

The First World War and the crisis in the mentality of the art intelligentsia

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THE FIRST WORLD WAR launched a global crisis which affected economics, politics, ideology, culture, and mentality. It aggravated the crisis of mentality that had emerged among the Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the twentieth century. It displayed specific characteristics within different professional groups of the intelligentsia, including the art intelligentsia. The art intelligentsia was a rather independent social-professional group, uniting people engaged in the creation, distribution and preservation of artistic values. Our initial premise is that there occurred a crisis of mentality among the art intelligentsia in the period under consideration, one that was expressed in a reassessment of values. The crisis was prepared by previous events in the political and cultural life of Russia and the world as a whole: by the first Russian revolution 1905-7, the publication of the collection *Vecbi* in 1909, and the revolution in aesthetics. Representatives of the art intelligentsia were acutely conscious of this crisis. Thus, in December 1914, V. Ivanov remarked that

[t]he war was reflected in everything as a shock of light, it marks a general shift in our energies both in the material and in the spiritual spheres, a shift that presages a general radical change of existing values.¹

Likewise, the art critic Baron N. Wrangel noticed in July 1914:

It is a strange business, but those interests, according to which we have previously lived, seem nowadays completely trifling. And the former values are worthless.²

One aspect of the crisis in the mentality of the art intelligentsia during the First World War relates to a crisis of identity (social, corporate, national). It is possible to describe the search for social identity as an inborn feature of the Russian intelligentsia, which, throughout its history, tried to find its place in the 'intelligentsia -people' relationship. At critical moments of historical development (the reforms of Peter I, the war of 1812, the abolition of serfdom in 1861) the intensity of this antinomy increased. Before the First World War, this pattern appeared most obviously during the revolution of 1905-7. The intelligentsia's search for the

¹ «Война на всем отразилась как светлое потрясение, она знаменует всеобщий сдвиг наших сил как в материальной, так и в духовной сферах, что предстоит общая коренная перемена существующих ценностей.» (*Голос Москвы* 2 December 1914, 273)

² «Странное дело, но те интересы, которыми жили до сих пор, кажутся ныне совершенно пустячными. И прежние ценности не стоят ничего.» (Барон Н. Врангель, 2001, *Дни скорби. Дневник 1914-1915 годов*, Санкт-Петербург, 26)

reasons for the defeat of the revolution led to the publication, in 1909, of *Vechi*, which was devoted specifically to this question. The symposium authors (Berdjaev, Bulgakov, Geršenzon, Izgoev, Kistjakovskij, Struve, and Frank) assigned responsibility and blame for the defeat of the revolution to the intelligentsia and called on it to repent publicly before the people. Despite the stormy and complex reactions of the intelligentsia to the *Vechi* ideas (more than 200 articles appeared in the periodical press in 1909 alone), the following years revealed a mood of confusion and apathy within educated society, a desire to be rehabilitated before the people, to draw together with them. Here we should note A. Étkind's ideas about the features of the relationship between the intelligentsia and the people in Russia, which he qualifies as a specific form of colonization and then decolonization: the people need to be taught, the people should be studied, and, finally, it is necessary to learn from them. In expectation of political revolution there came a consciousness of the advantages of the people, its moral and metaphysical value, its purity and unjust oppression. During the First World War, the art intelligentsia undertook an attempted rapprochement with the people both through joint participation in numerous patriotic actions, and through the increased influence of mass art.

The concept of 'corporateness' can be applied to the Russian intelligentsia with some reservations. On the one hand, emerging from various social groups, its representatives remained carriers of the culture of these groups; on the other hand, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the intelligentsia began to conceive of itself as a particular 'order' (as Berdjaev termed it), with its own morals and inherent attributes. Proceeding from this it is correct, in our view, to speak of a crisis of corporate identity. This crisis was also caused by the *Vechi* symposium, whose authors proposed to distinguish between the notions of 'intelligentsia' and 'the educated class'. In

their opinion, 'intelligentsia' was a negative concept, and 'the educated class' a positive one. Such a distinction resulted in a desire among part of the intelligentsia to dissociate themselves from the corporate group. It is also important to note the traditionally skeptical attitude in Russia towards those involved in intellectual work. The First World War aggravated this tendency. A good example are the words of A. Kuprin, who in the first days of the war wrote of his shame at being a writer:

