10-1-1991

Russia and the Soviet Union: Civilizational Dimensions

Boris Erasov
Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol25/iss25/6
RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION: CIVILIZATIONAL DIMENSIONS

BORIS ERASOV

The present trends in the political life and social thought of the Soviet Union again exacerbate the long standing problem of unity and diversity of this country or, speaking more broadly, its identity as the core of a world system, a totalitarian state, a civilization or a congeries of heterogeneous components. The problem seems to be old and new at the same time. Long a subject of intense civilizational debate, Russia suddenly almost disappeared from that debate after the great leap in 1917 into a world political and ideological system where civilizational dimensions were, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant. Still they could not be eliminated. One may well share L. Dumont's wonder that "the cultural confrontation, so obvious and so well documented through the whole century, is not taken into account for the understanding of the Russian Revolution" or, for that matter, of subsequent Soviet history.

There is sufficient ground to presuppose not only social but serious cultural and civilizational reasons for the October revolution inaugurating the communist period, for the subsequent formation of the communist system as well as for the proclaimed radical perestroika. However, the predominant approach to the macro-analysis of the Soviet system was and continues to be political and economic and the few studies with well established reputation could not dispell the uncertainty of the civilizational status of the Soviet Union and of the Socialist system. Maybe because of it the accepted macro-paradigms in the mentality of the Soviet and probably of the foreign elites malfunction, slip or fail altogether. A sure sign of it may be seen in the recurrent allusions to "the irony" or "paradoxes" of Russian history. But this may sooner be taken as a deeper attempt to penetrate the history of Russian society against many empirical, value-loaded, one-sided and ideologically biased descriptions or programmatic treatises.
The premise of the article is that only by introducing the civilizational dimension of analysis can we avoid turning the landscape of Sovietology into a theoretical and ideological chaos or into a field of new mythologies.

The evident crisis of the Soviet system and the signs of its growing dissolution or rearrangement are accompanied by an evident resurgence of the pre-existent sociocultural components which have survived under the pressure of some dozens of years' totalitarianism thus testifying to their long-term vitality. The diffuse and multi-dimensional nature of these changes as well as the preoccupation of the social thought with the current dramatic political turns and unexpected trends within the Soviet Union or the Socialist system at large make any general analysis tentative and call for a retrospective revaluation of the long-standing civilizational factors which are, or may be, in force in the present Soviet framework. In an attempt to reach a more reliable analytical ground we need:

— to assess the civilizational components pre-existent within the Soviet formation;

— to assess their status during the heyday of the Soviet system and its own civilizational implications;

— to expose the significance of the civilizational factors within the perestroika movement.

**Civilizational Heritage of Russia**

Taking the tsarist Russia in a summary way as the starting point of analysis, we are prone to regard it not as a civilizational entity but rather as an authoritarian empire with a flexible regime of political domination and a restricted cultural inclusiveness for various components. There was some degree, however limited and hierarchical, of autonomy of various ethnic and religious elements within the universal state. The dynastic monarchy was the general pivot of the imperial structure with a highly centralized bureaucratic mechanism.

With some evident exceptions (Poland and Finland) the incorporations in the Empire did not represent national entities. They were in various degrees multi-ethnic formations in which statehood usually belonged to the dominant ethnic group. Compact ethnic formations usually did not cover large territories and even
major ethnic groups (Latvian, Lithuanian, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijanian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Tajik, Uzbek, Kirgiz) were either divided between different states or united in inter-ethnic state amalgams which were actually remnants of the derelict empires of the past.

Uncertainty of territorial political division in the huge Eurasian space, lack of political stability, immaturity of national statehood and the growing ethnic diffusion were the factors that greatly facilitated the expansion of the Russian Empire and actually invited it. Political protection was by no means only a pretext for occupation. Cessation of interstate strife, stabilization of the settler regions against the encroachments of the Asian nomads or the Caucasian highlanders were definitely civilizing assets of the Empire.

Another explicit kind of heterogeneity was confessional. The Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity had the status of the official creed but actually was subordinated to the political needs of the Empire. The Western (Catholic) Christianity held fast in the Western part of the Empire and no amount of ideological vituperation on the part of the Slavophiles could diminish its influence. The other major religion, Islam, was definitely predominant in Central Asia, a major part of the Caucasus and a part of the Middle Russia (Tataria). Bukhara and Samarkand were influential centres for the other Islamic parts of the Empire as well as for the believers behind the borders.

An important religious domain was constituted by Buddhism, mainly in the Southern Siberia bordering with China, Mongolia and indirectly linked with Tibet as its formal spiritual centre.

