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**MASQUERADE:
SOURCES, RESISTANCE AND
EARLY SOVIET POLITICAL CULTURE**

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**MASQUERADE:
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Abstract

This article considers concepts of political culture, ritual and theatricality and their applications to early Soviet history and source criticism. A central dynamic in the emergence of a Soviet political culture, it argues, was the dissemination of new ritual practices and publicly performed group gatherings. The article describes a process of codification in the organizational vehicles developed to edify and transform the "new person" in early Soviet politics and culture. Given their increasingly formulaic conventions, it is suggested, the fundamental Soviet concern with "masking" and "unmasking" guilt had a strong tendency to escalate. This general discussion is complemented by illustrations of reading protocols and stenographic reports from the 1920s and early 1930s. Finally, the approach developed here toward decoding agency and intentionality in these sources is counterposed to resistance paradigms currently being imported into the Soviet field.

Dva raza prikhodil ko mne chelovek v voennoi forme...
Odnazhdy ia sprosila u nego, kto takoi byl Iurka.

--Iurka? Eto byl melkii moshennik.
--A tot...artist?...
--Eto byl krupnyi navodchik-vor.
--A starik Iakov?
--On byl ne starik, a prosto staryi bandit.
--A on...Nu, kotoryi diadia?
--Shpion, -- korotko otvetil voennyi.

(Arkadii Gaidar, Sud'ba barabanshchika)

No one is whom he seems to be in the enduringly popular 1938 children's story Fate of a Drummer Boy. The young and naive narrator Serezha, in one of the novella's opening scenes, finds himself at a carnival in Moscow's Park Kul'tury. Recognizing a girlfriend even under her mask, he implores her to leave off her disguise so that he can gaze at her unmasked face. Yet for the duration of the suspense-filled work, he learns that virtually everyone he encounters has masked his true identity -- most shockingly, Iakov, supposedly a former partisan who wears the Red Banner of Labor. The man he accepts as his own uncle turns out to be a spy. It is not just hidden enemies who are ubiquitous; positive heroes are disguised as well, from Serezha's own father, sent to the camps, to the little drummer boy in Serezha's book about the French Revolution, who gives his life warning the troops but is suspected of treason.¹

In this work of socialist realist fiction, to be sure, true identities are ultimately identifiable and are sorted out in the end. The theme of espionage is, of course, especially strong in the Soviet popular culture of the purge era. But the broader obsession with masked identities and hidden enemies can be recognized not only as a developing central motif in early Soviet and Stalinist

¹ Arkadii Gaidar, "Sud'ba barabanshchika," in Sochineniia, vol. II (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo detskoj literatury, 1949), 156-268.

ideology (and finding its own expression in cultural production); it was a fundamental issue around which an emerging Soviet political culture crystallized. In the end, the reader of the socialist realist novel is conveniently presented with the keys to true identity. But the historian trying to penetrate this world of ubiquitous concealment and accusation through sources generated by the party-state is confronted with a set of subtle and sometimes insoluble problems. In a world of masquerade, we had best begin by studying the shapes and sizes of the masks.

This article takes as its topic the emergence of a Soviet political culture in the 1920s and early 1930s. It is concerned with explicating how the masking and unmasking of guilt became intensified by strong elements of ritual and performance bound up in the dissemination of that political culture. Strategies and counter-strategies of concealment and revelation, it argues, were entrenched in specific Soviet practices, affecting the ways we must decode agency and intentionality within a Soviet house of mirrors. My premise is that the ways in which documents are generated are intimately bound up with the culture from which they emerge, and that interpreters of Soviet sources must come to an explicit reckoning with the specificities of Soviet political culture.

Because the "opening of the archives" and the study of early Soviet and Stalinist culture are even now in relatively nascent stages, however, there has been little sustained reflection on how reading Soviet archival documents is linked to understanding the communist cultural system in which they were generated. Much of the literature explicitly concerned with the "archival revolution" in Russian Studies revolves around issues of understandable urgency to practicing

historians -- access, Russian archival policies, and the limits of declassification.² Other treatments have been justifiably concerned with the effects of sensationalism on research strategies, on the organization of rare or newly-available collections, and on classification and finding aids.³

A third scholarly realm in which the new archival sources is considered at length is centered in Cold War and postwar international history. This last area of scholarly inquiry has the distinction of being almost entirely unconnected to the "domestic" historiography on the emergence of the communist system (including its political culture), which is still largely focused on the prewar decades. The Cold War literature, in addition to its own concerns with access and "revelations," seems resolutely trained on historiographical disputes. In the arguments among revisionist, orthodox and post-revisionist approaches to the Cold War, a central issue remains the role of ideology in Soviet foreign policy.⁴ As one astute participant deftly sums up the impasse in this debate, all competing explanations of the Cold War "require a story about Soviet intentions and motivations," but Soviet actors had strong external (and, it might be added, political cultural) motivations for concealing them.⁵ The problem is posed, but not taken to the level of sources,

² The term comes from the informative articles by Vladimir Kozlov and Ol'ga Lokteva, "Arkhivnaia revoliutsiia v Rossii (1991-1996)," *Svobodnaia mysl'*, no. 1 (Jan. 1997): 113-121 and no. 2 (Feb. 1997): 115-124.

³ On the first category, see Mark von Hagen, "The Archival Gold Rush and Historical Agendas in the Post-Soviet Era," *Slavic Review*, 52:1 (Spring 1993): 96-100; in the later, see the voluminous and invaluable work of Patricia Kennedy Grimsted.

⁴ See, for example, the seven articles in the special issue on "Soviet Archives: Recent Revelations and Cold War Historiography," *Diplomatic History*, 21:2 (Spring 1997), 217-306.

⁵ William C. Wohlforth, "New Evidence on Moscow's Cold War: Ambiguity in Search of Theory," *Diplomatic History*, 21:2 (Spring 1997): 229-242.

typologies of documentation, or strategies of source interpretation. As this suggests, the prime lacuna in the "archival" literature is source criticism.

This article begins with a discussion of the tangled genealogy of the concept of political culture and its applications to Russian history. The varied and expansive uses of the notion in the last several decades underscore the need to explicitly refine the application of this crucial but frequently amorphous category, particularly when applied to a period of revolutionary flux. In an attempt to move in this direction, I then describe a central dynamic in the emergence of Soviet political culture: the development and spread of new types of ritual practices and public performances that emerged to spread a new culture and transform its participants. The general discussion is complemented by illustrations of reading protocols and stenographic reports from the political and cultural history of the 1920s and early 1930s. Yet before proceeding to these examples the discussion includes, as a kind of methodological and historiographical interlude, some reflections on resistance paradigms currently being imported into Soviet history. This raises thorny questions about interpreting agency and intentions in the documents, and suggests the dangers of approaches that do not treat the reading of sources as flowing from understandings of political culture, but rather take their cue from external schemas.

The Didactic Revolution and Soviet Political Culture

The concept of political culture in contemporary scholarship has a history of its own that is essential to untangle before attempting to apply it to the Soviet field. Its origins lie in American political science of the 1950s and 1960s, in attempts to distinguish the "civic culture"

and "pragmatic" politics of the democratized West from other political systems. Among the classic definitions was Verba's formulation, referring to a system of expressive symbols and values that "provides the subjective orientation to politics."⁶ Social scientists attempted to measure that subjective orientation through objective means, such as the study of voting behavior. Political culture thus "originated as an analytical tool for political scientists using quantitative-behavioralist methods." It was linked up with modernization theory, Parsonian-influenced political sociology, and other trends in the behaviorist revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. But the concept outlived the Cold War social science in which it was born, because it provided a vehicle for introducing such "variables" as attitudes, values and ideology into the study of political systems. However, the resulting expansiveness gave the notion a "kitchen sink," catch-all reputation.⁷

It was this original incarnation of political culture -- with its assumption of subjective orientations and values embedded in the political system -- that proved attractive in the Russian and Soviet fields particularly to those positing implicit, recurring features of the political system over a long period of time. Hence the concept was invoked by historians attempting to show that Russian and Soviet political relationships were unbrokenly authoritarian, or by those providing the key to centuries of continuity stretching from Muscovite boyars to members of the Soviet

⁶ Lucian Pye and Sydney Verba, eds. Political Culture and Political Development (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 513.

