The Slave Soul of Russia

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TWO

Some Historical Highlights

I do not wish to relate the history of Russian masochism from the beginning, because the beginning is largely unknown. I also do not wish to tell this story in great detail, because it would be too distasteful for everyone involved, and besides there would not be nearly enough space in one volume. Nonetheless it is worthwhile at least to indicate some relevant high points, in roughly chronological sequence, before going into detail about specific, selected masochistic practices.

Religious Masochism

From the early days of Christian Rus’ (an East Slavic area occupied not by Russians properly speaking, but by “Rusians,” to use Horace Lunt’s linguistic neologism), there come reports of suffering welcomed by the sufferer. If, for example, the hagiographic accounts are to be believed, the princes Boris and Gleb permitted, even invited themselves to be murdered in 1015 by agents of their power-hungry elder brother, Sviatopolk. A variety of commentators have recognized the masochistic nature of this act (without using the psychoanalytic term). Soviet scholar S. S. Averintsev, for example, says that suffering was precisely what Boris and Gleb were up to (“Stradanie i est’ ikh delo”). Soviet semiotician V. N. Toporov terms the act a “paired sacrifice” and a “voluntary sacrifice.” Philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev calls it a “feat of nonresistance” in which the “idea of sacrifice” predominates.

Prince Jaropolk Isiaslavich, also assassinated by political enemies, is
supposed to have uttered the following words: “O Lord my God! receive my prayer and grant me a death from another’s hand, like that of my kinsmen Boris and Gleb, so that I may wash away all my sins with my blood and escape this vain and troubled world and the snares of the devil.” 5 To Prince Andrei Bogoliubskii, another political murder victim, are attributed these last words: “I thank Thee, Lord, that Thou hast humbled my soul. . . . And now, O Lord, if they shed my blood, join me to the choirs of Thy holy martyrs.” 6

Examples could be multiplied. These “passion-sufferers” (“strastoterpsty”) are legion in the chronicles and other documents from ancient Rus’. Holiness (“sviatost’”) was practically inseparable from sacrifice (“zhertva”) of some kind. 7 Historian George Fedotov suspects that the accounts are distorted, however: “The voluntary character of the death is often contradicted by the circumstances related by the same author.” 8 Many of the martyrdoms seem to have been concocted for political reasons. 9 Nevertheless, the idea of nonresistance to evil spread far and wide, and according to Fedotov began to be taken as a “national Russian feature.” 10

Ancient religious tracts are full of advice on the value of self-abnegation and suffering. For example, the Izmaragd (Emerald, which originated in the fourteenth century) characterizes humility as “the mother of virtues,” advises children to serve their parents “with fear as a slave,” and tells wives to obey their husbands “in silence.” Misfortunes are sent by a loving God to give people an opportunity to save their souls or even gain glory: “Sorrows and pains make the sufferers glorious, as gold in fire becomes still brighter.” 11

The tradition of religious asceticism, which in Slavic lands began in about the tenth century and continues down to the present day, offers numerous examples of the active quest for suffering. The young Saint Theodosius (ca. 1108–74) mortified his flesh with iron chains hidden under his shirt, or exposed his body to stinging gnats. He was later known to sleep sitting, to eat a very meager diet, to beat his head against the floor while praying, etc. 12 Fedotov says that the “relatively moderate ascetic exercises” (sic) of this saint were supplemented by constant labor, such as grinding wheat, cutting wood, or hauling water. 13

Saint Sergei of Radonezh (1314–92) wore uncouth garb, practiced heavy manual labor, would go for days without food, and adamantly
refused to be elevated in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, according to his biographer Epiphanius the Wise. His holy ideal was poverty, and in this he “imitated his Master Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Saint Irinarkh of Rostov (d. 1616) always walked barefoot and wore chains and a hair shirt. Bolshakoff says: “After his death a collection of iron and copper chains, belts and helmets was found in his cell.”

Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) was adept at fasting. One report has it that he ate nothing but grass for three years. When consulted by the holy woman Anastasiia Logacheva (1809–75) he recommended that she wear chains to quell her carnal lust. Anastasiia evidently followed this advice, for upon her death penitential chains were found beneath her clothing.

The masochistic practices of many of the holy monks were accompanied by paranoid fantasies or hallucinations (“demonology” is the theological euphemism for this). Theodosius said he was haunted by a “black dog” while praying. The recluse Isaac was pestered by demons who tricked him by taking the form of angels. The “much-suffering” John went about in nothing but chains and once tried to relieve his suffering by digging himself into the earth, where he experienced a terrible hallucination: “Over his head he saw the mouth of a horrible serpent belching flames. When the paschal night came, the serpent took the recluse’s head and arms into its mouth and scorched his hair. Out of the serpent’s mouth John cried to God, and the fiend disappeared.”

Perhaps the examples of religious suffering I have cited are extreme, and in some cases not credible. Yet it is generally acknowledged that the East Slavic holy men and holy women were indeed ascetic to a greater or lesser extent. Perhaps not all of them went to such great lengths at punishing themselves as the canonized saints were alleged to have gone. On the other hand, the less illustrious holy persons may have gone even further. Speaking of the relatively uneducated monks of the sixteenth century, Bolshakoff says:

Contemplation, the Prayer of Jesus and serious meditation on the Scriptures were replaced by extreme rigorism in the observance of a multitude of rites and by an astonishing severity in bodily mortifications. Long vigils, endless services, countless prostrations, extraordinary penances and fasting were de rigueur for every good monk, who, however, understood but little of the Scriptures and the Fathers.
The population of these sufferers in old Russia must have been substantial during some periods. For example, in 1700, before Peter the Great imposed cutbacks, there were 1,200 monasteries in Russia. The figure for 1900 is 800 monasteries (300 of them nunneries), housing 17,000 professed monks and nuns, and nearly 30,000 novices of both sexes. If religious suffering can be quantified (and even allowing for a decrease of asceticism over the centuries), these numbers are eloquent. They bespeak a religious masochism of massive proportions.

Not without reason does James Billington speak of “an almost masochistic doctrine of ascetic discipline” and “the almost masochistic desire of the . . . monks to humble themselves.” Actually, the qualifier “almost” is quite unnecessary here. In similar fashion George Fedotov says: “The evaluation of suffering as a superior moral good, as almost an end in itself, is one of the most precious features of the Russian religious mind.” Again, the “almost” may be deleted. Suffering is masochistic in nature, it is an end in itself for the religious sufferers—which is not to deny that other ends also exist for such sufferers. In the case of monastic asceticism the most frequently mentioned end is of course spiritual perfection and union with God, and the eloquent writings of Nil Sorsky, Seraphim of Sarov, and some others testify to the mystical ecstasy which can sometimes be induced (in part) by self-denial and self-punishment.

There are signs of a revival of monasticism in Russia at the end of the twentieth century. But it is not yet clear to what extent this revival will involve specifically ascetic/masochistic features.

Related (psychologically) to monastic asceticism is the Russian tradition of holy foolishness. The holy fool or fool in Christ (“iurodivyi Khrista radi”) was a familiar figure in all Russian towns up until (and in some cases even after) the Bolshevik Revolution. Russians had a special fondness for the holy fools. As Slavophile philosopher Ivan Kireevsky said, “the Russian had a greater respect for the rags of the holy fool than the golden brocade of the courtier.”

Psychoanalytically viewed, the holy fool was a sufferer, part of whose masochism was specifically provocative or exhibitionistic in style. Giles Fletcher, English ambassador to Russia in 1588–89, describes the phenomenon: They use to go stark naked, saue a clout about their middle, with their haire hanging long and wildly about their shoulders, and many of them with an iron
collar, or chaine about their neckes, or middes, even in the very extremity of winter. These they take as Prophets, and men of great holines, giving them a liberty to speak what they list without any controulment, thogh it be of the very highest himselfe.26

Often the “liberty” was paid for, however. Onlookers would verbally abuse or physically attack holy fools, or the authorities might arrest them. Holy fools would resort to all manner of scandalous behavior in order to provoke aggression: they sat on dung heaps, refused to wash, wore little or no clothing; they would dance about, shout obscenities or make incoherent utterances, smash objects, and so on. The sadistic impulse is unmistakable in all this, but the provocative-masochistic tendency overrides it. KovaIevskii demonstrates his awareness of this when he says of Pelagia Ivanovna, the nineteenth-century holy fool from the Diveevo convent, that “she herself would provoke [vyzyvala] everyone in the community to insult and beat her.”27 Saint Procopii of Ustiug, who lived in the thirteenth century, thanked onlookers for their retaliatory jeers and blows. Vasilii Blazhennyi of Moscow (sixteenth century) was said to willingly accept the curses of those he provoked.

Maksim Gor’kii beautifully captures the exhibitionistic aspect of the holy fool’s masochism: “Don’t You see, Lord, how I torment and lower myself for the sake of Your glory? Don’t you see? Don’t you see, people, how I torture myself for the sake of your salvation? Don’t you see?” 28

Holy foolishness held an appeal not only for those who practiced it, but for many of those who witnessed it as well. Sometimes large crowds would gather around holy fools who were going through their masochistic routines. Impressionable children could not but be influenced by holy foolishness. The future narodnik writer Gleb Uspensky and his childhood friends, for example, admired and even imitated a holy fool named Paramon: “The children began to believe in the possibility of redemption and the happy life that would come in the next world. They followed Paramon around town, fasted, put nails in their shoes, and the child whose shoes first leaked blood became the envy of all the others.” 29

The depiction of holy foolishness in various art forms has its own attraction. Russian literature features numerous examples of holy fools, or characters who resemble holy fools, such as Pushkin’s Nikolka, Nekrasov’s Vlas, Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin and Sonia Marmeladova, and Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago.30
Quite understandably, Billington associates holy foolishness with "masochistic impulses." This is not to deny that holy fools were doing other things besides being masochistic (e.g., they sometimes offered a form of social protest, they prophesized, some suffered from an autistic disorder, etc.). Nor should we forget that folly for Christ's sake existed in other branches of Christianity, such as Greek Orthodoxy. It is curious, however, that thirty-six Russian fools have been canonized, while only six Greeks have. Saward is quite justified to speak of the "Russian enthusiasm" for holy foolishness.

In the middle of the seventeenth century a new catalyst for masochistic practices developed on the Russian religious scene. It was at this time that a schism ("Raskol") arose between the official Russian Orthodox Church and a loosely affiliated group which eventually came to be called the Old Believers or Old Ritualists ("staroobriadtsy"). At issue were general questions of the growing secularization of Russian culture, the hierarchicalization of church authority, and the acceptability of foreign models for religious behavior. There were also some very specific issues of ritual, especially the question of how to make a proper Sign of the Cross. The Orthodox Patriarch Nikon, influenced by contemporary Greek Orthodoxy, issued instructions proscribing the old practice of using two fingers to cross oneself and requiring that this gesture be performed with three fingers instead. The theological doctrine behind this change is somewhat obscure (apparently three fingers signify the Holy Trinity, two signify the dual, divine-human essence of Christ). But the reaction to the new rule on the part of religious conservatives, such as the notorious Archpriest Avvakum (1620–82), was clear and categorical: "That wolf Nikon, in league with the devil, betrayed us through this crossing with three fingers." In particular the change in ritual was viewed by Old Believers as an opportunity to become victims:

In the instruction Nikon wrote: "Year and date. According to the tradition of the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers it is not your bounden duty to bow down to the knee, but you are to bow to the waist; in addition, you are to cross yourself with three fingers." Having come together we fell to thinking; we saw that winter was on the way—hearts froze and legs began to shake. Neronov turned the cathedral over to me and went himself into seclusion at the Chudovsky monastery; for a week he prayed in a cell. And there a voice from the icon spoke to him during a prayer: "The time of suffering hath begun; it is thy bounden duty to suffer without weakening!"
And suffer the Old Believers did. *The Life of the Archpriest Avvakum Written by Himself* is filled with grisly scenes of flogging, burning, mutilation, starvation, forced labor, and other horrors—all welcomed in the name of Christ:

Down came the rain and snow, and only a poor little kaftan had been tossed across my shoulders. The water poured down my belly and back, terrible was my need. They dragged me out of the boat, then dragged me in chains across the rocks and around the rapids. Almighty miserable it was, but sweet for my soul! I wasn't grumbling at God. . . . The words spoken by the Prophet and Apostle came to mind: “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him. For whom God loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons. But if ye partake of him without chastisement, then are ye bastards, and not sons.” And with these words I comforted myself.

