Reading Revitalized? The Perestroika Project and its Aftermath

In the first three chapters we have had occasion to observe that reading came to the forefront of public debate in Soviet Russia at times of attempted social transformation. In the 1920s, and then in the Khrushchev era, print culture was called upon to perform a mobilizing and educative function. Glasnost offered a particular variation on this perennial Soviet theme of cultural revolution. In the 1980s the task was no longer to make Soviet society literate, as it had been in the 1920s, or simply to help it acquire the reading habit, as had been the case under Khrushchev, but rather to improve the quality of reading in Soviet society.¹ The Soviet mass reading public was no longer to be kept in forced ignorance of its own history, and of the social and economic problems facing its country: it was to be provided with the information that the elite intelligentsia, thanks to samizdat and informal networks, had possessed since the 1960s. Perestroika in the cultural sphere was, in fact, nothing less than the attempted ‘massovization’ of the Soviet intelligentsia. The early stages of glasnost were outstandingly successful in this respect: an enthralling public debate began on most aspects of Soviet history and society; the circulations of the major journals shot up from hundreds of thousands to millions; Soviet society did indeed seem on its way to becoming ‘civilized’ and ‘intellectualized’. By the early 1990s, however, this cultural ‘progress’ had proved to be illusory.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first looks in some detail at the concept of ‘intelligentsia’ in the post-Stalin period, and more generally at the relationship between the forms of Soviet print culture and their social addressees. The second section examines the
various attempts made in the late 1980s to refit Soviet book production to the demands of the reader as well as to the cause of perestroika. In the third section I show how these attempts ran into trouble as economic reform proceeded and publishing diversified in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and in the fourth I seek to explain why they ran into trouble by examining the behaviour and attitudes of Soviet readers in the same period.

The intelligentsia and late Soviet culture

‘Intelligentsia’ is a notoriously (and sometimes infuriatingly) slippery term. When people speak of the intelligentsia, they often mean the ‘best part of the intelligentsia’, those fearless and morally upright intellectuals whose social conscience invariably forces them into the role of opposition to the the prevailing state authority. The opposite extreme is the over-inclusive definition of traditional Soviet sociology, which more or less equates the intelligentsia with white-collar workers of all kinds. In this section I want to find a ‘third way’, to argue that this group may be defined in cultural, not to say literary, terms, and thereby to demonstrate the importance of the concept of ‘intelligentsia’ for the present analysis of cultural change in the glasnost period.

In 1989, just before visiting Russia after an absence of sixty-seven years, Nina Berberova was asked by a Soviet journalist to comment on the readership of her celebrated book of memoirs, The Italics Are Mine, within the Soviet Union:

You see, I still have the old Russian habit of thinking of the reader of literature as an intelligent [member of the intelligentsia] ... all the people I’ve met here [that is, in America], who have come over the past fifteen years – it’s been a great gathering, there have been Jews, Armenians, a lot of Russians ... And I don’t remember a single person who failed to say: ‘I’ve read your Italics.’ Everyone’s read the book. For me that is the intelligentsia, the Soviet reader who knows me in Russia.

Berberova does not claim to be anything other than subjective as she recalls her personal experience of reader response, but her main idea – of the relationship between a reading public and a socio-cultural stratum – deserves further exploration. According to my simple working definition, the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1980s was made up of those people who were consumers of samizdat and other unofficially