It is still awkward for me that I am a writer and, among senior comrades, the most connected to the establishment, but I shall do my very best to make it up to them.³

The other way of overcoming the crisis of corporate identity was the move to change the status of the corporate group in order to be rehabilitated in the eyes of society. The war made it possible to realize this goal. Thus, the theatrical intelligentsia, through active participation in public life, and by organizing and participating in patriotic concerts, not only made a substantial material contribution to covering military needs, but also earned the recognition of society. The crisis of ethnic identity was expressed in the necessity to reconsider attitudes towards one's nation and Fatherland. Cosmopolitanism was a particular characteristic of the consciousness of the art intelligentsia as a whole and of the Silver age in particular. This can be explained, first, by its sphere of activity (art culture as the property of all mankind), and, secondly, by the fact that Russian culture at the turn of the twentieth century, due to the modernization of Russian society, was highly integrated into Western European culture and the art intelligentsia acted as mediator between Russian and West European cultures. Any war aggravates feeling of ethnicity. In a military situation, the psychology of 'us and them' becomes aggravated to such an extent that the world becomes rigidly divided into 'us' and 'not us'. On the basis of a common opposition to 'the Other' there emerges a sense of ethnic unity and, as a consequence, of that ethnic group's invincibility. In war conditions it was necessary for the intelligentsia to reconsider its position of cosmopolitanism in favour of nationalism.

³ «Мне до сих пор неловко за то, что я писатель и наиболее штатский среди старших товарищей, но я всеми силами постараюсь их наверстать.» (Quoted from: О. Цехновицер, 1938, *Литература и мировая война, 1914-1918*, Москва, 102.)

The First World War forced the art intelligentsia to reconsider its political views and this initiated a process of ideological-political demarcation. Debates over the character, reasons, culprits, and prospects of the war in conjunction with the analysis of Russian and German cultures became a watershed. The art intelligentsia divided into two camps which can be conditionally termed 'patriots' and 'pacifists'. In 1914-15, the majority of the art intelligentsia belonged to the camp of patriots. The overall psychological outlook of the patriots during the first days of war can be characterized by the observation of L. Andreev:

We have accepted the war as a necessity and we have accepted it without hesitation.⁴ The idea of a just war brought to victory united all. In the opinion of V. Ivanov, war was sacred, liberating and a great good.⁵ In his article 'Budetljane', V. Majakovskij approved of the necessity of war carried to a victorious conclusion:

The Russian nation, as the only one that has broken the raised fist, can force the face of the world to smile for a long time.⁶

F. Sologub, in his article 'There will be no peace', remarked:

We have begun the period of decisive battles for our self-assertion. Fate has dictated to us the necessity not only to win, but also to crush Germany, since otherwise there will be no life for us. Powerful Germany will always encroach on our economic and spiritual independence.⁷

The ideological basis of the 'patriots' was Slavophile philosophy. A characteristic of this group's thinking was the attempt to find the reasons for war not in the political sphere, but in that of culture. Only F. Sologub attempted to explain the war as a consequence of

⁴ «Мы приняли войну, как необходимость — и мы приняли ее без колебаний. » (Л. Андреев, 1914, *В сей грозный час*, Петроград, 5)

⁵ Вяч. Иванов, 1914, Родное и вселенское, *Русская мысль* 1994:12,107.

⁶ «Русская нация, та единственная, которая, перебив зенсенный кулак, может заставить долго улыбаться лицо мира.» (В. Маяковский, 1978, Будетляне, in: *idem, Собрание сочинений в двенадцати томах* 11, Москва, 57)

⁷ «Мы начали период решающих битв за наше самоутверждение. Мы роковым образом поставлены в необходимость не только победить, но и раздавить Германию, потому что без этого нам не жить. Могущественная Германия всегда будет посягать на нашу экономическую и духовную самостоятельность. » (Ф.Сологуб, 1914, *Мира не будет*, *Биржевые ведомости* 30 October 1914 (morning edn), no. 14 464)

the imperialistic policy of the European countries and, first of all, of Germany with its need for new living space. The majority of the art Intelligentsia saw the main cause of war as the clash of Slavonic and Teutonic cultures. K. Bal'mont paid attention to the historical antagonism between Russian and German cultures:

