

## The Last Soviet Dreamer

Encounters with Leonid Potemkin

Jochen Hellbeck

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JOCHEN HELLBECK

## THE LAST SOVIET DREAMER

### Encounters with Leonid Potemkin

My search for diaries and other personal records from the early years of Stalin's rule took me into a new direction when I arrived at the doorsteps of Leonid Potemkin's apartment in Moscow's Olympic Village, a compound built for the 1980 Olympics and subsequently used to house privileged Soviet citizens, on an early spring day in March 2002.<sup>1</sup> I had by that time already gathered a large body of personal diaries — from a range of Russian state, NGO, and private archives as well as from published records — for a book project on the language of self and the possibilities, forms, and problems of self-realization in Stalinist Russia.<sup>2</sup>

While each diary was unique in form as well as content, recounting a personal story in a flow of time that was subjected to punctuations very specific to the circumstances of the author's life, many of them evinced what I call a utopian consciousness. Their authors believed that they were living through historic times, more specifically the dawn of a socialist age. Active membership in the building of the new socialist world, they believed, would grant them a sense of true existence. These diarists dreamed the Soviet dream, a dream that unlike the American model promised an immaterial form of happiness. They sought fulfillment in the act of making history and joining the vanguard of humanity. Their diaries, while kept for other purposes as well, served them as a means to cultivate the type of moral personality, which they required as true subjects of history.

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1. This article could not have been written without the generous support I received from Véronique Garros and Natalya Korenevskaya. As fellow researchers of Stalin era diaries, they put me in touch with Leonid Potemkin and helped me in the early phases of my research in other vital ways. I am profoundly indebted to them.

2. Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Many diarists yearned for a form of self-integration into history and the collective body of the builders of the new society, emblemized in the parades of young athletes clad in immaculate white who marched in step to the tunes of cheerful Soviet songs. And yet, judging by the tone of their diaristic records virtually none of them achieved more than a fleeting degree of success in their striving. Their diaries abounded in complaints about the inability to fuse personal observations with the mandated “objective truth,” individual desire with collective duty. Their diaries often read as poignant records of personal alienation from society and, indeed, history.<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, Leonid Potemkin (born 1914), who kept a diary from the age of thirteen and recorded in it his life as a young worker in Stalin’s industrialization campaign (1931-1933), and subsequently the years of his studies at the Ural Mining Institute in Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg, 1933-1939), struck me as exceptional. I had read selections from the diary, covering the years 1934 through 1936, in *Intimacy and Terror* (1995) a pioneering anthology of newly discovered diaries from the Stalin era.<sup>4</sup> Potemkin’s diary resonated with a lyrical expressiveness and confidence that I had not seen elsewhere. A “victorious warrior on the road of life” (as he once referred to himself in the diary), he seemed to be able to integrate the spheres of the personal and the social, the experiential and the historical, seamlessly and over a prolonged time.<sup>5</sup> I was interested in seeing larger portions from the diary and in meeting with the author, a rare surviving diarist from the 1930s. The editors of the American anthology kindly gave me his telephone number and I called him up.

Reading the published sections from Potemkin’s diary I had been fascinated by the utopian spirit that breathed from the record of the aspiring geologist. Yet I was not prepared for this spirit to leap out of the pages of a diary and become embodied in an old man sitting across from me in his Moscow apartment nearly three quarters of a century later. Even in his old age Leonid Potemkin did not stop living the Soviet dream. Our meetings, which took place between 2002-2007, turned into an extended conversation about the construction of a social order of utmost justice and beauty, and his role as a builder of this order, in the course of which many of the thoughts and feelings recorded in the diary came to life, blurring the lines between past and present, text and reality, the aspiring student and the retired geologist. My conversations with him, often cheerful and uplifting, at times troubling if not chilling, are the central theme of this article.

That I would one day want to write about these conversations was not clear to me when I first embarked on them. My principal goal at the time was to obtain

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3. See especially the diary of Nikolai Ustrialov, discussed in Jochen Hellbeck, “Liberation from Autonomy: Mapping Self-understandings in Stalin’s Time,” in Paul Corner, ed., *Popular Opinion in totalitarian regimes* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); see also the diaries of Julia Piatnitskaya, Zinaida Denisevskaya, Stepan Podlubny, and Arkady Mankov, in Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*.

4. Véronique Garros, Natalya Korenevskaya, Thomas Lahusen, ed., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York: New Press, 1995).