⁷ The quotations and much of the above are drawn from Glen Gendzel, "Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 28:2 (Autumn, 1997), 226-232; see also Margaret R. Somers, "What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere? Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation," Sociological Theory, 13:2 (July 1995), 113-144.

Politburo.⁸ Significantly, even a very recent inquiry into the culture of revolutionary Russia rejects the concept of political culture based on a critique of the original political science definitions, as they made their way into such historical continuity theses. As far as it goes, this is a convincing critique: a loosely defined "subjective orientation" to politics was sought out by historians and then made into a prime historical cause.⁹

But political culture does not necessarily have to be seen as monolithic, nor is it always static or stable. It does not have to be reduced to the values of political systems, as in social science definitions in which the "cultural" component of the concept is given little exploration. Political culture has had a second, much different incarnation in the "new cultural history," originally influenced in particular by anthropological notions of culture and Geertzian "thick description." A new scholarly approach to the concept emerged, coincidentally, at roughly the same time as the new archival sources under discussion. Spurred on by scholarly interest in popular rituals and by the historiography of the French Revolution, historians have more recently used political culture to denote "systems of signs, symbols and linguistic practices," which can then be probed for their own internal rules and structures.¹⁰ This new exploration of what one writer calls "cultural semiotics" has played a role in the shift away from materialist social history.

⁸ I am thinking, first and foremost, of the well-known essay by Edward Keenan, "Muscovite Political Folkways," *Russian Review*, 45:1 (January 1986): 115-81. For a cogent critique, see Richard Wortman, "Muscovite Political Folkways' and the Problem of Russian Political Culture," *Russian Review*, 46:2 (April 1987): 191-198. For an application to Soviet politics, see Stephen White, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics* (NY: St. Martins, 1979).

⁹ Stefan Plaggenborg, *Revolutionskultur. Menschenbilder und kulturelle Praxis in Sowjetrussland zwischen Oktoberrevolution und Stalinismus* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1996), 8-11.

¹⁰ Somers, "What's Political or Cultural."

As it has gathered momentum, however, it threatens to be applied so broadly that "incautious historians are somewhat in danger of turning political culture into an indiscriminate uncaused cause once again."¹¹

The approach to the emergence of a Soviet political culture sketched out below flows from this conceptual backdrop as well as from much of the new literature on politics and culture after 1917. Soviet political culture can be conceived as the sum of relationships emerging from a sweeping but identifiable revolutionary process of attempting to mobilize, politicize, "enlighten" and transform subjects through new or modified organizational forms. This process cuts right across political and cultural development in the early Soviet Union, as the political-cultural repertoire evolved in a wide range of settings and institutions in the early and middle years of Soviet power.

Indeed, at this point one might speculate that there has been no general theory of Soviet political culture precisely because the boundaries among Bolshevik, Soviet and Stalinist political culture on the one hand, and "political culture" and culture in general on the other, are so hard to delineate. For several reasons -- the primacy of the "political" in the Bolshevik tradition, the totalizing aspirations of the party-state, and strong tendencies to repudiate liberal notions of separate spheres (such as political, cultural, economic, scientific etc., not to mention public and private) -- it is problematic to construct sharp boundaries between the political sphere and the broader culture.¹²

¹¹ Gendzel, 245-246.

¹² For an interesting perspective on this problem, see Robert C. Williams, "The Nationalization of Early Soviet Culture," *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 9:2-3 (1982): 157-172.

In any case, to continue: some of these "revolutionary" organizational vehicles, such as the vast array of cultural, educational and propagandistic methods grouped under the rubric of "political enlightenment" and "cultural enlightenment" work, were explicitly designed to target and, as it were, "Sovietize" the consciousness of the various groups at which they were aimed.¹³ In this category one might also include the various "red rituals" designed to replace traditional or religious rites. Others, such as festivals and celebrations, were cultural forms developed on a mass scale in the civil war period with great input from the non-party avant-garde and artistic intelligentsia.¹⁴ Still others might be classified as public meetings that over time developed their own, typical formats. As Kojevnikov has discussed, by the Stalin period "the repertoire of distinctive types of meetings, with their specific genres of discourse, was quite rich, and there were also many words for 'meeting with discussion' in the political language: sobranie, soveshchanie, zasedanie, vstrecha, obsuzhdenie, priem, sessiia, and others."¹⁵ Other gatherings with formulaic and ritual overtones were specifically developed within the Bolshevik Party, such as the purge session, the party meeting, or, later, the self-criticism session, but were also exported

¹³ The new regime spent enormous resources and energies on "political enlightenment" and a vast array of educational endeavors, as well as on agitprop. The most complete survey of activities classified as agitation-propaganda and political enlightenment remains Peter Kenez, The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1918-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ The literature here is large; see especially James von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); on revolutionary festivals, symbolism and ceremonies see also Richard Stites, Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989); on the role of the avant-garde, Katerina Clark, Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard, 1995), 122-142.

¹⁵ Alexei Kojevnikov, "Rituals of Stalinist Culture at Work: Science and the Games of Intraparty Democracy circa 1948," Russian Review, 57:1 (January 1998), 33.

outward to other locations. We might also include as a separate category in the development of Soviet political culture the written vehicles for eliciting and documenting information that became ubiquitous in Soviet society, such as the questionnaire (anketa) or denunciation (donos). Through many of these settings, and of course through the media, a strange new "Soviet" language and lexicon was promulgated; one scholar has aptly characterized this as a "language of state," and described it as comprised of "neologisms, acronyms, stump-compounds and foreign borrowings, extant Russian words with changed meanings and an odd stylistic mixture of bureaucratese, non-standard slang and high Marxist rhetoric."¹⁶ As the many "popular" or "political dictionaries" of the period attest, mastery of this new language was touted as a path toward civic integration and socialization -- in other words, once again, toward a transformation of the self.¹⁷

Study of the conventions, typology and language of these widely varied vehicles and practices of Soviet political culture has largely focused on documentary texts, such as in analyses of petitions or denunciations, for example.¹⁸ Yet similar conventions can be identified in types of behaviors, expressed in cultural and political group activities and recorded in different kinds of sources.

¹⁶ Michael S. Gorham, "Coming to Terms with the New Writing Citizen: Soviet Language of State in the Diary of Kostia Riabsev," East/West Education, 18:1 (Spring 1997), 9-10.

¹⁷ See, for example, B. M. El'tsin, Politicheskii slovar'. Kratkoe nauchno-populiarnoe tolkovanie slov (Moscow: Tipografiia Glavpolitprosveta, 1922). One of the most interesting sources on the new language is A. M. Selishchev's sociolinguistic study Iazyk revoliutsionnoi epokhi. Iz nabliudenii nad russkim iazykom poslednikh let (1917-1926) (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1928); see also the references to other studies in Gorham, "Language of State."

¹⁸ On the latter, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," Journal of Modern History, 68:4 (December 1996): 831-866.

