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Russian Concepts of Patriotism and their Reflection in the Education System Today

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Люблю отчизну я, но странною любовью
Не победит ее рассудок мой!
I love my native land, but love it strangely: reason
Has vainly tried to make this love less strange.
Mikhail Lermontov
translated by Anatoly Liberman

Abstract

The article deals with the problems and concepts of patriotism in Russia, its origins, philosophy and its importance in the contemporary situation in Russia, when the new Post-Communist state redefines and creates new ideology. The reasons to foster patriotism in modern Russia are analysed with great precision and the theoretical basis of Russian patriotism (before 1917) as well as Soviet and modern Post-Soviet patriotism concepts are explored in detail (historical parallels with some European developments are of considerable interest here). The second part of the article is devoted to the contemporary patriotism theories and “practices”, especially to those in the field of education. A profound outlook is provided not only on the ideology, or rather, ideologies gradually replacing “Soviet patriotism”, but also on the mechanisms of their practical realisation.

Why should a Russian, or anyone else, for that matter, experience patriotic feelings? In what does patriotism consist? It seems to me that it may take several forms. One is simple love of the country and the region within that country in which the person lives and lived at an early age – childhood and familiarity have a lot to do with it – an irrational but commonly-felt attachment to its fields, trees, hills, lakes, villages, its people, towns and customs. *Своя земля и в горести мила*, as the Russian proverb has it: ‘your own land is dear even in times of trouble’. Another reason for patriotism is pride in the national achievements in the sciences, arts and social progress. The first of these

reasons is, as I have said, not entirely rational, the second more reasoned. It is common knowledge that people attach themselves to a group and may come sooner or later to identify with it very strongly, as supporters of a football team do, or former students of a school, university or Brüderschaft.

This can be good, and is sometimes harmful. Patriotism is good if it leads a person to respect other people's attachment to their homeland; exclusive nationalism is evil when it turns into xenophobia and distaste, even hatred, for other nationalities. It strikes me that I have occasionally been praised by Russians as a lover of my country – *they* praise *me* because I love England, English language and English literature, while I see it as more significant that I, an Englishman, have come to love Russia, Russian language and Russian literature. I think this indicates a healthy aspect of Russian patriotism: they think it is good that I should love *my* country. Even in Soviet days Westerners who disparaged their own societies to express approval of the socialist system were not respected in the USSR by ordinary people.

There is, of course, a third, political, reason to foster patriotism. The founders of the American republic knew that no-one was born loving his country – it was something which had to be taught, instilled in a young person, and the reason to teach it was to ensure respect for national institutions, to promote civil peace, and *in extremis* to persuade people to sacrifice themselves for the common good (McDowell 2002: 27). It may be that this is truer of a young civilization like America than of Britain or Germany, and of one with a newer, more consciously constructed constitution. Nevertheless, the same view has ever been strongly held in Russia. As long ago as the reign of Ivan the Terrible it was considered essential to promote love of Russia, to identify Russia with the Orthodox religion, and with the authority of the Tsar (Flenley 1996: 224). The same notion appears in the rationale for Catherine the Great's school reforms in the eighteenth century (s. Johnson 1950: 49).¹ Under Nicholas I – powerful party in the administration strongly advocated 'Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality' (Utechin 1963: 72–75; Hosking 1997: 146). Under this slogan patriotism was enlisted to support a harsh régime – a policy which can, as it did in 1916–17, backfire when people make sacrifices which they find have merely intensified their own hardship for the benefit of a ruling élite (Hosking 1997: 170–172, 457–460). Nevertheless, it is still argued by many in Soviet and even post-Soviet society that national security is dependent on the level of patriotic feeling discerned in the population at large.

Russia has its theorists of patriotism. Vladimir Soloviev, writing in the Brockhaus-Efron Encyclopaedia a hundred years ago, distinguishes sharply between patriotism (good) and nationalism (a new word then, arising from the Irish demand for national independence) – bad (Brokgauz & Efron 1890–1904 a, b). He describes its origins as religious: the *otechestvo* (fatherland) was identified with the *votchina* (patrimony) of a particular god, and piety and patriotism were the same thing. Even the ancient Hebrews identified their land with its god: 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137, v. 4). He indicates that this is now obsolete (it isn't, of course, this notion survives to this very day in Russia, as we shall see) and has been replaced in countries like France, where patriotism arose in the days of Joan of Arc in the desire to be free of the hated English, by pure love of country.² Soloviev was of the opinion that

patriotism arose in Protestant Germany through a similar desire to be free of the foreign pope: while the Catholic section of society felt the international nature of the Church was more important.