5. Leonid Potemkin, diary, t. 51. 27 (3/6/1935).

Leonid Potemkin's permission to grant me access to his personal archive from the time of his youth — piles of diaries, letters, and other writings stored in a closet in his apartment. To be sure, I was also interested in having the surviving author comment on themes and episodes from his diary. But only with a delay did I realize that our conversations were a fascinating subject in their own right that went far beyond the book project for which I was initially conducting them. How I came to this insight, and how the terms of my conversations with Leonid Potemkin changed from our first to our last meeting, will also be discussed in this article.

In a most general sense these interviews illustrate how a survivor of the Stalin era makes sense of his life under Soviet power and the Soviet age as a whole after its demise. This situates my conversations with Potemkin in a wave of recent scholarship that explores personal memories of the Soviet past. Much of this scholarship relies on oral history methods to bring to light memories of the past that are not documented in written form.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, my project relied on a dense personal record from the past. While oral history conducted in the absence of such a marked trail proceeds by asking open-ended questions and leaving it to the historical subject to frame his or her life narrative, my point of departure was the diaristic voice of the young Leonid Potemkin. His diary anchored my conversations with the retired geologist in his Moscow apartment. I sought to incite Potemkin's present-day memories through readings of select passages from the diary to which I asked him to react. My goal was to establish a hermeneutic web of sorts in which the intellectual concepts and emotions that made up the language of self in the diary would come to life in his present-day recollections. After the project got underway I, too, became visibly enwrapped in this interpretive web as I began to realize how Potemkin assessed me through the set of values and emotions that we were unlocking in our conversation about his life. How exactly he viewed me will become clearer further below.

I derived from these conversations with Potemkin several insights that partly confirmed and partly departed from what I had taken away from his diary. One was an articulate historical consciousness that continuously underlay his understanding of himself and his times. There was a palpable sense throughout our interviews that Potemkin regarded himself as a historical subject whose thoughts and actions mattered within the context of world history. This consciousness, manifested in an acute moral responsibility toward "society" and, ultimately, the "world court of

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6. See especially the Oxford Russian Life History Archive created under the direction of Catriona Kelly, online at <http://www.ehrc.ox.ac.uk/lifehistory/index.htm>. The "references" section contains a long bibliography of recent Western and Russian studies that have made use of oral history. The website also provides links to a number of oral history associations worldwide. See in addition Irina Paperno, "Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience," *Kritika*, 3, 4 (2002): 1-35, which builds on memoirs, not oral history. My approach to biographically-minded oral history has benefited from Lutz Niethammer and Werner Trapp, ed., *Lebenserfahrung und kollektives Gedächtnis: die Praxis der „oral history“*, (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1980); Gabriele Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen* (Frankfurt: Campus-Verl., 1995).

history,” was at work in the diary of his youth as well.<sup>7</sup> Throughout his life it appears to have been the backbone of his sense of self as a builder of the new world.

To achieve this integrated biographical and historical consciousness was a matter of intense, unremitting work. Here my insights from the interviews departed from, and enriched, my reading of Potemkin’s diary. I had been puzzled by how effortlessly Potemkin seemed to position himself in the diary as a triumphant builder of the socialist world. His conversations with me, by contrast, brought to light the labor on which his integrated sense of self was dependent. It was the labor of rectifying (from his point of view) his interlocutor’s erroneous views about the Soviet past, but beyond that also of engaging and overcoming physical and intellectual weaknesses of his own. Much of our conversation could be read as a sustained ideological effort on his part to re-align himself and his environment historically, to achieve the seamless integration between the subjective self and objective world that his diary bespoke in such expressive ways. This insight helped me uncover fissures and areas of tension that underlay the smooth surface of Potemkin’s diaristic self-representation. Thanks to the conversations with him I became more aware of the performative quality of his language, which effectively sought to summon into being the world of perfection that it ostensibly described as a present-day reality.

My primary goal in carrying out this study is not to vindicate or put into question Potemkin’s views of himself, or his life as a whole. The goal is to advance historical understanding through a study of his interviews in the context of his life writings. Combined, these texts show how profoundly core tenets of the Soviet dream informed Potemkin’s self-understanding from the time of his youth until into his old age. Yet in spite of the spirit of historical empathy, which I sought to bring to the project, I had difficulties relating Potemkin’s lyrically expressive recollections of the Stalin era to my own understanding of Stalinist terror and repression. Clashes of interpretation may be unavoidable whenever a researcher meets a surviving author and gaps open up between authorial recollections and detached textual interpretation. These clashes can become especially pronounced when they involve a period as politically and morally contested as the Soviet Communist past.