Every religious domain had a particular social structure related to the composition of the clergy and ritual organization. In its wider implication every religion delineated the civilizational boundaries which by no means coincided with the imperial borders. The evident exception was the Orthodox Christianity which coincided with the central framework of the Empire and was connected with its historical assembling and served as its main ideological pillar. The non-Orthodox parts of the Empire definitely gravitated, although in different degrees, to their main bodies across the borders.

The Russian Eagle looked eastward and westward retaining its Imperial heart. Behind the symbol there was an awkward and
unstable symbiosis of different nations, cultural-historical regions and civilizations. But the picture was even more complicated, contradictory and disjointed.

The heterogeneity of the Russian Empire was not only due to its polymorphous cultural body politic or its multi-civilizational composition. Important issues were the wholeness of civilizational identity and the center-periphery correlation. It was the peripheral status of the Catholic, Islamic, or Buddhist components of the Empire which actually allowed their political inclusion in the Russian Empire. But what was the civilizational identity of Russia itself?

It is not uncommon until now to come across allusions to the Russian civilization as the successor of the Byzantine civilization or as the Russian branch of the Orthodox Christendom and consequently as the historical agent of their preservation. There is also a very influential tendency to regard the “Russian idea” as a continuation primarily not of the Kievan Russian but rather of the Mongol Empire to which the Moscow state was the proper successor and with which it actually coincided in space.

However diverse are the points of view on the Russian idea, there is no refutation of the fact that after Russian swept across the Euroasian space, reached the Pacific and even crossed it over to settle in America for a while, and established its dominions over the vast Islamic territories in Central Asia it has overreached the Russian idea in any of its interpretation.

We would not find a substantiation of the Orthodox or the Russian idea even in Toynbee for whom religions were the framework of civilizational structure. For him even the Romanov Empire since Peter the Great was a definite attempt “to westernize all the Russians” and the later Communist regime could be regarded as a product of the schism in the Western body social. According to him “the remaining acts of the Russian tragedy have been played out, to order, on a wider stage, as incidents in a Western drama” from which the West itself has been miraculously retrieved. Having primarily a distinctly anti-western nature, Communism became “a going concern” only within the limits of the defunct Russian Empire at the price of turning it into “a parochial socialist national state” with a totalitarian regime. We may put it to Toynbee’s merit that he did not try to squeeze the Russian state within the limits of Orthodox Christendom and he
rightly fixed the tendency of curtailment of the Communist appeal in the westward direction. However, his analysis (or prophecy?) of 1939 was too diffuse, premature and empirically restricted to take into consideration the fateful events of the subsequent decades.

Toynbee's classic civilizations were too organic and consistent over long periods of time in spite of all tribulations through which they made their course. The civilizational field proved to be more elusive letting ample scope not only for Sorokin's scathing criticism of most civilizationists' theories but also for later penetrations into modern dynamics of history.

The Russian case may become a relevant field of civilizational studies only if we turn to a multicivilizational paradigm which we can find, among others, in Nikolai Berdyaev. He saw in Russian history fundamental antinomies and "frightful incongruities" due to which it "developed in a catastrophic rhythm, through discontinuities and change in the type of civilization." He saw a reason for it in the confrontation and interaction of the "two streams of world history—the West and the East which have always been fighting with each other." He counted in Russian history five different periods which presented different identities: Kievan Russia, Russia of the Tatar invasion period, Muscovite Russia, Russia of the Peter the Great period, and Soviet Russia.

These identities by no means supplanted each other, they have not produced an organic unity but rather coexisted as a diffuse symbiosis.

Actually, in spite of the official formula "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality" accepted in the nineteenth century, adherence to Orthodoxy was often a liability for the imperial government bent on stabilizing the vast territories with a religiously heterogeneous population. A natural outcome of this incongruity was the growing submission of the Orthodox church to the imperial state and a deep religious schism dividing the official and the popular Christianity which was never in concord with the state and constantly phobic against western Christianity and Islam.

The policy of Empire-building required overcoming the antagonism between Christian and non-Christian believers (or rather, religious institutions) and dictated noninterference in the religious practices which left a wide margin for cultural au-
Boris Erasov

Religious tolerance had its confirmation in the ideas of cultural relativism which were widely expressed in the social thought and literature and greatly promoted the growth of fruitful Russian Orientalism.

However, the Russian Empire was not only a politically united congeries of various and divergent social, ethnic, and confessional units. The pragmatic policy of careful manipulation and regulation of the interests of different units and their elites had to be supplemented and sometimes overruled with an overall normative and axiological orientation presumably overarching the existing sociocultural motley. There were two competitive paradigms of such an orientation.

