake of maintaining itself. The country owes the State everything\textsuperscript{270}. The State owes the country nothing.

Consider, for instance, the letters of Ivan IV. Whether dictating a message to a friend or a foe, Ivan proves himself a masterful and lively debater armed with a vast array of memorized citations from Holy Writ and the Church Fathers; he clearly enjoys the game of debating itself, even when falling from elevated citations to the lowest imprecations—but never once does he envisage the possibility that he might be in the wrong. He is organically incapable of a worldview which would include the vaguest possibility that the inferior beings with whom he, for the sake of amusement, has deigned to bandy words might actually come up with arguments which could have the power to move him from his position. The fact that he has been so magnanimous as to explain his position at length is not an invitation to debate—it is a wall over which the opponent cannot climb. Ivan enjoys the game,

\textsuperscript{270} Let’s note the popular Russian phrase which signifies serving in the Army: “Paying your debt to the Motherland”—[“Выплатить долг Родине”], which logically signifies that a male’s very birth and first eighteen years of life had been handed out on credit, and now it’s time to pay the bill…
but the result of it for him is never in question, nor can ever be questioned in principle. Any attempt on the part of the opponent to assert his own position is seen as sabotage, disloyalty, sin or laziness. We remember how outraged he was at the fact that Prince Kurbsky had dared escape a death sentence he, the supreme and mighty one, had appointed for him.

Within its religious worldview the State in Russia always felt entirely free to utilize its people as it chose. There was never the same principle of give-and-take which had been part of Western social relations since the medieval period, and in fact, reached even further to the days of ancient Rome,—not only to Rome’s ‘magical’ religion which was also penetrated with the spirit of quid-pro-quo, but to practical Roman politics which had assured for centuries that any ruler who desires to reign longer than a week had better be prepared to live up to quite a few demands on the part of the people, starting with *panem et circense* and going on to a whole lot of *pecuniam*. One must realize that, whatever new ‘Western’ clothing the Russian State might have started wearing and whatever Western words it might be using, the nature of this entity has not changed over nearly five centuries, since the days when a paranoid thirteen year-old boy had an arrogant nobleman thrown to the hungry hunting dogs in the palace courtyard. “For we are free to be merciful
unto our slaves, as we are also free to execute them”… The religious model at work.

It’s important to note that the official presence of Christianity does little to change this. We can compare Lotman’s description of a religious system with Gordin’s view of Peter I, a man who—despite the vicious and humiliating jokes he played on the clergy—always observed religious rituals properly.

“The great tsar was repulsed by the very spirit of Christianity.

A genius workman, a mighty pragmatist, Peter was organically incapable of perceiving the moral abstractions of Christianity. A talented draftsman, who dreamed of building a polity of perfect regularity, in which everyone would have their own precisely marked place and would obey precisely formulated rules (after which contentment and bliss [“довольство и блаженство”] were to arrive), Peter, perfectly reasonably, felt the incompatibility of his ideology with the Christian idea of the spiritual sovereignty of each believer, with the special, extra-governmental connection of a person with the Church and—higher than that—with God, before whose face both sovereigns and slaves are equal.

One should certainly not idealize the Russian Church and the pre-Petrine era (not to mention the post-Petrine!), but Peter’s ecclesiastical reform reveals, like no other side of his activity, the deadening [“мертвящий”] pragmatism of his worldview and, as a result, the doomed nature of the edifice constructed upon such a foundation.”

A page later Gordin emphasizes:

“I repeat once more, there is no need to idealize the Orthodox Church prior to the reforms—with its cupidity, slave-owning, and adaptation to despotism. But whatever the sins of the actual ecclesiastical organization, the popular concept of the Church as a preserver of higher values (as compared to those of the State), as of a potential intercessor, as of a power ‘not of this world’—these concepts in themselves were extremely important for the people’s understanding of the world. In depriving the people of

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these illusions, Peter struck a heavy blow precisely to the spirit of the people which had been, in the final count, oriented toward the idea of freedom and higher justice. From now on, Divine Judgment was officially proclaimed to be illegal. Being was simplified and roughened to coarse, governmental habitus [“быт”].

The demiurge was building his world in which there was no place for autonomy of the spirit.”

