The Slave Soul of Russia
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THREE

Two Key Words in the Vocabulary of Russian Masochism

It would be difficult to move any further in this psychoanalytic treatise without an explication of two items which are very difficult to translate into English. Indeed, I will not translate them, but will refer to them in transliterated form for the duration.

Smirenie

The ethical notion of smirenie falls into the same semantic ballpark occupied by such English terms as “humility,” “meekness,” and “submission,” but the Russian term is more affectively loaded for Russians than the English terms are for most English speakers. Smirenie is primarily a religious (specifically, Russian Orthodox) feeling. Typically one submits oneself to a high dominance male called “God” (“Bog”), but other powerful figures, such as the peasant commune (“mir”), may also elicit this emotion.

Smirenie (together with etymologically related items) is generally evaluated in a positive way by traditional Russians. For example, most of the proverbs gathered on this topic by Dahl express approval:

Smirenie is pleasing to God, is enlightening to the mind, is salvation for the soul, is a blessing to the home, and is a comfort to people (Smiren’e—Bogu ugozhden’e, umu prosveshchen’e, dushe spasen’e, domu blagosloven’e i liudiam uteshen’e).

Smirenie is a girl’s necklace to a young man [is becoming to her] (Smiren’e devich’e [molodtsu] ozherel’e).
The Lord saves the humble of spirit (Smirennykh Gospod’ dukhom spasaet).

Quietly is not bad, the more humbly the more profitably (Tikh o ne likho, a smirne pribyl’nee).

God opposes the proud, but gives abundance to the humble (Gordym Bog protivitsia, a smirennym daet blagodat’).¹

In her semantic analysis of *smirenie* linguist Anna Wierzbicka speaks of “serene acceptance of one’s fate, achieved through moral effort, through suffering, and through realization of one’s total dependence on God, an acceptance resulting not only in an attitude of non-resistance to evil but also in profound peace and a loving attitude towards one’s fellow human beings.”² Thus, although *smirenie* implies a certain degree of psychological calm, it is not the same thing as passivity or inaction. It is attained only after great internal effort, even struggle. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the resolution of the struggle may well be self-abasing or self-destructive, that is, may be masochistic in certain situations.

Some Russian thinkers, sensing the masochistic potential in *smirenie*, take exception to the majority’s positive evaluation of this phenomenon. Many among the intelligentsia at the beginning of our century rejected *smirenie*, as Sergei Bulgakov indignantly observes in his contribution to the *Vekhi* symposium,³ although as we saw earlier, the intelligentsia were quite capable of finding other routes to masochism. Nikolai Berdiaev, a strong advocate of individual freedom as we have seen, is disgusted with the “slavish doctrine of *smirenie* [rab’e uchenie o smirenii].”⁴ He feels that Russians use *smirenie* as an excuse for disgraceful behavior: “The Russian is accustomed to thinking that dishonor is not a great evil, as long as one is humble in one’s soul [smirenen y dushe], is not proud, and does not put on airs.” “Better to sin humbly [smirenno greshit’],” says Berdiaev with tongue in cheek, “than proudly to seek self-perfection.” Even for the most horrible crime one may “humbly repent [smirenno kaiat’sia].”⁵

Berdiaev does not mention any specific criminal here, but Freud in his essay on Dostoevsky does, and at the same time expresses a view quite similar to Berdiaev’s:

A moral man is one who reacts to temptation as soon as he feels it in his heart, without yielding to it. A man who alternately sins and then in his remorse erects high moral standards lays himself open to the reproach that he has made things
too easy for himself. He has not achieved the essence of morality, renunciation, for the moral conduct of life is a practical human interest. He reminds one of the barbarians of the great migrations, who murdered and did penance for it, till penance became an actual technique for enabling murder to be done. Ivan the Terrible behaved in exactly this way; indeed this compromise with morality is a characteristic Russian trait. Nor was the final outcome of Dostoevsky’s moral strivings anything very glorious. After the most violent struggles to reconcile the instinctual demands of the individual with the claims of the community, he landed in the retrograde position of submission both to temporal and spiritual authority, of veneration both for the Tsar and for the God of the Christians, and of a narrow Russian nationalism—a position which lesser minds have reached with smaller effort.

The “submission” Freud speaks of here would very well render the Russian smirenie. And the “lesser minds” Freud refers to might well be ordinary Russian peasants who have at their fingertips so many proverbs about the virtues of smirenie.