Before moving on to this question, however, one might pose a more basic one. How can we explain the extraordinarily didactic thrust within the emergence of a Soviet political culture? In largest terms, it can be tied to the confluence of several long-term circumstances. One was the heritage of the Russian intelligentsia, which dominated the leadership of political and cultural movements alike, with its well-honed "enlightenment" missions of raising "consciousness."¹⁹ A fateful marriage was ratified when this intense didactic urge was wedded to the missions and practices of the state, a link that occurred in a six-year stretch of total war, with all its new methods of harnessing state power to mobilize, observe and attempt to mold populations.²⁰ A final, crucial ingredient to the mix was the centralization and emerging dominance of the Communist Party within a dualistic party-state in the period 1918-1920, which allowed Bolshevism to attempt to spread its own well-honed yet evolving traditions and customs to its new recruits and, especially in areas and times associated with socialist "advance," outside its own ranks.²¹

The evolution, dissemination and entrenchment of a new political culture, then, is a phenomenon that went hand in hand with the canonization of distinctive new forms -- ranging

¹⁹ The enlightenment ethos permeated even its liberal and "respectable" segments, forming a marked contrast to analogous groups in, for example, Germany; see, for example, James McClelland, Autocrats and Academics: Education, Culture and Society in Tsarist Russia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

²⁰ See here especially the comparative work of Peter Holquist, "Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context," Journal of Modern History, 69 (September 1997): 415-450, and V.S. Izmozik, "Politicheskii kontrol' v Sovetskoi Rossii, 1918-1928," Voprosy istorii, 7 (1997): 32-53.

²¹ Michael David-Fox, Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

from the repertoire of "political enlightenment" to often elaborate and intricate ritual practices such as the purge session. This process cut across several varying subperiods of Soviet history. Most notably, the civil war period, despite its stress on mass public events and the immediate construction of socialism, lacked the explicit culture-building mission and party-directed centralization developed after 1920. Many of the formative experiments of the "didactic revolution" were centered in the Red Army: in the Moscow military district alone in 1918 there were 209 cultural enlightenment committees, 346 reading rooms and 78 "homes of enlightenment."²² Paradoxically, then, the "retreat" of NEP, with the era's stress on the long-term, humdrum tasks of the "transition period," was influential in advancing and spreading the methods of the new political culture.

The broad process I have described by no means precludes the development or persistence of subcultures,²³ the maintenance or incorporation of elements from traditional cultures,²⁴ or certain continuities with tsarist state or prerevolutionary Russian political culture. In the last two categories, for example, Kozlov has argued that Soviet-era denunciations represent strikingly continuous "archaic survivals within the political culture of the USSR," as they remained in tsarist as in Soviet Russia a back channel of information for a paternalistic, underdeveloped state as well as a form of popular, traditional appeal. Nonetheless, as Kozlov

²² Kratkii ocherk kul'turno-politicheskoi raboty v Krasnoi Armii za 1918 god (Moscow: publisher not listed, 1919), 143.

²³ Here see, for example, Anne Gorsuch, "Enthusiasts, Bohemians and Delinquents: Soviet Youth Cultures, 1921-1928," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1992.

²⁴ See, for example, the inclusion of elements of peasant and folk culture in the Lenin cult as described by Nina Tumarkin, Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

shows so well, denunciations acquired traits connected to the Soviet regime's distinctive concerns, language, and ideology in differing periods. One would first need an explicitly comparative study across the 1917 divide, then, before reaching Kozlov's conclusion that they have a "timeless" character.²⁵

Let us return to the emergence of a specifically Soviet political culture. From the regime's point of view, the gap inherent in the didactic revolution between the means (the new organizational forums) and the ends (the creation of a higher consciousness and a "new person") fostered a particularly vicious circle. On the one hand, early Soviet Russia was permeated with optimism about the plasticity of human beings.²⁶ The party-state's pretensions about reeducation were rife not only in the vast adult education and political enlightenment initiatives but in many other areas of the new order. Even prison camps were in the early years portrayed as "methods of isolation and reeducation," and long after economic considerations became prime in the leadership's calculations for the GULAG, camps preserved departments of "political" and "cultural upbringing."²⁷ On the other hand, as will be argued below, the meetings and other vehicles designed by the regime to mold and transform participants soon became formalized. With so much riding on successfully negotiating them, people followed their rules or developed

²⁵ Vladimir A. Kozlov, "Denunciation and Its Functions in Soviet Governance: A Study of Denunciations and Their Bureaucratic Handling from Soviet Police Archives, 1944-1953," *Journal of Modern History*, 68:4 (December 1996): 867-898, quotations from 867, 871.

²⁶ On images of the New Person as a "mental construct" and hence a "creature" of the elite in revolutionary culture, see Plaggenborg, *Revolutionskultur*, 35-40.

²⁷ "Rozhdenie GULAGa: diskussii v verkhnikh eshelonakh vlasti," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 4 (1997): 142-156; Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas Whitney (NY: Harper and Row, 1975), 2:468-501.

strategies for manipulating them. In short, the political culture acquired from the outset its features of performance and ritual. In a regime preoccupied with combating enemies within and without, the suspicions that people were simply acting roles or making duplicitous gestures had great potential to escalate. At times it could seem like the political culture of the party-state had come to resemble a big and deadly masquerade.

Resistance Paradigms and Russian Studies

As my title suggests, a discussion of Soviet political culture can offer perspectives on the increasingly influential trend of resistance studies, which provides a potentially much different interpretive rubric for analyzing sources. We are, it seems, on the cusp of a significant debate in Soviet history about resistance. It is clear why many scholars, after the reversals of the collapse of communism, appear eager to adopt this framework. Quite clearly, new archival sources have more than ever before punctured the official, monolithic facade the regime erected. We have more indications than ever of discontent, resentments, chaos, struggles, rejection of official ideology, and outright unrest even under Stalinism. This, of course, might have been expected from the "archival revolution." But an incipient but discernable split seems to have opened between those historians examining how groups and individuals were shaped by the transformational drives of the regime, and those who are emphasizing the widespread nature of opposition to them.²⁸

²⁸ In Stephen Kotkin's well-known phrase, ordinary people in Magnitogorsk learned to "speak Bolshevik;" Kotkin emphasizes how little it matters whether they aped conformity or really believed, and along the way he suggests how officially promoted identities (such as "shirker" or

The fact that resistance studies have flourished elsewhere in other fields -- most notably, in the history of Nazi Germany and in postcolonial studies -- means that the notion is imported to Soviet history with a significant prehistory. Before resistance studies became more "professionalized" in Europe, the notion of resistance was a key part of postwar mythologizing and reckoning with the recent past. Why else, for example, should radically different acts carried out by groups ranging from peasants to political elites all be lumped under the notion of resistance? Michael Geyer argues in the German context that "resistance historiography became the posthumous act of inventing communities, creating fictitious solidarities ...Resistance became ever more a substitute for communities that had ceased to cohere." Geyer makes two other observations with particular relevance for the Soviet field. He refers to an "occupation model" which presumed some "residual free space or essence that remains intrinsically outside of domination" -- such as a church, a milieu, or an immutable sense of class or nation. In this way, the "enemy is externalized." Secondly, Geyer warns that historians tended to follow "the logic of the Gestapo," which "expected and persecuted classic modern forms of mass protest, secret

shock-worker) were accepted and shaped behavior. See Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), esp. 198-237. Jochen Hellbeck's work on the diary of Stepan Podlubnyi explores how a single individual with a tarnished past attempted to transform himself in dialogue with the regime. See Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-1939," Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, 44 (1996): 344-73 and Hellbeck, ed. Tagebuch aus Moskau, 1931-1939 (Munich, 1996). On the other side of this potential or incipient dispute, one could enlist Sheila Fitzpatrick's work Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), in which she embraces James C. Scott's notion of everyday resistance and "subaltern strategies" (5-6) and Jeffrey J. Rossman's anachronistically subtitled "The Teikovo Cotton Workers' Strike of April 1932: Class, Gender and Identity Politics in Stalin's Russia," Russian Review, 56:1 (January 1997): 44-69, esp. 69 n. 81.

organization, and expressions of discontent."²⁹

In the Soviet case a prime documentary basis for uncovering widespread resistance or anti-Soviet discontent is the svodki on the "moods of the population" compiled by the secret police.³⁰ Other treatments will have far more to say about the opportunities and dangers of utilizing this kind of source. But here it can be noted, first of all, that the rules governing the compilation of this particular source, which can only be fully understood in terms of the institutional history and culture of the secret police, are far less accessible to us than for other sources. A glance in a comparative direction can bring out the implications of this circumstance. Richard Cobb's The Police and the People shows how during and after the Jacobin period the commissaire de police was "subjected to very detailed instructions" -- Traités de Police and later even model procès-verbaux -- that "would cover almost every predictable situation." These governed "what he was to look for and even how he was to report it when he had found it."³¹

In the postcolonial context, James C. Scott famously moved the focus from organized rebellions to "everyday" resistance such as footdragging and dissimulation. He broke down the dichotomy between resistance and conformity by showing "a bewildering array" of actions in between. But by changing the definition of resistance from principled protest to almost any act,

²⁹Michael Geyer, "Resistance as Ongoing Project: Visions of Order, Obligations to Strangers, and Struggles for Civil Society, 1933-1990," in Geyer and John W. Boyer, eds. Resistance Against the Third Reich, 1933-1990 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 325-350.