A. The first one called for an expansion of the spiritual domain of Orthodox Christendom and for modification of its tenets so as to make it supra-national and tolerant of other confessions. Such an Orthodoxy could be regarded not as the spiritual department of the Universal State but, on the contrary, as an autonomous force capable of establishing a spiritual unity of diverse peoples.13

This task proved to be too exacting and received no satisfactory solution although a number of thinkers developed comprehensive conceptions expounding universal Christianity as a true orientation for all humankind.14 The Orthodox Christian religion had no transnational church and its adherence to national languages and histories was a constant limitation of its universality.15 In Russia the Orthodoxy was too tied to the Russian idea and the Russian statehood and the attempts to enlarge its scope and to make it relevant to a Universal State inevitably weakened the established symbols and undermined the uniqueness of the Russian church in its capacity of an institutional demiurge.16

All attempts of the secularized elite to utilize religion for the creation of a larger inter-confessional community met with resistance of the “true Orthodoxy” preferring its inveterate traditions to risky innovations.

B. The other paradigm consisted in universalization of the Enlightenment as an expansion of the domain of reason, civil rights, harmony of individual and society. Naturally this universalization expressed itself as a continuation of the European civilization. From Peter the Great on, Russia was represented as a prolongation and a worthy rival of the West and its historic destiny was conjectured as drawing the “new-caught, sullen peoples” (R. Kipl-
ing) into the civilizational circle. It was a secular variant, and devalorization of the religious dimension of unity helped to weaken the opposition between the antagonistic symbols: Orthodox—non-Orthodox Christianity, Christianity—Islam, Russia (as part of Europe)—non-Christian Orient. This was considered as a way to the gradual elimination of confessional confrontation and promotion of a civilizational whole.\textsuperscript{15a}

This paradigm was also replete with limitations and contradictions. Anyway, the center of the perspectively modernizing Orient was Russia as the fundamental and unique entity binding all other parts into a meaningful and functional whole. The non-Russian world of the Empire, its western and eastern parts somehow had to recede to subordinate places. There was the Slavic West as a cultural periphery of the Russian centre, there was the western Catholic and Protestant domain, mostly ambivalent but nevertheless complementary to the Imperial centre. But there was also the “non-Christian” East, primarily Muslim or nomadic, radically and negatively different from the normative Russian-Western culture.\textsuperscript{17}

This antithesis had deep and persistent historical roots in the resistance to the nomadic expansion and the subsequent confrontation with the Islamic states. Peaceful coexistence within the Empire was yet too short and unstable to constitute a meaningful whole.

In spite of all pragmatic policy and relativistic ideas of imperial thinkers, of all attempts at universalization of Orthodoxy or at an Enlightened Universal State, the constituent parts retained their sociocultural identity. The widening ethnic and confessional diffusion promoted cultural interaction without creating a reliable new synthesis. Moreover, it could take away from the Empire or the prospective Enlightened State the image of a messianic Great Russia as the epitome of power, spirit and reason.

There is no need to argue about the polymorphous character not only of Russia but of any other macro-social formation. No civilization is entirely coherent and we might resort to Pitirim Sorokin for substantiating this thesis. Still, the analysis of any “normal,” i.e. mature, stable and long-standing civilization convinces us that they can be regarded as a sort of diffuse systems unified by a formative principle (as in Islam) or by a hierarchical
structure of values and social groups (as in Hinduism). This principle was manifestly absent in the Russian universal state in which political power was the main unifying force.

Again N. Berdyaev may be taken here as a thinker with a keen perception of the contradictions inherent in the Russian body social which made it an unstable colossus of incongruous parts and orientations. Among its many variegated antinomies, singled out by him, the following may be taken as the major ones:  

— the search for ultimate spiritual freedom versus servile submission to secular power and denial of human rights and dignity;
— the radical apolitical denial of the state in favour of community freedom versus a strong orientation to a powerful, all encompassing state for which everything serves as a means of self-aggrandizement;
— the apocalyptic other-worldly search for Truth and ultimate salvation versus this-worldly materialistic inclinations;
— an Orthodoxy bent on maintaining universal Christian values and order versus the russification of Christianity.

Finally, one more major contradiction assumed dramatic proportion in the dynamics of the XIX-XX century. It was the challenge of modernization through westernization which was experienced as a double-edged danger of social disorganization and national degradation. The symbiotic quasi-civilizational formation within the framework of the Russian Empire became deeply involved in relations with the West. The influence of the rapidly modernizing Europe naturally increased the inner incongruity and instability of the Empire in the social as well as national respects. The very survival of the Russian universal state was put under question. Military defeats suffered by Russia in the West as well as the Far East were tokens of fragility of the colossal Empire. And there was no civilizational structure to meet the challenge.

Civilizational Dimensions of the Soviet System

The collapse of the monarchy in the hectic revolutionary years was followed by a social upheaval and the Civil War the result of which was a virtual dismantling of the whole imperial structure as if validating Sorokin's idea of a congeries of unrelated elements in relation to Russia.