One does not have to actually mention God or the tsar to get into the spirit of smirenie. For example, Slavophile philosopher Aleksei Khomiakov says:

The reverence felt by the Russian who passes through Europe is quite understandable. Humbly [smirenno] and with bowed head he visits the Western sanctuaries of everything beautiful, in full awareness of his personal—and our general—impotence. I would even say that there is a kind of joyful feeling in this voluntary humility [v etom dobrovol’nom smirenii].

The one before whom one feels smirenie does not even have to be male. Khomiakov’s great reverence for his powerful mother is apparent in these words he wrote shortly after her death:

As far as I am concerned, I know that, however useful I may be, I owe to her both my direction and my steadfastness in this direction, although she did not intend this. Happy is he who had such a mother and such a mentor in childhood, and at the same time what a lesson in smirenie is given by this conviction! How little of what is good in a person belongs to that person!

As we saw earlier, Khomiakov advocated smirenie of the individual primarily in relation to the collective, be that collective religious or secular (the extended notion of sobornost’). However, the collective, I will argue below, is itself an icon of the mother.

A curious thing about smirenie is that the one who achieves it is often proud of it, or is at least not deprived of self-esteem because of it. One submits, yet one is not lowered in one’s own eyes. On the contrary,
one may be elevated, one may be narcissistically gratified. Khomiakov even speaks of an undesirable “proud smirenie” (“gordoe smirenie”). In his book on Dostoevsky Berdiaev says that “often Russians take pride in their special smirenie [gordiatsia svoim iskluchitel'nym smireniem].” Dostoevsky’s personifying statement about Russia’s greatness (in The Brothers Karamazov) is a perfect example: “Russia is great in her smirenie” (“velika Rossiia smireniem svoim”). But a peasant proverb admonishes: “Self-abasement (excessive smirenie) is worse than pride” (“Unichizhenie [izlishnee smirenie] pache gordosti”).

The apparent logical anomaly indicates that a reactive psychological process of some kind is taking place. Custine, too, noticed this: “Conforming to this social devotion, he [the typical Russian peasant] lives without joy, but not without pride; for pride is the moral element essential to the life of the intelligent being. It takes every kind of form, even the form of humility,—that religious modesty discovered by Christians.” The French word which Custine uses here is “humilité,” which in context seems to be a reasonable translation of smirenie.

The process is familiar to psychoanalysis. Otto Fenichel speaks of the “pride in suffering” and “ascetic pride” which accompany certain masochistic practices. The extreme form is what Charles Sarnoff calls “masochistic braggadocio.” Not all Russians take pride in their smirenie. But it is clear that smirenie itself is a psychological state widespread in Russia, and that this state offers abundant opportunities for masochistic enactment.

Sud'ba

The most total form of resignation to events in the universe is fatalism. Such an attitude was endemic among the peasant masses of Russia. This is recognized by very different kinds of scholars. Historian Richard Pipes says, for example: “The true religion of the Russian peasantry was fatalism. The peasant rarely credited any event, especially a misfortune, to his own volition. It was ‘God’s will,’ even where responsibility could clearly be laid at his own doorstep, e.g. when carelessness caused a fire or the death of an animal.” Compare K. D. Kavelin who, in his 1882 polemic titled The Peasant Question, declared: “The peasant may be happy, or sad, he may complain about his fate [sud’bu], or he may thank God for it, but he accepts good and evil without so much as
a thought that one might be able to attract the former or fight against and defeat the latter. Everything in his life is given, predetermined, preestablished."  

It is easy to see the relevance of such attitudes to masochism. A peasant who failed to act on his or her own behalf because of fatalistic ideas was more likely to be victimized than the peasant who did not. The fatalistic peasant was more likely to be behaving self-destructively than the realistic peasant.

The relevant lexical item here is *sud'ba*. Most dictionaries render this word as "fate" or "destiny," but Wierzbicka shows that the Russian concept is holistic, referring to a person's entire life which seems utterly predetermined, while the English words refer to more limited situations and occupy a fairly minor place in English-speaking cultures. Wierzbicka found that, in comparable corpora of Russian and English, *sud'ba* occurs much more frequently than *fate* and *destiny* combined.

*Sud'ba* is taken for granted. The philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev described it as a "fact" that is "beyond question." It is also unavoidable. One's *sud'ba* is something one must accept with total resignation and passivity. "You can't walk away from *sud'ba*" ("Ot sud'by ne uidesh'"), says the proverb. It is a proverb all Russians know, not just peasants.