A particularly interesting character in the early nineteenth century was Peter Chaadaev. His ferocious attacks in his *Lettres philosophiques*³ on Russian cultural backwardness, as he saw it, aroused fury in the government, and he was even declared ‘mad’ and confined. But he ‘loved his country as Peter the Great taught [him] to love it’, that is – with open eyes, critically and unsentimentally (McNally 1969). This was not good enough for Nicholas, Uvarov, and the other proponents of official nationality. Patriotism was seen as essential to national stability, and after 1848 – in saving Russia from revolution. ‘I am convinced,’ wrote Uvarov as early as 1833, ‘that every professor and teacher, being permeated by one and the same feeling of devotion to throne and fatherland, will use all his resources to become a worthy tool of the government and to earn its complete confidence’ (quoted by Hosking 1997: 146). Later in the century Alexander Herzen’s undoubted Russian patriotism, which Marx regarded as a betrayal of socialism (Utechin 1963: 118), did not prevent him from supporting the Poles – in opinion which lost him much favour among the Russian public. It is also worth remembering that Lev Tolstoy, that most Russian of writers, held patriotism to be incompatible with Christianity (s. Maude 1953: 318–337; Christianity 1922).⁴

I leave aside numerous other theoretical issues in the Russian and in more general contexts. There is the very word *Rodina*, which can mean anything from the native village to the whole of Russia. There are implications in the etymology of this word, its connection with *rody* (birth), its frequent hyphenation in emotive contexts with *mat*’ (mother) as in the wartime slogan ‘*Rodina-mat*’ *zovet*’ (Your homeland summons you to fight), and its near-synonym *otechestvo*, based on *otets* – father. These include the Slavophil/Westernizer controversy, and the Pan Slavist movement and all it implies. We have not examined in any detail the relationship between patriotism and nationalism, chauvinism, jingoism and the like. There remain the related issues of ethnicity and nationality. Contemporary theorists in the West write rarely of patriotism, being perhaps somewhat afraid of this word and preferring to speak of ‘national identity’, which is not exactly the same thing. Extremely interesting is the way people in a given culture sometimes construct a national identity for themselves, partly on genuine, partly on spurious pseudo-historical sources. All these issues we leave aside.⁵

Many readers of this paper will be well acquainted with the concept of ‘Soviet patriotism’, which was a prominent element in the system of values inculcated into children in the Soviet school (Savin 1978).⁶ Here the country loved was not – in theory, at least – Russia, but the Soviet Union. Allegiance to the USSR was required because it was the ‘first socialist country ever created’ and the *rodina* (homeland) of the working classes. While, if challenged, Soviet educators might have regarded traditional patriotism as ‘bourgeois’, one could easily detect in Soviet books, films, newspapers, schools and society generally, a good deal of latent sentiment about birch trees, the ‘pure Russian sky’, the boundless steppes. It would be unfair to say that the Soviet school curriculum was notably more focused on Russia and the Soviet Union than the English national curriculum is on Britain, but there were certain features which indi-

cated the presence of a strong national *Russian* pride. To me, this makes it all the more surprising that a good number of teachers then and now believed that Russia had been quite left out. In 1988, when I was teaching in a Moscow school, the art master, a crusty and passionate man, spoke with indignation of ‘the way these children have been deprived of their heritage’, and he had them painting churches, windmills, and scenes of Russian traditional life whenever he could. This same feeling is prominent today in many quarters. Gerlind Schmidt (2001) detects the feeling that the Soviet Union ‘de-russified the Russian people’. This feeling leads to demands among teachers for curricular emphases of this sort, and of the establishment of ‘Russian schools’ on the model of the *natsional’nye shkoly* which existed in the areas occupied by ethnic minorities in the USSR.⁷

It is also fair to note that the ‘Soviet patriotism’ preached under communism promoted the idea of the ‘friendship of Soviet nationalities’. When this began to break down with the outbreak of the enmity between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s, many intelligent and aware, educated Soviet people were aghast. How could this be? There had obviously been a massive failure of *vospitatel’naia rabota*. There was then, and is now still, a touching faith in the ability of methodology – in theory – to convey moral principles in such a way that they will be practically effective. While none of us would be teachers if we did not think that ethical attitudes could be fostered through education, there are still many teachers in Russia who have never learned to lower their expectations of what it is possible to achieve to a more realistic level.

What of today? When communism broke down in the old Soviet Union, the values that accompanied, indeed which ran through the whole education system, seemed irrelevant. Worse than that, they appeared discredited, though there was much good in them. The baby was thrown out with the bathwater. Some Russian teachers today shy away from conveying values in their teaching for fear of having to change them yet again with some new change of régime. Other educators try to compile new lists of values,⁸ and sometimes they appear to believe teachers should inculcate these in the same didactic and dogmatic ways they inculcated the old ones. Where does patriotism fit in?