Fortunately for Avvakum’s reader, there is some occasional comic relief. Avvakum is capable of making fun of himself, he gently humiliates himself (this is part of his masochism) and his tormentors. He is aware of his own narcissism, for he confesses to the pride which moved him to become self-appointed leader of his schismatic religious movement. As Priscilla Hunt observes, the revelation of this pride “. . . went beyond the conventional self-denigration of the humility topos.” There is a grandiose flair to Avvakum’s masochism. His “voluntary suffering,” his “self-abnegation and debasement” entitled him to assume leadership of what he felt was the true spiritual way for Russia. And for this political prominence he paid precisely what he wanted to pay: he and three of his companions were placed in a pit filled with wood and burned to death.

Many lives came to a violent end during the apocalyptic days of the Russian schism. Avvakum and other leaders of the Old Believers sometimes even glorified suicide. Christ himself, after all, had welcomed the cup of death. There are numerous reports of both individual and mass suicides (usually by burning, sometimes by drowning) in the Old-Believer communities. A “deranged love affair with death,” as Brostrom calls it, spread across the northern forests of Russia. For example, in a village in the Ustiuig region on October 8, 1753, 170 Old Believers—men, women, children—locked themselves in a large hut and would not let two Orthodox priests approach to dissuade them from their intention to “suffer in the name of Christ and for the two-fingered sign of the
cross.” Then, after shouting obscenities at the priests, they proceeded to set fire to the hut, and all inside died in torment.40

D. I. Sapozhnikov, who has written an entire book on this horrifying subject, provides a chart detailing fifty-three recorded incidents of individual or mass self-immolation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The chart indicates a grand total of 10,567 victims, although the actual figure is undoubtedly higher because it was impossible to record all incidents of group suicide in the far-flung Old-Believer communities.41

As historian Robert Crumme y observes, “the Old Believers wanted martyrdom and were willing to go to great lengths to organize suitable circumstances.” Their “urge for passive suffering” provides a striking illustration of a specific, religious type of masochism. The various instances of mass suicide among Old Believers had “psychological rather than social roots.”42 A psychoanalyst can only agree with this assessment by a professional historian.

Old Believer communities exist in remote parts of Russia to this day. The self-immolation practiced by some Old Believers eventually became an emblem of Russia’s dark side. Mussorgsky’s great opera Khovanschina, for example, is based on events surrounding the Old Believer schism, and ends with a mass suicide by fire. Avvakum’s autobiography exerted an enormous influence on the Russian radical intelligentsia, and on such literary artists as Merezhkovskii, Voloshin, and Nagibin.43 There is probably an interesting article waiting to be written about the similarities between what Ziolkowski calls Avvakum’s “auto-hagiography” and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s narcissistically charged The Calf Butted the Oak.

Christian Russia was (and in some respects still is) a land of myriad schismatic and sectarian groups, most of which arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition to the Old Believers (including the numerous subgroups within this group, such as priested and priestless varieties, or those who “wander” and those who do not) there are, to name a few: the Dukhobors or “wrestlers for the spirit,” who reject established churches and civil authority; the Molokans or “milk drinkers,” whose asceticism is moderate and who eat dairy products on days of fasting; the Khlysty or “Flagellants”/“Christis,” who attain religious ecstasy (“radenie”) by various forms of self-mortification including possibly self-flagellation (depending on which expert you consult); the Post-
nks or "fasters;" and the Skoptsy or "castrators," who (the experts agree) mutilate themselves by removing their reproductive organs.\textsuperscript{44} Again, Billington refers explicitly to the "masochistic" qualities of Russian sectarianism.\textsuperscript{45} The masochism is particularly obvious among the Skoptsy, although it does not appear to be erotogenic, even though the sexual organs are involved. That is, the mutilation does not involve sexual orgasm. Indeed, guilt over sexual feelings seems to be the cause of the mutilation, for such feelings were perceived as an obstacle to spiritual salvation. Among men one testicle might be removed ("polu-oskoplenie" [half castration]), or both ("malaia pechat’" [minor seal]), and sometimes the penis itself would be removed as well ("bol’shaiia pechat’" [major seal] or "tsarskaia pechat’" [the tsar’s seal]). Among women the nipple(s) or the entire breast(s) would be removed. The clitoris and/or labia would be cut out in some cases. Many, perhaps the majority of the Skoptsy, however, preferred "spiritual" castration, that is, sexual abstinence, to actual bodily mutilation.

As a result of their extreme practices members of some of the sects imagined that they became "Christ’s" (or, if women, "Bogoroditsy" or "Mothers of God"). This idea is actually a logical extension of a notion prevalent among all practicing Christians in Russia. The ideal sufferer in the "Russian religious mind" (to use Fedotov’s expression) is, after all, Christ himself. Averintsev says that Russian saintliness is characterized by the most literal possible imitation of Christ, by a total willingness to "turn the other cheek," as Christ both practiced and preached.\textsuperscript{46} For example, Saint Boris "imitated" Christ (the verb is "s’podobiti").\textsuperscript{47} Epiphanius says of Sergei of Radonezh that "in all things and at all times he imitated his Master Jesus Christ our Lord . . . ."\textsuperscript{48} Professor Brostrom has examined Avvakum’s imitation of Christ in some detail.\textsuperscript{49} The monastic director ("starets") Amvrosy (1812–91) repeatedly advised his listeners and correspondents to imitate Christ, for example: "You should . . . try in every way possible to pull out this root [of evil], through humility, obedience, and imitating the Lord Himself Who humbled Himself to the form of a servant and was obedient to death on the Cross and crucifixion."\textsuperscript{50}

The poor and suffering peasantry of Russia were, by their very misery, often thought to be perfect imitators of Christ (cf. the tradition of confusing "krest’ianin" [peasant] with "khristianin" [Christian]).\textsuperscript{51} To this day even not particularly religious Russians will, in a bad situa-
tion, utter the proverb: “Bog terpel, i nam velel” (“God [i.e., Christ] endured, and ordered us to [endure] too”). In suffering, a Russian is by definition imitating Christ.

Imitation of Christ is not some fuzzy, distant ideal for the religious Russian. It means concrete, physical and/or mental suffering. It can even entail a conscious search for humiliation. Dunlop says that starets Amvrosy “elected to spend his life hanging on a cross of self-abnegation.” The image of the cross is of course the Christian image par excellence. But here is a concrete example of just what that “cross” was for Amvrosy. The scene is the Optina Pustyn monastery in 1841, when Amvrosy was not yet a starets and was known as Alexander:

Once when . . . Alexander and Staretz Lev were together the Staretz suddenly intoned, “Blessed is our God, now and ever and unto ages of ages.” Alexander, thinking that the staretz desired to commence the evening rule began to chant, “Amen. Glory to Thee, O God, Glory to Thee. O Heavenly King. . . .” Suddenly the staretz brought him up short, “Who gave you the blessing to read?” Alexander immediately fell down on his knees, prostrated himself and asked for forgiveness. The staretz, however, continued his tirade, “How dared you do that?” And Alexander continued his prostrations, murmuring, “Forgive me for the sake of God, Batiushka. Forgive me.” By fighting down the instinct of self-justification Alexander was able to crucify the “old man” in him and put on the new.

Such complete self-abnegation is the truest possible imitation of Christ.

Toward the end of his unhappy life the Russian writer Nikolai Vasil’evich Gogol (1809–52) became more and more attracted to religious self-abnegation. Christian humiliation became a goal for him. A great admirer of The Imitation of Christ, he gave advice such as the following to readers of his Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends: “Pray to God . . . that someone should so disgrace you in the sight of others that you would not know where to hide yourself from shame. . . . That man would be your true brother and deliverer.” This advice Gogol applied to himself as well: “I myself also need a slap in public and, perhaps, more than anybody else.”

If a slap was what Gogol wanted, a slap is what he got, for even friends repudiated Gogol’s book which, among other things, pretended to give religious advice to the tsar, requested that everyone in Russia pray for him (Gogol), advocated flogging for both the offender and the victim, and claimed that the common folk were better off illiterate. The publication of Selected Passages was followed by further masochistic
acts. For example, Gogol burned the manuscript of a book on which he had been working for five years, the second part of *Dead Souls*. He grew increasingly religious, visiting Optyna Pustyn on several occasions, and developing a close relationship with an Orthodox priest by the name of Matvei Konstantinovsky. The latter recommended fasting and incessant prayer. Gogol followed this advice with a vengeance, and as a result he died of starvation and exhaustion on February 10, 1852.

There is a rich and ever-changing terminology for the various forms of religious masochism in Russia. For example, in the Russian theological literature Christ’s voluntary relinquishment of divinity in order to experience human suffering is often termed “kenosis” (from the Greek, meaning “self-emptying”; cf. Philippians 2:6–8). The meaning of the term expands when scholars characterize the *imitation* of the self-humiliated Christ as “kenotic.” The meaning expands even further when, in her book *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought*, Nadejda Gorodetzky says: “meekness, self-abasement, voluntary poverty, humility, obedience, ‘non-resistance,’ acceptance of suffering and death would be the expression of the ‘kenotic mood’.” Fedotov, although resisting the breadth of Gorodetzky’s conception, adds a spatial dimension: “It [kenoticism] is a downward movement of love, a descending, self-humiliating love, which finds its joy in being with the rejected.” Even Mikhail Bakhtin, whose dialogic theories would appear to have nothing to do with religion at all, gave kenoticism a central role.

Kenoticism, asceticism, monasticism, holy foolishness, self-immolation, self-flagellation, and self-castration are different, if somewhat overlapping religious practices. Each is worthy of in-depth psychoanalytic study in its own right. Although all share the property of moral masochism, other psychoanalytic properties are involved in varying degrees and combinations as well (such as paranoia, narcissism, exhibitionism, depression, and intellectualization), and each practice will fit slightly differently into the psychobiography of any given religious masochist.

*Early Observers of Russian Masochism*

Serfdom was one of the first social phenomena to be attacked by the fledgling Russian intelligentsia at the end of the eighteenth century. Berdiaev goes so far as to say that the intelligentsia “was born” when Aleksandr Radishchev (1749–1802) expressed his outrage over the cruel
treatment of Russian serfs in *A Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790). According to Radishchev, the peasant who works the field is the only one who has a real right to it, yet “with us, he who has the natural right to it is not only completely excluded from it, but, while working another’s field, sees his sustenance dependent on another’s power!” The enslavement of the Russian peasant not only provokes moral indignation in Radishchev, but induces him to make interesting psychological observations, such as the following:

> It appears that the spirit of freedom is so dried up in the slaves that they not only have no desire to end their sufferings, but cannot bear to see others free. They love their fetters, if it is possible for man to love his own ruination.

Not only the literal slave, however, behaves slavishly. Members of the nobility can display extreme servility in their relations with others. Radishchev wonders whether those abused by a certain high dignitary know that

> he is ashamed to admit to whom he owes his high station; that in his soul he is a most vile creature; that deception, perfidy, treason, lechery, poisoning, robbery, extortion and murder are no more to him than emptying a glass of water; that his cheeks have never blushed with shame, but often with anger or from a box on the ear; that he is a friend of every Court stoker and the slave [rab] of everybody, even the meanest creature, at Court? But he pretends to be a great lord and is contemptuous of those who are not aware of his base and crawling servility [nizkosti i polzushchestva].

If the serf grows to love his chains, the nobleman wallows in servility. In both instances Radishchev identifies what appear, on their face at least, to be masochistic attitudes.

Poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) reacted somewhat negatively to Radishchev’s characterization of the peasant’s plight in Russia. The French peasant, or the English factory worker is worse off, opines Pushkin in his 1834 essay on Radishchev’s *Journey*. This is doubtful, however, and in any case is irrelevant. At one point Pushkin declares: “Take a look at the Russian peasant: is there even the shadow of slavish degradation [ten’ rabskogo unichizheniia] in his behavior and speech?” This rhetorical question is followed by praise of the Russian peasant’s boldness, cleverness, imitativeness, generosity, etc.—none of which necessarily preclude slavishness at all.