³⁰ Sarah Davies bases her description of "popular opinion" largely on such documents in her Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³¹ R.C. Cobb, The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789-1820 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 15. "Every regime," he remarks at another point, "will get the police that it deserves" (49).

Scott raised the likelihood that scholars could find resistance almost wherever they looked for it. Already in his first book Scott suggested that since conformity was merely a "protective disguise," public interaction provides only a "partial transcript." The full transcript remains to be established by teasing out subordinate critiques of power through immersion in their own milieu. Unfortunately, historians of Stalin's Soviet Union do not have recourse to ethnographic methods, but the appealing assumption that resistance lies just beneath the surface remains available to them.³²

Scott's influential work raises other questions when applied to Soviet Studies. The assumption of a hidden transcript of resistance leaves little room for the notion that subordinates may find it "hard to articulate a counterreality," that they experience a "doubled or divided consciousness," or that they may embrace "contradictions or mixed beliefs."³³ In addition, Scott's broad division between dominant and subordinate may not fit the power hierarchies of Soviet-type societies, in which one person looking up could become a total subordinate, but looking down becomes a dominator, so that "a similar domination may be exercised at each level."³⁴

Perhaps the most thorny questions, however, have to do with locating resistance in a political culture that was permeated with notions of masking and unmasking opposition. As several observers have recently pointed out, Bolsheviks until World War II spoke of observing

³² James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven: Yale, 1985), esp. 284-301, and Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcripts (1990).

³³ The above quotations are drawn from the important article by Susan Gal, "Language and the 'Arts of Resistance,'" Cultural Anthropology, 10:3, 407-424.

³⁴ Gal, 414-415.

the konspiratsiia -- they continued to adhere to conspiratorial models of politics.³⁵ In the drive for absolute orthodoxy and unanimity begun in the 1920s, when even the relatively few open oppositionists called themselves the true Leninist-Bolsheviks, methods of hiding and revealing opposition -- and potential opposition -- became central to the political system. What does it mean for the historian to read resistance in a political culture that elevated the unmasking of real, potential and fictitious opposition to one of its central preoccupations? When actors in the system developed elaborate strategies to deflect such charges?

A final, problematic issue has to do with social differentiation: surely the actions of groups to which the emerging Soviet political culture was less accessible, such as the peasantry, must be read in a different light, but the sources generated by the state on those groups were still shaped by Soviet political culture. The examples about interpreting archival documents that follow are in this sense limited, as they come from my work on a complex of topics including higher learning, Bolshevik party education and research institutions, cultural policy, and the history of the social sciences.³⁶ In short, they are connected to the intelligentsia and party intellectuals and politicians almost exclusively centered in Moscow and the urban centers. Nonetheless, it is problematic to tie this discussion completely to any one social site. For one thing, the early Soviet period was a time of widespread social dislocation and flux. The example of German resistance studies is again instructive; as Geyer also notes, study is parcelled up

³⁵ For example, see Andrea Graziosi, review of Rapports secret soviétiques. La société russe dans les documents confidentiels 1921-1991, in International Review of Social History, 40:2 (August 1995), 313.

³⁶ The archives I have worked in most include RTsKhIDNI, TsAODM (the former Moscow Party Archive), ARAN and GARF (including the former TsGA RSFSR).

among Protestant ministers, youth gangs, etc. yet working-class, peasant and aristocratic milieux tend to be taken as fixed.³⁷ Secondly, the intelligentsia, like the political system and political culture, is a moving target: one of the regime's key goals was to promote a new intelligentsia from subordinated classes.

What about the new archival sources? Does all this hold any relevance for the next time we blow dust off an archival papka?

Ritual Practices and Conventions

One of the most striking features of early Soviet political culture is the increasingly formulaic, planned and conventionalized nature of many of the new organizational forms that cut across culture and politics in the years after 1917. The term "ritual," to which a massive anthropological and social science literature is devoted, threatens, like political culture, to be applied indiscriminately as a "global construct." In the sense that ritual can imply a high degree of understanding among the participants in it and the evocation of emotion or faith, it may fit some but hardly all of the practices I am discussing -- and even those might vary across various times and places. In the Academy of Sciences purge session described below, for example, well-developed meanings and conventions set in a party context are being applied for the first time to what seems in part a non-comprehending or unwillingly participating group. Furthermore, early Soviet communism also launched an explicit "ritual movement" in the 1920s to develop new red

³⁷ Geyer, 334.

rites, usually invented traditions to replace religious rites connected with the life cycle.³⁸ For these reasons, and especially when discussing the flux of the early Soviet years, one can make a useful distinction between full-blown rituals and ritual practices; the later can refer to activities that are imbued with collective rules in which some degree of ritualization has occurred.³⁹

The process of codification in revolutionary culture is especially well illuminated in the work of James von Geldern on mass festivals between 1918 and 1920. Frequently heterodox and chaotic mass festivals gave way to increasingly single-minded, scripted events. Indeed, so great was the distrust of "spontaneity" that by 1920 in mass meetings "cells of fomenters" worked the crowd in order to simulate spontaneous enthusiasm.⁴⁰ This is just one example of a process of canonization of various new methods that is widely discernible in the early 1920s. For example, in the early 1920s model scripts of agitational trials and myriad other forms of "political enlightenment work" (some of which are still virtually unknown, such as the "living newspaper") were published, debated, and refined. In the words of Richard Stites, "Bolshevik observers of culture in the early 1920s were alive to the ritual and theatrical elements unfolding in all kinds of arenas. There was often a kind of reductionism in the rhapsodic appeals of some to turn all life into theater and all of theater into church."⁴¹

³⁸ It is these civic and anti-religious rites that Richard Stites largely has in mind in his "Bolshevik Ritual Building in the 1920s," in Sheila Fitzpatrick et al., eds. Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 295-309.

³⁹ For the above I have drawn on the discussion and references in Soo-Young Chin, "Perspectives on Ritual," Reviews in Anthropology, 24 (1995): 177-185.

⁴⁰ von Geldern, 146.

⁴¹ Stites, "Bolshevik Ritual Building," 296.

If this process was partly a process of deliberate canonization, one that was itself spurred on by the newly prominent missions of the "cultural front" after 1920, it was also a process of remarkably rapid routinization facilitated by the top-heavy, centralizing, control-oriented urges of the new Bolshevik political order. This is readily apparent in many of the practices of the party-state. For example, the purge as a means of regulating and purifying party and state institutions was deliberately codified during and after the first all-party purge of 1921. For one thing, the Politburo and Central Control Commission strove to wield it surgically, like a scalpel: if in the early 1920s instructions were differentiated by class groups, by the late 1920s they were setting target quotas for different groups and regions.⁴² But the purge was also theorized in party discussions as a test, a trial, as a "steeling device."⁴³ It is clear that the process of going in front of the purge commission, with the symbolic laying down of one's party card on the red cloth, had acquired strong elements of ritual.