Yet what I took away from these conflicts of interpretation was a deep sense of the researcher’s ethical responsibilities toward his surviving historical subject. Leonid Potemkin had demonstrated courage and trust in making his archive accessible to a historian from the “capitalist West,” allowing him not only to read in the book of his life but even to contribute a chapter to it. The stakes for Potemkin were considerable. They were not just of an intellectual and moral order — whether I would understand and share in his ideological vision — but political as well. For a Soviet communist, the mode of textual biography carries tangible political weight.

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7. The “world court of history” is a term coined by Hegel. While Potemkin did not use it verbatim, his diary bespeaks a clear responsibility toward society and history, see Potemkin, t. 5, ll. 84ob—85 (summer or fall 1936). In a letter to Stalin, Potemkin’s contemporary Nikolai Bukharin invoked the Hegelian term explicitly (see Jochen Hellbeck, “With Hegel to Salvation: Bukharin’s Other Trial,” *Representations*, 108 (Summer 2009): 56-90.

Throughout the Soviet era every member of the communist party had to periodically write and recite his autobiography, a form of narrative CV that was to demonstrate the party member's political maturity and ideological steadfastness.<sup>8</sup> Seen from this perspective, my biographical account — an account, moreover, that would be published in the West — could not but have repercussions for Potemkin's sense of biographical integrity and his life as a whole. These stakes only underscore the degree of goodwill he extended to me in making available his personal archive and in consenting to be interviewed in front of a camera. In turn, it seems only appropriate for us as researchers and listeners to respond to Potemkin's trust by extending to him our respect.

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Since my conversations with Potemkin centered on the diaries of his youth, these require a brief introduction. Leonid Potemkin began to keep a diary in 1927, at the age of thirteen. His archive contains five diary notebooks spanning the years 1927-1936, followed by others, which contain his diary notes for the years 1940, 1942-1945, 1955, 1957, and 1966-1987. To date my research on Potemkin's life has been centered on the early diaries (1920s and 1930s), which I have read in their entirety. Only recently was I given access to some of the later diaries.<sup>9</sup>

A central theme running through the diary of the young man who left school in 1931 to join the industrialization campaign, working as a driller before enrolling as a student of geology in the Ural Mining Institute in Sverdlovsk from which he graduated with highest distinctions in 1939, was his awareness of living through truly historical times. The socialist world was coming into being and it was his duty to embody the desired features of the vaunted new socialist man. The socialist age, defined by historical youth, strength, and optimism, not only gave every Soviet citizen the opportunity to live to the fullest, but also mandated of them to fully invest themselves, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, so as to live adequately in these extraordinary times. In his diary Potemkin kept exhorting himself to think and act in ways that befitted "our time and role in history": "we need to be ahead of the leaders of the past, we need to be greater than the great people of the past." He was cognizant of the enormous stakes — Goethe and Pushkin, he once remarked, spoke fourteen languages, whereas he and his fellow students barely mastered one — yet kept urging himself on.

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8. Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

9. For a long time Potemkin did not tell me that he returned to keeping a diary during and after the war. That they existed became clear to me only when I studied an inventory list of his archive established by the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). At Potemkin's bequest I had contacted GARF and facilitated the transfer of his personal documents to the state archive. Once they are fully inventorized these materials will be available to researchers as *fond* 10174. They comprise 2 *opisi* and a total of 357 documents.

One way in which Potemkin sought to mobilize himself was through music. He attended concerts and went to the Sverdlovsk opera house, describing in his diary how the music he heard tuned his nerves and perfected his personality. Music was so important to him not because of any musical talent on his part (on the contrary, he complained about “hereditary musical deafness”), but because its melodious scores formed an aesthetic and sensual vocabulary that he employed to represent himself and the world in identical terms of harmonious perfection. Music effectively served as a background score against which he extolled the extraordinary beauty of his life and the socialist system.

Potemkin also sought to cultivate this spirit with others, primarily young women to whom he sent letters extolling their enrapturing beauty. Much like with music, he used the language of love to summon forth a heightened emotional state that he believed should animate the builder of the new world. Potemkin made a point not to cling to the emotional uplift he received from music or adoring girls for his personal satisfaction, but to channel it into his social and political work. As he wrote to a female friend: “Zina! Your image has kindled in me a mighty new flame of turbulent reveries and an irrepressible upsurge in my community life. ... With miner’s, comradely greetings, L.P.” For Potemkin, the building of socialism was a labor of love.