Compare with Lotman’s observation:

“The demiurge was building his world in which there was no place for autonomy of the spirit.”

The current situation is not that different in any realistic way:

despite the trappings of a pseudo-democratic system, the reality of Russia is that of an insecure dictatorship. It has turned away from the old ideologies and has been unable either to restore them or to create new ones. Putin’s attempt to blend hurrah-patriotism with today’s resurgent, thoroughly tamed and obedient Orthodoxy, as well as a rehabilitation of Stalinism and autocracy generally (witness the scandal over the equestrian monument to Ivan IV recently erected in Orlov), bears no criticism. The current regime so maniacally prides itself on its pride of its past, mainly in order to forget the fact that the present is unattractive and the future…is not only unimaginable but unimagined,—because those in power are only there for the moment, they have no long-term program to

272 Ibid, p. 12
274 Poor Benckendorff is spinning in his grave…

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imagine or propose, and neither the possibility nor the interest in proposing one.

Russia is currently ruled by people who have no interest in actually ruling it—their only interest is in the material wealth they can drain during their time in power. For people raised in Soviet poverty (and even in the Soviet equivalent of wealth, once they have seen the Western version of the same), this is understandable. Finally a chance came to gain that which they had dreamed of ever since they, as Soviet school children visited museums and saw the former homes of the royal house. The country is a milk-cow and they will have their milk by hook or by crook, while planes stand ready to take them to their villas in Europe in case something goes wrong. As five hundred years ago, their territories and positions are given to them for ‘kormlenie’—as fodder, for food. Once again Russia encounters the same problem as it had in the days of Ivan IV—the man sitting in the Kremlin is the richest ruler of the poorest subjects, while his inner circle spends their time on open robbery, hurrying to use the moment for they know—at any moment the Sovereign may take back everything and condemn yesterday’s mighty power to nothingness. Again and again we see the country

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275 I recall an oligarch, a few years ago, who had built an estate not far from Moscow. A pseudo-18th century ‘Rastrellian’ palace, separated by a formal French garden and connected by a bridged canal to an equally pseudo-18th century pavilion. I could just see a little Soviet schoolboy, in his dark-blue school uniform, being taken on a school fieldtrip to Peterhof, where he swore to himself that one day, no matter what it costs him (or anyone else), he would have a little Peterhof of his own! Rather touching, really. And let’s face it—who among us would refuse a chance to have a mini-version of, say, Rinaldi’s ‘Chinese Palace’ if given a chance?
step onto the same rake—“The problem was not that little was given, but the historical inflexibility of those who were doing the giving”...  

Perhaps the saddest, and certainly the most remarkable thing (to anyone who has not studied Russia), is that neither side sees anything particularly wrong with this equation. While in the wealthiest and most advances countries in the world, such as the Netherlands, Norway or Denmark, neither the wealthy nor the aristocratic spurn public transport (and royalty simply takes a bike!), which has been made sufficiently comfortable for everyone—in Russia those in power leave the plebs sitting in traffic and the fumes from forty year-old buses while they speed down a cleared road, protected by a howling, flashing and menacing escort—for they are part of the State! They have been allowed to approach to the sacred flame of power and bask in its lucrative glow, and are therefore entitled to all of their wealth, while the hoi-polloi will wait at the roadside. For them there is literally no point to power if you cannot use it to affirm your superiority over those around you, if you cannot use its magical protection against the natural and habitual results of insult and boorishness which you are now free to dish out to all and sundry—save those above you who deserve obsequious service.

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Sure, your average Russian might shrug, it’s unfair. But that’s how it is and those who are in the government are always thieves anyway. Would you be any different with access to power and money? Would you be any better than them? There’s no point raising a fuss. It is the way the world has always been and will always be. It is human nature. It is life…