In the historical past Germans have been a misfortune for Russia and Slavs in general not only with their negative but also with many of their positive features.⁸

A no less popular theme of discussion was the role of Russia in the present war. Conceptions of the special divine mission of Russia prevailed. Vjačeslav Ivanov proceeded from a recognition of the goal of historical development as the consolidation of an oecumenical community. E Sologub considered the war to be on a religious plane whereby Russia protected true Christianity. V. Brjusov also recognized war as a mission assigned to Russia—a mission to put an end to the atrocities and cruelty of the Germans. The poets S. Krečetov and S. Gorodeckij also paid attention to this same role for Russia. Many representatives of the art intelligentsia stressed the necessity of protecting fellow Slavs (S. Gorodeckij, S. Berežkov etc). A. Tolstoj saw Russia's task in the political revival of entire peoples and in the struggle of the weak against the strong; among the weak he counted not only Poland and Serbia, but also Armenia, Romania, and Italy.⁹ The majority of 'patriots' considered the war as a positive good for Russia, presenting Russia with an opportunity to strengthen its international status. Some literary and artistic figures pointed to the internal importance of the war—the consolidation of Russian society. In addition to their political understanding, many 'patriots' tried to view the war through the prism of individual benefit. In N. Gumilev's opinion the advantage of the war was that it allowed an escape from the overwhelming feeling of individ-

⁸ «Немцы в историческом прошлом не только своими отрицательными чертами, но и многими из положительных, были несчастьем для России и славян вообще.» (К.Бальмонт, 1915, У К. Бальмонта, *Биржевые ведомости* 29 May 1915 (morning edn), no. 14 871)

⁹ В. Иванов, Родное и вселенское (Ivanov); Ф. Сологуб, 1914, Выбор ориентации, *Отечество* 1914: 6, 104 (Sologub); В. Брюсов, 1915, Туркам, in: *Биржевые ведомости* 27 March 1915 (morning edn), no. 14747 (Brjusov); *Война в произведениях прозаиков и поэтов* (Москва, 1915), 51 (Krečetov); *ibidem*, 48 and *Современная война в русской поэзии* 2 (Петроград, 1915), 144-5 (Gorodeckij); Центральный государственный архив литературы и искусства г. Санкт-Петербурга, f[ond] 416,op[is'] i, d[elo] 17,fo. 37z» (Berežkov); В. Петелин, 1978, *Алексей Толстой*, Москва, 174 (Tolstoj).

ual personality.¹⁰ G. Ivanov believed that 'the war has broken the spiritual circle of individuality and given birth to broad common interests'.¹¹ It is necessary to note, however, that, from the very beginning of the war, critical remarks and fears were also heard within the camp of the 'patriots'.

In 1914-15, the camp of 'pacifists' was not numerous. This can be explained by wartime mass psychology. The principle 'he who is not with us, is against us' led to the public condemnation of all statements counter to the jingoistic-patriotic campaign of official ideology. Therefore it was impossible for the 'pacifists' to act openly against the government's policy and the war. One of the most consistent pacifists was M. Vološin. The poet's position can be described as personal pacifism—he was not against the war, but did not want to participate in it.¹² Following Christian principles, he refused military service. The position of Z. Hippus represented another version of pacifism. She proceeded from the belief that any murder, including organized killing by government in war, is a crime. In her diary, she remarked:

War, in essence, as such, I deny. Any war ending in a complete victory by one state over another, over another country, carries within itself the germ of a new war, for it gives rise to national-state bitterness, and each war removes us from that to which we aspire—from ecumenicalism.¹³

On 26 November 1914 Z. Hippus gave a paper on History in Christianity at the Petrograd Religious-Philosophical Society. Like Z. Hippus, D. Merežkovskij acted from a pacifist position. He proceeded from the belief that in its essence war is absurd, that it cannot be justified by anything, that 'War against War—that is the desirable and proper meaning of the present war'.¹⁴ The main disastrous con-

¹⁰ Н. Гумилев, 1915, Записки кавалериста, in: *Биржевые ведомости* 9 October 1915 (morning edn), no. 15 137.

