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# Alternative Freedoms<sup>1</sup>

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THIS IS A TIME when our leaders in Britain and the USA are claiming that “our” ideas about freedom are applicable across the world: that the value of freedom is universal. So it is also a time when it is appropriate—even urgent—for us to think carefully about the range of ideas held in other societies. I am going to talk about Russia, and try to answer this question: if you were a Russian and tuned in to some speech by Bush or Blair about “freedom”—what would this word bring to your mind? I shall suggest that Russians are conflicted about freedom, quite suspicious of it in fact, and I hope to explain to you why.

Perhaps I should say a word about the exercise I shall be involved with in asking this question. I am not a philosopher and I am not going to re-hash philosophical theories of freedom, not even those of Russian philosophers. Nor am I going to apply influential theories—let us say Hegel’s or Foucault’s ideas on freedom—to anthropological materials. Instead, I want to use our word “freedom”—whose multiple meanings will be implicit and left to your imaginations—to *elicit*, as it were, a range of ideas held in Russia. That is, the perhaps less familiar ideas held by ordinary people, deliberately downplaying the more easily accessible theories pronounced by intellectuals and politicians.

Let me start with the words Russians use. Though words do not provide a complete key, they are our first guide to how people are thinking. The Russian language, more than English, has a number of different terms to express ideas that we can recognise as being “about” freedom. I am going to describe three of them and how their content has changed historically to the present day. Each of these ideas of freedom contains its own Nemesis, that is, what can seem to be “good” about them in one context, or from one perspective, can seem dangerous and

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<sup>1</sup>Read 30 April 2005.

wrong from another. I'll further suggest that freedom can be as much a sensation or feeling as an idea. This expansive diversity—both in the resources available to think about freedom and in the evaluation of particular ideas—means that it would be complacent and irresponsible to generalise about “the Russians,” as if there were no schisms or disagreements here. My task, rather, is to attempt to trace the lineaments of ideas that sometimes run together and sometime clash.

The Russian word most commonly used to translate the English “freedom” is *svoboda*, which today can be broadly construed as liberty or political freedom. Yet in mediaeval times, *svoboda*, which is based on the root *svoi* (self, ours),<sup>2</sup> seems to have meant something rather different, that is, the security and well-being that result from living amongst one's own people. *Svoboda* (freedom) first of all was the agglomeration of practices of our own way of life, most fundamentally contrasted with those of alien people and enemies. It suggests an image of a social kind of freedom, one that was not centred on the singular individual.

*Svoboda* was first generated within a hierarchical political structure. “We,” the full members of the patriarchal and kin-based community, also implied the presence of the “not yet us.” These were the children, but also domestic slaves, captives, and later the serfs, who might one day attain this full status but meanwhile lived under various constraints. The process of attaining freedom was thus first conceptualised as an entry *into* a privileged political state of liberty, rather than as a move *out* from captivity into an indefinite state called freedom. So, telescoping a long history, the officially-defined *svoboda* in Soviet times came to have a double sense: first of all independence, not being ruled by foreigners with an alien set of values; and, second, privileged political status, in a situation where a part of society (the prisoners, the Gulag inmates) was unfree. Shalamov, when he was under investigation at the Butyrka prison in the 1960s, enquired about his rights under the constitution. “It doesn't apply to you,” the investigator replied, “Your constitution is the criminal code” (1989, 236).

Now despite the seemingly back and white division between the free and the unfree, in practice the Soviet designate of the “we” (the *svoi*) who are free could slide from category to category, identifying with or excluding certain addressees, even when one person was talking. An example is Kalinin's speech to peasant farmers in 1929. Through collectivisation, he proclaimed, “we humanity,” then “we

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<sup>2</sup>The Indo-European root of *svoboda* is \*se or \*sue, the same root that forms the social category *svoi* (self, ours, one's own) (Il'in 1997: 54–58; Paxson 2005, 96).

agrarian-scientists,” and finally “we Soviet communists” will leap from the world of necessity into the “kingdom of freedom.”<sup>3</sup> Very likely, we must suppose, many of the farmers listening to such speeches would have been quite unable to put themselves in the position of any of these official “we.” But whoever is identified as “free” (*svobodniy*), the old “us”/“other” distinction clings to the way the word is used. This might explain, at least to some extent, why the notion of “our own kind of freedom,” freedom as different from those of others and therefore not universal, might come easily to Russians. It could suggest that Russians are free in ways others can’t be. In Soviet official discourse, for example, it could lend itself to claims that the freedoms of socialist life are superior to those (falsely) claimed by the liberal West.