While the Russian State that Peter I—in his cursed madness,—had engendered, has failed in one part of its vaunted ambition, namely to raise responsible, brave and inwardly-liberated people (save for a few brief bursts which tended to end badly),—it certainly succeeded in the other. It raised slaves. Slaves a-plenty. Generation after generation of them. That may sound harsh, but the nature of a society based on slavery, upon an indifference to personal responsibility and initiative, alcoholism, debauchery, laziness and a dislike of learning have been noted by pretty much every foreign traveler to Russia for the last five centuries, and the massive changes of the 20th century only exacerbated some of these qualities. This is how the State views them and uses them, and for the most part this is how they have come to seem themselves. It may not be stated in as many words—but for the overwhelming part, Russians do not challenge…it does not occur to them to challenge…anything the State chooses to do with them for its right to do so is a priori unchallengeable, sanctified and beyond reproach
or question. Very rarely, and for the most part unsuccessfully have people attempted to challenge its authority or anything it chose to do to them. The State is simply viewed as having the right to do what it chooses with its slaves, and the fact that we haven’t officially called them ‘slaves’ since the 1790’s does very little to change reality. Personal slavery has disappeared from Russia following 1861, but after the brief proto-Constitutional period and particularly after the Revolution, the power of State slavery returned in full measure, and encompassed the entire country so that even simple life in the USSR became a form of imprisonment. You could be in prison or a camp, or you could be living your normal, routine life—but either way you were not free, and if the State wished to transfer you from one condition to another it needed no explanations.277 A slave demanding such an explanation would be considered inexcusable.

For the most part the government might view its subjects as indifferent slaves, loyal only because no decent possibility of disloyalty comes along, useless if it were not for the fact that they buy so much of the alcohol which goes to make up so much of the State’s budget278…but they are there. Buying booze. Reproducing

277 We recall Osip Mandelshtam and that incident with the signed death warrants…
278 There’s a reason Russia never succeeded in its long-proclaimed, endless, centuries’ long war against alcoholism. Vodka manufacture is a state monopoly. Even in the days of Alexei Mikhailovich there was a law on the books which foresaw the possibility of a wife trying to stop her hung-over husband from going to a wine-shop in order to drink himself, her and the children into slavery. The wife received a sentence of hard labor in Siberia for interfering with the Sovereign’s profits… While the percentage it makes up of the state budget varies over the centuries, it is always high. In the days of Catherine II it reached nearly a third
quickly enough before their early deaths to produce more buyers of future booze, as well as future cannon fodder and future producers of future cannon fodder. Masses, waving enthusiastically when the media needs a new photo. Tax-payers. Man-power. Agriculturalists. Property. Protoplasm…

Drops in the ocean, allowed nothing more than the privilege of flowing into the whole, with no right to ask for anything except for the joy of offering themselves on the altar. Sometimes, if the proper entourage is provided, as in the mid-1930’s or the mid-1950’s they will even be enthusiastic about it! Does the State say to go to distant parts, clear wilderness, look for valuable materials in the soil and deliver them up to the State with no regard to the difficulties involved or the number of victims? I’ll just get my bag! But there is no bargain it can strike with its citizens that those citizens will ever be able to trust. The same attitude exists now as ran in the letters of Ivan IV—the Grand Prince may be

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of the annual totals. There were quite successful temperance agencies prior to WWI, but when the War began to take a toll on the budget, they were shut down and vodka sales heavily promoted instead. And Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign was a total failure for many reasons.

279 I’m sorry, but I just can’t resist a final bit of the late, lamented Gene Wilder’s Brooksim from Blazing Saddles: “You’ve got to remember that these are simple farmers. These are people of the land. The common clay of the new West. You know…morons.”

280 Although…was it gold the State asked for, or platinum? Let me check that fine print.

281 Still, sometimes, in its impenetrable ‘wisdom’, the State does not let you get your bag. As we recall from the memoirs of the brave, honorable and upstanding General Sablukov, in the days of Emperor Paul’s reign young officers took to bringing their passport and a sum of paper money in the pockets of their uniforms when they went on parade before the Imperial gaze—so that they would be prepared in case they made a mistake before the pug-like visage of H.I.M., and He, in His anger, was not pleased to give them time to stop by the house on their way to Siberia. By the end of Paul’s five years on the throne (really barely four), Sablukov and one other man were all that was left of the original officer corps of that regiment.
pleased to bandy words with one of his slaves at the moment, but there is no sense of a debate between equals, for one side of the debate does not, in principle, have any equals. We may quote extensive sections of the classics at our pet parrot, and we may even laugh when it replies. But do any of us even consider the possibility of taking as a serious opponent a being that is *a priori* and permanently inferior?

