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# Russian society in the light of the Maidan

**Olga Sedakova**
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Poet and essayist Olga Sedakova takes her fellow Russian writers and intellectuals to task for responding with silence to the light emanating from the Maidan: a light of hope, of solidarity and of rehabilitated humanity. A light that Russia would do well to see itself in.

In light of the Maidan, Russian society is a shameful sight to behold. It is a harsh thing to say, but I cannot think of a milder way to put it. This is of course my own opinion, and there are very few people in Russia who will agree with me. Even the words I have chosen as the title of this piece – "the light of the Maidan" – will be regarded as a direct insult by most Russians. And among them are many usually thought of as "intellectuals" and "liberals". They would probably be happier if I had used phrases like "The bonfires on the Maidan", "The acrid smell of smoke on the Maidan" or at best "The drama of the Maidan". What I know about the Maidan I have learned from very dear friends of mine who have spent the last few months camping out on the square, from direct broadcasts from where it has all been happening, from the way in which the composer Valentyn Sylvestrov has responded to events (I place more faith in the way great artists perceive reality than in anything else). All of this leads me to talk about the light of the Maidan. Of course I mean specifically the peaceful Maidan, unyielding in its peacefulness, not the antics of a few fringe elements, which is all the media have been concentrating on.

Above all this is the light emanating from people who have overcome their fear. The victory of the Maidan is a victory over fear, as the philosopher and publisher Konstantin Sigov has called it. While I was reading the never-ending stream of comments from my enlightened compatriots on the events in Ukraine (and I am going to try to address some of them in what follows), I kept calling to mind the words of T.S. Eliot in "East Coker", one of his Four Quartets:

> Do not let me hear
> Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
> Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
> Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.

I'm not saying that our commentators are old men, but rather the only wisdom that they possess is the wisdom bred of fear. The victory over fear - what the Maidan is - is seen through the eyes of people who have not yet emancipated themselves of their fear. They do not see what there actually is; they only see what might come afterwards (and for them, of course, nothing good will come afterwards).

Georges Nivat, French historian of ideas and translator of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, has written about the Maidan as a possible breath of fresh air in a Europe living on compromises and without ideals after the two traumas of the twentieth century - Nazism and communism. He writes that this breath of fresh air is a mere possibility. He is not expecting it to inspire any new resistance to evil. Europe's reliance on compromise comes from a preference for inner comfort and peace. The fear of being enthusiastic about anything is too firmly fixed in the European mind. In Russia this fear is even firmer.

The light of the Maidan is also the light of hope. Hoping for something that differs from what we already have seems like madness. There are precedents for thinking like this: after the February Revolution of 1917 came October and the Communists (this is the most frequently cited example). Putting it another way: the idealistic stage of the revolution was followed by dictatorship and terror. Then we had civil war and the complete collapse of the country. There is probably no place in the world that is more afraid of revolution than Russia. We have every reason to regard anything at all as better than war and revolution. Such has been the experience of several generations.

Hope for a better life usually lives in spite of past experience - no matter how difficult it has been. In Russia, however, there is no place for such a hope. We feel like we are in some kind of train; it has been set off in a particular direction and it's rushing along, but no one has asked us where we want to go, and it's absolutely clear that we aren't in control of anything. The Russian people lived through the events of the snowy spring of 2011 and now they feel crushed like never before.

The light of the Maidan is also the light of solidarity. There have been many truly outstanding examples of solidarity on the Maidan. This was solidarity without class or national differences. Russia has no experience of solidarity comparable to the Maidan, and there were few instances of it in the past.

The light of the Maidan is also the light of rehabilitated humanity. Russian intellectuals live in an atmosphere of global irony, deep scepticism and cynicism. They place no trust in high ideals, revolutionary romanticism and national pathos. A square packed with inspired people singing the national anthem or saying the Lord's Prayer together fails to match their understanding of what is "modern" and "contemporary". Many Russian commentators describe events like these in Ukraine as "archaic" . No wonder. What Russians see as "modern" is all too often nothing more than grotesque buffoonery.