But the use of *svoboda* from the early nineteenth century also to talk about revolt and revolution meant that it could turn against its official version. *Svoboda* could not be captured by the state alone. In the voice of poets and bards freedom is liberation from tyranny, or the blessed sensation of existing “freely,” adjacent to non-freedom:

. . . getting together with a beautiful girl,  
to fly in a taxi spraying mud  
alongside the wall of the prison where I sat out three years,  
a bottle in hand—there she is, freedom!<sup>4</sup>

*Svoboda* indicates the society of the people who are *not unfree*, but apart from that it suggests little about what that society might be like. Now Russians suggest that there is another even more basic idea of freedom, one that has a positive foundation and does not depend on the existence of un-freedom. This derives from an ancient Russian concept that is rather unfamiliar to us—*mir*.

*Mir* has the meaning of the universe, all humanity, the world, or any given world, and in the past it also referred to the rural commune, the “social world” of the peasant. *Mir* points to the well-being naturally present between all persons, communities, and their environment. It gives rise not to a concept, but to a feeling (*oschuschenie*) of freedom, which is given by self-realisation in an entire universe conceived

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Il’in (1997, 75).

<sup>4</sup> Iosif Brodskii (1972), quoted in Ionin (1997, 9). Leonid Ionin in his book *Svoboda v SSSR* (Freedom in the USSR) develops a theory “to help understand how a full human existence is possible in societies of total repression” (1997, 11). If freedom pertains to the everyday and is not limited to political liberty, Ionin suggests, it may consist in the ability to move from one finite situation of meaning to another, for example, from work to dreaming, from scientific to religious experience, or from being tied to a place to travel. Such a shift has the quality of a leap (*skachka*) of liberation. Repressive societies that sharply delimit spheres of human experience and construct numerous constraints to movement thus also provide the opportunities for experience of the sensation of freedom (1997, 9–36).

as a whole. So the freedom arising from mir has an adverbial quality. To live (how)? Freely. If svoboda freedom is based on the political construction of a bounded society (that of the free), mir by contrast can be directed outwards limitlessly. It is no accident that the Soviet spacecraft is called *Mir*.

This is the idyllic image of the universalised community, which ignores its fatal downside, namely that if individuals subordinate themselves to such a totality they may be easily manipulated by any government claiming to represent it.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, the actuality of poverty-ridden peasant communes did not correspond to the idyll of mir-freedom, though plenty of people tried to argue that it did. Yet it was just this largely illusory structure that was re-established by the Soviets when they replaced the mir-communes with collective farms. Indeed the Soviet government carried mir to its apotheosis, after it carried out linguistic reforms. Mir-world was now written the same way as a different word, mir meaning peace. Soon there came slogans like *Miru mir!* (Peace to the World) which played on the new sameness. And there are songs—especially popular after Gagarin’s flight—

We are for mir! And this song  
We will carry, friends, across the sunlit world (*po svetu*)

where Russians tell me it is impossible to know which sense of mir is intended.

So there was this giddy high Soviet alignment of world and peace, both now called mir, which overrode any disjunction between itself and reality. Indeed, it also projected freedom as revolutionary, ploughing through and casting aside the “petty” habits of everyday life, which have so often had a bad press in Russia.

That the mass parades proclaiming mir and svoboda were increasingly standardised, permeated with the heavy instrumentalism of the party, and later often thought of as tiresome duties or simply as occasions to have fun, does not detract from the evidence that there was a possible sensation of freedom here. This is worth pointing out because

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<sup>5</sup> Positive freedom suggests that people can find their real selves in the social whole of which the individual is a part. It arises from the wish to be my own master, a subject not an object, and this is connected with rationality because self-mastery means not being a slave to one’s own base, irrational instincts. The dominant self is thus identified with reason and the ability to calculate, aim and strategise. This higher self can be identified with the rational state, which is the embodiment of human rationality. Therefore such a state is justified in coercing people, making them “free,” even if this is against their wishes—for those wishes would by definition be irrational, ignorant, etc. Berlin emphasises the danger of this idea because it is so liable to be manipulated by totalitarian governments in their own interests (Berlin 1969, 118–72).