A person is, in a sense, sentenced forever to a specific *sud'ba*. There is no choice. There can never be two of them, there can be only one: "Dvum sud'bam ne byvat', a odnoi ne minovat'" ("There is no such thing as two *sud'bas*, and one there is no escaping"). The same can be said of death, as in Count Rostopchin's words to Muscovites about to be invaded by Napoleon: "Dvum smertiam ne byvat'. Chemu byt' togo ne minovat'" ("One cannot die twice. What is to be cannot be escaped").

Wierzbicka makes a good argument for her thesis that the phraseology of *sud'ba* stresses "an attitude of acceptance and resignation." Here are some of the phrases and expressions she culls from Aleksandr Zholkovskii's extensive entry in the Mel'chuk-Zholkovskii combinatorial dictionary and from Dahl's dictionary of peasant Russian:

*Chto sud'ba skazhet, khot' pravosud, khot' krivosud, a tak i byt'* ("Whatever *sud'ba* decrees, be it just or unjust, will come to pass").
*Sud'ba ruki sviazhet* ("*Sud'ba* will tie your hands/arms").
neumolimaiia sud’ba ("inexorable sud’ba").

v rukakh sud’by ("in the hands of sud’ba").

ruka/perst sud’by ("the hand/finger of sud’ba").

voleiu sudeb/sud’by ("by the will of sud’ba").

tslepaia sud’ba ("blind sud’ba").

These lexical collocations (and many others like them) have the effect of personifying or anthropomorphizing sud’ba. Typically one is resigned not to some impersonal force, but to a quasi-human being.

By personifying sud’ba it is easier to lay credit or blame at its—her—door. Personification is here a setup for psychological displacement and potential masochism. To blame some event harmful to the self on “blind sud’ba” is a way of not having to take responsibility for it. In effect, “I am not the cause, blind sud’ba is the cause.” In some cases “I” may in fact not be the cause; in others, however, “I” may be responsible, but also unconsciously unwilling—for whatever reasons—to admit responsibility. It is in the latter situation that the individual is behaving masochistically.

Wierzbicka presents an impressive array of evidence to support her thesis that “Russian grammar is quite unusually rich in constructions referring to things that happen to people against their will or irrespective of their will.” Some of the grammatical constructions in question reflect, in her opinion, “a folk philosophy at the heart of which appear to lie a kind of ‘fatalism’ and a kind of resignation.” 27 I will not repeat Wierzbicka’s lengthy linguistic analyses here, but it is worth noting that the infinitive form of a verb is often involved in such constructions, as in the sequence type negation + infinitive + dative (person):

Ne vidat’ tebe etikh podarkov ("Alas, you’ll never see these presents").

Ne raskryt’ tebe svoi ochen’ki iasnye ("Alas, you’ll never open those bright little eyes”—folkloric).

Ne vidat’ Egoriu ottsa-materi ("Egor wasn’t fated ever to see his father or mother again").

Ne byt’ tebe burzhuem/ Ne byt’ tebe Frantsuzom ("You are not fated to be a bourgeois/ You are not fated to be a Frenchman”—Marina Tsvetaeva).
The infinitive of the verb “byt’” (“to be,” as in the last example) can participate in a variety of “fatalistic” constructions. Sometimes the words suzhdeno or sud’ba (or both) are brought in, as when Tat’iana surrenders herself to Evgenii Onegin in Pushkin’s famous poem: “No tak i byt’! Sud’bu moi u Otnyne ia tebe vruchaiu.” (“But so be it! My sud’ba/ Henceforth I place in your hands.”).

There is something childlike about Russian fatalism. Or, to put it another way, there is something motherly about fate itself. Joanna Hubbs says: “Among the Russian peasantry, there was a firm belief that a mother controlled a child’s development and growth by conferring a particular fate upon it.” The fatalistic expression “na rodu napisano,” literally “it was inscribed at birth,” is ancient and widespread in Russia. The lullabies a mother sang to her child were believed capable of casting a spell upon the child (“baiukat’,” “to sing lullabies to,” is related to “baiat’,” “to charm,” “to cast a spell”).

Usually what the mother wished for the child was positive—that it grow up to be big and strong, for example. But Russian peasant mothers sometimes wished a much worse sud’ba upon their child, namely, death. Folklorist Antonina Martynova found that, out of a corpus of 1,800 lullabies collected, 80 expressed the mother’s wish that the child should die. An example may be taken from a recently published collection of folklore about children:

Баю, баю да люли!
Хоть теперь умри,
Завтра у матери
Кисель да блины —
То поминки твои.
Сделаем гробок
Из семидесяти досок,
Выкопаем могилку
На плешивой горе,
На плешивой горе,
На господской стороне.
В лес по ягоды пойдем,
К тебе, дитя твоё, зайдем.