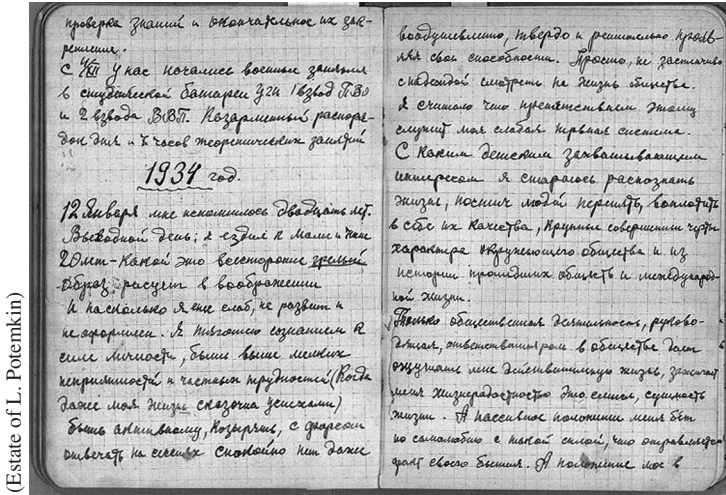
A young schoolteacher by the name of Liudmila whom he met in a summer camp for aspiring geologists unleashed in him ardent thoughts about the principle of beauty: “Beauty,” he noted in his diary, “is not an unrealized illusion but the very thing that our society strives for and produces. It is the best thing created by mankind, it is the sprouts of everything new in our country, the beautiful people and the new, pure relations in our society. My heart was set aflame...” Yet when Leonid approached Liudmila on these terms he was disappointed. All he felt on her part was naked physiological desire. Still, he did not give up his hope to remake her into a true “comrade.” Among other things he read to her the analysis of her personality that he had performed in his diary, “so as to disclose before her eyes an image of beauty. So as to work on her emotions, force her to reflect on her life..., to show her through the light refracted by an artistic lens that just as with simple light, which contains all colors, she too carries all the unconscious and not yet developed traits of beauty in herself.”<sup>10</sup> During their final meeting in the summer camp he lectured Liudmila “about the traits of the new man with his strong, renewed feelings — a creator of the new life.” Every Soviet citizen had the potential to turn into such a model new person. To realize this potential required a developed political consciousness and a strong will.

Shortly after his encounter with Liudmila Potemkin gave up writing in his diary. The diary, he explained, was self-referential and therefore offered little use as a means to educate others’ personalities. By this time Potemkin was serving as a Komsomol leader and he was used to giving inspiring speeches to large groups of

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10. Potemkin, diary, t. 5, l. 92.

students. He also single-handedly wrote a textbook on dialectical materialism, which he used to teach lagging students at the Mining Institute. Leaving behind the diary, Potemkin took to the medium of letter-writing which, he believed, was better suited for the “mutual anatomy” and perfection of the “soul.” In 1937 he started a correspondence with Ira Zhirkova, a student whom he had met at the Institute of Literature in Gorky. Potemkin was the more ardent of the correspondents; he invoked to her the “greenhouses of the socialist future” and he also subjected her letters to him to thorough critiques, chiding her for lapses in ideological steadfastness and preaching the principles of dialectical materialism. Nevertheless, Ira appeared to approximate his ideal of a female “comrade in spiritual and creative life.”



(Estate of L. Potemkin)

Pages from Leonid Potemkin’s diary of 1934



(Estate of L. Potemkin)

Ira Zhirkova’s letters to Leonid Potemkin, 1937-1938



(Estate of L. Potemkin)

The university student in 1937



After graduating with highest honors from the Sverdlovsk Mining Institute in 1939, Potemkin embarked on a steep geological career. As head of a geological mission in the Nordic Pechenga region, he discovered an enormous nickel field that was prospected according to an innovative method endorsed by him against the opposition of other geologists. He received a nomination for the Stalin prize. A member of the Communist party since 1941, Potemkin rose in the Party administration as well. He briefly served as Party secretary of Moscow's Lenin district in 1956. His career was crowned by his appointment as deputy minister of geology of the RSFSR in 1965. Through many of these years he kept corresponding with Ira Zhirkova. But he married another woman, with whom he had two children.