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol25/iss25/6
However, the new universal state was soon reassembled in almost the same boundaries (with the exception of the homogeneous nations of Finland and Poland) thus overruling for a time the principle according to which the plural empires were bound to disintegrate. But the new state had a very specific character. It was at the same time a universal empire with oppressive administrative methods as well as a quasi-civilization with a paraphernalia of a non-Western civilizational paradigm.

The prevalent paradigm of the Soviet Union in the social thought has been that of a totalitarian state comparable to other totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. In this paradigm a formidable state-party ruling system provided a framework of unification and total (holistic) regulation of all basic functions including the economic. Reduction to totalitarianism makes the civilizational analysis of any society irrelevant as if validating in relation to the USSR the recent denomination of it as “an evil empire” or as “an anti-civilization.” One can find sufficient evidence for that in the anti-communist classics, such as N. Platonov, G. Orwell, A. Solzhenitsyn, A. Shalamov, A. Zinoviev and in many others. The completeness of their criticism of the system and the finality of their damnation of its inhumanity greatly substantiates the verdict.

However, the totalitarian dimension of the Soviet Union does not supply a sufficient paradigm for the macro-analysis of the Soviet system. The state-party regulation based on a preponderance of holistic, strictly centralized politics not differentiated from economic, social or cultural life was supplemented with a large-scale civilizational mechanism providing some space, however controlled or restricted, for culturally conditioned modes of existence. But it was a particular mode of culture.

True, it is not easy to disentangle both dimensions of the Soviet reality—the totalitarian and the civilizational. An intense debate started as far back as the Twentieth CPSU Congress (1956) whether the repressions and coercion were only “a deviation” from “the true socialism” or inherent in it. A growing number of dissidents saw in it only an alienating repressive system and a distortion of all human values. The problem remains unresolved even now and the growing debate has overshadowed the figures and teachings of Lenin and then of Marx, overwhelming the communist ideology. The radical criticism meets, however, with
Boris Erasov

strong and entrenched opposition on the part of the state-party die-hards.

There is more in this debate than just sheer resistance to change and vested interests of the ruling elite. And this is primarily the universal appeal of Communism based on Marxist teaching and by no means restricted to the Soviet Union. Global, although piecemeal, expansion of Communism was not only inspired by the Soviet governing regime. Soon after the revolution it was recognized as a liability and the attitude to it was very ambivalent whatever the official declarations.

The civilizational analysis of Communism is often obscured by the circumstances of its genesis. Born in an exemplary European setting it was regarded by its adherents as the ultimate achievement of the moribund Western (Capitalist) civilization. The subsequent history of Marxism was always counted as starting from its European origin.21

However, in the passage from West to East Marxism lost its genetic potential for social criticism and became the orthodoxy, the indoctrinated ideology and the spiritual basis for an anti-Western civilizational system. In a generalized analysis we may find in Communism, as it was established in the Soviet Union and other countries of the Socialist system, some structural elements similar to those that we find in other non-Western civilizations:

— a universalistic (“international”) ideology based on a sacralized teaching intensively implanted in the public mind and sociocultural life;

— a cult of the Founding Teachers, recurrent rituals, wide ritualization of symbolic history;

— a unified and hierarchic mass party as the vehicle of a general regulation closely tied to the state but at the same time having influential connections with communist parties in other countries involving mutual obligations.

The structural aspects of Communism have been amply analyzed primarily in political terms. Turning to meanings and values we cannot write them off as just “utopia,” “mythology,” “absurdity,” “pathology” or self-deception” as it is currently stated in many critical pamphlets of the perestroika. In essence we deal with a fundamental sacralized ideology. Here we meet one of the many paradoxes of Soviet reality: an ideology born in typically Western conditions becomes the dominant world-view
of a non-Western macro-formation antagonistic to the very survival of the parental civilization.

In ideological programs and convictions implanted to some degree into the public mind Communism as the last and highest stage of socialism was to accomplish “world historical tasks:”

a. to do away with the economic relations based on market and private property which are to be supplanted by direct communitarian relations;

b. to eliminate the legal sphere independent from the political system in favor of communitarian self-regulation;

c. to eliminate the essential presence of the Western culture with its motives of individuality, free initiative, personal responsibility, pluralism and differentiation of various spheres of life in favor of collectivism and the wholeness of life even at the expense of its simplification;

d. to supplant Christianity as well as other religions based on theistic principles and Man-to-God relations in favor of a depersonalized atheistic faith in the Universal Historical Process (or the Historical Necessity) ensuring the inevitability of collective salvation for the community of true believers.