the subjectivity enabling this kind of sensation, being the distinctive creation of a particular kind of politics and use of language, is so foreign to people from societies never organised in this way. The Soviet bloc as the “bastion of freedom”—one might laugh, or be shocked, as plenty of Russians were too. But that laugh would come from thinking of freedom as pertaining to the individual. The subject of *mir*, however, is “we,” not “I.” It is the plural subject of a joint commitment, as the philosopher Margaret Gilbert puts it (1996). Perhaps only the organised penetration of power into all subjects, the dependency that resulted when virtually all adults were employees of the state, and the psychological inclinations resulting from never being outside a collective of one kind or another from kindergarten onwards, could produce this affective consequence—the euphoria of the universalised “we” of a new kind of society, who are free because “we” encompasses all.

I hope this helps explain the deeply non-intuitive fact (to us) that there are Russian villagers today who identify freedom, precisely with Stalinism. Freedom here melds *svoboda* with *mir*, producing an emotion of security, warmth, and expansiveness that is still remembered by older people today. According to a recent ethnography, the villagers say, for example (Paxson 2005, 96), “During the time of Stalin, we lived better than we live now. Everyone was free. There was everything everywhere.” Yet it is not that these same people forget about the fear and suffering of the Stalinist repressions. The very existence of the “radiant past” was shot through with darkness (Paxson 2005, 109): “How we lived better then! How we were joyous! *One wrong word and they could take you away in the middle of the night. We lived in friendship and generosity! Remember how they took away that woman—for one little rhyme—she never came back.*”

Nevertheless, the villagers say quite seriously that the sudden arrests, even if unjust in each particular case, were “not bad” if they maintained social discipline. Indeed, in this view *fear* was essential—without it there would be instability, slackness, disorder.

Of course, I am aware in presenting this disturbing picture, that there were people in Russia who located *svoboda* differently, i.e., precisely in those pockets that were held apart from the Soviet system.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This idea has been beautifully explored by Finn Sivert Nil’sen in relation to everyday lives in Leningrad (Nil’sen 2004, 229–32). In Nil’sen’s account, freedom in Russia, especially Soviet Russia, was always an attempt of individuals to establish a “still core of being,” away from authority, which was externalised. Yet freedom, he argues, demands an anchor, i.e., authority, from which and against which to project itself. I appreciate this idea, but I think we can go further anthropologically by recognising that there is not just one universal idea of freedom, even in one society. See also Yurchak’s discussion of “deterritorialized milieus” in late Soviet society (2006, 126–57).

But what I am pointing to is the more widespread notion, where *svoboda*-freedom is held to exist *by means of* an overall state of “discipline,” and its pleasure is inextricably tangled up with fear.

I now discuss one further idea of freedom, perhaps the most important. Many people hold that the true Russian word for freedom is *volya*. *Volya* means “will” as well as individual, personal freedom. For example, “Potashnikov [a Gulag camp inmate] swore not to save himself by becoming a brigadier, not to allow himself to violate any other person’s *volyu* [will/freedom] in this place” (Shalamov 1989, 15). Now *volya* does pertain to the individual. It is the state of fulfilment of desires that you yearn for when in a situation of non-freedom. When prisoners of the Gulag talked about their release, they said they would go out to *volya*, not *svoboda*.

*Volya* is sensation, emotion, and action. It is both the conscious willing and the active exercise of boundless release, something that one experiences away from society or any kind of limitation. It is direct and unpretentious. “There she is, freedom [*volya*], bare-footed and simple,” wrote Nabokov. It opposes the dry factual character of reason. A Russian saying goes, “Rationality answers to truth and lies, *volya* to good and evil.”

But *volya* too has dark shadows. It is central among a group of words that tie together desiring/willing (*veleniya*), demanding, and commanding (*poveleniya*). So in political life there can be a *volya* that indicates a despotic freedom of action. The potential conflicts attached to the idea can be seen from sentences like “The *volya* [will] of the Tsar became opposed to the *volya* [freedom] of the Cossacks.” This ambiguity allowed the *volya* of sovereignty to be seen as a positive creative force, a meaning especially prevalent in the revolutionary period. Thus the Bolsheviks highjacked *volya* to their own purposes, grabbing it again for the collective political subject, with countless slogans like “We are striving to submit the economy to our *volya*!” or “The party knows no limits to its *volya*.” Will-freedom here appears as the pure power produced by the Soviet system—which two Russian anthropologists have called power “not for the work of just government, but for the manifestation of absolute happiness, the highest pleasure in our real world” (Shcherbinin and Shcherbinina 1996, 8).