From interesting new work on two other important political cultural forms, it can be concluded that this process of codification progressed rapidly if one compares the early 1920s with the late 1920s, but also that the far more rigid social and political order of the Stalinist 1930s and 1940s developed and regimented the unspoken rules to a qualitatively greater degree. In the first case, the show trial, with its coordinated accusations of guilt, contained many

⁴² See the differentiated instructions for the 1921 purge of white-collar personnel and other groups in "Protokol No. 41 Zasedaniia Politbiuro Ts.K. RKP ot 21.VI.21 goda," RTsKhIDNI f. 17, op. 3, d. 17, ll. 1-2, and the 1929 request from Emelian Iaroslavskii for "orientation figures," with its discussion of all major purges from the 1920s, in "V Politbiuro TsK VKP(b)," RTsKhIDNI f. 613, op. 3, d. 17, ll. 29-30. For a still-useful treatment of the results of purges based on published data, see T. H. Rigby, Communist Party Membership in the USSR, 1917-1967 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁴³ See, for example, "O predstoiashchei chistke partii," Bol'shevik, no. 4 (28 February 1929), 3.

ritualized elements, but as a staged courtroom performance its closest affinity, of course, was to theater. In this regard, it has been demonstrated that the scriptedness of the Shakhtii trial of 1928 was far greater than the show trial of the SRs in 1922.⁴⁴ In the second case, the self-criticism session, the codification came later at the end of the 1920s. Inner-party principles valorizing a confessional mode and, in part, formal retractions of one's positions had been at work for years, and were in part connected to the party's relations with inner-party oppositional groups. But as a practice self-criticism was entrenched in an all-union campaign of kritika/samokritika in 1928-29. This, in turn, formed one part of a pseudopopulist democratization and anti-bureaucratization campaign that played a large role in the contemporaneous attack on specialists and on "right deviationists," the purge of the party and state apparatus, and the launching of Stalin's "Great Break."⁴⁵ The practice continued in the 1930s, and by the Zhdanovshchina in 1947-48 an entire theory of self-criticism was consolidated by Zhdanov and approved by Stalin as an innovation in Marxism-Leninism. This ideological discussion was matched by a refinement of the perceived procedural regulations governing the self-criticism session; as described by Kojevnikov, the wrong tone, for example, or alternately a mastery of "sincere" self-criticism could determine the outcome of the exercise.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For a comparison of the 1922 and 1928 show trials in the context of their theatrical paradigm, see Julie Anne Cassiday, "The Theater of the World and the Theater of the State: Drama and the Show Trial in Early Soviet Russia," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford Univ., 1995).

⁴⁵ On the self-criticism campaign in the context of Stalin's consolidation of power, see Catherine Merridale, Moscow Politics and the Rise of Stalin: the Communist Party in the Capital, 1925-1932 (London: Macmillan, 1990), 211-215; in the context of the party intelligentsia and Sverdlov Communist University, David-Fox, Revolution of the Mind, 127-132.

⁴⁶ Kojevnikov, "Rituals of Stalinist Culture," 34-40.

These two examples suggest that Soviet political culture provided a remarkably fertile field for the development of new ritual practices. Each of these had its own trajectory and process of codification across the various subperiods of the early Soviet and Stalin years. Some of them, such as the mass agitational spectacles of the civil war period or the little-known kul'tpokhod of Great Break vintage, lost much of their momentum within a few years after they were invented. Ritual practices, this implies, can be analyzed in terms of in the immediate circumstances in which they were enacted, the broader subperiod in which the practices were shaped, and also the long-term continuities of the genre.

Let us take as an example the wave of repressions against the intelligentsia in the late 1920s, specifically the bolshevization of the Academy of Sciences in 1929-1930. This reorganization of one of the most autonomous non-party institutions remaining in the USSR was accompanied by arrests of academicians and a well-known purge of the academy apparat. In recent years Russian scholars have painstakingly reconstructed lists and biographical data on those who were repressed, and have exhaustively explored previously unknown aspects of the "academic affair."⁴⁷ Western scholars, when dealing with the post-Shakhtii general offensive against the non-party intelligentsia, have also been understandably concerned with establishing the extent of repressions.⁴⁸ But there have been few if any attempts to probe changes in

⁴⁷ See V. A. Kumanev, ed. Tragicheskie sud'by: Repressirovannye uchenye Akademii nauk SSSR (Moscow: Nauka, 1995); V. P. Leonov, et al., eds. Akademicheskoe delo 1929-1931, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Biblioteka RAN, 1993); and A. I. Dobkin and M. Iu. Sorokina, In Memoriam: Istoricheskii sbornik pamiati F. F. Perchenka (Moscow: Feniks, 1995).

⁴⁸ In discussing the purging and "re-elections" of professors in 1929 and 1930, for example, Fitzpatrick showed that many expelled professors soon found new jobs because of the vast expansion of higher education. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), 194-195.

atmosphere and behavior in the midst of such repressions, and the spread of highly stylized forms of behavior through such vehicles as purge sessions.

But the stenographic reports of the academy purge, set against the parameters of purges sessions in other settings in which they were more common, suggest a another significance for this particular operation. The purge commission was made up of Figatner from the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate (RKI), an assistant, and leading academicians, including Academy of Sciences permanent secretary Sergei Fedorovich Ol'denburg; the body went through about 600 cases in the summer of 1929. "In our commission there were almost no disagreements," Figatner said at one point. But in an unusually bold maneuver the academicians, including Ol'denburg, repeatedly intervened in plenary sessions to demonstratively praise the qualifications of employees who had been dismissed in commission. Figatner reacted by curtly "recommending" the previous decision be upheld.⁴⁹ In a general assembly on 19 August, biographical data on sotrudniki were read aloud, each one was questioned, and comments were sought from the floor. At first only praise of high qualifications could be heard, but soon revelations of concealed relatives abroad, falsified ankety and other charges broke down this collegial solidarity. At another point Figatner openly talked about anonymous denunciations from within the Academy which armed the interrogators with all the right questions to ask.⁵⁰

All this implies that what is important is not only the number ultimately dismissed, but

⁴⁹ "Stenogramma zasedaniia Plenuma komissii po proverke apparata Akademii Nauk SSSR. 29 Avgusta 1929," GARF f. 3316, op. 1, d. 15, ll. 478-484; "Komissiiia po chistke apparata Akademii Nauk. Zasedanie 21 oktiabria 1929," *ibid.*, ll. 488-495.

⁵⁰ "Stenogramma obshchego sobraniia sotrudnikov Akademii Nauk SSSR. 19 avgusta 1929," GARF f. 3316, op. 1, d. 15, ll. 411-420; "Stenogramma zasedaniia obshchego sobraniia sotrudnikov Akademii Nauk. 30/VII-1929," *ibid.*, l. 8.

the introduction of conventions of the purge sessions -- including denunciations, group dynamics of public interrogation, and the entire package of practices and attitudes built into the purge session itself. In fact, it can be established that introduction of these vehicles for exporting party political culture to hitherto non-party milieu was a conscious operation. The 1929 and 1930 professorial reelections, for example, were conducted by party legal official Andrei Ianuar'evich Vyshinskii, at that time the head of Narkompros' Glavprofobr. Vyshinskii, of course, described his goals not in terms of introducing ritualized forms of communist political culture but of bringing the sword of proletarian self-criticism to the reactionary professoriate. Measures included self-criticism, public reelection sessions, and a "campaign of social evaluations" in which students were encouraged to differentiate the "reactionary" from the loyal professoriate.⁵¹

It may make as little sense to depict Ol'denburg as "resisting" by speaking out repeatedly about removed colleagues' qualifications as it does to indict him of being complicit by participating on the purge commission in the first place. What is more revealing may be to analyze how well he maneuvered within the limits set by the rules of the game. In fact, the example is instructive, for Ol'denburg has been classified in diametrically opposed terms as the protector of the Academy's autonomy and as a conciliator par excellence.⁵² It is appropriate, then,

⁵¹ "Protokol zakrytogo zasedaniia kollegii Narkomprosa ot 1-go avgusta 1929 goda," GARF f. A2306, op. 69, ed. khr. 1876, l. 29. See also A. Ia. Vyshinskii, "O nashikh kadrakh," Nauchnyi rabotnik, no. 1, Jan. 1930, 32-36.