The elimination of the pre-existing Christian culture in favour of “scientific atheism” led to the rejection of the idea and symbolics of a personal God supplanted by a belief in a transcendental depersonified law governing human destinies as well as society and nature. In spite of the persistence of the classical European culture, a strong trend to depersonalization and reification of the normative world-view was aimed at a radical separation of the Soviet culture from the Western one. The classical Western or Russian patterns with their elaborate personal, realistic and tragic elements were treated as a “pre-history” that ought to be gradually overcome in order to create a basis for a new “post-capitalistic” civilization.

Thus, from the point of view of meanings and values as well as in its structural paradigm the Soviet formation was modelled as a paradigmatic generalized non-Western civilization. The tremendous scale of the task, the pressure of time necessary for catching up with the formidable antagonist were major reasons for converting a budding civilization into a totalitarian state.

In its ideological expression the Revolution was a repudiation of a particularistic principle in history in favor of a universal
history in which capitalism leaves the ground for Communism with all other societies having the status of "retarded" and bound to be involved into an accelerated rhythm which will help them "to catch up" with the more developed.

A drive to universalism made it necessary to obliterate the differences between various social and cultural groups which should all become subjects of uniform regulation by the state-party bureaucracy. In the social sphere the task was to destroy or diminish—through class struggle—not only formal class differentiation but particularistic social units (the family, local community) and "to build a classless society." In the ethnic sphere the perspective consisted in the unification of all nations and ethnic minorities in one harmonious whole ("a united Soviet people"), Ethnic elements were tolerated only in the secondary spheres: local forms of production, particular ways of life, folk art, traditionalistic elements in culture. With all solicitude to the growth of "national intelligentsia" the regime took care to diminish its national expression and make it "international." The meanings and values constituting the identity of national unities were to be discarded in favor of the common "socialist" content of culture.

This refers to the Russian culture no less than to the "multi-national" assemblage. The state ceased to be Russian not only in its name but also in the status of the Russian population as well as the ascription of the ruling class. Derussification as well as denationalisation in general were principles of Soviet political culture. Formal belonging to a nation was actually supplanted by the social (class) origin or by party membership. The Russian language became a vehicle of "international" culture with dire consequences for its quality.

The endogenous potential of the national units was to be subordinated to the interests of the centralised universal system concentrating all potential of achievement of conjectured super-goals of collective salvation. Uniformity of the world-views, of orientations of education through school, mass-media, mass culture was, on the one hand, essential for upgrading the level of common people, on the other hand, it set restrictions against all dissenting groups and individuals who could be potential innovators.

The rationale of the centralized universalism was sustained by the necessity of uniting disparate territorial and social units which
did not constitute an organic whole. But it could be done only at the expense of the more developed units which had to share their gains to compensate the others’ losses.

The triumph of the Supreme “Historical” Law led to self-alienation of all participant subjects. The civil society ceased to be a subject and was downgraded to a manipulated body. The rights and potentialities of every unit and group were alienated by the higher-standing body but the whole formation was subjected to the supreme ontological authority. The legitimate authority of the ruling system was relegated to a depersonalized Universal Historical Process against which there was no appeal.

There is a definite similarity of the Soviet civilization to other non-Western civilizations in structural respect as well as in general value orientations. This similarity reveals the civilizational secret of the Soviet system taken as the core of the world communist system. It may be regarded as a project of a super-civilization opposite to the Western type and confronting it in all essential respects.

The important difference from classical, “normal” non-Western civilizations was an absolute and constant insistence on industrialization and “material progress.” This aspect is often taken as a reason to denote Socialism in the 1930-50s as a way of modernization. However, all evidence shows that the main purpose of this development was “the defence and security of the gains of Socialism.” In the mentality of the ruling elite the political and military power of the state capable of extending at least some influence all over the world embodied the “final victory” of Socialism.

Taking stock of the achievements of the “real socialism,” we can state that the Communist civilization in conjunction with the state-party totalitarian system has demonstrated its ability to ensure stability and integration of a widely heterogeneous congeries of different peoples at the expense of elimination of their heterogeneity and reduction of it to some uniformity in vital spheres of social regulation.

Its viability in economic and cultural development proved to be low and restricted to the spheres important for survival and continuing confrontation with the West. However, it was not capable of self-sustained development and therefore doomed to stagnation. The paradigmatic destiny followed the Communist system.
close at its heels. The evident failure of the system to keep up the appearances and promises of well-being for the population from time to time caused frantic attempts at modernization through some structural changes and a wider opening of the windows to the world. But the reforms inevitably failed as soon as they revealed the absolute necessity of changing the principles, structure and very identity of the system. Long after the detrimental consequences and failures of the system became obvious the rationale of universalism continued to exercise a heavy hold on the society through the centralized system of regulation and spiritual ontology of common salvation in “the struggle for Communism.”

The Soviet Civilization at Stake

The current dissolution of the Soviet system has various dimensions. Dismantling of the state-party totalitarian rule in political and economic life proved to be tied up with the general macro-regulation. The established quasi-civilizational structure has proved to be inadequate and baleful in its consequences. The anti-totalitarian transformation inevitably undermined the meanings, values and structure of the “socialist culture.”