There's another oft recurring motif in what is said by those who do not like the Maidan - that it's "all very complicated". They keep reminding us that nothing is simple, there are no such things as absolute good or absolute evil. The two sides are both right and wrong at the same time. The most we can hope is that they live together in peace. Does that mean we have to live in peace with blatant thieves? Well then, the argument comes , "they" - meaning the opposition - are going to do the same once they've seized power.

This assertion of complexity that defies comprehension is then bolstered by examples of cruelty on both sides. Facts, however, are offered mainly to confirm the cruelty of "them" - the opposition. Indeed, moral agnosticism is another part of our difficult historical heritage. Should we really be surprised that there is still a refusal to state unequivocally whether Stalinism was "good" or "bad"?

I am here limiting myself to a brief overview of how Russian intellectuals have reacted to the Maidan. I do not wish to talk about those who blather about "eurofascism", "Banderites" and so on, even if I am very much afraid that they are in the overwhelming majority. Sadly, they are just victims of the "information war" waged by the official propaganda machine. If you listen to the same thing day after day there are bound to be certain consequences.

If I now mention just one of these propaganda motifs, it is simply because it is more complex than the common clichés of "fascism" and "antisemitism": let me say some words about the Maidan's supposed "russophobia".

The people on the Maidan are protesting against the rule of kleptocrats and neo-Stalinists who are not accountable to the people. By this I mean a state in which the power of those in charge is unlimited, they do not have to answer to the people they rule, or inform them of their actions, and all their subjects have to do is offer their rulers their unstinting devotion. Maidan, which opposed this regime, is viewed as anti-Russian - and there are good reasons for this. The regime in Ukraine was supported by Moscow, and Russia itself represents this form of rule in an even more concentrated form. The people on the Maidan are striving to finally leave the Soviet past behind. As recent events demonstrate, such attempts are still punished by Russia where a clear distinction between "Russian" and "Soviet" has yet to be made.

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In connection with this article, Olga Sedakova published an open letter addressed to "my Ukrainian friends":

## Olga Sedakova: Letter to my Ukrainian friends

*All of us in Russia - those of us who are horrified by the prospect of war in Crimea - feel quite helpless at the moment. None of us has the slightest possibility of exerting any influence on decisions taken by our authorities. They broke off any kind of dialogue with their opponents long ago. Appealing to them is useless. The only point of writing appeals is to clear the conscience of those who write them: "I don't want to be guilty". Even so, that is not the worst thing. The worst thing is that it is completely impossible to hold a dialogue with the vast majority of our compatriots, who quite sincerely, believing every word, repeat the same loathsome slander that official propaganda feeds them with. This propaganda gives rise to an unprecedented level of aggressiveness. Monsters are born when reason goes to sleep. I beg you not to give up the hope that, even if you cannot forgive the people who have been subjected to these psychological assaults, reason and spiritual health will one day be restored to Russia. Only then will the peace for which we pray to the Lord be possible. No, I do not want to be guilty. I wish you a future that is open and free, a future that evil spirits are now attempting to smother. May God prevent*

EUROZINE

*them from succeeding in their intent.*
*With love and my deepest admiration for your bravery...*

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# A Mountain Cradle Song

*for Vika Naveriani*

The dense walnut thickets are full of empty cradles.
The dead are now children and want someone sitting there with them
to rock them, to drive fear away and to finish singing the song:
—Oh, dear heart of mine, who could ever replace you? Sleep now.

And night hangs over me, and it's so full of longing
that the spring tumbles down and in answer, all of the trees
grow taller and taller until they meet yet other springs . . .
—Oh, dear heart of mine, who could ever replace you? Sleep now.

Would you watch over us through the window while you sleep?
Last year's wafer grows dry and hard on the table: it's for you.
There won't be another. Another's concession, omission,
—Oh, dear heart of mine, who could ever replace you? Sleep now.

An old, old man there commemorates you: bowing low,
as though there was someone lifting him up in their palm.
He knows that God hears him, but still he won't touch the bread,
and he lifts up his palms and implores you: Please take this from me!—

go to sleep, heart of mine: all the stones and the herbs and the hands,
planted there by a widow who fell to the ground of our parting,
and the weeping went on like a spring, and the answering sounds
raised the walnut tree up from the earth 'til they merged into one . . .