⁵² Compare I. D. Serebriakov, "Nepremennyi sekretar' AN akademik Sergei Fedorovich Ol'denburg," Novaia i noveishaia istoriia, no. 1 (January-February 1994): 217-38 and M.A. Sidorov, "Permanent Secretary Ol'denburg -- Defender and Patron of the Academy," Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 63:4 (1993): 308-321, orig. in Vestnik Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, 64:4 (1993): 358-371 with the chapter on Ol'denburg in Vera Tolz, Russian Academicians and the Revolution: Combining Professionalism and Politics (London: Macmillan, 1997). For a recent reevaluation stressing Ol'denburg's involvement before and after 1917 in furthering a

that one treatment highlighting the ambiguity in interpreting the actions of a later president of the Academy, Sergei Vavilov, refers to the "mask" which Stalinist culture so often prompted one to wear. At a time when the realm of possible maneuver and obligatory role-playing was much more tightly set, this mask covered the gap between open political conformism and half-hidden messages and intrigues through which a master "of the language and games of this culture" could succeed.⁵³

Performances and Theatricality

Soviet political culture, as it emerged, also contained strong elements of theatricality. This is not unconnected to its cultivation of ritual; since ritual acts are often publicly performed, several links between ritual and performance have already been apparent. But the term theatricality can also convey several other features of the young Soviet political culture which are not to be conflated with ritual. These include its direct links to theater as a decisively influential cultural form in the early Soviet state, the importance of theatrical genres in political enlightenment, and the large role of the cultural avant-garde in the development of a culture

program for the state organization of science -- and hence his stature as a "willing or unwilling" founding father of "the golden cage that the Soviet system of scientific research became" -- see Loren R. Graham, "The Abortive Effort to Reform Russian Science: An Historical View," in Michael David-Fox and György Péteri, eds., Academia in Upheaval: Origins, Transfers, and Transformations of the Communist Academic Regime in Russia and East Central Europe (Westport, Conn. and London: Bergin & Garvey, 2000), p. 5, citing M. Iu. Sorokina, "Molchat' dalee nel'zia..." (Iz epistol'nogo nasledii akademika S. F. Ol'denburga) "Voprosy istorii estestvoznaniia i tekhniki, no. 3, 1995, 110.

⁵³ See Alexei Kojevnikov, "President of Stalin's Academy: The Mask and Responsibility of Sergei Vavilov," Isis, 87 (1996): 18-50, especially p. 49.

concerned with edifying and transforming the audience. More broadly, the term underscores the importance of roles and scriptedness in the public meetings that were a locus classicus of early Soviet political culture. Here one can establish links and parallels to high and aesthetic culture.

It is interesting to note that what one scholar terms Soviet "theatrical ideology" became, in tandem with the broader political culture, oriented around transforming the audience. As Meierkhol'd declared in 1920, "every spectator is, as it were, a model of Soviet Russia." The young Sergei Eisenstein, on the opening of the First Workers' Stage of the Moscow Proletkul't in 1923, declared that the spectator "is made the basic material of the theater; the task of every utilitarian theater (agit, poster, health education) is the molding of the spectator in the desired direction and frame of mind."⁵⁴ Theater itself was, in Katerina Clark's memorable phrase, the "cradle of Soviet culture." Avant-garde theater activists well before 1917 viewed theater as a "construct for a totalizing experience" to overcome alienation and transform man. When these currents meshed during the civil war period with the Bolshevik embrace of theater as a key educational and propagandistic device, theater became the queen of the revolutionary arts.⁵⁵ It might be added: as Bolshevik politics itself acquired an increasingly didactic function and scripted character in the 1920s, the revolutionary polity itself was becoming more and more theatrical.

One implication of the strong streak of theatricality in Soviet political culture is that the actions of many "actors" in this system are best interpreted as the playing of roles, which were

⁵⁴ Quoted and discussed in Lars Kleberg, "The Audience as Myth and Reality: Soviet Theatrical Ideology and Audience Research in the 1920s," Russian History/Histoire Russe, 9:2-3 (1982): 227-241.

⁵⁵ Clark, Petersburg, 74-104.

often tightly set or overdetermined. Again, this holds implications for reading sources. One can (and should) analyze the rich cache of protokoly of student seminars from the Institute of Red Professors in the mid-late 1920s in terms of the specific charges levelled against one figure or another, or the content of the debates in various disciplines. But the very fact that the meetings were protocolled, that votes were counted on formal resolutions about a doklad on Kant or Hegel, shows that the model of the party cell in political life had been transposed to party intellectual affairs.⁵⁶

Elsewhere I have compared the dynamics of these meetings of the red professors in the mid-late 1920s with the features of a little-known form of political theater, the agitational trial (agitsud); the point of the comparison is to suggest how features of Soviet political culture acquired mass and depth in widely varying settings.⁵⁷ The agit-trial, also known as politsud or pokazatel'nyi sud, was an early form of revolutionary propaganda theater that emerged in the Red Army in the civil war. The themes of the dramatized trials typically dealt not only with counter-revolutionaries and political issues, but public health themes ("sanitary trials") and anti-religious propaganda. Even concepts like pornography or policies like NEP could be put on trial, and the "trial of a cow" was intended to reveal the idiocy of rural life.⁵⁸

What Fülöp-Miller termed the "theatricalized life" of early Soviet Russia was in part

⁵⁶ The most significant of these protocols, which because of their detail and lengthy quotations are often a kind of hybrid between protokoly and stenograficheskie otchetny, are in GARF f. 5284, op. 1, dd. 192, 338.

⁵⁷ David-Fox, Revolution of the Mind, chap. 3.

⁵⁸ To my knowledge, there are only two full-length analyses of agit-trials: Cassidy's dissertation and Elizabeth A. Wood's unpublished paper, "Agitation Trials: Theater and State Power in Post-Revolutionary Russia." Wood is currently completing a monograph about the trials.

spurred on by the wide currency of theatrical methods and genres in political enlightenment work.⁵⁹ The "living newspaper," for example, typically involved acting out the day's headlines from a Soviet newspaper. The club movement and the student movement, both key components of 1920s "cultural front" initiatives, also placed great emphasis on theater. The party students who were directly involved in perpetuating and developing Bolshevik political culture were familiar with acting roles from other areas as well. At the "real" show trial of the SR Party in 1922, for example, Sverdlov Communist University students and young Communists reportedly rehearsed for 4 hours before they rallied at the train station against foreign socialist dignitaries, allowed in to the country as defense representatives for the accused SRs; in front of the courthouse, the students were mobilized to chant "death to the SRs!"⁶⁰

Here I will bring out only one of the most striking parallels between the agit-trial as a genre of revolutionary theater and the political-intellectual gatherings of the young Marxist social scientists. The conventions of the red professors' seminars allowed for the seminar leader (*starosta*) to take charge of exposing others' methodological mistakes. In essence, he acted as prosecutor and judge; and the red professors' unusually aggressive prosecutorial practice of "working [people] over," bombarding them with intensive questions from all sides, was homologous to the role of the accuser in the agit-trial. In the IKP department of natural science in 1926 and 1927, for example, the member of Bukharin's immediate entourage, Vasiliï Nikolaevich Slepkov, played such a role. During this period he introduced a barrage of motions

⁵⁹ The term comes from the title of chapter 7 in René Fülöp-Miller's Mind and Face of Bolshevism: An Examination of Cultural Life in Soviet Russia (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928).