Baiu, Baiu da liuli!
May you die now,
Tomorrow at mother’s
There will be kissel and pancakes,
This—your funeral repast.
We'll make a little casket
Of seventy boards,
We'll dig a little grave
On bald hill,
On bald hill,
Where the Lord lives.
When we go gathering berries,
We'll drop by to see you, little child.

It is probably safe to say that the majority of peasant mothers did not feel this way, at least consciously, and that they regarded their little children instead as a precious blessing. But one should keep in mind that mothers, like anyone else, are capable of feeling conscious or unconscious ambivalence toward those whom they love: “Children are a joy, children are also a sorrow,” says a proverb. In any case, there is substantial evidence that many Russian peasant mothers, under certain very trying conditions, actually wished their children would die. But what were these conditions?

One of the prominent demographic features of tsarist Russia was the extraordinarily high childhood mortality rates among the peasantry. In the eighteenth century Mikhail Lomonosov estimated that half of the 500,000 infants born annually died before the age of three. David L. Ransel has gathered statistics demonstrating that nearly half of the children born in late nineteenth-century Russia died before the age of five. To explain this appalling figure, Ransel points to the unsanitary conditions and cruel practices surrounding childbirth (see below, 190–93). He also observes that infants were often put on solid foods from the first days of life, that is, at a time when their bodies could not possibly handle the pathogens thereby introduced. Infants were often fed by means of a “soska,” an unsanitary rag containing food that had been partially chewed by another member of the family. With time the “soska” would putrefy, and even larger quantities of pathogenic bacteria would enter the child’s gastrointestinal tract.

One reason why this was happening was that mothers were absent all day during the summer work season. Having an infant to care for—even a very sick infant—was no excuse to stop working in the fields (here a mother submitted to pressure from the family and commune), so someone else in the family had to look after the child. The child was breast-fed only early in the morning and late at night—if it was breast-fed at all. In the daytime the deadly “soska” was in the child’s mouth
almost continuously. Even when the mother was more often available for breast feeding, the “soska” was still used as a source of food and as a pacifier.

The *sud'ba* of very many of these children was early death. In some areas during the summer months up to 80 percent of children born failed to survive. They died largely from the extreme dehydration produced by “summer diarrhea.”

Ransel notes the understandable guilt which some mothers felt about their neglect. He also discusses the resigned, fatalistic attitude which parents developed as a result of the “carnage” that was going on around them. Some proverbs expressed the psychological distance that parents tried to gain from their horrible experiences, for instance, “It’s a good day when a child dies,” or “The death of a child is a mere chip off your knife blade, but that of a mom or dad leaves a gaping hole.” The death-wish lullabies would have to be included with this kind of lore.

What about the children who survived the high childhood mortality rates? They, as they became old enough to understand, must have been deeply disturbed by the deaths of siblings and other children around them. They must have realized that they too were potential victims, and that their parents were somehow responsible. They also must have sensed that their parents were trying not to become too attached to them, or wishing for their death outright. As we will see in the clinical discussion below (chap. 5), a child who perceives a parent (especially the mother) as hostile, withdrawn, or otherwise inadequate may develop in a masochistic direction. Certainly a child whose mother openly expresses a death wish against the child will be adversely affected. One can easily imagine a masochistic fantasy arising out of this situation, and perhaps persisting into adulthood, in effect: “very well, then, my mother wants me to die, so I will die—or commit some self-destructive act.” Such a person might needlessly get into dangerous, suicidal situations. But when something bad actually happened, *sud’ba* would be blamed. It would be too painful to think badly of one’s own mother.

The peasant child who died left its natal mother and went back to “mother earth.” Everyone who lives must die. Everyone’s fate is death. But it is not immediately obvious why death should be imaged by the survivors as a return to the mother. Why not the father—or a second cousin for that matter? Why any person at all? One’s lifeless body goes into the earth, but why personify the earth in this context?
That Russians did (and still do) personify the earth as a mother is well known. The peasant topos “mother moist earth” (“mat’ syra zemlya”) refers to the mother specifically as a place one goes to after dying, or in order to die (as opposed to a fertile place which gives birth to a harvest—for which there are other topoi). Ransel speaks of peasant beliefs about the earth pulling the child back to itself, inviting death. A child born face down was expected to die soon. There are several proverbs of the type “We are born not for life, but for death [Ne na zhivot rozhdaemsia, a na smert’].”