Oh, living—it hurts. But still we rose up and we gazed
at the walnut tree there by the house, at all its empty cradles.
The others did not dare, but we still endured to the end.
—Oh, dear heart of mine, who could ever replace you? Sleep now.

And now I stand here, and the trees cover me like a shirt.
I look through the windows and hold in cupped hands without fear
the lightest remains—see, they wouldn't offend a soul.
Oh, dear heart of mine, who could ever replace you? Sleep now.

*Trans. Martha M. F. Kelly*

**The Damnation of the Dead and the Return to Life**
Olga Sedakova
Oct 29, 2016, pravmir.ru
https://www.pravmir.ru/proklyate-pamyati-i-vozvrashhenie-k-zhizni/

For me this is the most important day of the year. On Lubyansky Square as they read the names of innocent victims you experience at once a most profound grief and a deep purification—as in an ancient Greek tragedy. No other public event permits you to experience anything like it.

It is especially important that those who come to read the names include not only people with personal memories of victims but also people without "their own" such dead. There are no such victims amongst my own close kin. And I like that the event reaches beyond the frame of family memory, that we read the names of complete strangers. Otherwise we might view all of this as a purely private affair: the descendants of the repressed, those "offended" come to commemorate "their own." Instead it is an event that encompasses the whole nation. This grief is a shared grief, even if no one in your family suffered. I have now witnessed—three times, in fact—someone read out the names they were given and say all of a sudden that they came from "the other side": their predecessors were those who pursued and executed victims. And he (or she) brought an apology on their behalf. Each time the repentance was so sincere and powerful that it shook everyone.

Such a practice—the reading of lists of names—is very familiar to church-going people. We do this at every liturgy—we write and read requests for health and for eternal rest. But there is a huge difference: the people we remember in the service remain in our memories. There is no need to "return" these names.

But that is precisely what is happening here: a return from oblivion, a triumph over the second death, its own kind of resurrection. For the people we commemorate on the Lubyanka were killed twice over. Physically the first time; and then the very memory of them was killed. It is as though we were fulfilling the ancient custom found as far back as the Roman Empire—*damnatio memoriae*—the damnation of memory: when an enemy of the state, an enemy of Caesar, was wiped out, they ritually wiped out the very memory of him. They erased his name from every document, every inscription; they destroyed his portraits. The same thing was done here in the twentieth century. And we need to remember that nearly everyone acquiesced. So even if we were not informants or prison guards, we took part in this annihilation of memory. When we read and listen to the names of the departed, we are trying to redeem this shared guilt. That is likely where the feeling of purification, of catharsis, comes from.

It gladdens me how year by year these readings resound with notes of grief and repentance. And of profound reflection on what has occurred. Moods of vengeance and retribution are have no place here. All that recedes into the background. And if someone dares to proclaim, "Never forget, never forgive," or some such message, no one responds: it is so out of keeping with the general tone.

Right now I am reading Don Carlo Gnocchi, an Italian saint from the twentieth century. He ended up in Russia during war time with Italian troops. Here is what he writes about the Russian people at the beginning of the war: "This people does not yet understand at all its profound suffering, which is very like the torments of hell. For them it is still unfathomable and contradictory."

It seems to me that we also have failed to understand that where our country ended up in the twentieth century was indeed very like the torments of hell—and not just for those who were poisoned and killed, but for all of us together. It is the fact of this failure to understand or recognize the past for what it is that explains the resurgence of nostalgia for Stalinist times.

There is a lot of talk today about how to find something that will connect us all, that will create a sense of national unity. The task seems impossible: how, on what basis, to reconcile us all?

It is here, on the Lubyanka, that you can sense a genuine, mysterious unity, in the line of those who have come to read the names of the murdered. This genuinely connects people. It is a unity that contains love for one another, trust in one another, respect for one another. We sense that we are working on a shared task, and this task is not simply a wish to recall those who have been killed and forgotten. Those who come here are connected by something like a shared faith, a shared understanding of the world. And we have gathered to bear witness to this faith. We might define our shared belief thus: organized violence against a human being is impermissible and can never be justified; cruelty for any cause is hateful; no one may disregard the life of a human being. Only from such belief can spring the genuine, uncontrived, unfabricated unification of people.

*Recorded by Oksana Golovko*
*Translated by Martha M. F. Kelly*