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I learned about many aspects of Leonid Potemkin's life, including his correspondence with Ira Zhirkova and many unpublished passages from his diary, only after meeting him and obtaining his consent to work with his personal archive. Potemkin consented to this not without qualms and reservations. It had in fact proved quite difficult for me to meet him in the first place. For several years following the publication of *Intimacy and Terror*, I would call him whenever I was about to come to Moscow, but he kept deferring a possible meeting, citing his poor health. There was another issue as well. As he explained to me, he was upset by a reference to him in *Intimacy and Terror* as a "young unlettered careerist." (His niece Olga Grigorievna, an English teacher, had translated for him, word by word, the book's introduction as well as the section devoted to his life. He also took exception to other passages in the anthology that, he said, misrepresented the meaning of his life and the Soviet era as a whole.)<sup>11</sup> It took me many phone calls before he accepted to see me on that March day in 2002. During this meeting Potemkin insisted that we sign a contract in which, in return for getting access to his archive, I would pledge to abide to strict standards of historical "objectivity" in my analysis of his life and not "distort" the "true meaning" of the "facts" mentioned in his diaries. We had a prolonged discussion over how his and my understanding of historical objectivity might diverge, following which we both signed the contract.

He was anxious. I was impatient to get to work with his archive. And I did not listen. During our first encounters our historical interpretations clashed frequently. After reading his ebullient diary notes I asked him about darker aspects of the Stalin period: denunciations and purges, the terror. He insisted on the uplifting facts and bright thoughts recorded in his notebooks as the decisive historical reality of his life. Careful not to wound him with my differing views I would show him a two-page outline of what I intended to write. A few days later he would hand me his response: a fourteen-page typewritten "explanation" of the facts. I looked at him as an unreformed Stalinist hardliner and I felt, strangely, that the presence of the

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11. See about this misrepresentation, Véronique Garros's reply : "Traduction : trahison? Ou comment faire place aux conflits d'interprétation ?", *La Lettre du CEMS*, 4 (avril 1999): 2-3."

surviving author, which I had considered to be an asset, to some extent stood in the way of my analysis of his life writings.

Only gradually did I begin to see something very important: that the old man who anxiously followed my research was not that different from the person who paraded on the pages of the diary from the 1930s. The obligation to commune with history and align his life to a moral and social ideal, so powerfully evoked in the diary of the young geologist, continued to preoccupy Potemkin in his conversations with me in his Moscow apartment. His insistence on a coherent, single meaning of his life, to be derived from an “objective” reading of the facts recorded in his diary, was an attempt to set the record straight, in two ways. In an immediate sense it meant that he had to rectify what he believed were erroneous interpretations, thoroughly uninformed by “scientific Marxism,” of Soviet history advanced by me as well as by the editors of *Intimacy and Terror*. Just as with the lagging fellow students in the Ural Mining Institute seventy years ago, whom he had taken in tow, teaching them the basics of dialectical materialism, he tirelessly expounded to me what he believed were the principles and the mechanisms of the historical development of the Soviet order.

Yet his explanations were addressed not only to me, or others, but in large measure to himself as well. In discussing his life with me he extended the quest that had defined his diary, to achieve a consonance between subjective experience and objective reality, and thus to align his personal life with history. The meaning of Potemkin’s life, I began to understand, was not to be found in solving our quarrel about the reality or importance of a particular fact or event; it was located in the very fabric of our dialogue. To see it required that the fabric be decoded for what it actually meant.

The following long excerpts from my conversations with Potemkin introduce this fabric. They are part of a videotaped interview that was conducted in July 2003 and lasted for four hours. Another set of videotaped interviews, four hours long as well, was produced in December 2004. It is safe to say that by the time of the first videotaped interview we had progressed beyond our initial conversations that revealed more incomprehension on my part and that on his part lacked the tight texture and associational breadth that is visible in the video transcript. While no clear-cut theoretical model guided me in these interviews, I sought to follow a hermeneutic method, by drawing Potemkin into a conversation with the language of his youth and on this basis making the past meanings contained in the language come to life. To work, this hermeneutic venture requires a decidedly sympathetic listener who, rather than challenging or disavowing the testimony of his historical subject, seeks to understand and build on it. This is what set these interviews from 2003 and 2004 apart from my earlier attempts at a conversation with Leonid Potemkin.

JH: You were a young man in a regime that represented itself in terms of historical youth. What comes to mind in connection with this type of youth?