A particularly sharp critique of serfdom was made by the philoso-
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Phébus Petìr Yakovlevîc Chaadaev (1794–1856). In the first of his famous *Philosophical Letters*, written in French in 1829, he said:

Why . . . did the Russian people descend to slavery [l'esclavage] only after they became Christian, namely in the reigns of Godunov and Shuisky? Let the Orthodox Church explain this phenomenon. Let it say why it did not raise its maternal voice against this detestable usurpation of one part of the people by the other. And note, I pray you, how obscure we Russians are in spite of our power and all our greatness. Only today the Bosphorus and the Euphrates have simultaneously heard our canon thunder. Yet history, which at this very hour is demonstrating that the abolition of slavery is the work of Christianity, does not suspect that a Christian people of forty million is in chains.67

Chaadaev clearly disapproves of slavery, but he does not really direct his disapproval at the original enslavers, that is, at "our national rulers" who he believes inherited the spirit of "cruel and humiliating foreign domination" from the Mongols. Rather, he criticizes the Russian Orthodox Church for not intervening on behalf of the Russian people. For Chaadaev, official Russian Christianity is despicable for its failure to act. It is more backward, less truly Christian than Christianity in the West (he forgets the Christianity of the American South). He seems to suggest that the Russian Orthodox Church was itself behaving slavishly when it acceded to slavery in Russia.

Chaadaev utilizes an interesting familial image here: the Russian Orthodox Church did not raise its *maternal* voice ("sa voix maternelle") against serfdom. In effect, the Russian church is *not as good a mother* as the Roman Catholic Church which, since the time of Tertullian, had been known as *Domina mater ecclesia*.

Where there is a mother, a child cannot be far behind. For Chaadaev that child is Russia herself, or individual Russians:

We live only in the narrowest of presents, without past and without future, in the midst of a flat calm. And if we happen to bestir ourselves from time to time, it is not in the hope, nor in the desire, of some common good, but in the childish frivolousness of the infant, who raises himself and stretches his hands toward the rattle which his nurse presents to him.68

Chaadaev repeatedly resorts to the image of a child: "we Russians, like illegitimate children, come to this world without patrimony"; "We are like children who have never been made to think for themselves."69

Russian "children" lack not only a sufficiently maternal church, but
a real legal system as well. As a result, according to Chaadaev, childish Russians come to expect, even welcome punishment from the paternal figure of the tsar, traditionally referred to as “little father tsar” (“tsar' batiushka”) by Russians. The rule of law is utterly alien to Russians: “For us it is not the law which punishes a citizen who has done wrong, but a father who punishes a disobedient child. Our taste for family arrangements is such that we lavish the rights of fatherhood on anything that we find ourselves dependent on. The idea of lawfulness, of right, makes no sense to the Russian people.”

So, childish, inadequately mothered Russians live an abominable life. They willingly subject themselves to paternal authority. Incapable of asserting their rights, they only know how to ask permission: “Nous ne disons pas, p. e., j'ai le droit de faire cela, nous disons, telle chose est permise; telle autre ne l'est pas.”

Russians also enslave one another. Chaadaev, himself an owner of serfs, is racked with guilt. He has ideals of freedom, but he cannot live up to them, consequently his self-esteem is lowered: “Weighed down by this fatal guilt, what soul is so fine that it will not wither under this unbearable burden? What man is so strong that, always at odds with himself, always thinking one way and acting another, he does not in the end find himself repulsive?” Given this attitude, it is not surprising that Chaadaev was subject to fits of depression.

The First Philosophical Letter, recalled Aleksandr Herzen, was “a shot that rang out in the dark night.” It provoked an uproar when it was published in Russia in 1836. The tsar got wind of the scandal and the journal in which Chaadaev’s work had appeared was closed down. Chaadaev himself was placed under house arrest and—more than a century before psychiatric abuse was reinvented in the Soviet Union—Chaadaev was officially declared insane by the tsarist authorities. For over a year he endured daily examinations by a physician.

An essay ironically titled The Apology of a Madman (1837) was one result of this very frustrating situation. In it Chaadaev, among other things, takes back some of the criticism he had directed at Russian Christianity. The Russian Orthodox Church is now praised for its humility rather than castigated for its servility. The Russians as a whole (not just serfs or the clergy) are characterized as submissive, but this feature now has a positive aura:
Fashioned, moulded, created by our rulers and our climate, we have become a great nation only by dint of submission [force de soumission]. Scan our chronicles from beginning to end: on each page you will find the profound effect of authority, the ceaseless action of the soil, and hardly ever that of the public will. However, it is also true that, in abdicating its power in favor of its masters, in yielding to its native physical climate, the Russian nation gave evidence of profound wisdom.75

Just what this “wisdom” was Chaadaev does not make clear in 1837. But in his later years he changes his mind again and criticizes the Russian slave mentality: “Everything in Russia bears the stamp of slavery [le cachet de la servitude]—customs, aspirations, enlightenment, even freedom itself, if such can even exist in this environment.”76 In 1854, during the Crimean War, he says:

Russia is a whole separate world, submissive to the will, caprice, fantasy of a single man, whether his name be Peter or Ivan, no matter—in all instances the common element is the embodiment of arbitrariness. Contrary to all the laws of the human community, Russia moves only in the direction of her own enslavement and the enslavement of all the neighbouring peoples. For this reason it would be in the interest not only of other peoples, but also in that of her own that she be compelled to take a new path.77

It is clear from his changes of opinion that Chaadaev must have harbored contradictory feelings about the submissiveness of Russians. A close reading of his works demonstrates that he experienced an intense ambivalence toward the idea of submissiveness generally. His psyche harbored both masochistic and antimasochistic impulses.78

Native Russians like Radishchev and Chaadaev were not the only ones to comment on the subject of Russian slavishness. Foreign visitors could not miss it either. A good example is the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), who was in Russia from 1824 to 1829. The “Digression” of his Forefathers’ Eve, Part III (1832) offers, among other things, a satire of Russian servility. Mickiewicz tells an anecdote about a peasant servant found frozen to death on the field of Mars in Petersburg. It seems the peasant had been ordered by his master, a callous young army officer, to sit still and guard a fur coat. The officer had not come back for his coat, and the servant, rather than disobeying orders by donning the warm coat, literally froze on the spot. The narrator comments:
Oh, poor peasant! your heroism, a death like that,
Is commendable for a dog, but an offense for a human being.
How will they reward you? Your master will say with a smile
That you were loyal unto death—like a dog.
Oh, poor peasant! why do I shed a tear
And why does my heart quiver thinking of your deed:
Ah, I pity you, poor Slav!—
Poor nation! I pity your fate,
You know only one heroism—the heroism of slavery.  

As David Brodsky observes: “The anecdote shows the peasant’s complicity in his own exploitation by a frivolous ruling elite.”

Another foreign visitor to Russia, Astolphe de Custine (1790–1857) had much to say on the subject of Russian slavishness. Custine was a French marquis who, having met Mickiewicz beforehand, spent a summer traveling in Russia. His book, La Russie en 1839, was a great success in France and was very controversial in Russia, where it was read by many despite the ban on it there.

Custine visited various Russian cities, including Petersburg (then the capital), Moscow, Iaroslavl, and the great trading center of Nizhni Novgorod. He also stayed in the lice-infested roadside inns of many small villages. No matter where he traveled in “the empire of the tsar” the overwhelming impression he received was one of gloom and misery: “the life of the Russian people is more gloomy [triste] than that of any other of the European nations; and when I say the people [le peuple], I speak not only of the peasants attached to the soil, but of the whole empire.” Indeed, according to Custine, Russia is a society in which “no happiness is possible.”

The primary source of this unhappiness is the slavish attitude of Russians toward authority of any kind. This applies to all Russians, not just serfs (compare Olearius’s previous declaration, “They are all serfs and slaves,” or Chaadaev’s assertion that there is no visible difference between a serf and a free person in Russia, or Masaryk’s later statement that “both slaves and lords have servile souls”).

Russian nobles, for example, are not like the cultivated, independent aristocrats of France and Germany, but are ambitious, fear-ridden individuals who are always trying to appease the tsar and other higher authorities. Thus the courtiers surrounding the Hereditary Grand Duke impress Custine with their hypocritical behavior: “What has chiefly
struck me in my first view of Russian courtiers is the extraordinary submissiveness with which, as grandees, they perform their devoirs. They seem, in fact, to be only a higher order of slaves; but the moment the Prince has retired, a free, unrestrained, and decided manner is resumed, which contrasts unpleasantly with that complete abnegation of self, affected only the moment before;” 88 “there are slaves everywhere,” says Custine, “but to find a nation of courtly slaves it is necessary to visit Russia.” 89

Custine was an aristocrat whose father and grandfather were guillotined by French revolutionaries, so it is not surprising that he hoped to find evidence in Russia to support the idea of autocratic rule. But Russia changed his mind: “I went to Russia to seek for arguments against representative government, I return a partisan of constitutions.” 90 Having now experienced a “nation of slaves” 91 Custine can declare that “a peasant in the environs of Paris is freer than a Russian lord.” 92

The idea of Russia as a “nation of slaves” seems to have been in the air by the late 1830s. Around the time the first edition of Custine’s book appeared, the poet Mikhail Lermontov (1814–41) wrote a poem, now famous, about Russian authoritarianism:

Прощай, немытая Россия,
Страна рабов, страна господ,
И ты, мундиры голубые,
И ты, им преданный народ.

Быть может, за стеной Кавказа
Сокроюсь от твоих пашей,
От их всевидящего глаза,
От их всеслушающих ушей.¹

Farewell, unwashed Russia,
Land of slaves, land of masters,
And you, blue uniforms,
And you, people, devoted to them.

Perhaps beyond the wall of the Caucasus,
I will hide from your pashas,
From their all-seeing eye,
From their all-hearing ears.⁹⁴

Russia is here personified. She is “unwashed,” as a person would be, she is spoken to (“Farewell”), as one would speak to a person. Her person is multiplied by the many who occupy her—the “slaves,” the “masters,”
and the “pashas” (i.e., the tsarist gendarmes). She is despicable not only for her oppressors, but also for her oppressed who seem to welcome their oppression, who appear to be united in their willingness as one collective people (“narod”) to obey the oppressors (“devoted people,” or, in other variants, “obedient [poslushnyj] people” or “submissive [pokornyj] people”). Lermontov’s contempt for the “land of slaves” is clearly very much in the spirit of Custine’s critique of the “nation of slaves.”

Given that so many accomplished writers—Radishchev, Chaadaev, Mickiewicz, Custine, and Lermontov—had already dealt with the phenomenon of Russian servility by the middle of the nineteenth century, it is not difficult to understand why the definition of Russia as a “land of slaves” has stuck. It is now a topos taken for granted by many scholars of Russia. For example, writing in a 1992 issue of The Times Literary Supplement Leszek Kolakowski was able to speak of a “gloomy image of the eternal Russia, country of slaves,” without bothering to use quotation marks or to mention his nineteenth-century predecessors in this matter.

Even the “iron tsar,” Nicholas I, with whom Custine spoke personally, admitted to the sadomasochistic nature of his government’s relationship with the Russian people: “Despotism still exists in Russia: it is the essence of my government, but it accords with the genius of the nation.” For this despotic “essence” to accord with the nation’s “genius” implies that Nicholas was indeed dealing with a “nation of slaves.” The people ruled by Nicholas took, in his own view, a specifically masochistic stance with respect to his “despotism.” Psychoanalysis offers a more straightforward terminology than the euphemistic phrase “genius of the nation [le génie de la nation]” uttered in French by the Russian tsar.

So, the Russian people have a genius for masochism. This talent, in Custine’s estimation (although not in his terminology), applies to the lower as well as to the higher social orders, but in the former actual physical violence is very often involved as well:

Here, among a thousand, is another example. The postillion who brought me to the post-house from whence I write, had incurred at the stage where he set out, by I know not what fault, the wrath of his comrade, the head hostler. The latter trampled him, child as he is, under his feet, and struck him with blows which must have been severe, for I heard them at some distance resounding against the
breast of the sufferer. When the executioner was weary of his task, the victim rose, breathless and trembling, and without proffering a word, readjusted his hair, saluted his superior, and, encouraged by the treatment he had received, mounted lightly the box to drive me at a hard gallop four and a half or five leagues in one hour.  

Custine seems to have witnessed such violence on a daily basis during his stay in Russia: “A man, as soon as he rises a grade above the common level, acquires the right, and, furthermore, contracts the obligation to maltreat his inferiors, to whom it is his duty to transmit the blows that he receives from those above him.”