⁶⁰ S. Dvinov, "K protsessu SR (pis'mo iz Moskvyy)," Sotsialisticheskii vestnik, 2 August 1922, 5-6.

labelling fellow students "methodologically unsatisfactory," "disloyal" to the seminar, "methodologically incorrect," and perpetrators of "blunders from a methodological point of view." That this did not destroy the work of the seminar, but rather was enacted as a legitimate function, is suggested by the fact that the watchdog was unanimously elected dean (dekan) of the natural science department in 1927.⁶¹ Rather than fit the actions of individuals into outside categories (resistance, complicity) or officially sanctioned categories (opposition, orthodoxy) it makes sense to ask: Does this person's actions relate to a proscribed role, which might well change if that person appeared in another setting?

This concern with the dramatic revelation of guilt in the agit-trial and the party student discussions found yet another parallel expression in Soviet legal culture and practice. Demonstration trials were staged on circuit in order to be closer to factories and villages; such trials comprised 17.1 percent of all criminal cases in 1926. They were the analogue of the political, all-union show trials for ordinary cases, but while the big show trials came in waves (1921-24, 1928-33, 1936-38) the "everyday" demonstration trials were staged throughout the period. Conviction and sentence were typically meted out according to plan, in order to heighten the scripted, agitational message; and while accusers appeared in other trials "hardly at all," they were common in the demonstration trials.⁶²

The last major aspect of Soviet political culture I will explore has to do with the hunt for

⁶¹ Protocols of seminars at the Institute of Red Professors, GARF f. 5284, op. 1, d. 192, l. 45, 46, 48-9, 56l; GARF f. 5284, op. 1, d. 338, l.29.

⁶² The above is drawn from Peter H. Solomon, Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 44-46. "Demonstration trial" is Solomon's translation of pokazatel'nyi sud, designed to distinguish it from both the theatrical genre and the political show trials of the same name.

opposition. As this was one of the central preoccupations of Soviet communism, elaborate methods for unmasking and deflecting charges of opposition developed. It is worth noting that the centrality of orthodoxy and deviation in the Soviet political system presents a challenge but also a great boon to historians, as it no doubt contributed to the elaborate record-keeping practices of the regime. It is difficult to imagine that so many meetings down to the lowliest party cell would otherwise have been protocolled and stenogrammed.

In classical Marxism, of course, stripping away "ideology" to reveal underlying class interest was a central methodological device. But in the Soviet 1920s and 1930s masking and unmasking became both more pervasive and consequential because it intersected with political practices in profound ways. It is impossible to elaborate all the circumstances in which concealing -- from oppositionist views to class background to anything deemed damaging -- became important.⁶³ But as in the party's pervasive campaign mode, a typical pattern of escalation is apparent. For once the appearance of unanimity was more or less achieved, the hunt shifted to hidden enemies masquerading as loyalists -- hence the complex game of appearances and intentions embedded in charges such as "double-dealing." Kotkin puts it nicely: "The imputation of double-dealing would have made no sense in the absence of the party's obsession with orthodoxy as well as the appearance of unanimity, an obsession that was made operational by Stalin's relentless drive for absolute power." Rittersporn has written suggestively about the imagery of "omnipresent conspiracy" apparent at least since the campaign against the "right

⁶³ Daniel Orlovsky produces interesting material suggesting the "masked quality of Soviet society" in "The Hidden Class: White-Collar Workers in the Soviet 1920s," in Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds. Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 220.

deviation" in 1929; Kotkin comments that the reason politics in the USSR could be seen as a conspiracy was that in the Soviet case it was a conspiracy.⁶⁴ This, however, does not imply we need only to study conspiratorial political practices; it implies we must try to link those practices to the conspiratorial mentality and the practices it engendered.

The concern with ferreting out concealed enemies was in fact given a qualitative leap forward at the outset of the Stalin era, during the upheaval surrounding the "Great Break." This, first and foremost, stemmed from the fact that the intensive unmasking of hidden opponents became a central device connected to Stalin's consolidation of sole power, and thus raged unchecked throughout the political-cultural ecosystem. One of Stalin's most brilliant uses of political theater was a six-month-long hunt for unnamed "rightists," beginning with small or abstract targets in late 1928 and culminating in the condemnation of "Bukharin and Co." in February 1929. The final unmasking of Bukharin, Rykov and Tomskii as the revealed rightist leaders followed in the best traditions of revolutionary theater -- especially the kind, as in the most riveting agit-trials, where the full extent of the guilt of the masked enemy is tantalizingly unclear for a lengthy period. The ephemeral "Right Opposition" was swept away, but rightists remained, as Lars Lih notes, a preoccupation for years to come.⁶⁵ In the party-wide campaign, half-rightists, conciliationists of rightists, objective rightists, waverers, etc. were all linked to the Right Opposition.

⁶⁴ Gábor Tamás Rittersporn, "The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s," in J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning, eds. Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993); Kotkin, 305, 556 n. 98.

⁶⁵ Lars Lih, introduction to Lih et al., eds. Stalin's Letters to Molotov (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), 49. See also Catherine Merridale, "The Reluctant Opposition: The Right 'Deviation' in Moscow, 1928," Soviet Studies, 41:3 (July 1989): 382-400.

This hunt for "rightists" might suggest large potential or actual support for Bukharin, Tomskii or Rykov in particular or anti-Stalinist Bolshevism in general. But the "new archival sources" suggest things were more complicated than that. Consider the meeting of Sverdlov Communist University's party cell in November 1928, where one activist caused a sensation by dramatically declaring: "Right here at the university there are deviations of a left and right nature (noise)...The Bureau together with the party organizers must expose and destroy them." Yet a moment later the same speaker added: "And if they do not exist, then that is good (noise)."⁶⁶ Was this activist masking the existence of the right deviation, or were deviationists masking themselves? Even if neither were the case, the process of unmasking would go on.⁶⁷

Policymaking Modes: Limits of Performativity?

Let us shift the scenes once again to a situation no less crisis-ridden than the purge of 1929, and no less conflict-laden than the meetings of red professors: to the height of Stalin's Great Break in higher learning. This final example, however, taken from the files of the Commissariat of Education, comes from stenographic reports of a much different type of event, a closed-door policy meeting within a state institution. It is chosen to raise questions about the limits of those elements of performance and ritual in Soviet political culture raised above. The

⁶⁶ "Protokol No. 5 obshchego sobraniia iacheiki Komuniversiteta Sverdlova ot 29/XI-1928," RGAODgM f. 459, op. 1, d. 30, ll. 48-50.

⁶⁷ On the "Right" as an invented opposition, see David-Fox, Revolution of the Mind, 182-191.

hard-headed, policy-oriented, utilitarian mode represented here, one that is also familiar to students of the Soviet state, is one ostensibly far less governed by stylized conventions.