LP: You see, precisely this new social order and its new thoughts and strivings, all of this, you know, has remained with me until even the end of my life. For instance, even now, strange as it may seem at my venerable age, doctors tell me: Usually people of this age come to us as sick people, they are all so serious, depressed by their ailments, begin to talk about their illnesses and all

the rest. “You,” my doctor says, “come and make us compliments, it’s pleasant for us to talk to you, not like with a sick person, a client who complains that this hurts or that hurts, but with a person healthy in spirit, with such a young person who is younger than his age.” This is what I even heard from doctors.

JH: You think that this is a remnant of that time [the Stalin period]?

LP: Absolutely! It dates back to that time. To be young at heart.

JH: So that would mean, this is a time that conserves youth...

LP: Yes!! Yes, it is a sort of, how should I put it..., a ferment, roughly speaking. You apply the ferment and it continues to work for a whole lifetime, and it is even useful for your health, and I’ll add to that that it influences... You see, right now especially I’m feeling this contrast, right now it is not interesting to watch television, most of the time it shows all sorts of fights between people, and then all these unpleasant stories, murders, terror, all of this creates oppressive feelings, puts you in a bad mood. Back when I was young, when you listened to our Soviet songs on the radio, this cheerfulness and energy, you know you just want to [sing out]... *Ever Higher, Ever Higher, the Planes are Flying*,<sup>12</sup> and the people are raised in spirit, they are cheerful, want to strive for something. I even spoke with psychologists, I spoke with [A. A.] Bodolev, the President of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences and a professor of psychology, he’s an author of well-known studies. And he said that television transmissions, means of mass communication, they can be used to damage people’s psychic health, they can depreciate the psyche and make it feel sad, oppressed, and hopeless, if you affect it all the time and show only what’s bad. On the other hand, by means of music you can create a cheerful and buoyant mood, and conserve a youth of spirit. I even think this mood is created not by chance, but deliberately. In order to oppress the personality. All of this is done deliberately and to such an extent that it poisons one’s interest in life.

Cheerfulness and youth, Potemkin indicates, were central attributes of the Soviet regime as well as of his own life. These attributes were not to be taken for granted; they were produced through deliberate and laborious sculpting. The task of any government, whether it was the Stalinist regime or the post-Soviet Russian state, was to generate feelings of cheer and optimism that served to unify the people and incite them to strive for a joint purpose. Likewise, every citizen was socially obligated to tune his emotions so as to help to build the common future with utmost energy and dedication. In turn, an individual’s participation in this purposeful collective project imparted a sense of youthful vitality, historically speaking but also physically. While celebrating these positive emotions in ways reminiscent of the diary of his student years (“More life! More ease in my work and deeds. I have to be able to take the joys of life, to embody them in myself and to be able to create them in others”<sup>13</sup>), Potemkin shows a marked hostility toward negative feelings, again fully in tune with his diary narrative from the 1930s. States of pessimism and despair have no legitimate place in his conception of personal or social life, for they sap vital energies from the concerted social project of building the perfect future. Indeed, he surmises, these negative

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12. Potemkin is citing the refrain from “Aviamarsh” (1931), a famous song on pilots: “We are born to make fairy tales come true /to overcome land and space /Our mind has given us wings and hands of steel /And in the place of a heart a flaming engine. [Refrain:] Higher, ever higher and higher/ We direct the flight of our birds/ And in every propeller breathes/ the calmness of our borders...”

13. Potemkin, diary, t. 5, ll. 59ob-60 (first entry for 1936).

feelings are deliberately planted by political enemies of the socialist state. Strikingly, Potemkin's associations about youth and cheerfulness lead him to intone a popular song from the Stalin era. He continues to embrace music as a means to organize his nerves and mobilize the will, a theme prominently discussed in his youth diary.

The following passage from our interview expands on the theme of positive, as well as negative, emotions, and it concludes with an unexpected (for me) and shocking twist. Even though the passage is presented in the form of three segments, intersplined by my own commentary, as a whole it evolves as a single, unbroken and unabridged conversational flow. Taken as a whole, the passage suggests the power of oral history to yield deep, if at times also unsettling, insights in the course of a dialogue that builds on personal documents from the past and seeks to make this past come alive in shared musings about the documents and the language and emotions they evoke. It begins with me reading to Potemkin an excerpt from a letter sent to him by Ira Zhirkova in 1938.

JH: [citing Ira's letter] "Leo, you idealize everything..."

LP: Aha.

JH: "I fully agree with your arguments about life, but the only thing is that to your words one needs to add: this is how it is supposed to be..."

LP: Yes...

JH: "...while to my words one must add: this is how it is. That's all."<sup>14</sup>

LP: Aha. That's correct.