The idea about transmitting blows down a dominance hierarchy is remarkable. In Fedor Dostoevsky’s *Diary of a Writer* for the year 1876 the idea is expressed in a similar context. Dostoevsky as a young man had once observed how a government courier repeatedly struck his coachman on the back of the neck while the coachman, in turn, whipped his horse mercilessly:

This little scene appeared to me, so to speak, as an emblem, as something which very graphically demonstrated the link between cause and effect. Here every blow dealt at the animal leaped out of each blow dealt at the man.

One could argue that Dostoevsky borrowed his image from Custine. But a merely literary approach would disregard the real contribution these authors make: Custine and Dostoevsky were depicting the same, objective social reality in Russia. People were beaten upon in old Russia, and those who were beaten upon tended to beat others.

Dostoevsky appends a further insight to his observation: “Oh, no doubt, today the situation is not as it used to be forty years ago: couriers no longer beat the people, but the people beat themselves [narod uzhe sam sebia b’et], having retained the rods in their own court.” What Dostoevsky has in mind here is the alcoholism prevalent among the common folk. He clearly understands that it is masochistic in nature, otherwise he would not metaphorize it as self-beating.

If Dostoevsky’s reaction to the horrifying reality of Russians beating themselves and one other was to praise “the people” for its Christlike sufferings (see below, 240), Custine’s response was to castigate the Russians for their essentially sadomasochistic social order:

Thus does the spirit of iniquity descend from stage to stage down to the foundations of this unhappy society, which subsists only by violence—*a violence so great, that it forces the slave to falsify himself by thanking his tyrant; and this is*
what they here call public order; in other words, a gloomy tranquility, a fearful peace, for it resembles that of the tomb. The Russians, however, are proud of this calm. So long as a man has not made up his mind to go on all fours, he must necessarily pride himself in something, were it only to preserve his right to the title of a human creature.\textsuperscript{103}

I have italicized two revealing aspects of this passage. First, there is an underlying masochistic attitude without which the sadistic practice could not continue. The one who is beaten upon “thanks” the one who beats (there are Russian proverbs on this topic, as we saw earlier), or at least accepts the beating without complaint. Second, the beating, which for what Custine would consider a normal person in a Western society would injure self-esteem, is instead consciously understood to support self-esteem. The victim pretends no damage has been done and experiences instead a special kind of pride. This compensatory or reactive pride is encountered time and again in accounts of Russian national character.

\textit{The Slavophiles}

The notion of Russian slavishness was also taken up by the so-called Slavophiles (“slavianofily,” who might more accurately have been characterized as Russophiles). For example, the philosopher Aleksei Khomiakov (1804–60) spoke of the “servility toward foreign peoples” (“rabolepstvo pered inozemnymi narodami”) characteristic of Russians.\textsuperscript{104} Generally the Slavophiles were uncomfortable with Russian slavishness. They looked forward to the liberation of the serfs, and they believed in something like free speech. At times they would even try to deny the existence of servile attitudes in Russia. This led to some convolutions of thought which are quite fascinating for a psychoanalyst to consider.

It was asserted, for example, that Russians could be free even when enslaved (or even when subjected to what looked like slavery to a Western observer). Thus the ordinary Russian peasant was free even while being submissive to the government. Konstantin Aksakov (1817–60) expressed this paradox in 1855 as follows:

This attitude on the part of the Russian is the attitude of a free man. By recognizing the absolute authority of the state he retains his complete independence of spirit, conscience and thought. In his awareness of this moral freedom within himself the Russian is in truth not a slave, but a free man.\textsuperscript{105}
According to Aksakov, Russians are essentially apolitical people who accede to authoritarian rule only because they have better things to do, namely, to develop their inner spiritual life: “And so the Russian people, having renounced political matters and having entrusted all authority in the political sphere to the government, reserved for themselves life—moral and communal freedom, the highest aim of which is to achieve a Christian society.”

The key idea for explaining this paradox, I think, is the adjective “communal” (“obshchestvennyi”), which appears again and again in Aksakov’s discourse, as in the oxymoron “inner, communal freedom” (“vnutrenniaia obshchestvennaia svoboda”).

The Slavophiles felt that intense communal interaction, especially of a religious sort, was the way to avoid enslavement by external, governmental power. The more Russians were enticed away from their native communal interaction (e.g., by the model of popular governments in the West, or by the westernizing reforms of Peter the Great), the more likely they were to be turned into “slaves.” Only when Russians were being true to their essentially communal nature were they really “free.”

Before further elucidating the peculiarly Slavophile understanding of “freedom,” it is necessary to elaborate on the vital importance of communal action for the Slavophiles. I will begin by introducing a term which is frequently encountered in writings about Russian Slavophilism. Sobornost’ (from “sobor,” “council” or “synod”) has been variously defined as “innate striving toward communality,” “voluntary and organic fellowship,” “sense of communality and unity freely acknowledged rather than externally imposed,” and so on. Originally the term was religious or theological in nature, that is, it was an attempt to capture the idea of the “principle of conciliarism,” or even the idea of the “catholicity” of Christ’s church. But Aleksei Khomiakov and some of his Slavophile and neo-Slavophile followers broadened the notion, making it apply to secular collectives as well. For example, N. S. Arsen’ev utilized the term to characterize the congenial group spirit of the various literary salons and other social gatherings among the intelligentsia in Moscow during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Or, as recently as 1990, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn proposed that a consultative body (a “Duma”) be formed in Russia based not on mere “mechanical” voting, but on sobornost’. An example in Khomiakov’s own work is an open letter he penned
in 1860 to the people of Serbia which, among other things, glorified the communal decision-making process which allegedly characterized all Orthodox countries:

It is no accident that the commune, the sanctity of the communal verdict and the unquestioning submission of each individual to the unanimous decision of his brethren are preserved only in Orthodox countries. The teachings of the faith cultivate the soul even in social life. The Papist seeks extraneous and personal authority, just as he is used to submitting to such authority in matters of faith; the Protestant takes personal freedom to the extreme of blind arrogance, just as in his sham worship. Such is the spirit of their teaching. Only the Orthodox Christian, preserving his freedom, yet humbly acknowledging his weakness, subordinates his freedom to the unanimous resolution of the collective conscience. It is for this reason that the local commune has not been able to preserve its laws outside Orthodox countries. And it is for this reason that the Slav cannot be fully a Slav without Orthodoxy. Even our brethren who have been led astray by the Western falsehood, be they Papists or Protestants, acknowledge this with grief. This principle applies to all matters of justice and truth, and to all conceptions about society; for at the root of it lies brotherhood.\(^\text{113}\)

The passage is replete with terms for the collective that Khomiakov and the other Slavophiles were fond of using: commune (“obshchina,” roughly equivalent to “mir,” another Slavophile favorite), local (land) commune (“zemskai a obshchina”), brethren (“brat’ia”), brotherhood (“bratstvo”), and society (“obshchestvo”). What holds the Orthodox collective together, according to Khomiakov, is an individual’s submissive attitude toward it. Each member accedes humbly (“smirenno”) and with love to some mysterious spirit of the collective, that is, to a unanimous resolution of “the collective conscience” (“sobornoi sovesti”). This is sobornost’ in action.

 Appropriately enough, the document from which this passage is quoted was itself signed by a collective of eleven individuals, including such well-known Slavophiles as Iurii Samarin and Konstantin and Ivan Aksakov.

Ivan Kireevsky (1806—56) was a Slavophile who described the alleged communal life of ancient Rus’ as follows:

You see an endless number of small communes [obshchin] spread out over the entire face of the Russian earth, each having its own manager of its laws, and each forming its own special accord [svoe osoboe soglasie] or its own small mir; these small mirs, or accords, fuse with other, large accords which, in turn, make up the regional accords which, finally, comprise the tribal accords, from which are formed one huge, general accord of the whole Russian land.\(^\text{115}\)
SOME HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

There is much erasure of boundaries going on in this grandiose and hopelessly idealized picture. Not only is the communal mir equated with the agreement or accord ("soglasie") which brings it into existence and maintains it, but the smaller mir merges with ("slivaiutsia") the larger mir to which it belongs. This merging process proceeds on up the hierarchy of collectives, until all of ancient Russia is seen as one huge, harmonious collective.

Among the Slavophiles, Konstantin Aksakov was, as Walicki says, "the most ardent and uncritical admirer of the rural mir." Aksakov was emphatic about the duty of the individual to submit to the will of this kind of collective:

The commune [obshchina] is that supreme principle which will find nothing superior to itself, but can only evolve, develop, purify, and elevate itself.

The commune is an association of people who have renounced their personal egoism, their individuality [ot lichnosti svoei], and express common accord [soglasie]: this is an act of love, a noble Christian act which expresses itself more or less clearly in its various other manifestations. Thus the commune is a moral choir [nravstvennyi khor] and just as each individual voice in the chorus is not lost but only subordinated to the overall harmony, and can be heard together with all the other voices—so too in the commune the individual [lichnost'] is not lost but merely renounces his exclusivity in the name of general accord and finds himself on a higher and purer level, in mutual harmony with other individuals motivated by similar self-abnegation [v soglasii ravnomerno samootverzhen-nykh lichnostei].

The metaphor of the collective as a "moral choir" is quite appropriate in a context where the word "soglasie" (etymologically, "con-sonance") keeps coming up. The metaphor would later be picked up by the Symbolist supporter of sobornost' Viacheslav Ivanov (see Ivanov's notion of "khorovoe nachalo"). Here the image is elevated, sublime (as is Kireevsky's use of the term "soglasie"). But the corresponding "self-abnegation" of the individual does not recede from sight. There may be free speech in the Slavophilic commune, but when all is said and done there is no such thing as a minority opinion, or a loyal opposition. Everyone has to agree, the decisions of the commune have to be unanimous. One mustn't spoil the music. There is an ever-present threat that the personality ("lichnost'") will assert itself, "like a false note in a choir."

We may return now to the Slavophile notion of "freedom." It is a remarkable fact that, despite all their emphasis on submission to the
collective, the Slavophiles still believed the individual member of the
collective to be “free.” For example, according to Khomiakov only the
individual Christian has authority. Even God does not have authority.
Participation in Christian life must come freely, from within. It can never
be coerced in any way. The true Christian is not a slave, says Khomiakov
repeatedly. The true Christian is free.

Of course if an individual Christian decided not to exercise the
option to submit freely to the will of the collective, then a problem could
conceivably arise. That is, an individual, without necessarily becoming
the “slave” of some external authority, might still reject unanimity and
sbornost’ as well. Khomiakov does not consider this possibility. Indeed,
there is no room for dissidence in Khomiakov’s Christianity. The true
Christian is free only to go along with the collective.

This can be best characterized as a masochist’s idea of freedom. It
fits in with the general Russian tendency to characterize freedom in a
paradoxical way. Dostoevsky’s famous character Kirilov, for example,
asserts that the highest form of free will is suicide. Or, there is philoso-
pher Nikolai Fedorov’s idea that the Russian tradition of obligatory
state service actually fosters freedom. George Young comments: “While
Westerners may look upon the Russians as a weak, slavish people who
allow themselves to be herded like cattle by dictators who for some
reason are best loved when most oppressive, Fedorov interprets the
Russian lack of self-assertion as a subtler and more advanced under-
standing of freedom.”120 Another example is the bold oxymoron “free
theocracy” (“svobodnai a teokratiia”), which is how philosopher Vladi-
mir Solov’ev characterizes his ideal of social organization. As Billington
says, Solov’ev’s task was “to reconcile total freedom with a recognition
of the authority of God.”121 In the twentieth century we have conserva-
tive thinker Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn asserting that “Freedom is self-re-
striction! Restriction of the self for the sake of others!”122

Examples could be multiplied. Here it is sufficient to indicate that
neo-Slavophile thought regarding freedom is consistent with the incon-
sistent attitudes expressed by the Slavophiles on the same theme.

Without an understanding of the masochistic element in the Sla-
vophile notion of freedom one might well argue that the Slavophiles
either advocated submissiveness or advocated freedom, but not both.
There have been endless debates on which of the alternatives is cor-
rect.123 In fact, because of the underlying masochism of their ide-
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ology, Slavophiles were in a position to advocate both with good conscience.