But this “highest pleasure” is exactly what calls forth the dark side of will-freedom. It is not just that the *volya* of another person may be harmful to one’s self, it is that the psychic consequences of unrestrained *volya* are likely to be destructive to the very person holding it. If the “everything-is-permitted-ness” (*usedozvolennost’*) of power is this pure joy, then its frustration or, even worse, its removal, is a torture hardly to be borne.

Let me give an example from a Russian novel. It concerns a Stalinist boss, Aglaya Revkina, who had run her small empire as she pleased, surrounded on all sides by flattering smiles and fawning officials. When Khrushchev makes his speech denouncing Stalin, she is shocked to the core and refuses to accept the dethroning of her great hero. People begin to complain. Called in by the higher party boss, she is told firmly that the party has a new line, and she must obey. Her power (her capacity for *volya*) ebbing away, Aglaya experiences such spurts of malicious anger (*zloba*) that she literally starts to tremble. She clenches her fingers into fists, presses her arms to her sides, and shakes, feeling her heart is beating abnormally fast. She goes to see a doctor, but pays no attention to his advice that she must try to be nice to people. In fact, she exercises her anger and her freedom. In a hall full of supine delegates, she dares to abstain from a vote to confirm Khrushchev's new policies. Called to the rostrum to explain this shocking act,

. . . the closer she got, the less resolve she felt. And reaching the lectern, she altogether quailed. She sensed such weakness in her legs she wanted to sit or even lie down. She leaned on the lectern and started to burble. . . .

In the hall the tension rose and there were cries:

“That’s enough.”

“Down.”

“Shame! Shame! Shame!” rang out in the hall.

Aglaya had not expected this reaction. For her, a partisan and a heroine, it became really frightening and terrible, and she covered her face with her hands, and ran from the hall crying.

Here, we see the exercise of will and freedom (*volya*), yet it is inextricably tied up, in this political context, with anger, dismay, and the loneliness of standing out from the crowd.

What I have tried to describe so far is three different concepts of “freedom,” how they were related to one another in the Soviet context, and how each of them came at a heavy cost—of distance from reality, of fear, of anger or isolation.

None of them is anything like an individual rights-based notion of freedom, nor yet concepts that relate freedom of the self to rational choice. So what has happened to these ideas now that the Soviet system has been swept away? This question is important because it is these very transformed variants that we must interact with in Russia today.

Freedom has always been a highly spatial idea in Russia, and is associated with sheer openness, endless space (*prostor*). Into this spacious landscape has come marching the new official idea of *svoboda*—freedom. In political life *mir* has faded away, but *svoboda* is rampant.

Svoboda-freedom has a new content, widely seen to come from the West: namely contested elections, privatisation, consumer choice, religious revivals, NGOs, environment movements, gender consciousness-raising groups, and so forth. The new svoboda is available to anyone with the wealth or resources to exercise it. But the problem, as we know, is that great numbers of poorer Russians are simply unable to take part in most of these “freedoms.” And the fact that some of them, like democracy-oriented NGOs, can be canceled abruptly, as is happening under Putin, reminds everyone that these freedoms are still granted from above. They are favours, in fact. The present-day svoboda-freedom is thus associated with the arrogance of political-financial clout, with corrupt little islands of energy and agency, and it tends to be resented or frankly rejected, by everyone else. Even in the most banal of situations—someone has built himself a house on the banks of Lake Baikal and surrounded it with a spacious estate and a fence. To all the people who are used to going anywhere, to taking anything, to all the untrammelled pursuits so prevalent in Russia—just wandering, fishing, mushrooming, collecting berries, hunting—that fence is an affront to both svoboda and volya. The old structure of svoboda, constituted by privileged citizens placed “above” a mass of those unable to join its ranks, has reasserted itself.