JH: Now, in retrospect, do you think you were an idealist - or not?

LP: You see, the term doesn't apply, because the scientific definition of idealism, in accordance with dialectical materialism, it is something completely different. You know, idealism stands in opposition to dialectical materialism. In my case it is different: to strive for the ideal, toward the lofty and beautiful, toward what is useful for society, that is not exactly the same as to say you're an idealist. An idealist is someone who denies all that is material, who lives only in spirit and connects this spiritual realm to religious understandings.

This segment reveals the Party agitator in Potemkin who proceeded to preach to me about the Marxist distinction between "utopian" and "scientific" socialism. The latter, to which he ascribed, rejects an association with romantic idealism; it stresses that its historical optimism is anchored in scientific analysis. In fact, Leonid Potemkin had also lectured Ira Zhirkova in his letter responding to hers back in 1938. Throughout my conversations with Leonid Potemkin I had a growing sense that he wanted to make me into a soul mate comparable to Ira Zhirkova. He sought to draw me into a conversation about the rich and beautiful, in part so that he himself could validate these powerful emotions.

Our conversation continued:

JH: Nevertheless, in reading your diary one gets a sense that you always strove to live a life that hovered above daily existence...

LP: Yes! Yes!

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14. In a previous letter, Zhirkova had complained to Potemkin about the misery, hatred, and darkness in life, an oblique reference to the Stalinist purges taking place at the time.

JH: ...and that this higher sphere represented an artistically integrated sphere. Something like a piece of art.

LP: Correct, correct. Art in essence is also something that elevates a person. For instance, a beautiful painting, it elevates the spectator aesthetically, it provides him with aesthetic satisfaction. The same thing with ballet or theater, even drama. In the confrontation between personalities the drama shows how the good has to prevail, how you strive toward the good, even in a drama, a tragedy.

JH: So that, in principle, your diary or what you wrote in your personal correspondence, one has to read this as an expression of such striving...

LP: Yes, yes!

JH: A piece of writing is to mobilize...

LP: Yes!! It is to mobilize oneself and also to incite others to do the same thing.

JH: So one shouldn't read the diary as a repository of real facts...

LP: No!

JH: The writing is to instill enthusiasm...

LP: Yes! For instance they say about art that apparently it is romanticism, pure fantasy, someone creates an image that is too good to be true, and that this doesn't exist in life, that everything in life is worse.

JH: There is widespread criticism that, for instance, the newspapers of the Stalin era don't mirror the reality of the times. Would you say that this is not their principal task, and that the task is to affect people from all sides and all the time so that they create more and raise themselves to such heights...?

LP: Yes, yes! Yes, yes. Even among society itself, I think, there was such a direction, also in music and the theater, and in films, they tried to show people who performed good deeds, they wrote about front-rank workers in production, showed them in films, and you watched them with interest. Positive characters are always more pleasant, people watch them with pleasure and satisfaction. Negative types, by contrast, they repel you. Clearly art has an educational role, it must reside above daily life. This in my view is a noble task that applies to any society. Literature that does not incite a striving for improvement, toward becoming a better person, is not literature.

Potemkin's observations on writing and literature opened a new perspective for me on his diary. His exuberant, indeed triumphant, statements about the attainments of the socialist state as well as his personal achievements, had to be read on a performative rather than merely constative level. They sought to summon into being the very exuberance that he was describing. Many pages of the diary, and not only those that described the intoxicating effects that music had on him, read like an extended musical score that was to summon forth an enthusiastic devotion to the socialist cause, a passionately burning flame that he believed kindled the soul of the new man. If the diary narrative had a profoundly performative and programmatic quality this also meant that to act according to its designs and to try to close the gap between language and reality was a matter of intense labor. This labor only occasionally shines through the diary, such as when the young geologist strenuously exhorted himself to be relaxed and more cheerful in his appearance, but Potemkin's interview statement makes it clear that the entire diary rested on a great deal of labor, unstated tension, and repression, to raise himself from his present-day imperfections to a perfect future state. In light of this, the mostly one-dimensional ideological narrative of the diary assumes more complexity and existential relevance.

In the interview Potemkin also made clear that the mandate to represent only the bright, noble, and good was not confined to his diary but applied to literature and artistic production at large. It was a striking remark that suggests how the socialist realist aesthetic that he appears to have in mind was at work beyond the domain of official Soviet art, and that it could generate real meaning in the context of personal everyday life. From the lofty and bright future that the socialist realist gaze locks in on, I shifted our conversation to darker areas of the Stalin period.