There was some question as to whether the freedom advocated by Khomiakov was individual or was a property of the larger, supra-individual collective. But the problem of the distinction between individual and collective itself perfectly reflects the poor demarcation which typically results when an individual takes a masochistic stance with respect to an object (see the clinical discussion below).

The questionable distinction between individual and collective is also apparent in Ivan Kireevsky's formulaic characterization of life in an idealized ancient Rus': "The person belonged to the mir, the mir belonged to the person."

In general, the constant references to "inner" freedom in Slavophile writings about the (by definition external) collective testify to a confusion between self and collective object in the Slavophile imagination. There can of course be no "inner" freedom when the only choice is to go along with the wishes of the collective. Or rather, there can be "inner" freedom, but only if it is consistently masochistic in its aims. In the West this would not normally be considered to be "freedom," although in Russia it is often what is meant by "volia" or "svoboda"—two words often unavoidably but misleadingly translated as "freedom."

Masochistic Tendencies among the Russian Intelligentsia

Although many in the Russian intelligentsia ever since the late eighteenth century have commented directly or indirectly on the masochistic tendencies of Russians, there is also a masochistic tradition within the intelligentsia itself. This is particularly true of those members of the intelligentsia who were politically engaged, the so-called radical intelligentsia.

In 1851, for example, the liberal emigré journalist Alexander Herzen characterized the powerlessness of the "thinking Russian" in the face of tsarist oppression as follows: "This is the source of our irony, of that anguish which eats away at us, drives us to fury, and urges us on until we reach Siberia, torture, exile, or untimely death. We sacrifice ourselves without hope, from bitterness and boredom [ot zhelchi; ot skuki]." This sounds like self-sacrifice for the sake of self-sacrifice. It is really no different from the general Russian masochism Herzen was hinting at
when he spoke of Russian slavery: “A long period of slavery is no accident, for it corresponds to some feature of national character.” Yet Herzen did not want to recognize the masochistic element specifically in traditional communal life, preferring instead to view it as a native Russian “communism” capable of protecting the peasant from exploitation by landowners and others. Subsequent populist thinkers followed Herzen in ascribing great potential to the peasant commune for the future of Russian socialism and communism.

Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89) was a radical journalist who spent nineteen years in Siberia—and could have spent fewer years there if he had been willing to petition for a pardon after ten years. He was apparently not being ironic when he referred to his Siberian period as the happiest in his life (the “Bless you, prison” theme reverberates to this day in Russian literature, e.g., in the works of Solzhenitsyn). When Chernyshevsky married he made it clear to his wife that she was free to commit adultery (she obliged him). The ideal revolutionary in his novel What is to Be Done? (1863) sleeps on a bed of nails. Harvard scholar Adam Ulam says that there was something in Chernyshevsky’s obstinate endurance of suffering that “borders on masochism.” Not so. This was masochism.

Petr Kropotkin (1842–1921), although born into the privileged Russian aristocracy, was a champion of the exploited peasantry and a revolutionary best known for his theoretical writings on anarchism. As a young man he volunteered for military service in Siberia—when he could have remained instead in the capital. Once, when languishing in a French jail for his revolutionary activities, he refused to accept an offer of bail from friends. William H. Blanchard, in a very interesting study on revolutionary morality, is explicit about Kropotkin’s moral masochism: “Kropotkin is difficult to understand without the assumption of some motive of moral masochism, a feeling of guilt that requires some compensatory behavior.” According to Blanchard, Kropotkin illustrates a thesis that may be made about revolutionaries generally: “Revolutionaries must be prepared to suffer if they are to advance their causes. They must show the government they cannot be broken, even by imprisonment. Perhaps the only people suited for such long ordeals of suffering are those who derive some satisfaction from the experience of suffering itself.”

The intelligentsia’s will to self-sacrifice found its first full-scale outlet
in the so-called "going to the people" ("khozhdenie v narod") movement which took place starting in the mid-1870s. This was a joint effort primarily by upper-class young people to serve their social inferiors, the Russian peasant folk ("narod"). Some of these populists (sometimes called "narodniki"—although this term is somewhat vague and has a convoluted history) wanted simply to help the peasants by educating them and their children, giving them medical treatment, and so on, while others (especially followers of the sadistic Bakunin) wanted to foment anti-tsarist revolution. As it turned out, most of the peasants themselves were not interested in achieving the social progress intended for them. In some cases they even turned over the agitators to the police. There were mass trials. The populist movement, initially at least, was a gross failure.

Perhaps this failure was not itself an unconsciously intended self-punishment, but the original goal of political action by the Russian intelligentsia did involve a form of self-sacrifice, even self-punishment. Billington says these activists—especially during the so-called "mad summer" of 1874—were "swept away by a spirit of self-renunciation." Fedotov sees "something irrational" in the movement, adding that "sometimes the motive of sacrifice was everything and the positive work had but a secondary importance." Tibor Szamuely says: "Atonement for serfdom became the collective mission of the intelligentsia." Szamuely speaks of "the overpowering guilt-complex of the Russian intelligentsia, its obsession with the ideas of collective sin and social redemption."

Nadejda Gorodetzky translates from the memoirs of a "man of the seventies," M. Frolenko:

Youth brought up on the ideas of the 'sixties was imbued by the idea of serving the people and sacrificing personal career or goods. Many had, in their childhood, sincere [religious] belief. The teaching of Christ: to lay down one's soul, to give away one's possessions, to suffer for one's faith and ideal, to leave father and mother for their sake, to give oneself wholly for the service of others, was a testament of God. It was not difficult with such a background to take in the teaching of the 'sixties about one's debt to the people and the necessity to pay back for all the privileges received in their childhood.

The reasoning here is not at all unlike that of guilt-ridden individuals who entered monasteries. To the extent that some narodniki, in addition to dressing as peasants, actually managed to share the unaccustomed miserable life of the peasant—to work long hours, eat poorly, live
among vermin, and so forth—they paradoxically achieved for themselves the very humiliation which they longed to liberate the peasant from. According to Gorodetzky, the “desire for self-abasement” extended to the realm of education, for many of the narodniki felt that they did not deserve to become educated off the backs of the starving peasants: “If we wait and finish our studies, we may become bourgeois-minded and no longer wish to go down among the people.”

Although some of the narodniki admired Christ, Gorodetzky does have difficulty fitting them to the procrustean bed of Christianity. The psychoanalytic category of masochism is more appropriate as an explanatory, or at least just a descriptive category. Similarly, Fedotov has a hard time determining “what kind of Christianity . . . dominated the subconscious mind of the Narodniks.” Christianity is not an inherent property of the “subconscious mind,” however. Again, masochism is.

One does not have to be a Christian to be a moral masochist. One can be an atheistic Russian intelligent, for example. It is simply false to attribute covert Christianity to a declared atheist. Scholars would not be so astonished that the narodniki resemble Christian monks if they were willing to admit masochism as a legitimate tertium comparationis.

It goes without saying that the narodniki were doing many other things besides being masochistic: they were reacting to odious tsarist authoritarianism; they were providing some education at least to peasants; they were identifying with the peasants; they were escaping from their parents; they were preparing the way for large-scale revolutions in Russia, and so on. The identification with the peasantry is of particular psychoanalytic interest, and is closely associated with masochism. This identification has often been expressed in Russian as “soedinenie” (union) or “sliianie” (merging). Richard Wortman (without mentioning psychoanalysis) speaks of an “identification with the peasant” among the intelligentsia of the fifties and sixties. Paraphrasing the “anthropological principle” of Chernyshevsky, Wortman explains: “To understand the peasant, one had only to understand oneself.” Wortman also points to Aleksandr Engel’gardt’s advice to fellow narodniki to acquire peasant humility (for then one is more likely to succeed in living and working with the peasants).

Not all the Russian intelligentsia went as far as the narodniki in the masochistic direction (and even fewer went as far as the terrorists among them in the sadistic direction, e.g., those who assassinated Tsar Alexan-
der II in 1881). But the self-destructive or humiliating idea surfaces again and again in the literature about the intelligentsia. Berdiaev, in his contribution to the controversial *Vekhi* (Signposts) symposium of 1909, states paradoxically: “The best of the intelligentsia was fanatically ready for self-sacrifice [samopozhertvovanie]—and no less fanatically preached a materialism which negated all self-sacrifice.” G. P. Fedotov says of the intelligentsia that “heroic death [was] more important than a life full of labor.” Joanna Hubbs believes that “the intelligentsia assumed the role of the ‘Humiliated Christ,’ sacrificing their personal ambitions for the salvation of their motherland.”

Particularly eloquent on the subject of the intelligentsia’s masochism is Tibor Szamuely in his book *The Russian Tradition*. Following in the footsteps of Dostoevsky, Sergei Bulgakov, and others, Szamuely sees the Russian intelligentsia as a kind of loosely organized religion:

The intelligentsia . . . represented something in the nature of a revolutionary priesthood, a subversive monastic order. Its way of life was founded on a genuine asceticism, an aversion to worldly riches, a scorn for the ordinary “bourgeois” creature comforts. Self-abnegation became second nature; the Russian *intelligent* was easily recognizable by his utter and un-selfconscious disregard for material considerations, his fecklessness and impracticality, his indifference to appearances and cheerfully disorganized existence.

The intelligentsia regarded this hand-to-mouth existence as an admirable and highly moral condition. In part it reflected their voluntary renunciation of conventional values—it also went a long way towards satisfying the search for martyrdom which, whether consciously or not, underlay so much of their activity. In autocratic Russia martyrdom, in prison or exile, was not difficult to come by; it was accepted not merely courageously, but often, it seemed, eagerly. The cult of suffering, the idea of the necessity of sacrifice—sacrifice of oneself no less than of others—formed a vital element in their ethos. Suffering cleansed one, brought one nearer to the tormented people; the sacrifice of personal happiness, of the best years of one’s life, and, if need be, of life itself, was the price that had to be paid for the achievement of a new Golden Age; only through suffering and sacrifice could the guilt of privilege ever be expiated.

There is considerable psychoanalytic insight here. Without mentioning Freud, Szamuely not only perceives the moral masochism of the Russian intelligentsia (he calls it “search for martyrdom” or “cult of suffering”), but grants that it might be unconscious (“whether consciously or not”). Szamuely also detects the role of guilt (“suffering cleansed one,” “guilt of privilege”) and the issue of separation from/merging with another
suffering object ("brought one nearer to the tormented people"). These are all topics that are familiar to the clinician, as we will see in chapter 5.

Speaking specifically of the masochism of the literary intelligentsia, Vera Dunham says: "Fiction of social concern was inclined to paint a dark picture of contemporary society, much darker than might have been realistically warranted. The black tone was added by the intelligentsia's need to be tormented." 148

Some scholars have been reluctant to accept the idea of a self-lacerating, masochistic Russian intelligentsia. In his essay on "The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia," Isaiah Berlin rejects "the generally held view of the Russians as a gloomy, mystical, self-lacerating, somewhat religious nation," preferring to regard Russian intellectuals, at least, as possessing "extremely developed powers of reasoning, extreme logic and lucidity." The problem here is that these two things are in no way mutually exclusive, as Berlin seems to think they are. The gloomy, self-punishing Stavrogin—to take a well-known literary example—certainly possesses "extremely developed powers of reasoning." Yet Stavrogin is a cold calculator and a guilt-ridden masochist all wrapped in one. He eventually commits suicide, which is the most masochistic act possible.

Berlin says: "If you study the Russian 'ideologies' of the nineteenth and indeed the twentieth century, I think you will find, on the whole, that the more difficult, the more paradoxical, the more unpalatable a conclusion is, the greater is the degree of passion and enthusiasm with which some Russians, at any rate, tend to embrace it." 149 In other words, the Russian intelligent is capable of acting in accordance with perceived logical truthfulness, even if the logical conclusion harms someone—including the logical Russian who is reasoning so well! Berlin's own Herzen offers Siberian exile as an example, as we saw above.

Berlin, too, offers an example, namely, the odd behavior of the social critic Vissarion Belinsky during his period (1839–40) of Hegelian resignation to the forces of tsarist autocracy. Nothing was more contrary to Belinsky's own natural inclination to resist autocratic power and help the downtrodden, which is to say nothing could have been more masochistic for him personally: "Belinsky gloried in the very weight of the chains with which he had chosen to bind his limbs, in the very narrowness and darkness which he had willed to suffer; the shock and
disgust of his friends was itself evidence of the vastness, and therefore of
the grandeur and the moral necessity, of the sacrifice.”