¹¹ «война разорвала душевный круг индивидуальности, породила широкие общие интересы» (Г. Иванов, 1914, Испытание огнем, *Аполлон* 1914:8,53).

¹² о В. Купченко, 1997, *Странствия Максимилиана Волошина*, Санкт-Петербург, 200.

¹³ «Войну, по существу, как таковую, отрицаю. Всякая война, кончающаяся полной победой одного государства над другим, над другой страной, носит в себе зародыш новой войны, ибо рождает национально-государственное озлобление, а каждая война отдает нас от того, к чему мы стремимся — от вселенское™.» (З. Гиппиус, 1990, *Петербургский дневник*, Москва, 24)

¹⁴ «Война с войной — таков желательный и должный смысл настоящего войны.» (Институт Русской литературы (Пушкинский дом) (Санкт-Петербург), f. 24, op. i, d. 229, fo. 4)

sequence of war, for him, was self-devastation, the self-destruction of the spirit, and thus he appealed to the Russian intelligentsia 'not to snuff out the Spirit'.

The defeats of the Russian army in 1915, the consequent retreat and new failures changed the attitude of the art intelligentsia to the war. Hopes for victory died away and anti-war moods became ever stronger. Beginning in December 1915, under the leadership of M. Gor'kij, the journal *Letopis'* appeared bringing together on its pages the opponents of the war. V. Ivanov and V. Brjusov switched to a position of partial pacifism in 1915 and in March 1916 A. Blok wrote: 'Today I have understood, at last, clearly, that the distinctive characteristic of this war is non-greatness..'¹⁵ The changing attitude of the art intelligentsia to the war reflected the changing mood in society at large, which was tired of military defeats and the economic difficulties that the government seemed unable to improve. In the press, articles criticizing the government's policy appeared more and more frequently. Many saw political change as a possible outcome of the war. Z. Hippus remarked in the autumn of 1915: 'The war cannot be terminated naturally, there will be a revolution before its end.'¹⁶ In L. Andreev's opinion the logic of the development of the war dictated the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty.¹⁷ R. Ivanov-Razumnik came to the conclusion that 'the flame of revolution would be born from the fire of war'.¹⁸ A. Remizov made an amazing prophecy in the fairy tale 'Queen Majdone', where he predicted not only revolutionary upheavals, but also a civil war following them.¹⁹ Berdjaev was the first to point to the presence of this ideological-political crisis among the Russian intelligentsia in his 1915 article 'War and the crisis of the intelligentsia's consciousness'.²⁰

¹⁵ «Сегодня я понял, наконец, ясно, что отличительное свойство этой войны — невеликость...» (А. Блок, 1971, Записные книжки, in: idem, *Собрание сочинений в шести томах* 6, Москва, 274).

¹⁶ «Война не может кончиться естественно, раньше конца ее будет революция.» (Гиппиус, *Петербургский дневник*, 23)

¹⁷ Андреев, *В сей грозный час*, 228.

¹⁸ «из огня войны родится пламя революции» (Р. Иванов-Разумник, 1923, *Перед грозой. 1916-1917*, Петроград, 9).

¹⁹ А. Ремизов, 1914, Царица Майдоне, *Биржевые ведомости* 16 November 1914 (morning edn), no. 14 597.

²⁰ Н. Бердяев, 1990, Война и кризис интеллигентского сознания, in: idem, *Судьба России. Опыты по психологии войны и национальности*, Москва, 43- 8.