Our three historians worked in a time and place when the profession of teacher, of historian, and especially of a teacher of history was fraught with danger as never before. Ideology was the one point on which the new regime had no intention of backing down. Not since the days of the Spanish conquest of the Americas had a conquering power [the Communist government did factually conquer its own country, no point arguing on that score], cared so deeply about the beliefs of those it conquered, nor struggled so ferociously to eliminate the previous system of belief in order to replace it with its own. Power over the country was not enough, control over the lives and property of individual people was not enough. Ideology was paramount. It was dedication that the State truly needed. Having come to power illegitimately, through blood and force, the Bolshevik State tried desperately to establish its own structure of belief, of officially mandated and universally enforced dogma which could not be left open to challenge or question. The
new rulers desperately yearned to be seen not merely as legitimate—but as necessary and inevitable, as pre-destined and ideal. As Christian churches had once been built over the ruins of pagan temples, so communist libraries, clubs and meeting halls filled those of the empty churches it did not destroy. The One True Faith needs no competitors…

There was that religious aspect again. It was not only submission and obedience that mattered to the new rulers, no—it was faith, a belief both passionate and sincere! Hence the vast program of propaganda, hence the enormous investment in patriotically-oriented film, hence the creation of a new line-up of ‘great men’ who could be worshipped in an officially Annalist, post-Great Men world. The belief of the people had to be sincere and fervent, that was the only way the State would make sense to itself, the only way it could justify its own existence even in its own eyes. And that, in a key way, contributed to the death of the USSR. Yes, the economic implosion was a key factor. Yes, the international isolation did not help. But this was really the vital moment. A system based on enthusiasm for its premises can no longer maintain control when this enthusiasm runs low, when these premises are seen by the majority as false and useless. No artificial

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282 The twenty-eight Panfilovites, Pavlik Morozov, Chapaev, etc… And of course, Lenin himself at the center of the mythos. “И Ленин - такой молодой, И юный Октябрь впереди!” as Magomaev’s song had it.
iconostasis of geriatric leaders, no artificial (or even real), mythology of wartime heroism, no infusions of foreign cash, no ideological training can make up for a lack of belief which keeps the religious structure going.

Gods die when there is no one left to believe in them. So do human systems.

What is a historian to do in such a situation? How does a person trained to deal with the past find a way to deal with a resurfacing of this past in the present? How does one forewarn against some elements and prevent them surfacing in the future, or on the contrary, how does one help others surface anew from the depths? By telling the story of the past in such a way as to leave guideposts behind, allowing the reader’s thoughts to go to the present and to draw connections, as did Eidelman. By openly and angrily discussing the mistakes of the past in modern terms, constantly forcing the reader into a comparison of past and present, as does Gordin. By puncturing the delusion of dogma the system has built around itself, by gently leading the reader to consider the incompatibility of the iron-clad Idea with real human life, as did Lotman.

When these historians who belonged, grace of their education and personal backgrounds, to the European, legalistic,
‘magical’ tradition found themselves living in and dealing with the ‘religious’, dogmatic, absolutist State, they were forced to find new means of expression which would allow them to work and to project their ideas, and on the other hand would shield them from excessively close scrutiny and censorship. We have seen the methods available. Some, like Panchenko and Likhachev, departed for the safer and deeper waters of medieval history. Some bowed their heads and wrote as they were bidden. Some, like our trio, explored the possibilities for expression afforded by Aesopian language, layered meaning and allusions. A discussion of the past hid references to the present in such a way as to get the book through censorship, while still allowing the reader to draw the necessary parallels and conclusions.