Perhaps the most eloquent Russian spokesman for the idea of a
masochistic Russian intelligentsia was the writer and critic Dmitrii Merezhkovskii (1865–1941). In that volume of his collected works titled
“Sick Russia,” Merezhkovskii repeatedly asserts that Russians—espe-
cially members of the intelligentsia—are slavish by nature. Russians
cannot be “holy,” he says, without being slavish, because when they are
free they are sinful: “In freedom they are sinful, in slavery they are
holy”; “Holy Russia is a land of holy slaves.”

Merezhkovskii advances the idea that the numerous rebellions in Russian history never
amounted to much because the rebels (Pugachev and his crew, the
Decembrists, etc.) always wanted to be defeated. The long line of Rus-
sian uprisings constitutes “an eternal rebellion of eternal slaves.”

Characterizing the memoirs of the famous serf-turned-censor Aleksandr
Nikitenko (1804–77), Merezhkovskii says: “A slavish book about a
slavish life. The writer is doubly a slave, both by birth and by calling—
a serf and a censor.”

Merezhkovskii, writing under the influence of Viacheslav Ivanov
(1866–1949), describes Russians in a way that strongly suggests the
modern psychoanalytic conception of moral masochism: “Self-denuncia-
tion and self-humiliation [Samooblichenie—samooplevaniye, literally
“spitting on the self”] are generally characteristic of Russian people.”

Among Russians there is a “terrible will to descent, to disrobing, to self-
destruction, to chaos.”

Merezhkovskii (unlike Ivanov) actually uses the word “masochism” (“mazokhizm”). It occurs in reference to the
suddenly repentant attitude of some of the intelligentsia after the events
of January 9, 1905 (so-called “Bloody Sunday,” when tsarist police fired
on a crowd of peaceful demonstrators in Petersburg, killing over a
hundred people). Here is how Merezhkovskii describes a “former Marx-
ist” who was castigating the “ignoble Russian revolution”:

His eyes shone with that delight of self-flagellation, self-destruction [samoistre-
blenia], that voluptuousness of shame which in the moral realm correspond to
the physical voluptuousness of blows, to masochism [sootvetstvuiut fiz-
icheskому sladostrastiu poboev, mazokhizmu].

These words, written in 1909, predate Freud’s writings on moral mas-
ochism by some fifteen years. The similarity is remarkable. Both
Merezhkovskii and Freud take the self-destructive element in (the original, erotogenic sense of) the term "masochism" as a model for self-defeating attitudes and behaviors generally.

Even more remarkable, however, is the primordial maternal imagery Merezhkovskii utilizes to depict the attitudes of failed revolutionaries. He refers to a passage in the story "The Holy Wanderer" by Zinaida Gippius. A little child named Vasiuta is dying. For several days Vasiuta has been in agony, and is so worn out he cannot even cry. His mother takes him into her arms. He looks into her eyes, she asks what she can give him. His little head hanging limp, he replies softly: "You could give me a bit of milk, Mamka, but I don't feel like it [da ne khotstsa]." The child is so totally defeated by his illness that he does not even want his favorite milk.

The defeatist former revolutionaries, says Merezhkovskii, are like this little Vasiuta. They hang their heads. There is nothing left for them, their former desires are meaningless. The attitude of a defeated adult is like the attitude of a defeated child, a child that no longer even wants milk from its dear mother. The image is primal, it refers the reader back to a very early stage in the child's relationship with the nurturing mother. Psychoanalytically speaking, the image is pre-Oedipal. Merezhkovskii anticipates what post-Freudian analysts will have to say about the ontogenetic origin of masochistic attitudes (see below, 94ff.).

Curiously, the maternal imagery returns in Merezhkovskii's depiction of something that would seem to be the very opposite of defeatism, namely, rebelliousness: "We [Russians] no longer believe the testimony of Saint Hippolytus that 'The Antichrist will ascend into the heavens.' Yet we sucked this in with mother's milk; it's in our blood, even amongst nonbelievers: treachery, sinfulness, the demonism of any kind of escape upward into flight [kainstvo, okaianstvo, liutsiferianstvo vsiakoi voobshche voli k voskhozhdeniu, k poletu]." Tolstoy's philosophy of reductive simplification, Pisarev's nihilism, and Bakunin's anarchistic tendencies are all examples of this upward-directed defiance, says Merezhkovskii.

Rebellious Russians did indeed "suck in" their rebelliousness "with mother's milk"—if the psychoanalytic view is to be believed (below, 106, 119). The primal rebellion was against the controlling mother in Russian matrifocal society. But the primal submission was also submission to that mother. Defiance and masochism are the two necessary poles
of life’s earliest ambivalence. Merezhkovskii senses this, even though he is not altogether explicit. The maternal imagery puts him just next door to psychoanalysis.

According to Merezhkovskii, wild, barbaric faces peep out from behind the ascetic mask of the Russian Christ. When Christ rises from the dead on Easter Sunday Russians customarily proclaim their holy joy to one another, saying: “Christ has arisen!” (Easter is a very special holiday—more important than Christmas—in Russian Christianity). But Merezhkovskii tells us that he has heard drunken Russians mix mother oaths with their ritualized utterances celebrating Christ’s resurrection. Again, maternal imagery accompanies the vertical motif.

“What if the Russian idea is Russian insanity?” asks Merezhkovskii. This is not a very precise diagnosis, clinically speaking. But Merezhkovskii clearly wants us to understand that there is something wrong, something pathological in the slavish attitude of Russian intellectuals toward authority. Russia is like a man being buried alive. He screams in protest, but the dirt just piles up on the coffin, a cross is placed there, and the great Russian thinkers do nothing but find ways to justify what is happening:


A caricature, to be sure. But Merezhkovskii has understood something essential, something masochistic about the very “Russian” worldviews of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solovyev, and Ivanov.

**Masochism and Antimasochism**

Vasilii Rozanov (1856–1919) was a contemporary of Merezhkovskii’s who also cultivated hostile sentiments toward Russian masochism. His antimasochism is most clearly expressed in his writings about religion and sexuality. According to Rozanov, religious belief and erotic feelings should overlap with one another. There is too much asceticism and glorification of suffering in Christianity. Christ essentially castrated and made slaves out of his followers. Russians should have more reverence for their pagan roots. The Russian Orthodox church should
recognize that human beings are sexual creatures. Withered, impotent old monks should not be held up as shining examples for young people. The sexual activity of a newly married couple should be encouraged. Indeed, it should begin right in the church where the wedding takes place, and the young couple should live on the church premises until the wife is pregnant. 

Rozanov is fond of using maternal imagery to convey his ideas: "Christianity is the sweat, pain, and joy of a mother who is giving birth, it is the cry of a newborn child." But here Rozanov wants to emphasize the joy ("radost"'), not the pain ("muki"): "One cannot insist enough on the fact that Christianity is joy, only joy, and always joy." 

In contrast to his antimasochistic religious stance, however, are Rozanov's equally strong masochistic inclinations. For example, even though the Church refused him permission to marry the woman he loved (and with whom he had five children), Rozanov continued to praise the Church in his writings, for example: "The Church is the soul of society and of the people." Rozanov's servile attitude toward tsarist power is also well known, and was essential to his extreme conservatism. As for Russia herself, Rozanov never failed to see her in a bad light, yet he never stopped loving her either. Russia was condemned to sin and to suffer immense pain for her sins (here Rozanov is, as Lisa Crone says, a "prophet of doom"). Because Mother-Russia is a sinner one is obliged to love her:

It's no great accomplishment to love a fortunate and grand motherland. It is when she is weak, small, humbled, even stupid, even depraved—that we should love her. Precisely, exactly when our "mother" is drunk, when she tells lies, when she gets all tangled up in sinfulness—that is when we are obliged not to leave her. But this is not all: when finally she dies and is picked at by the Jews until nothing but her bones are left, then that person who weeps by her useless, spat-upon skeleton will be a real Russian.

With this thoroughly disgusting imagery Rozanov not only idealizes Russian masochism, but reveals his own necrophilic and anti-Semitic tendencies.

Another Russian thinker who strayed into antimasochistic territory—and whose maternal imagery is equally interesting—is the religious philosopher Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1828–1903). Fedorov lived ascetically, but advocated a view profoundly opposed to the fatalistic attitudes normally met with in Russia. Fedorov believed that it would
one day actually be possible to restore life to people who have died, that is, to all those previous generations that have succumbed to what Fedorov termed "the blind force of nature." *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, a posthumously published treatise that Fedorov was writing for most of his life, has been called brilliant by some, half crazy by others.\(^{171}\) There can be no doubt, however, that the theory of human resurrection advocated in this complex work is fascinating.

Death is the source of all unhappiness. "Why does what is living die?" Fedorov repeatedly asks. Or, to personify the issue: "Why is nature not a mother to us, but a stepmother, or a nurse who refuses to feed us?"\(^ {172}\) Nature is even an "executioner" of those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their fellow human beings. But Fedorov resists death, he is disgusted by "altruists" who have a "passionate desire to be martyrs," that is, who in psychoanalytic terms engage in masochistic behavior. Fedorov's "project" for the resurrection of all humankind is a rejection of both the masochistic welcoming of death as well as the not particularly masochistic acceptance of death that all aging human beings develop. For Fedorov, death is simply not acceptable—not for one's self, not for one's fellow humans with whom one wants to connect ("rodstvennost"), not for previous generations of humans to whom one is connected by the all-important bonds of kinship ("rod"). "Blind nature," who deals in death, must be conquered, must be "regulated" by means of scientific understanding. She must be given eyes to see us with, and only we humans, the highest and most intelligent form of life, can give her those eyes. Thus, to extend Fedorov's imagery to its logical conclusion, nature will no longer be the mere stepmother who tends to fail in looking after us orphans (cf. Russian "besprizorny"), but will be the ideal mother we all knew before we knew death, the first organism we deigned to personify, to give a face.

In fact, however, Fedorov tends to "patrify" rather than "matrify" the natural universe (he invents the Russian term "patrofikatsiia").\(^ {173}\) The earth tends to be seen as a graveyard of our fathers ("kladbishche otsov") rather than our mothers (or rather than both). The face we will confront when we reach the ultimate spiritual summit will be the face of God the Father. These are just a few of the many side-effects of Fedorov's ordinary Russian sexism (his insistence that a wife's place is in the home, and his frequent references to "feminine caprice" require no comment).
Particularly interesting is Fedorov's denigration of mothers—this despite his extensive and life-affirming vocabulary of words based on the Russian root meaning "birth" ("rod," "rodstvo," "rodstvennost'," "rodnoe ia," etc.). Once everyone is resuscitated no further childbirths will be necessary. Mothers are among the masochistic "altruists" whom Fedorov disapproves of. Christ did not admonish us to be like mothers, but rather to be "like children." Contradicting Saint Anthony's idea that the model of Christian love is the mother's total devotion to her child, Fedorov says that the son's love for the father is a better model. Even among animals mothers are totally devoted to offspring, and "the human race . . . would be no higher than animals if its morality were limited to maternal love." 174

Thus, even if nature were a mother rather than a stepmother, she would not meet Fedorov's high standards. It seems that even real mothers cannot protect their children from eventual death. Therefore it is up to children to take matters into their own hands, to work together on the "common task" of eliminating death through education and science.

Fedorov's great enmity toward death may seem exaggerated, but it is also very Russian. Other Russian thinkers have tried to find ways to resurrect the dead in one form or another, and many aspects of Russian culture manifest a preoccupation with resistance to death. In a very interesting 1965 article Peter Wiles viewed such varied phenomena as the Soviet slogans about Lenin's immortality ("Lenin is more alive than all the living"), the Orthodox tradition of preserving a saint's remains whole and intact, the Russian religious emphasis on Christ's resurrection from the dead, the folkloric figure of Koshchei the Deathless, the hyper-development of gerontology in Russian medicine, Lev Tolstoy's obsession with death—and of course Fedorov's philosophy—all as manifestations of the Russian preoccupation with death.

The Russian fascination with resurrection is, in essence, a preoccupation with a special form of masochism: does one or does one not submit to death? The ultimate enslavement for every Russian is enslavement to death.

