The Slave Soul of Russia
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Conclusion

At the beginning of this book I stated that, over the centuries, Russians have enacted for themselves a culture of moral masochism. By this I did not so much mean to characterize Russians as to offer a characteristic of many, perhaps most Russians. Perhaps masochism is even the essence of the Russian soul, but such a claim would really have to be the topic of another book. A psychological trait, not national character, has been my focus here.

There is much more that could be said about Russian masochism, of course. In some areas I have only scratched the surface. For example, I have said practically nothing about Russian apocalypticism, although this phenomenon bears remarkable resemblances to the discourse of impending doom which emanates from some masochistic patients on the couch. But the sheer quantity of evidence I have adduced should indicate that moral masochism has been and continues to be a force in Russia.

There are many other aspects of Russian culture that are worthy of psychoanalytic study. A whole book could be written about Russian xenophobia, for example (indeed, whole books could be written about the xenophobia of every existing ethnic group on our planet). The overall phenomenon of Russian nationalism, both in earlier periods and in the current period of post-Soviet disintegration, awaits detailed psychoanalytic study. Russian orality (from the famous vodka-fixation to the abundance of food-imagery in Russian literature) is another interesting psychological phenomenon that would bear investigation. A psychoanalysis of Russian Orthodox religiosity (apart from its masochism)
would make a fascinating study. The psychodynamics of self-esteem in Russia have yet to be examined in any detail. And of course the psychoanalytic consequences of the enormous economic and sociopolitical changes that are going on in Russia right now deserve scrutiny.

There is so much more to the Russian soul than its masochistic aspect. Yet the masochism is there. It permeates that soul, that psyche, that culture—from the self-immolations of Old Believer communities to the self-sacrifices of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia; from the foolishness of holy fools to the antics of Ivan the fool; from the tolerance of spousal abuse to the acceptance of iron rule by the collective.

If I have tended to speak interchangeably of the culture of moral masochism on the one hand, and individual masochism on the other, if I have quoted Russian cultural practices as often as I have quoted individual Russians—it is because there is so much overlap between culture and the individual psyche ("dusha"). Every individual immersed in a culture carries that culture around in his or her own psyche. Psychoanalysis studies the individual, as I emphasized in the Introduction to this book. But the individual interiorizes a culture, so it is difficult to psychoanalyze an individual without also psychoanalyzing culture. Furthermore, culture cannot be enacted except by individuals. They may not be a sufficient condition, but they are a necessary condition for culture. Thus culture is as much in the individual psyche as the individual psyche is in culture.

Culture is not to be equated with the collective, however. In Russia the collective is a tyrant, and the individual typically gives in. Culture, on the other hand, is not a tyrant. Or rather, tyranny is only one of its many potential features. Among its other features is personal agency ("lichnost"). A culture implies personal agents because it needs personal agents to bear and enact it.

In particular, a culture of moral masochism is borne and enacted by personal agents, because at the very heart of moral masochism is an agent acting—consciously or unconsciously—against his or her own personal interests. Even if the social environment is exceedingly rich in opportunities to suffer harm or humiliation, personal agents do not just disappear. Masochism does become more likely, but masochistic persons are there too. To assert that they are not would be to imply that the culture in question is perpetrated by something less than persons—some
kind of automata, or “savages,” for example—and that position would be both inaccurate and racist.

Some years ago I came across a book titled Russians as People. The author, Wright Miller, had not written a bad book, actually. But his title did provoke me to think: What on earth might Russians be, if not people? The implications were unfortunate.

Masochists are people. It makes more logical and moral sense to recognize their masochism than to deny their personhood. Whether the masochism itself is “pathological,” or is a “disorder” that ought to be “cured”—is another question. My own inclination is to leave Russians be. I have no practical recommendations or prescriptions to make. Not all psychoanalysts are therapists, and besides, masochists are extraordinarily difficult to cure on the couch. A change in identity is required.

Russians have to find their own way. Perhaps they will even figure out how to harness masochism for economic advancement. Some of the Old Believers and sectarians did become fabulously wealthy.

In his book on Dostoevsky Berdiaev says: “There is a hunger for self-destruction in the Russian soul, there is a danger of intoxication with ruin.” I confess that I have sometimes found it exhilarating to observe this danger—from afar.

For me, masochism is part of the very attractiveness and beauty of Russian culture. Where would Tatiana Larina or Dmitrii Karamazov or Anna Karenina be without their masochism? To “cure” them of their masochism would be to detract considerably from their aesthetic appeal. The beauty of masochism, however, like all beauty, resides in the mind of the beholder.