It is understandable that Lotman, Eidelman and Gordin all see the Petrine reforms as a monumental and key downturn in Russian history, which has engendered many if not most of the problems which Russia continues to deal with today. In depriving the country of its pre-existing (albeit imperfect), system of spiritual leadership and then failing to make the new secular religion into a fully adequate substitute whether in the Imperial or the Soviet period\textsuperscript{283}, the State laid the foundation for a fundamental

\textsuperscript{283} Or now, for that matter.
contradiction. In “Between Slavery and Freedom” Gordin, after discussing Miliukov’s views of Peter’s naval reform, goes on to state:

“The story of the fleet turned out to be a mirror reflection of the great reform in another aspect as well. Despite monstrous human and material sacrifices, the attempt to create a large fleet ‘in a large leap’ [“большим скачком”] proved a failure. In the 1730’s, when military operations demanded ships, it turned out that Russia factually has no fleet. Countless human lives and all manner of resources were wasted in vain. But this was the prefiguration [“прообраз”—fore- or pre-image, as it were] of the State reform in which the means inevitably formed the result. The choice of unlimited force over the country and over the will of each of her citizens as a chief and universal means fatally lead to a break between the country and the new government. This same choice also determined the nature of the new government. Raised on force, categorically refusing to take into calculation the interests of the individual person, it could inspire nothing but the mistrust and hostility of the people. The personal loyalty of the peasantry to the individual persons of tsars and tsaritsas (though far from all of them), loyalty to the autocratic principle (up to a point), a patriotic feeling toward Russia as a fatherland never sufficed to remove the dangerous tension in the relations between the people and the government machine. The machine, feeling the danger, repaid the people with vicious mistrust.

Upon blood, force, the crushing of man was raised the cruel, military-bureaucratic monster which used the country as a base of raw resources.”

This was just one of the bifurcational moments of which Lotman spoke, and of which we see so many in the 18th and 19th centuries. In facing a wide array of European techniques and ideas, Peter ruthlessly swept aside everything that did not lead to a reaffirmation of his absolute power and chose the materials for his reforms with neither a systemic approach nor a consideration for the

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284 Gordin, Between Slavery and Freedom, p. 20
long- or short-term effects on the people who would bear the cost of his fantasies. The farmer does not care what his cows think about his plans to raise the beef production figures. Peter’s military-bureaucratic chimera survived—despite everything—for nearly two centuries, stumbling from crisis to crisis, presenting a façade of cultural and artistic glamour behind which hid chaos and corrupt impoverishment.

When the State was refashioned by a mustached Georgian with a…unusual…sense of humor, its nature was changed far less than its façade. It remained religiously, rather than magically oriented. It continued to view itself not merely as the ruler but as the owner of the land and all those upon it. It owned and was owed everything by those who owned and were owed nothing; all it gave it gave out of mercy—“милость”—and could take back at will. The Caesaropapism inherited from Ivan’s proud intriguer of a grandmother was deep-rooted and the poison of its flowers was as insidious as it was deadly.

Russian society has spent half of a millennium developing a society in which the almighty state was—and is,—the great whole in regard to which the pitiful and insignificant individual unit had only one right—the right to pour into the all-encompassing ocean, the right to willingly surrender all self-control and will to the supreme power and expect nothing back in return. Those individual
units who refused to do so could not be merely ignored—they had to be expelled or destroyed, for their very existence disturbed the ideal, religious image which the State was attempting to create. There can be no neutrality. Failure to show support is equivalent to treason. Those who are not with us are against us. All my life I will remember a phrase I had heard at school during my Soviet childhood—“If you spit at the collective, the collective won’t notice. If the collective spits at you—you will drown!”

And yet, it is curious to note that in that darkest and most painful of all elements of Russian history—in serfdom—Lotman manages to find a small, but significant positive aspect. Of course it is impossible to calculate the real ratio of the damage done—for centuries—to individual human beings vs. the grand benefit created for a culture over the centuries. It was slavery for the majority which allowed a not-unqualified form of freedom for a percentage of a percentage of the minority. The most active and socially vital part of the nobility—the officer corps, had an exclusive privilege among the non-taxable estates.

“Strange as it may seem to the reader, it should be said that serfdom had, for the history of Russian culture as a whole, certain positive sides. It was upon serfdom that rested a certain independence—albeit perverted in its basis—of the nobility from the State; that without which culture is impossible. An officer did not serve for money. His wages barely covered the costs of military life, especially in the capital, in the Guard. […]”

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285 Lotman, *Conversations on Russian Culture*, p. 28
A nobleman served because there was quite simply no alternative to doing so. A nobleman who did not serve, did not attain a rank and remained unto death a legal adolescent—a “недоросль”—was a remarkably rare phenomenon. Some form of service to the State was necessary, even if it was a sinecure which carried no real work or responsibility. All these careers were, naturally, under the supervision and, much more importantly, upon the budget of the State. However, an officer whose income came in greater measure from his serfs than from his salary was indeed in a position of relative security, of tenuous quasi-freedom. Officially slaves and factually slave-owners—they were, in relative terms, closest to that state which—in Russian conditions,—can almost be called ‘free’.