Of course for everyone—Russians and non-Russians alike—death is a serious issue, to put it mildly. But for someone living in a culture of moral masochism death is, in addition, viewed through the filter of masochistic motivation. One does not only feel anxiety, or dread, or eventual philosophical acceptance. One goes further, one welcomes
death with open arms, or, on the contrary, one *denounces* it in disgust. Fedorov's "project" may be understood as an extended denunciation of death.

The polarity of attitudes toward death may be illustrated by an aspect of the difficult personal relationship between Fedorov and Lev Tolstoy. The great novelist and moralist was always saying things that irritated Fedorov. Tolstoy's "love of death" was particularly intolerable to Fedorov. On one occasion Tolstoy expressed his affection for the human skull lying on a desk at Fedorov's house. On another occasion Tolstoy said to a colleague of Fedorov's: "here I am standing with one foot in the grave, and all the same I'll say that death is not a bad thing." As Young points out, these remarks apparently led Fedorov to break off personal relations with Tolstoy.

On his deathbed Fedorov did not admit that he was dying. He carried his antimasochism to the ultimate extreme.

Viacheslav Ivanov, apparently reacting to Fedorovian ideas about death, had a more accepting, Tolstoyan attitude. In his philosophical discussion of the inseparability of humanity from nature ("Priroda," in this case not "blind") Ivanov quite spontaneously lapses into maternal imagery:

> From the time that he is conscious of himself, Man remains true to himself in his secret wish: to conquer Nature. "I am alien to you," he says to her, but he himself knows that he does not speak the truth, and that she, welcoming the future with an inescapable embrace, answers: "You are mine, for I am you [ty moii, ibo ty—ia]." And thus speaks the oracle: you will not be victorious over the Mother [ne pobedish' Materi] until you yourself turn to her and take her into your arms, saying: "You are mine, for you are I myself [ty moia, ibo ty—ia sam]."

There is an antagonism between Mother Nature and Man, and Man cannot win until he admits that he and Mother Nature are one and the same. But the victory will be Pyrrhic, once fusion with this particular mother is achieved, for Ivanov is clearly referring to death at her hands. The danger of being dominated by her, of welcoming her masochistically, is not escaped after all. Unlike Fedorov, Ivanov is willing to give up the wish to conquer Nature, to defy death. Ivanov's masochism in this context contrasts with Fedorov's antimasochism.

Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948) was a Russian philosopher so preoccupied with masochistic and antimasochistic ideas that he came to view
practically the entire world as a would-be slave driver of the individual. In his 1939 book *Slavery and Freedom* he argues that a great variety of things—God, nature, the collective, civilization, individualism, the state, the nation, war, money, revolution, sex, beauty, and even "Being" itself—all are capable of "enslaving" the individual. This view may be characterized as slightly paranoid.

According to Berdiaev, the individual human being is inclined to cooperate in his or her own enslavement: "man likes being a slave and puts forward a claim to slavery as a right." But one must resist enslavement. The existence of one's very personality ("lichnost") depends on a persistent refusal to be enslaved. This resistance, however, leads to suffering, for in most cases, according to Berdiaev, it is easier to go along with whatever pressures are exerted on the personality than to be assertive or to seek freedom ("svoboda"). The truly free personality therefore cannot avoid suffering. Indeed, Berdiaev says, "in a certain sense personality is suffering."  

Berdiaev's advocacy of "free personality" would thus, on its face, appear to be an advocacy of masochism. This is not true *a priori*, however, for not all suffering has to be self-destructive or humiliating (e.g., temporary suffering in order to obtain something advantageous to the self would not be considered masochistic by the clinicians, as we will see below). Besides, there are very few people who go in for such suffering: "Free personality is a flower that blooms but rarely in the life of the world." It is obvious from reading his books that Berdiaev himself was one of those rare flowers.

All Russians have a talent for suffering, asserts Berdiaev. Our philosopher is perhaps not such a rare flower after all. This is evident from his discussion of Dostoevsky in *The Russian Idea*, a book originally published in 1946: "The problem of suffering stands at the center of Dostoevsky's creation. And in this he is very Russian. The Russian is capable of enduring suffering [vynosit' stradanie] better than the Westerner is, and at the same time he is exceptionally sensitive to suffering, he is more compassionate [bolee sostradatelen] than the Western person."  

Suffering is much too important to the Russian to be separated from what Berdiaev sees as the traditional slavishness of the Russian: "The understanding of Christianity was slavish," he says of the Russian Orthodox Church's centuries-long subordination to tsarist will. Russians are characterized by a "love of freedom," but they also demonstrate an
"inclination to slavery" ("sklonnost' k rabstvu"); "Russians . . . either riot against the government or they submissively bear its yoke." Russians are thus a contradictory, ambivalent people, in Berdiev's view (and in the view of many others of course, from Merezhkovskii to Freud, from Belinsky to Brodsky). But the positive side of this particular contradiction, the striving for freedom, does not eliminate the negative side, the "inclination to slavery," nor does it eliminate the ability "to endure suffering" entailed by both sides.

There is a curious family background to Berdiaev's obsession with freedom and slavery. In his autobiography Berdiaev repeatedly speaks of his alienation from his family, especially his French-speaking mother: "The expression 'bosom of the mother [materinskoe lono]' said nothing to me—neither that of my own mother nor that of mother earth." Here Berdiaev, by his own terms, is being very un-Russian for elsewhere he had said: "The Russian people have always liked living in the warmth of the collective, in a sort of dissolution in the earthly element, in the bosom of the mother."

Berdiaev's sense of alienation ("chuzhdost'") extends to the whole world, yet the imagery he uses is persistently maternal, often involving birth: "I cannot remember my first scream, elicited by my encountering a world alien to me. But I know for certain that from the very beginning I felt that I had fallen into an alien world." The positive result of this perpetual alienation was a quest for freedom ("svoboda"), a quest which is imaged as resistance to the familiar and familial. The verbal root -rod-, meaning "birth," occurs again and again:

Everything familial [rodovoe] is opposed to freedom. My repulsion against familial life [rodovoi zhizni], against anything connected with the birthing element [rozhdaushchii stikhiei], is most likely explained by my insane love of freedom and of the source of personality. Metaphysically this is mine most of all. Kin [Rod] always struck me as an enslaver of the personality. Kin [Rod] is the order of necessity, not freedom. Therefore the fight for freedom is the fight against the power of the familial [rodovogo] over the human being. The opposition of birth [rozhdeniia] to creativity was always very essential to my philosophical thinking.

The linguistic play here is striking, it is a kind of bad poetry. Berdiaev is too concerned with notions expressed by means of the root -rod-, that is, by the overall idea of birthing. He can barely bring himself to mention
his mother, yet a mother is precisely the one who gives birth. The last sentence is particularly revealing, for it suggests that Berdiaev set his own personal independence, expressed as creativity, over and against his mother’s ability to give birth. Yet the strength of the opposition only indicates the extent of the identification with the person opposed, that is, with the “birther” who would “enslave” him. Berdiaev’s beloved freedom is itself a mother: “I issued from freedom, she is my female parent [la izoshel ot svobody, ona moia roditel’nitsa].”

In his early writings (during the First World War) Berdiaev was as interested in Russian ambivalence about being enslaved as in his late works. But the earlier writings reveal a greater preoccupation with the Russian willingness to be enslaved, and they contain a remarkable personification cum gendrification of Russia. Not only is Russia a slave, she is a female slave. The “slavish” (“rab’e”) in Russian character may be equated with the “womanish” (“bab’e”). Writing under the direct influence of Rozanov, Berdiaev says that there is not so much an “eternal feminine” in Russia as an “eternally womanish” (“vechno-bab’e”):

The Russian people does not want to be a masculine builder, its nature may be defined as feminine, passive, and submissive [zhenstvennaiia, passivnaiia, i pokornaiia] in governmental matters, it always awaits its bridegroom, its husband, its master. Russia is a submissive, feminine land. A passive, receptive femininity with respect to governmental power is so characteristic of the Russian people and of Russian history. There is no limit to the humble endurance of the long-suffering Russian people [Net predelov smirennomu terpeniui mnogostradal’nogo russkogo naroda].

This gendernized imagery of Russia’s slavishness eventually became a commonplace in Russian cultural commentary. For example, writing at about the same time as Berdiaev, the poet Maximilian Voloshin characterized Russia as a “bride” and a “female slave.” Unlike Berdiaev, however, Voloshin metaphorized Russia’s self-destructiveness specifically as sexual promiscuity:

Подпалаешь лихому подговору,
Отдалась разбойнику и вору,
Подожгла посады и хлеба,
Разорила древнее жилище
И пошла поруганной и нищей
И рабой последнего раба.
So you listened to the evil counsel,  
Gave yourself to burglars, thieves and scoundrels,  
Burned your towns and crops and would not save  
This, your ancient home. And from this wasteland  
You went out—embarrassed and a beggar  
As the least slave of the lowest slave.  

Approximately half a century later Vasilii Grossman, in his bitter novel *Forever Flowing*, would pick up on this sexist metaphor and would even specify Russia's bridegroom, namely, Vladimir Ilych Lenin: "The Great Slave [Velikaia raba] rested her seeking, questioning, evaluating gaze on Lenin. He became her chosen one."  

Lenin himself showed some appreciation of the Russian slave mentality. In his 1914 article "On the National Pride of the Great Russians" he says that the Russian people are oppressed by "tsarist butchers, nobility, and capitalists." This is possible, in part, because of the Russian nation's "great servility [velikoe rabolepstvo] before priests, tsars, landowners, and capitalists." Lenin quotes, with approval, words he attributes to Nikolai Chernyshevsky: "a pitiful nation, a nation of slaves, all slaves from top to bottom."  

True, admits Lenin, Russia also produced great liberals and revolutionaries, such as Radishchev, the Decembrists, Chaadaev, and others (there was antimasochism as well as masochism). Russia gave rise as well to a "powerful revolutionary party of the masses" in 1905. But, according to Lenin, the existence of "overt and covert Great Russian slaves," that is, "slaves in relationship to the tsarist monarchy" cannot be denied. Lenin is particularly incensed by the use of slavish Russian peasants to stifle freedom in neighboring countries:  

No one who is born a slave can be held responsible for that fact. But the slave who not only avoids striving for freedom, but justifies and embellishes on his slavery (for example, he calls the suffocation of Poland, Ukraine, etc. a "defense of the fatherland" of the Great Russians), such a slave is a lackey and a boor who elicits a legitimate feeling of indignation, contempt, and loathing.  

For Lenin, it is the duty of Russian social democrats to despise Russia's "slavish past" and her "slavish present"—the latter most prominently exemplified, in Lenin's opinion, by Russia's role in the ongoing First World War. The best thing is for tsarist Russia to be defeated, because tsarism enslaves Russians and other nationalities. The best way to "defend the fatherland" is to revolt against one's own monarchy, landown-
ers, and capitalists. They are, after all, the “worst enemies of our motherland [khudshikh vravov nashe rodiny].” 195

One can of course reach one’s own conclusions as to whether the subsequent defeat of Russian monar chism resulted in a lesser or greater quantity of “overt and covert Great Russian slaves.” I think, however, that anyone acquainted with the history of the Stalin period would estimate that the sheer quantity grew.

Custine would have agreed. He would have asserted that, in principle, the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 could not eradicate the Russian slave mentality:

Tomorrow, in an insurrection, in the midst of massacre, by the light of a conflagration, the cry of freedom may spread to the frontiers of Siberia; a blind and cruel people may murder their masters, may revolt against obscure tyrants, and dye the waters of the Volga with blood; but they will not be any the more free: barbarism is in itself a yoke.

The best means of emancipating men is not pompously to proclaim their enfranchisement, but to render servitude impossible by developing the sentiment of humanity in the heart of nations: that sentiment is deficient in Russia. 196

Custine understood that political revolution is not enough. There also has to be a change in the way people think, in their very psychology. Otherwise political repression just comes back. The “iron tsar,” Nicholas I clamped down (and got away with it) after the Decembrist uprising. In our century it was Stalin and his henchmen who managed to re-enslave the Russian nation after the bloodshed of the late teens and early twenties. In George Kennan’s opinion, even if we grant that Custine’s book is not a very good characterization of Russia in 1839, it is nonetheless “an excellent book, probably in fact the best of books, about the Russia of Joseph Stalin.” 197 This statement, we should keep in mind, comes from a former ambassador to the Soviet Union who had extensive dealings with Stalin. Kennan adds: “Whatever else may be said about Custine, and whichever of his many weaknesses may be held against him, his readers of the present age must concede that he detected, in the glimpse he had of Russia in the summer of 1839, traits in the mentality of Russian government and society, some active, some latent.” 198

An external, political yoke will always be possible as long as the Russians are weighed down with their internal, psychological yoke, that is, their masochism together with any reactive antimasochistic strivings.
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Custine understood this implicitly. He stepped right up to the brink of psychoanalysis.