People are worried that this new “freedom” is not really freedom at all, but the downside of endless openness, namely “limitlessness” (*bespredel*), a new slang word that actually means unbridled-ness, lawlessness, mayhem, chaos. In newspaper cartoons, the Russian everyman is hemmed in by the grabbing of “autonomy,” “local sovereignty” and so forth. Or the ordinary fellow is depicted standing forlornly to one side, while bandits and oligarchs gorge on Russia.

The same idea, that freedom can turn upon itself, is found in many different contexts, for example in Internet chat-rooms, where I have also been doing some research. There are many chat-room forums devoted to the relation between freedom and lawlessness. We were so happy to get freedom of expression, people say, but now what has happened? Forum administrators have sprung up, censoring messages, banning people from the site, insulting and bullying them—“like bandits.” This is the “lawlessness” that in fact kills off freedom.

Let me describe finally how patterns of svoboda and volya have become evident in the landscapes of contemporary Russia. A recent study of Chukotka in far northeast Siberia describes the “islands” of the new freedoms, namely the Sibneft gasfield, five-star hotel, new airport, karaoke bar, fitness gym, and Internet café brought in by Roman Abramovich, the oligarch governor. These pockets have an existence that is literally insulated from the cold and dark of the Arctic. Mean-

while, it is those very snow-covered plains and forests that are the domain of volya-freedom. The old grand imperious volya will-freedom has long since disappeared from political life (at least in public), but volya is still cherished by everyone *personally*, even the poorest pensioner or the drunken unemployed. In Chukotka long-term inhabitants' notions of land-use are pregnant with ideas of unlimited expanse, spaces unordered, unsettled, and dangerous. Volya is frequently evoked by ordinary people, not as a self-willed misanthropic rejection of society, but as a trial of self-realisation and the "beyond the limits" fortitude necessary if one is to truly inhabit this harsh land. The firefighters of Anadyr, for example, were constantly in motion between the urban security-girt islands of svoboda and the actually free expanses. It was the opportunity for volya out in distant realms that they valued. Their perilous boat-runs to some outlying fire-base were expressions of volya in several dimensions: they were simultaneously an outwitting of nature and the authorities, and the keeping alive of the community out there. For under the decks the boat would be packed with illegal contraband food and equipment to sustain people in remote communities (Thompson 2004, 236–38). Even on the dangerous winter journey of a solitary individual, brought to the brink of an isolated death and in that condition experiencing a kind of existential epiphany, the monologue whereby the firefighter tells himself that this experience is one of volya is not antisocial or even asocial. For the monologue to oneself always also has a non-present addressee—in this case the fireman's social world of family and neighbours, who define volya as "tempering the self but also as a moral responsibility" (Thompson 2004, 243).

Thus, to sum up, we can perhaps surmise that volya has become the sphere for personal ethics and svoboda that of efficacious, yet immoral action. The new svoboda furthermore is associated with privilege and foreignness, indeed with the humiliation of what Russians see as "imperialism" and "global power." Meanwhile, mir has evaporated—perhaps, though, to morph into the freedom of pure space (*prostor*), nature, the environment. The three ideas of freedom have come to inhabit very different worlds of value. None of them is identical with Western ideas of freedom. But after all, Russians are far from alone in this. Much of the world is culturally different in this regard.

If we are thinking about ordinary lives, perhaps everywhere freedom can be understood not mainly as a principle or a goal, but rather as *an outcome*, which can emerge in various contexts. I have tried to show how in Russia there are different kinds of freedom, freedoms that we could imagine as existing in different places that people can enter. People can find themselves *in* freedom. And they can also locate it away from themselves, regarding a certain kind of "freedom" with suspicion, as is

happening today for many ordinary people with *svoboda*. We can see now, I hope, why our own leaders' speeches about freedom are unlikely to be understood by a Russian listener as they were intended. But if I may end with a metaphor—people are navigators. They can actively seek out, be excluded from, come up against, resist, or leap into different senses of freedom, all of which allows them to live in their own ways. They can also create new freedoms, difficult as this may be. The history of the ideas of *svoboda* is far too rich a resource for it to be linked merely with a distorted version of Western freedom for very long. This ability of navigation itself is a kind of freedom. And pointing out that to understand another's point of view and the leeway they have for navigation, demands considerable effort—if any of us are make our experiences of freedom intelligible to others—is an allegory for collaborative anthropology.

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