Yet another part of the crisis in the mentality of the art intelligentsia was a crisis of creativity. The new cultural and social situation emerging challenged literature and art to new tasks, thus it became necessary for the art intelligentsia, on the one hand, to pursue its creative process and, on the other, to incorporate the realities of war. The experience of this creative crisis had two aspects, namely ethical and aesthetic. The ethical aspect consisted in the recognition or non-recognition of the possibility of continuing creative activity when guns were shooting. Some representatives of the art intelligentsia took the position of denying such a possibility. This opinion was most sharply expressed by Z. Hippus. In August 1914, she addressed her fellow writers with the following words:

Poets, do not write too early,
Victory is still in God's hands
Today wounds are still smoking,
Words are not yet needed today.
In the hour of unjustified suffering
And an unresolved fight,
A chaste silence is needed, And, perhaps, silent prayers.²¹

E. Lundberg, evaluating the condition of contemporary literature in 2014 remarked that abstention was real proof of the authenticity of talent and strength of mind and spirit.²²

The majority of the art intelligentsia expressed the opposite point of view. The leader of this group was L. Andreev who, in 2015, came out with a programmatic article titled 'Let the poets not be silent', where he remarked that

[s]ilence—that is the dream of the poor in spirit. Here is the magic of art: the description of the shot of a 42-millimetre gun can be more audible than the shot itself.²³

In this connection, he called on artists to hear the war:

²¹ «Поэты, не пишите слишком рано, | Победа еще в руке Господней. | Сегодня еще дымятся раны, | Слова еще не нужны сегодня. | В часы неоправданного страдания | И нерешенной битвы, — | Нужно целомудрие молчанья, | И, может быть, тихие молитвы.» (З. Гиппиус, *Живые лица*, Тбилиси, 131-2)

²² E. Lundberg, 1914, Литературный дневник, *Современник* 1914:12,250.

²³ «Тишина — вот мечта для нищих духом. Вот магия искусства: описание выстрела сорокадвухмиллиметровой пушки может быть слышнее, чем сам выстрел.» (Л. Андреев, 1915, Пусть не молчат поэты, *Биржевые ведомости* 18 October 1915 (morningedn), no. ij 155)

To hear war is to re-evaluate the whole of one's life. The main task is to force people to hear the war, to concentrate not only purely external attention on it and its questions, but also deep within to interest, to disturb and to agitate.²⁴

A. Cebotarevskaja considered that

[t]he greatest sin is keeping silent [*molčalinstvo*] and washing one's hands of the great business of national defense, for the sake of which streams of blood and floods of tears are poured out.²⁵

By contrast, D. Filosofov criticized both extreme positions:

No, shouters do not promote our collective task. But the silent do not help either. They have helped themselves, have protected themselves from the difficult task of making both ends meet, of connecting 'programs' with any number of programmatic events.²⁶

He called on writers nevertheless to speak

with silences, for a quiet voice is needed most of all now and above all it is more audible than a shout.²⁷

During the war literature and art should lift the moral spirit of their compatriots.

The aesthetic side of the crisis of creativity was evident in the fall of artistic quality. The war led to the emergence of new subjects. From the first days of the war numerous military verses and stories appeared. Works of fiction, the most popular genre, were published in newspapers, in thick journals, and also as special collections and almanacs. 335 literary almanacs appeared between 1914 and 1917, not taking into account journalistic, religious and *Inbok* (cheap

²⁴ «Услышать войну — это значит переценить всю свою жизнь. Главное в том, чтобы заставить услышать войну, сосредоточить на ней и на ее вопросах не только чисто внешнее внимание, но и внутренне глубоко ею заинтересовать, потрясти и взволновать.» (ibid.)

²⁵ «Самый великий грех — это „молчалинство" и умывание рук в том великом деле народной обороны, ради которого льются ручьи крови и потоки слез.» (А. Чеботаревская, 1915, В защиту «военной литературы», *Биржевые ведомости* 4 December 1915 (morningedn), no. 15249)

²⁶ «Да, крикуны не способствуют нашему общему делу. Но не помогают и „ молчальники ". Себе они помогли, оградили от трудной задачи сведения концов с концами, от соединения „программы" с самими что ни на есть программными событиями.» (Д. Filosofov, 1914, in: *Голос жизни* 7 December 1914, no. 10, I)

²⁷ «пускать с умолчаниями, ибо тихий голос теперь нужнее, а главное слышнее крика» (ibid., 3).