Recent Developments

During most of the Soviet period it was impossible to discuss Russian masochism openly in Russia. Abroad, however, discussion was possible (e.g., Berdiaev, Fedotov, and some others, as we have seen). Particularly interesting are the publications of Russian dissidents in the West from the 1970s. Julia Brun-Zejmis has recently analyzed the works of such thinkers as Andrei Amal’rik, Igor’ Shafarevich, Iurii Glazov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Dmitrii Dudko, Vasilii Grossman, and others in light of their highly diverse views of “Russian subservience” and “Russia’s martyrdom under the Soviet regime.” Brun-Zejmis finds fascinating parallels between the writings of these thinkers and the works of Chaadaev long before them. I will have more to say about some of these writers below. Here it is sufficient to quote one of the dissidents Brun-Zejmis discusses, namely, O. Altaev, who makes a very interesting argument about the “dual consciousness” of the servile Soviet intelligentsia:

The intelligentsia does not accept the Soviet regime, it tends to shun it and at times even despises it. Yet, on the other hand, there is a symbiosis between them. The intelligentsia feeds the regime, it cherishes it and fosters it. It awaits the collapse of the Soviet regime and hopes this collapse will come sooner or later, but it also co-operates with it. The intelligentsia suffers because it is forced to live under Soviet rule, yet it strives toward prosperity. We have here a combination of the incombinable. It is not enough to call it conformism, for conformism is a completely legal compromise of interests by means of mutual concessions accepted in human society everywhere. It is also not enough to call it opportunism. That would be a narrow interpretation, for opportunism is a result of deeper processes. It is servility, but not of an ordinary kind, but an ostentatious servility with suffering, with “a Dostoevskian touch” to it. Here we have at the same time a horror of the fall and enjoyment in it; no conformism, no opportunism knows of such refined torments.

Such suffering is clearly an example of moral masochism, although Altaev of course does not use the psychoanalytic term and tends to emphasize its collective aspect.

Within Russia it became possible to consider the question of Russian masochism openly only after the mid-1980s. The reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev were the key to this process. Whether Gorbachev
intended to or not, his institution of glasnost stimulated intellectuals to grapple with the issue of Russianness itself.

One of the first to publicly recognize the traditionally slavish attitude toward authority in Russia during this period was the noted poet Evgenii Evtushenko. Writing in a 1988 issue of Literaturnaia gazeta, Evtushenko argued that “slavish blood” has accumulated to such an extent in his culture that “... today it must not be squeezed out drop by drop but pumped out by the bucketful.”

In his article Evtushenko attempts to explain the recent Russian coinage priterpelost'. According to Evtushenko, priterpelost’—rendered as “servile patience” by the resourceful Antonina W. Bouis—is an attitude which has for many decades allowed Russians to tolerate chronic shortages of ordinary consumer goods and services:

Priterpelost is capitulation before “infinite humiliations” [Pasternak’s phrase]. First we humiliate ourselves [unizhaemsia] to get an apartment. We humiliate ourselves hunting in the jungles of commerce for wallpaper, faucets, toilet bowls, latches. The sight of a Yugoslav lamp fixture or a Rumanian sofa bed brings fireworks to our eyes. When a child is born, we humiliate ourselves to obtain day care and kindergartens, finding nipples, crawlers, disposable diapers, carriages, sleds, playpens. We humiliate ourselves in stores, beauty parlors, tailor shops, dry cleaners, car-repair garages, restaurants, hotels, box offices and Aeroflot counters, repair shops for TVs, refrigerators and sewing machines—stepping on our pride, moving from wheedling to arguing and back to wheedling. We spend all our time trying to get something. It’s humiliating that we still can’t feed ourselves, having to buy bread and butter and meat and fruit and vegetables abroad.

Evtushenko was not describing a merely current or temporary situation. Seventy-one years after the Bolshevik Revolution, and forty-three years after defeating a by now affluent Germany, Evtushenko’s Russia was still a country of widespread consumer deficits. Since the fall of the Soviet Union the economic situation has only become worse, of course.

How has it been possible for Russians to endure their economic deprivation for so long? The answer, Evtushenko seems to suggest, is a chronically low self-esteem: “Every queue, every shortage shows our society’s disrespect for itself [neuvazhenie obshchestva k samomu sebe].” Custine, too, had noticed the low self-esteem of the Russians when he observed that living in Russia “renders characters melancholy, and self-love distrustful [les amours-propre défiants].” A society that thinks so little of itself, says Evtushenko, will tolerate being victimized, or will
only grumble mildly at the authorities and avoid real insight into its situation. Above all, it will not act. The authorities alone are not responsible, says Evtushenko, and blaming them is no excuse for inaction. The people ("narod") themselves are, in part, responsible. They do not respect themselves enough to protest, to support perestroika, to take concrete action against "humiliating queues."

Anyone who has ever stood in a line for long knows the feeling of frustration that comes with this experience. But for Russians there is more than frustration. There is surrender, surrender which becomes chronically intertwined with self-identity and self-respect.

Evtushenko says that Russians passively accept their bad situation because they feel they deserve a bad situation: "If we put up with it, then we deserve it." Anyone who accepts humiliation deserves humiliation. Russians ask for it, they get it, and it is appropriate that they get it. Evtushenko approves of the punishment. But he says "we deserve it," which is to say he invites it for himself as well. He is a Russian, he knows himself, he knows that there is a part of himself that wants to be humiliated. He wants to overcome that part of himself, he wants Russians to overcome that part of themselves. But that masochistic part is nonetheless still there, and as long as it is there self-esteem will be low: "most of all, I want our country to like itself"—which is to say that, at present, it still does not like itself.

Russians love their country, Evtushenko says: "We are proud of its traditions. But not all traditions are good. And priterpelost' is a bad tradition that must be rejected." National self-esteem is reduced by masochistic priterpelost'. It is only a rather perverse, that is, reactive, concept of national pride that would include a traditional wish to be humiliated.

During the late Soviet and, now, the immediate post-Soviet period there have been abundant discussions of the self-destructive variant of masochism in the Russian press. It is not difficult to see why. Many political, economic, and cultural structures have come tumbling down, as if on purpose, as if their destruction were somehow intended.

An anonymous 1992 editorial in Nezavisimaia gazeta states that society ("obshchestvo") is in such extreme disarray that "it is capable of only a more or less rapid self-disintegration [samoraspadu]." In a poem on the front page of a 1992 issue of Literaturnaia gazeta poet Andrei Voznesenskii declares that "Russia is a suicide" ("Rossiia—
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samoubiitsa"). In a January 1991 issue of the same newspaper Lidiiia Grafova speaks of "the bacchanalia of our self-destruction."

Perhaps the most eloquent portrayal of self-destructiveness was offered by the former dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In a now famous essay predicting the breakup of the Soviet Union Solzhenitsyn says:

We have forfeited our earlier abundance, destroyed the peasant class together with its settlements, deprived the raising of crops of its whole purpose and the soil of its ability to yield a harvest, while flooding the land with man-made seas and swamps. The environs of our cities are befouled by the effluents of our primitive industry, we have poisoned our rivers, lakes, and fish, and today we are obliterating our last resources of clean water, air, and soil, speeding the process by the addition of nuclear death, further supplemented by the storage of Western radioactive wastes for money. Depleting our natural wealth for the sake of grandiose future conquests under a crazed leadership, we have cut down our luxuriant forests and plundered our earth of its incomparable riches—the irreplaceable inheritance of our great-grandchildren—in order to sell them off abroad with uncaring hand. We have saddled our women with backbreaking, impossibly burdensome labor, torn them from their children, and have abandoned the children themselves to disease, brutishness, and a semblance of education. Our health care is utterly neglected, there are no medicines, and we have even forgotten the meaning of a proper diet. Millions lack housing, and a helplessness bred of the absence of personal rights permeates the entire country. And throughout all this we cling to only one thing: that we not be deprived of our unlimited drunkenness.

So: we have done this, we have done that, the destruction is our fault, it is really self-destruct. This sounds very much like masochism. But there is a catch. A society is not a person. The "we" is not an "I"—however much the Russian imagination strives to equate the two (see below, chap. 9). Real masochism is about individual persons, not societies. Russian society may be falling apart in many respects, but the locus of masochism is in its self-destructive citizens—the alcoholics, drug addicts, suicides, overburdened wives, envious peasants, unproductive workers, and so on. And of course there are other reasons for the disintegration of Soviet Russia besides the masochism of individuals. Indeed it could be argued that individual masochism was greater in the more stable periods of Russian history than during Russia's troubled times, for it was then that individuals knuckled under to authority.

The topic of masochism has even become fashionable, and sometimes even the formerly rare Russian word "mazohkizm" is used in these discussions. In a recent interview in Moskovskie novosti writer VI.
Sorokin uses the word to refer to the fondness for the camp theme in the writings of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov. More often than not the Russian word is used in a metaphorical sense of the self-destructiveness of a group rather than of the individual, as in an article which appeared in Moskovskie novosti in 1991: "We must oppose the masochistic slogan [mazokhistskomu lozunzu] about the immediate disintegration of government with a slogan about the freedom of downtrodden nations." Sometimes, although the word "mazokhizm" is not used, that is nonetheless what is meant. For example, a series of articles on "self-destructiveness" ("samorazrushenie") appeared in Literaturnaia gazeta in 1992. In one article Vasilii Golovanov interviews medical researcher V. D. Topolianskii, who argues that Russia's totalitarian past fostered self-destructive behavior:

A totalitarian society needs the self-destructive person [samorazrushaushchiia], meaning a person who can be controlled. Therefore totalitarianism creates an unusually subtle system for achieving the seduction, corruption, and, ultimately, the self-destruction of the personality. The final product is a person who has so lost track of himself, and has squandered his abilities and attachments to such an extent that he gains pleasure from the fact that he is scum [podonok].

Every normal person, according to Topolianskii, has a need to do some useful, even creative activity. If this need is repressed externally the individual may start to behave in a self-destructive way. A worker's negative attitude toward work is an example. The shoddy workmanship of Soviet industrial products harmed not only consumers, but did psychological harm to the workers themselves, or induced them to harm themselves. Tatiana Zaslavskaiia, in her secret "Novosibirsk Report" of 1983, spoke of the "low value attached to labour as a means of self-realization" among Soviet workers. Anyone who lived in Russia during the late Soviet period knows the proverb, "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work." But in behaving according to this proverb one was really betraying oneself, one was acting in a self-destructive fashion. The worker's "I don't care" attitude—which translates Topolianskii's very oral Russian expression "naplevatel'stvo," literally, "spitting on [something]"—could only lower one's own opinion of oneself and make one feel like "scum." One might just as well have been one of the most extreme forms of masochist, that is, an alcoholic, as in the proverb: "If vodka interferes with your work, give up work!" Another recent commentary on masochism in Russia comes from
the president of the recently founded Russian Psychoanalytic Society, psychiatrist Aron Isaakovich Belkin. In an article that appeared in the newspaper *Sovetskaia kul'tura* in July of 1991, Belkin discusses the negativism of the contemporary Soviet media ("Everything is bad, everything is horrible, and everything will become even more horrible!"), comparing it to the attitude of a normal adolescent who is trying to break free from the parents by constantly finding fault with them. He points to alcoholism, endemic boorishness ("khamstvo"), and the widespread I-don't-care attitude as examples of "self-destruction of the personality" ("samodestruktsiia lichnosti").

Curiously, Belkin does not use the psychoanalytic term "masochism," and demonstrates no awareness of the recent psychoanalytic research on masochism that has been going on in the West (see chap. 5, below). In the newly emerging psychoanalytic literature, on the other hand, masochism is explicitly discussed in light of recent Western research. These discussions are for the most part confined to erotogenic masochism, however.