JH: But this literature also talks very openly about enemies. On the one hand there is this life in a higher realm, and on the other hand there were show trials, sentences, executions. So there was a duality, no?

LP: That is how things were in practice. I can tell you that I saw very appealing theories in programs, in theory, selfless ideas; but in practice things were often different. But to figure out what was right and what wasn't, you need to be a procurator. Well — how, and on the basis of what, can you establish whether these people were correctly sentenced or not? Moreover, for a long time I had doubts, how can there possibly be that many enemies of the people, anti-Soviet elements, that's impossible. I felt this personally, there couldn't have been so many of these people. But then Perestroika happened. And when everybody began to turn against Soviet power, I just gasped. It turns out that under Stalin too few people sat in prison [laughs]. That's how it turns out. What a change, everybody became anti-Soviet all of a sudden, here you are! And I had thought that innocent people suffered under Stalin. That they were all innocent. So there were culprits!

With the same consistency that Potemkin talked about the perfect socialist order, justifying it in the ideological language of Stalin's time, he also talked about the supposed enemies of this perfect order. As I listened to him in stunned silence, he elaborated on the identity of the supposed enemies of Perestroika. Stalin, he declared, did not believe that the wealthy kulak peasants could be peacefully transformed into adherents of socialism. But he trusted the sons of kulaks. Citing Stalin's alleged words, "A son does not answer for his father," Potemkin went on to say that the party proceeded to invite those sons and their offspring into their ranks, even electing them to the highest political functions. It was clear that he had Mikhail Gorbachev in mind, or both Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, both of whom hailed from a grandfather who had been persecuted as a kulak peasant under Stalin. Potemkin maintained his belief in the reality of a fierce global class struggle well into the twenty-first century, as is evident from this passage, but also from his repeated offhand references in our conversations to "Chekists," "class enemies," and "foreign spies" (he at one point suspected that the latter were behind the misrepresentation of his life in *Intimacy and Terror*).

While harsh in his opinion of the last Soviet reformer, Potemkin was remarkably equanimous with respect to certain features of life in Russia today. I asked him what he thought about the fact that the important nickel repositories in northern Karelia that he had discovered and explored for the benefit of the Soviet state are now privatized and in the hands of capitalist-minded Russian oligarchs. Didn't he feel betrayed? Here is how he responded:

LP: You know, I knew well before what capitalism is all about [Laughs]. Therefore I was not depressed, I simply didn't expect any better from capitalism. That's why this was no shock for me. I feel as if I stand on a higher position than other people, I can see over their heads, over the current era. ... What's now going on — I simply don't despair. I stand above it.

This remarkable statement once more shows how the communion with history, which Potemkin cultivated in his Stalin-era diary, continues to underlie his sense of self. The belief in discernible laws of historical progression, which direct human social activity toward a tangible bright future, underpinned Potemkin's subjectivity, during the years of his student life under Stalin as much as in the post-Soviet world. Notwithstanding the wreckage inflicted by the Communist system, he continued to live the Soviet dream. Throughout his life this dream provided him with moral certitude; it also may have contributed to his striking vitality and presence of mind that I could not help being impressed by in my conversations with this youthful nonagenarian. Yet I was also struck by his oblivion to the fate of those who fell victim to his scheme of historical progression. Moral certitude in his case could verge on blind rectitude.

As we took a break from a long interview and sat in his kitchen, where he treated me to beer and *sosiski*, Leonid Potemkin confided to me why he had decided to open his door to me in 2002, despite his misgivings about the capitalist West. He said that he had liked my persistence in calling him. I was struck and surprised. I had actually feared that my insistent phone calls might be interpreted as impolite and insensitive, and might alienate him. But then I understood that he was appraising me by his own, Bolshevik, standards according to which persistence is a virtue. It signals a strong will and thus can act as a historically progressive force. It made me think of the famous Stalin-era saying that “there is no fortress a Bolshevik cannot storm.”

Leonid Potemkin died in December 2007, just short of his 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. In summer 2007 when I last saw him he announced to me that his niece Olga Grigorievna was translating for him into Russian the chapter in my book that was devoted to his life under Stalin. He promised that he would produce a written response. Judging by the ratio of his past fourteen-page “explanation” in response to my two-page outline, I should expect a very long explanation this time around. I hope that he has written it, and I look forward to reading it.



(Estate of L. Potemkin)

Leonid Potemkin  
in his Moscow apartment, 2005

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