Much of the old value system survives.⁹ There is still a strong sense among many Russian teachers of the mystic connection of the Russian land with the Russian people. There is also a commonly-held view that Russian-ness is inextricably entwined with the Russian Orthodox religion (the modern version of the primitive view that the land was the patrimony of a god who could be worshipped there alone). To love your country is *good*. Teachers set out to instil and strengthen this sense in children. Emigration, while admitted to be unavoidable in some contexts, is seen as undesirable, almost degrading. There is some sentimentality in this attitude – or is it strong emotion rather than sentiment? One teacher has published a scenario for use as a candlelit concert of Russian poetry (Zhagrova 2001: 223 ff.), the purpose of which is to stress this mystic relationship. Я как сын люблю тебя, Россия!’ (Konstantin Simonov);

Все пройдет, а Родина –
Останется,
Если мы то чувство сохраним (V. Firsov).

But this programme does emphasize that ‘love for one’s native land arouses in Russian poets a civic sensibility and, moreover, a benevolent concern for the whole of humanity’. If it does, we surely say ‘Amen’ to that!

Both these themes are taken up in a round-table discussion reported in *Russian Education and Society* (Upbringing 2001: 15–50), which also reveals the misgivings of some educators. There is the civic argument: ‘One of the most crucial tasks that our society has come up against is, the revival of patriotism as one of the most important spiritual and social values, the foundation on which the new Russian statehood is built’ (ibid.: 24).¹⁰ It involves the ‘shaping of the youngster’s own civic stance’ (ibid.: 28) and through associated work on social projects, it helps pupils to ‘perceive society more seriously’ (ibid.: 29). There is the emotional argument: ‘Patriotism is a feeling that is necessary, grand and wonderful’. It enables young people to ‘be in touch with the most memorable pages of the history of the Fatherland’ (ibid.: 27). Elsewhere, (Vartanova & Orekhova 2001)¹¹ Pushkin is quoted (in an admittedly ambiguous line): ‘Ни за что на свете я не хотел бы переменить отечество’ [not for anything in the world would I change my native land].¹²

In the round table referred to misgivings are expressed firmly, but cautiously. One speaker ‘considers it unacceptable to favour the [tradition] of one people over [that] of another ... [which] can cause students to have nationalistic prejudices, to warp their ideas about some [other] people, its cultural achievements’ (Zakiaeva in Upbringing 2001: 32). An interesting intervention on the subject of language reminds the audience that a good knowledge of Russian by a non-Russian should not be seen as evidence of an internationalist attitude, just as a desire to communicate in a native language should not be taken as a manifestation of his limitations (Upbringing 2001: 33 f.). Two other articles conflict in their basic philosophies. One has the title: ‘How to teach tolerance’ (Stepanov 2001), and discusses issues of national identity, territory, unpleasant events in past history such as deportations of populations, discrimination against minorities and fears over immigration. The author hopes his programme will enable children to understand the similar concerns of other ethnic and national groups. The conflicting paper is another exploration of Russian poetry, designed to increase respect for the past military success of Russia (Oparina 2000). In praising the memory of past heroism, the author shows no sense that Russia was ever expansionist, or that other ethnic/national groups might have stayed, intermarried with Russians or made any contribution to Russian history, culture or society. What she gives is a chronicle of glorious wars, prominently 1812 and 1941.

This leads us to the issue which has only been hinted at so far: *military-patriotic education*. One of the speakers (a woman – always the more belligerent sex in Russia!) – at the round table referred to above (Alieva in Upbringing 2001: 31) perceives the advance of NATO towards the borders of Russia as proof of a threat necessitating NVP (*nachal’naia voennaia podgotovka*), elementary military training, as it was known in the Soviet era. The recent history of military training in schools¹³ has been extremely varied. Towards the end of the Soviet era many schools were quietly abolishing NVP from their curriculum: apart from any philosophical objection to it, it was mightily unpopular in many schools.¹⁴ To the fury of the military establishment, NVP

was removed from the school curriculum in 1991. By presidential decree in 1999, it was again made compulsory in the two senior classes of the Russian school. It is not clear whether this decree has in fact been implemented.