The three-day-long gathering (soveshchanie) brought directors of VUZy (higher educational institutions) and universities together on June 21-23, 1930 in front of the commissar of education, Andrei Sergeevich Bubnov, and other Narkompros officials. In order to understand its significance one must realize that the 1929-30 academic year witnessed perhaps the most profound reordering of higher education in Russian history. A package of projects that had been applied most intensively in communist institutions in the 1920s -- proletarianization, active methods of pedagogy (working in brigades), promotion of party members, so-called production practice -- were carried out everywhere on an unprecedented scale. Programs and curricula were redone many times in attempts to channel disciplines in a "practical" direction on the model of higher technical education, facilitate rapid graduations, and boost Marxism-Leninism in the social sciences. Narkompros was purged and in crisis; it watched as technical institutes and then various university departments were transferred from its jurisdiction to that of the economic commissariats. The very idea of a university came under assault beginning in 1929, as the institutions were branded in the press as "feudal relics" unsuited to the age of industrialization. Universities were stripped of departments, laboratories and property, which then became the subject of lengthy, drawn-out disputes.⁶⁸

It was this meeting of university directors -- almost all of them communist party members

⁶⁸ The most significant study remains Sh. Kh. Chanbarisov, Formirovanie sovetskoi universitetskoi sistemy (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1988). See also my article, "The Assault on the Universities and the Dynamics of Stalin's 'Great Break,' 1928-1932," in David-Fox and Péteri, eds., Academia in Upheaval, pp. 73-103

recently installed in their posts -- which marked a turning point in the drift of the universities toward total liquidation. In its wake Bubnov and the Narkompros leadership moved toward a more strenuous defense of state universities and as well as Narkompros possessions and prerogatives. This shift, in turn, ultimately may have helped pave the way for the restoration of the universities in 1932 and after. The new commissar of education, Bubnov, brought in to replace Lunacharskii in 1929, was a militant young outsider with previous posts in Agitprop and the Political Administration of the Red Army, and he had been unwilling to make such a defense earlier. In a later self-criticism, Bubnov admitted to not having adequately resisted "clearly liquidationist moods."⁶⁹

The time of the three-day-long directors' soveshchanie was one when published works on higher education were filled with ideological speech about wreckers and feudal relics; the overwhelmingly no-nonsense, "practical" rhetoric of the university officials is thus all the more striking. One after another, they rose to criticize Narkompros for its constant reorganizations, lack of support, and flights of ideological fancy. One declared: "The current academic year in the life of VUZy, in part due to the leadership of Narkompros, was the worst year in the entire existence of Soviet power." Another noted that credits were late for the second year and budgets became known only at the end of the academic year; in January old amounts were allocated for vastly increased contingents. Study plans were changed in the middle of the year, divisions and faculties were reorganized. "On the questions we ask a thousand times of Narkompros -- in writing, by telegraph, orally, by telephone -- we get one answer. There are several proposals, but

⁶⁹ See, for example, "V NKRKI RSFSR. Zam. Narkompros M. Epshtein," 28 August 1930, GARF f. A2307, op. 15, d. 111, l. 51; Chanbarisov, 198.

what will happen? "We don't know." Another director referred to "an exceptionally large number of major shifts" in the first half of 1930 in the official, codified "overall aims" (tselevye ustanovki) for university departments as well as in admissions quotas. Shimanskii from Leningrad University declared: "Much has been said about...waverings in the [Narkompros] leadership. Take this example. In autumn they tell us: 'Technologize.' So we do it, put together study plans. Now they say: 'Theoreticalize.' So we theoreticalized. If in the course of the last academic year we rewrote study plans three times, how many will it be next year?" Still others referred to the alarm over the fate of the universities resulting from transfer of departments and creation of new institutes.⁷⁰

In this policy meeting, then, there was no talk of feudal relics or wreckers, nor were there, seemingly, the stylized conventions of group behavior we have seen before; organizational matters reigned supreme. Of course, one might say, this was a time of organizational crisis and a different kind of meeting. But on a deeper level this policy meeting can be connected to the published ideological discourse and other, more staged types of public meetings.

To be sure, the policy meeting followed its own unspoken rules: the immersion in concrete organizational details, sanctioned by the nature of the forum, was the only way to approach the potential destruction of the universities that was on everyone's mind. This was not the place to dispute or even speak of whether universities in fact represented archaic holdovers from the age of feudalism. However, one can detect a whiff of inner-party struggle even amidst the talk of credits and curricula; the indictment of Narkompros for "waverings" employed a term

⁷⁰ "Stenogramma soveshchaniia direktorov VUZ'ov ot 21-22 iunია 1930 g.," GARF f. A2307, op. 15, d. 104, ll. 10-19, and Ibid, 23 June 1930, d. 105, ll. 31-34, 46.

often used in relation to deviationists from the party line. Furthermore, there is an interesting phenomenon of slippages; not everyone could shift easily from ideological to policymaking mode. In a similar gathering of Narkompros' State Academic Council, to cite but one of the more obvious examples, a reference to "wreckers in agriculture" referred not to kulaks; it was a zoologist discussing a new program for the study of vertebrate animals.⁷¹

The most interesting questions, however, are raised by the remarkable manner in which the university directors, as if on cue, rose up one after another in front of Bubnov to criticize Narkompros and its work. Was this not a performed if muted version of a coordinated denunciation, a "working over" in some ways similar to the red professors' meetings? If there is a connection, then the norms of the public rituals of communist political culture can be fruitfully linked even to what appears at first sight to be a purely businesslike, policy-oriented, non-ritualistic forum.

I want to shift perspectives one last time, in an attempt to relate the problems of political culture and interpreting sources raised in this paper to the formation of the Soviet archival system. One of the most significant studies of the emergence of the Soviet system of archival organization, contained in Khorkhordina's monograph, has drawn attention to a series of ordinances in the early and mid-1920s that shaped Soviet assumptions about arkhivnoe

⁷¹ "Plenum universitetskikh seksii GUS. Zasedaniia ot 7/VI-32 goda," GARF f. A2307, op. 17, d. 21, l. 78.

stroitel'stvo in lasting ways. These included the creation of a de facto hierarchy of collections and types of documents judged on the basis of their institutional importance within the party-state, and collected and arranged according to their institutional provenance; strict divisions between central and local, pre- and post-1917 documentation; and the groundwork for separating out documents for secret preservation that led to the rise of an "archipelago" of special collections. Khorkhordina labels this a "party-institutional" (partiino-vedomstvennyi) approach to archival organization. She notes that the "strict orientation towards documents of institutional origins,...central organizations and certain categories of historical-revolutionary materials weakened attention paid to documents from personal archives, collections of non-outstanding personalities, and to 'low-level' local archives."⁷²

The manner in which this secretive, hierarchical archival system has been widely but still incompletely opened between the late 1980s and late 1990s has conspired to keep the center of scholarly attention on "high-level" sources, defined in the same sense that the Soviet archival system itself understood them. The partial declassification between 1991 and 1996 (one recent estimate hazards the guess that 6 million out of a possibly 25 million folders were released), the continuing general inaccessibility of secret police and presidential archives, and the gradual dribbling out of top-secret sources have all combined to keep historians waiting until the next layer of the onion is peeled away.⁷³ In other words, the most revealing sources are often assumed to be the ones the Soviet archival system itself classified as the highest and the most secret.

⁷² T. I. Khorkhordina, Istoriia otechestva i arkhivy. 1917-1980-e gg. (Moscow: RGGU, 1994), 98-99, 106-109, quotation on p.108.

⁷³ The estimate, which is A. N. Elpat'evskii's, is discussed in Kozlov and Lokteva, "Arkhivnaia revoliutsiia," no. 2, 122.

In this paper I have laid out an approach to reading sources that attempts to interpret them from within the perspective of early Soviet political culture. It has attempted to draw attention to conventions and tacit rules that came to regulate genres of meetings and behaviors that were increasingly codified in a "didactic revolution" geared toward molding and mobilizing its subjects. The case of resistance theory suggests the difficulties of imposing interpretive strategies developed without attention to a political culture increasingly concerned with masking and unmasking; for this political culture, I have suggested, tended to generate fictional or exaggerated opposition and greatly complicates the straightforward labelling of intentions. To work around those problems, I have advocated study of the ritual practices and elements of performance that became more pronounced in Soviet political culture, and hence embedded in the sources. This implies that many kinds of "ordinary" sources can be compared and analyzed for a different kinds of "revelations" about the culture in which they emerged. In fact, all of the examples I have used come from "rank and file" protocols and stenographic reports of relatively "low-level" events, which nonetheless have the advantage of representing the most common forms of documentation preserved within the Soviet archival system. Put together, they can open a window into early Soviet political culture in ways in which many top-secret, high-level documents undoubtedly cannot.