“Let us allow one more parallel. The antique democracy of classical Athens was created at the expense of slaves and second-rate citizens. It would be strange to prettify the slave-owning regime and presume that it was not tied to monstrous abuses. And yet it would be no less strange, in viewing the statues of Phidias and Praxiteles, in reading Sophocles or Euripides, to keep saying: ‘That’s all at the expense of slave labor’. Moreover, even the compositions of a convinced supporter and ideologist of slavery, Plato are not only not summed-up by slave-owning ideology but are unquestionable one of the foundations of all European civilization. Slave-owning antique society created a universally human [“общечеловеческую”] culture. We’ve no reason to forget what the transformation of the nobility into a closer ruling estate cost Russia, but neither are there reasons to forget about that, which Russian noble culture of the 18th and early 19th centuries gave to Russian and European civilization.
Having won the dominant position, the nobility sought to weaken its dependence upon the State, and therefore upon the principles of 'regularity' and rank-based hierarchy.  

In reading the works of the three men who have been the subject of this study, we have seen them return, time and time again, to the golden, albeit flawed, glow of the Alexandrian age. “Pushkin and the Decembrists” — there is a verbal sequence which seems to act as a lens, focusing the light and promise of the era on a small group of inter-connected people. Here were the few people who had taken in the very best a century of Westernization had been able to provide while managing to avoid taking in most of that which was worse. The remarkable inner freedom of these people, their deep, internal connection to Europe and universal human culture, their internal dignity, pride and honor — all this draws the historian’s attention like a bright light in the darkness. Their appearance in Russia — in the obscurantist darkness, the corrupt bureaucratism, the vengeful and xenophobic ignorance which had formed (and let us not deceive ourselves — continues to form!), the basis of that culture — is nothing short of a miracle. It is one made possible by the appearance of the Petrine state which, while reducing the remaining 99% of the country to a condition of the most desperate servitude, managed to create a set of conditions under which — a century later — a tiny percentage of a tiny percentage managed to

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286 Ibid. pp. 40-41
287 Did anyone ever bother counting Pushkin’s bastards among his peasants?
find the freedom to write verse and discuss politics. Brilliant verse. Daring politics. And they even made St. Petersburg one of the most beautiful European cities in the process! So much given for so little…

Born, raised, and condemned to live their entire life in a country which had no intention of allowing them either internal or external freedom of any variety; realizing the value of that freedom and the cost its absence had had for their country over the centuries; determined to fight against the slow death of personal honor and dignity which had been the cost of rising in Russian society and administration—they put all of their passion, all of their indignation and fury into teaching and writing. Damned to live in a society which considered boorishness a normal element of the status quo—they wrote and spoke in a courteous and elegant language which had nothing of the formal and insincere. Forced to live in a world which daily proclaimed the truthfulness of lies—they fought for the primacy of fact. Chained to a country which rewarded snitches and murderers while mocking the honorable and destroying the decent—they stood for courage and honor. Living in a State which never spared the individual—they cared for single and singular human lives, knowing that each of those lives was, no matter what the State said, irreplaceable and priceless.
Yakov Gordin lives, as Natan Eidelman and Yuri Lotman had lived, in a society which had not merely lost, but which had deliberately and consciously destroyed its sense of shame, along with the people who made that wider social sense possible. They had spent their lives working to resurrect, even on paper, and above all in their personal behavior, a world—semi-imagined, of course, as is the world of every thinking person,—in which honor and pride had a real significance, a true sense and a true worth which made them worth a trip to Siberia or to the scaffold. In a world which had forgotten all basic human decency they remained, as severe monuments to a world long-gone, as reminders of it which called contemporaries to remember a time when there had been such people, people like Pushkin and the Decembrists, people like Eidelman and Gordin, who would stand for what was proper and right even at the greatest cost. Their loss—and let us not pretend otherwise—is Russia’s tragedy and curse.
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