But – what exactly has this to do with patriotism? The argument is, and has always been, as we can see from the earlier part of this paper, that strong patriotic feeling ensures that young people will be willing to defend the fatherland. This feeling must therefore be encouraged and instilled. Thus recruits for the armed forces will be ensured.¹⁵ Those who put this view do not state in what the military threat to Russia consists; it seems to me that the idea is simply that it is a good thing if young men (and women, for that matter) are bursting to join the army. One recent article claims that sociological surveys show that 80 per cent of young people would be willing to serve in the armed forces (Piatikop 2001). Here is a very unacademic remark: I do not believe this finding, and I do not think anyone believes it. And if it were true, why does anyone need military training in schools? The article in which these views appear may or may not be typical of the attitude of a certain mind-set in the Russian population, but it seems to suggest that what really irritates such people is the perceived fact that ‘young people are moving away from their social role as defenders of the fatherland.’ This is seen as the fault of the ‘stupid mistake’ of de-ideologizing education, which took place in the early 1990s, and as a consequence of the ‘anti-Russian’ work of the Soros foundation (ibid.: 102). How is this compatible with the 80 per cent who wish to serve in the forces, one may ask?

So there we have it. Patriotism in education in Russia was seen for many centuries as a way, perhaps even a semi-religious way, of exhorting children to accept the position of the Tsar and of autocratic government. Its role is still held by many to be to reinforce civic responsibility and the social conscience, rather than to allow critical assessment of the history, current policy and public attitudes of Russia. At its best, it is believed to encourage tolerance and internationalism, and to combat xenophobia. Pride in and love of Russia are seen as an emotional and spiritual value which is wholly good. There are forces in society and in education that regard the fostering of patriotic feeling as essential to the successful defence of the realm.

We see now why Lermontov, in the lines quoted as the epigraph to this paper, described his love of his country as ‘strange’ and beyond the grasp of his reasoning powers. He goes on to say that he rejects pride in its military glory, civil peace and ancient traditions. This cannot have gone down well with Nicholas in 1841! What he did love, he says, was the silence of the steppes, the rustling of the forests, glimmering lights in the villages at night ... and the dances and songs of the peasants, viewed through a fine mist of alcohol.¹⁶ Well, he *was* a romantic poet, so perhaps we should expect the emotional element to be paramount. But there is no reason to conclude that his attitude is not also reasoned and defensible. What is certain is that it would be regarded as insufficient by many of the educators who argue so passionately for patriotic education in the Russian school today.

Notes

1. Catherine empowered Jankovich de Mirievo to head a Commission for the Establishment of Schools in 1782. His report refers to ‘true love for the fatherland and one’s fellow citizens’ as an aim of education.
2. This view is taken up and most engagingly stated in Bernard Shaw’s play *St Joan*, near the end of Scene IV.
3. The works of Peter Chaadaev (1794–1856) were written in French, but are widely available in Russian. McNally is also the author of *Chaadaev and His Friends* (1971), which includes a substantial discussion of his views and his place in Russian thought.
4. His view was expressed particularly in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, see ‘Patriotism’ in Maude (1953). See also *Christianity and Patriotism* (‘Khristianstvo i patriotizm’) (1922), translated by Garnett 1894.
5. A variety of such matters are discussed in relation to several countries across the world in an excellent symposium: Tonkin, McDonald & Chapman (1989).
6. The standard official approach to Soviet patriotism is outlined in his article ‘Vospitanie uchashchikhsia v dukhe sovetskogo patriotizma i sotsialisticheskogo internatsionalizma’.
7. There is an immense literature on the ‘Russian school’ movement. One source of information that gives the spirit behind the motivation involved is: Goncharov (1998). On the relationship between the Russian school and Russian Orthodox religion, see also Muckle (2001), esp. 177–178.
8. Discussion in English of a new value system in post-Soviet education may be seen, for example, in the following articles: Karakovsky (1993); Nikandrov (1995) and Vaillant (1998).
9. Though not directly quoted here, the following have been helpful in exploring the issues involved: Flenley (1996), cited above; Smith (2001).
10. The words are those of M. M. Magomedrasulov, from Dagestan.
11. Pushkin’s line is the title of their article: ‘Ni za chto na svete ia ne khotel by peremenit’ otechestvo’.
12. The line is ambiguous because the word *peremenit* may mean to *change* either in the sense of to exchange for another or to change the nature of.
13. I am grateful to Dr. Stephen Webber for advice on the subject of NVP; his research on the subject awaits amplification and publication (Webber & Liikanen 2001).
14. For information on the curriculum and rationale of NVP in the Soviet era, see Muckle (1988), 168–170.
15. Issue no. 4 of *Narodnoe obrazovanie*, 2001, contains eight articles on military history and on military-patriotic education. Together they comprise a diatribe against those who would abolish or restrict such education, and they apparently represent strongly held opinions among some post-Soviet educators.
16. Lermontov’s poem ‘Rodina’ is dated 1841. The translation quoted is by Liberman in his work (1983).

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