The supposed Soviet Union and international Socialist unity proved to be unstable and conditioned by the ruinous centralized system. The political and economic crises turned out to be at the same time a crisis of identity on several levels. The macro-identity of the Soviet Union at large is definitely crumbling not only as the core of a world system or as an integral political formation, but also as a major historical attempt at creating a new super-civilizational unit.

The official repudiation of the restrictions on the inner dissident trends and of the confrontation with the outer world was expressed in the widely proclaimed intention “to enter into the world civilization” and “to de-ideologize spiritual life and political relations.” It was with renewed wonder that the leaders and social thinkers often met the unexpected upsurge of national movements and religious revival. This revival often evidently disagrees not only with economic rationality but also with civilizational principles in any variant.

But the integrative potential of nationalism is always restricted and relative. It involves separation from the minorities of “non-
native" population and confrontation with the neighbouring groups.

So we are back again to some extent to the original question about the civilizational and macro-sociological identity of the Soviet Union. But it is not only the predicament of social science. For the second time in one century, society has to decide this question of tremendous significance.

Of course, the situation is by no means the same. The ethnic or religious revival in the USSR is not a return to the pre-existing sociocultural identity even if national movements are inevitably motivated by such ideas. The difference from the pre-revolutionary situation can be summed up in the following main items:

— a high degree of industrialization and urbanization (with significant gradations for different republics), even if centralization has distorted the network of organic economic and social relations;

— a wide migration of population between regions and republics leading to intensive interethnic diffusion and dispersion of the population;

— the growth of national intelligentsia;

— the increase of differentiation in all spheres of life which makes it necessary for every ethnic group to promote higher culture while sustaining its national identity.

It would be wrong to regard all ethnic movements in the Soviet Union as belonging to the same types and directed against the centralized system. There is a noticeable divergence between movements for national sovereignty in the republics enjoying a union status and consequently having legitimate claims on the territory and means of production, and the movements of lower-level ethnic groups subordinated not to the center but to a particular republic. The latter usually appeal to the center for legitimate protection, thus bringing back to life the prerequisites of the imperial domination.

Ethnic revival in the Soviet Union threatens not only the previous quasi-civilizational unity but the traditional civilizational framework as well. The rising wave of national movements in the Baltic republics leads to alienation not only of the Russian-speaking population but also of the Polish groups. The Ukraine is not only claiming back political sovereignty but also cultural independence from Russia, including a reappraisal of its history.
Increasing clashes in the Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus often take place between different ethnic groups supposedly belonging to the Islamic faith. The civilizational situation in the Transcaucasian region remains highly incongruous; the primeval and ossified Christianity of Georgia and Armenia is usurped by revivalistic nationalism only to face the mounting nationalism of Islamic populations. And as throughout all history the civilizational status of Russia proper remains indeterminate, subject to many contradictory movements.

Still, behind the wave of “wild” nationalism there is an evident general trend toward the revival of previous civilizational identities and allegiances. The Baltic republics, Moldavia, Ukraine (and separately of it western Ukraine) show, although with noticeable specificities, a strong pro-Western orientation and invariably model their reconstruction on the “capitalist” lines even if it looks like a late peripheral modernization. The resoluteness of their break with the previous “patronymic” center (and with the Communist party) is a measure of their westernization.

The movements in Central Asian republics are distinctly Asian-oriented. A much weaker tendency toward market relations is supplemented with a strong desire for nationalistic consolidation directed against the rival ethnic groups. There is usually a much closer accord with the Communist party, which even earlier, was very much “nationalized” and “orientalized” and with the change of the official course adapted itself to “national representation.” Not relying much on industrial modernization, these republics usually insist on territorial claims (land and water resources) which may lead to violent clashes.

The period of “wild” nationalism is inevitable in conditions when religious and civilizational identities have been greatly weakened. But these identities manifest themselves in:

a. a growing interest in the classic culture and high traditions which for every group of cultures has its civilizational boundaries;

b. the growth of all the higher religions and revivalistic movements;

c. the intensification of relations with co-civilizationists within the Soviet Union as well as beyond its borders.

The tentative and much discussed roster of the civilizational regions in the USSR looks as follows:

a. the North-Western region of the Baltic republics, historically
and culturally peripheries of the European civilization in its East-European or Scandinavian variants;

b. the Russian or rather Great Russian civilization comprising European Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia with their specific but similar languages, a similar Christian religiosity and common history;\(^{26}\)

c. the Islamic region comprising Central Asia, Southern Kazakhstan, Transcaucasia and the Northern Caucasus;

d. Siberia as a very diffuse, sprawling and tentative protocivilizational region or a cultural area which through centuries has been mainly a functional periphery of the tsarist Russia or of the Soviet Union and in some respects can be regarded as a symbiotic congeries of different ethnic and national cultures with slight chances of civilizational fulfillment;

e. the Buddhistic region as a periphery of the Chinese or Tibetan Buddhism and culturally remote from the western “theistic” regions;

f. the Far East (especially Primorye), far removed geotechnologically from the USSR center and with a growing involvement with the North Pacific region.