popular prints) publications. All of them were issued as charitable fund-raisers and proceeds from the sale went to military needs. Their contents were defined by the patriotic moods of the authors expressed in several themes: the heroism and courage of Russian combatants, the image of the enemy, the suffering of the civilian population, and the successful military actions of Russia. In the main, we see an aesthetisation of war. As a rule, one of the main heroes of the stories is necessarily the courageous soldier, a representative of the Russian people. The idealization of this image, which received the name *kuz'mokrkučkovstvo*, is obvious. In 1914 there appeared in Moscow an anonymous book entitled *The Heroic Feat of the Don Cossack Kuz'ma Fedorovič Krjučkov*²⁸, which told the story of how a simple Cossack, together with four comrades, destroyed an enemy horse patrol of twenty-seven dragoons, eleven of which were killed by Krjučkov himself. The theme of *kuz'mokrkučkovstvo* circulated widely in fiction. Russian soldiers easily and cheerfully gained victory in the stories of D. Romanov ('In the wood'), V. Belov ('The ferry', 'By the light of the moon'), and A. Fedorov ('Reflection').²⁹ The absence of significant realistic works and the unconvincing nature of this fiction allow us to point to a fall in the artistic level of realistic prose during the First World War. Despite their low artistic value, these stories are an interesting source for tracing the history of Russian culture.

Military poetry addressed a wider range of issues than did prose. It was an expression of the emotional response to current events. The first eighteen months of the war saw the birth of so-called topical poetry. No significant event at the front was passed by the poets. In the thematic collection *The Modern War in Russian poetry* (1915)³⁰ there were sections devoted to the themes of the Slavs, Galician Rus', Poland, the War, the Native land, the Cossacks, Heroes, the Mother, the Sister of Mercy, England, Belgium, France, the Enemies, Humour and Satire, National Creativity (and a supplement). In content, the majority of these poems approximated to propaganda slogans. Their main theme was a jingoistic-patriotic and optimistic perception of the war. Behind the political slogans of the day poetry lost its purpose.

²⁸ Геройский подвиг донского казака Кузьмы Федоровича Крючкова, Москва 1914.

²⁹ All in: *Около войны. Отражения* (Москва, 1915).

³⁰ *Современная война в русской поэзии* (Петроград, 1915).

At the very beginning of the war, there emerged a specific military dramatic art. The Suvorin Theatre in Petrograd put on *The Shame of Germany* (Tozor Germanii') by M. Dalskij, and the Moon-park *The Reims Cathedral* ('Rejmsskij sobor') by G. Ge. In Moscow and Petrograd, productions of L. Andreev's play *The King, Law and Freedom* ('Korol', zakon i svoboda'), devoted to Belgium's suffering in the war, were staged. But, as there was no demand for it, military dramatic art did not succeed.

There was a similar situation in painting. The aspiration to fix war on canvas was not crowned by success. Portrait painting was the most popular genre. Art critics listed I. Repin's 'The feat of a sister of mercy' ('Podvig sestry miloserdija') and 'The feat of a volunteer' ('Podvig dobrovol'ca') by the young artist Zverev as examples of successful portraits, where the authors managed to present an image of the time in a compressed psychological schema. It is notable that during the war not a single significant painting was created on a military theme. The financial success of auction sales of paintings on military subjects (for example, I. Repin's 'The king of Belgium, Albert I' ('Korol' Bel'gii Al'bert I) was sold for six thousand rubles) is explained not so much by their aesthetic value as by the patriotic motives of the buyers. More successful and in higher demand were such forms of mass art as the poster and the cheap popular prints. These helped to popularize the war among the wider population, mobilizing it for participation in civil actions and lifting morale. This brief survey of military subjects in literary works and visual works of art leads to the conclusion that they did not promote the development of culture.

Having considered the various aspects of crisis in the mentality of the art intelligentsia, one can conclude that the intelligentsia displayed huge creative energy in addressing the tasks put forward by the war. It is fair to say that it adapted to new historical conditions, reconsidered many of its positions, strengthened its status in society, and raised its authority. A continuation of the overcoming of this crisis would have helped the group to realize itself to the fullest extent, but the subsequent course of historical events did not offer such an opportunity. The change in the cultural and political situation in 1917 led to an even greater aggravation of the crisis in the mentality of the art intelligentsia.