To resist death too much is to resist “mother moist earth.” Jesus Christ was the only one to succeed at this, for he underwent a resurrection (“voskresenie”) which is celebrated on Easter Sunday, the most important holiday in the Russian Orthodox Church. In view of this, is it surprising that Merezhkovskii heard mother-cursing mixed in with the happier utterances of an Easter celebration? (see above, 50). An eloquent religious proverb captures the contrast: “For some it’s ‘Christ has arisen,’ but for us it’s ‘Do not weep for me, mother!’” (“Komu: ‘Khristos voskrese!’, a nam: ‘Ne rydai mene, mati!’”). The words in the first half of the proverb are traditionally spoken by Orthodox Russians to one another on Easter Sunday. They signify great joy. The words in the second half, which derive from portions of the Russian Orthodox liturgy and from the folkloric spiritual songs, were spoken by Christ to his Blessed Mother as he was dying on the cross. They mean utter misery. The alternatives expressed by the proverb are thus: arise and live versus die in the presence of the mother. Resurrection is not only opposed to death, but is in some sense contrasted with the mother. In rising from the dead one emerges from the mother, in dying one re-enters the mother. In the spiritual songs, for example, the Mother of God experiences a quickening of her womb (“Utroboiu svoei razgoraiuchii”) as she sees her son dying on the cross.

Psychoanalyst Theodor Reik offers, I think, the clearest explanation for the fateful association of death with the mother, although he is not speaking specifically about Russians:

For all of us the mother is the woman of destiny. She is the femme fatale in its most literal sense, because she brought us into the world, she taught us to love, and it is she upon whom we call in our last hour. The mother as a death-dealing figure became alien to our conscious thinking. But she may become comprehensible in this function when death appears as the only release from
suffering, as the one aim desired, the final peace. It is in this sense that dying soldiers call for their mothers. I can never forget a little boy who, in the agonies of a painful illness, cried: "Mother, you have brought me into the world, why can't you make me dead now?"44

Mothers bring children into the world. Therefore the possibility of leaving the world, of death, ought also to be associated with the mother. One's inescapable fate is personified as a mother everywhere, not just in Russia. A mother who is neglectful, or outright infanticidal, only intensifies a personification which already exists in the minds of those who observe her. Some Russian peasants no doubt understood that children were dying all around them in part because of maternal neglect. But, as children themselves, they had already understood that their mothers had given them life, and that they therefore "owed Mother Nature a death" (to use Freud's expression).

When people die in droves, or for no apparent reason, life does not seem to be worth much. That is, when *sud'ba* is behaving in "stupid" fashion, an individual's life holds little value, as in the proverb: "*Sud'ba* is a turkey, and life is a kopek" ("Sud'ba—indeika, zhizn'—kopeika"). When one feels mistreated generally, fate may be represented as a bad mother, that is, a stepmother, as in songs about "*sud'ba*-stepmother, bitter lot" ("sud'ba-machekha, gor'kaia doliushka").

Nikolai Nekrasov's poem "Mother" features a "martyr-mother" who says to her children:

«Несчастные! зачем родились вы? 
Пойдете вы дорогою прямою 
И вам судьбы своей не избежать!»

Unfortunate ones! What were you born for? 
You will set off along the straight road, 
And you will not be able to escape your *sud'ba*48

It is as if this poor mother were predetermining the *sud'ba* of her poor children by her very utterance. The lines have a distinctly performative ring.

Nadezhda Durova (1783–1866), the famous noblewoman who dressed as a man and fought in the Russian army against the Napoleonic invaders, also heard about the unhappy *sud'ba* in store for her specifically from her mother: "She spoke to me in the most horrible terms about the *sud'ba* of this [i.e., female] sex [о sud'be etogo pola]; a woman, in her opinion, is obliged to be born, to live, and to die in
slavery [v rabs'tve]; eternal bondage [nevolia], burdensome dependence, and all sorts of oppression are her lot [dolia] from the cradle to the grave." 49 Only Durova, unlike most Russian women of her day, rebelled. She was one of the notable Russian antimasochists. Slavery was no sud'ba for her.

Soviet social psychologist V. V. Boiko says that the immense burden on modern mothers consists, in part, of "a large moral responsibility for the sud'ba of her children." 50

I hope these diverse examples sufficiently indicate that the idea of sud'ba is very often associated with the mother. In the clinical discussion of masochism below (chap. 5) I hope to show that this association is not an accident.