For each civilization we can find a specific and meaningful system of value orientations relevant to work, wealth, time, and community. The usual striking example is the difference between the industrial or technical proclivities of the urbanized population of the Baltic republics or Russians and the aptitude to rural activities typical to the population of Central Asia. There is a manifest difference between definitely individualized and fragmentary sociality of the western population and the intensely communitarian type of the Asiatic or Caucasian peoples. Again, the Islamic overall universality with its heavy emphasis on particular social structures is alien to the cultures which retain at least some vestiges of Christianity. Even the predominance of the Soviet system for several decades has not effaced this difference.

The political disputes and confrontations between the center and the republics or between the republics themselves usually overshadow the growing tendencies for cultural integration on a different level. Still there is a growing consensus of experts in favor of “a double solution:” political sovereignty of the republics and ethnic confederation of ethnicities in a community primarily on the cultural basis. The civilizational identities as usual take a
Civilizational factors promote integration of social and national communities belonging to the particular civilization. At the same time they differentiate great sociocultural complexes from each other. Therefore civilizational universalism may subdue rivalries between nations of the Central Asia or Northern Caucasus, but it leads to exacerbation of cross-cultural clashes between Armenia and Azerbaidjan or between the population of the Baltic republics and the Russians.  

The functional rationale of civilizational principles will promote the self-determination of civilizational regions of the Soviet Union. It is important to note also that the boundaries of civilizations included in the Soviet Union are by no means circumscribed by it. On the contrary, they dissect its official frontiers and help to establish a persistent traffic of people motivated by similar ideals, values and attitudes. There is an intense communion between nations of the Islamic region on both sides of the Soviet border. The peoples of Southern Siberia (the Buryats etc.) look for their cultural sources into the Buddhistic civilization of Mongolia and Tibet or China.  

The disintegration of the Soviet system may lead to its civilizational split. However, the imminent pluralization does not necessarily lead to disintegration which may result in a far-reaching destabilization of social life. Therefore, instead of the artificial and stagnant political unification, an alternative basis of cross-national and cross-civilizational interaction should be elaborated. That is why the problem of cultural interaction and understanding becomes so important. The paradigm of artificial official unity should be supplanted by mutual recognition of cultures, great and small traditions.  

The civilizational problems of the Soviet Union turn out to be intertwined with international cultural relations. Power politics on a grand or a small scale need to be supplanted by cultural interaction. But it is the civilizational approach primarily that should help avoid the proliferation of ethnocentric pluralism and create a coordinated universe combining the achievements and endogenous potential of different cultures.
NOTES

1. Given the extent of the ISCSC debate on diverent paradigms of civilization and given the Society’s lack of agreement on their nature, I would rather define a civilization as a sociocultural formation around a central core of cultural values and meanings. An elaboration of this concept see B. Erasov *Culture, Religiya i Tsivilizatsiya na Vostoke* (Culture, Religion and Civilization in the Orient) (Moscow: Nauka, 1990).


3. J. Billington’s *The Icon and the Axe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970) can still be counted as a masterful interpretation of well-chosen material. He tried through the ambivalent dimensions of Russian history to show the contradictions of Russian culture through which sense “could ultimately be made out of the implausible aspirations of Russian thought and the repeated rejection of higher ideals in Russian reality” where “freedom comes out of tyranny, life out of death” (pp. 595-596).


8. Toynbee’s point about Russia that from the eighteenth century “Russia sought and obtained admission to membership in the Western Society, and the remaining acts of the Russian tragedy have been played out, to order, on a wider stage, as incidents in a western drama” (Vol. 5, p. 104) needs a discount. Confrontation with the West was the main raison d’etre for the Soviet State. The evident argument that Communism which swept Russia was definitely of the Western origin is impossible to refute. But it became “Russian communism,” later “Chinese” or “Cuban” and to a much smaller degree was retained in Europe (as “academic” or “parliamentary” communism!


10. N. A. Berdyaev, “Russkaya ideya” (Russian idea), in: *Voprosy Filosofii*, 1990, no. i, p. 77. The article is a reprint of Berdyaev’s publication of 1946.

11. Ibid., p. 79.


13. The primary among them are, of course, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev.

14. Saa S. A. Averintsev, “Pravoslavie” (Orthodox Christianity), in:
Boris Erasov


15. As N. Berdyaev put it “Russian history gave an entirely unique spectacle of a complete nationalization of the Christian church which defines itself as universal” (N. Berdyaev, Sudba Rossii (Russian destiny) (Moscow: Sovetsky Pисатель, 1990), p. 17.


17. Ibid., pp. 52-53.


19. An even more detailed description of the incongruities in Russian culture may be found in the book by N. O. Lossky Charakter russkogo naroda (Character of the Russian People), Vol. 1, 2 (Frankfurt/Main: Posev, 1957). However, after presenting an elaborated juxtaposition of merits and shortcomings of the Russian people, Lossky seems to be at a loss how to deal with flagrant discrepancies, only hoping against hope that “after overcoming the godless and inhuman Communist power, the Russian people, with God’s assistance, will . . . be a supremely useful collaborator in the family of peoples” (Vol. 2, p. 86).


21. For a thorough recent discussion of the “real meaning” of Marxism and of its distortions, see the collective work Omsmyslit kult Stalina (Thinking Over the Stalin Cult) (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989), and numerous publications in practically all major magazines.

22. In the disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian soil and in the resettlement of Christianity from East to West we may find an archaic parallel to the destiny of Marxism. As we shall see, the similarity is not only in the complete resettlement from the place of origin to entirely dissimilar and far-away lands. “The Rape of Marxism” may be regarded as a postponed revenge for the alienation of Christianity from the Orient.

23. It is true that the transcendental dimension of Communism was rather vague. The pragmatic call “to build a new world here on this earth” was always a liability for the ideology and there was a definite trend to postpone the fulfilment of earthly desires to future generations.

24. This is no place to draw a comparison between the dynamics of the Soviet formation and the classical non-Western civilizations. The great
life cycles of civilizations as described by A. Toynbee prove to be too comprehensive and therefore metaphorical. Nevertheless, the paradigm of stagnation going as far back as Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) and recently elaborated by J. Needham, G. von Grunebaum, M. G. Hodgson and others proves to be relevant for our purpose. A vital correction should be the rhythm of modern history, compression of centuries into dozens of years in conditions of globality of intercivilizational relations.

25. While the political decomposition of the Empire can be seen in the spectacular falling away of the East European countries and in the frantic attempts of the western republics to gain independence, civilizational disintegration is shown by a downfall not only of the official ideology but also of the very worldview which had been so thoroughly and painstakingly imposed upon the society. Without this worldview and an accepted ideology the system loses all semblance of legitimacy. In spite of the frantic attempts of the die-hards to stick to the old ideological guns the amount of scathing criticism, its uncompromising character have definitely changed the spiritual climate of the society. Violent accusations (even at the CPSU Congresses) against the new state leadership, the democrats, and the mass-media are virulent but mostly pathetic. Nevertheless, the “anti-civilizational” evil is very resistant and has at its disposal the huge machinery of the authoritarian state system.

26. Without going far into the problems of modernization I should only say that there is no certain correlation between market relations and civilizational belonging. Consequently, the market applications in the Baltic republics may be rather an indication of Western orientation. On the contrary, intense trade activity of the Caucasian population, sometimes a kind of “bazaar imperialism” all over the country, is of distinctly Oriental origin.

27. One of the most fundamental programs of the revival of the Great Russian civilization has been given by Alexander Solzhenitsin. “Kak nam obustroit Rossiyu (How Can We Reconstruct Russia).” In spite of heavy criticism, especially on the part of non-Russian national radicals, his program had a wide appeal. Still, the process of inner disintegration goes further. The magazine Obshchestvennye nauki (Social sciences) has carried an article by V. Semenkov “Do the Russians Need a Great Power” (1990, no. 6). The answer is definite: “Enough of it.” But the underlying reason is rather Toynbeeian: “It is time to realize, that we Russians are tired of being too big. I speak not of a daily weariness but of the tiredness of the Russians as a historical subject. We might say that it is the existential plight of the contemporary Russian” (p. 127). To evade the burden of bigness it is necessary to recognize the reality of sub-ethnic Russian groups stretching over wide geocultural space.

28. I would like again to insist strongly on the point basic for the whole article that there is no rigid correlation between a civilization (as related to its worldview and mode of sociality) and its region. I entirely agree with D. Richardson that “geography becomes less and less important” in more developed civilizations (The Boundaries of Civilizations in Space and Time,
Ed. by M. Melko and L. Scott. Lanham, 1987, p. 9). Frontiers belong to the world of politics, civilizations can claim space often with little regard to political and any other frontiers, thus creating "multi-civilizational" spaces. The Soviet example convincingly illustrates this point.

29. Although consolidation of the Muslim population so far is rather tentative, it is evidently growing, as evidenced by the active revivalist movements in different regions of the Soviet Union.