

## **Re-creating Mankind: The Philosophy and Actualization of the "New Soviet Man"**

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**Bio:**

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**Abstract:**

My research is fundamentally an exploration into the dynamics of what has been conceptualized as “The New Soviet Man.” My intention is to examine not only the Soviet regime’s actual implementation of this idea into society, but also to investigate other factors surrounding this idea such as the philosophical foundations of the New Man, the response of the New Man in the public and private sectors of the Soviet Union, and whether or not the Soviet Government’s idea of creating a New Soviet Man could be interpreted as a success or failure on the level of real-world application and the theoretical level. The sources from which my research and conclusions are drawn stem from numerous disciplines that range from historical interpretations to philosophical treatises and even to Soviet literature that focuses on the New Man concept. I hope my research clearly conveys the amalgamation of all these different sources and factors surrounding the idea of the New Soviet Man into a refined analysis that reveals a larger idea behind this social experiment of essentially re-creating humanity.

## Introduction

As the Bolshevik party took control of Russia after the October Revolution in 1917, they initiated large scale reforms in numerous sectors of society, while ultimately instituting changes in the political, economic, and cultural realms; that would all work together to clearly define their newly founded United Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) for the next seventy years. These reforms were predominantly focused on the wide-spread cultivation and propagation of Marxist/Leninist ideology throughout every portion of the USSR's social spectrum. One of the most important initiatives taken was the promulgation of a new philosophical idealism that strove to mold the masses, specifically the proletariat working class, to form a "New Man." Though this philosophical concept, coupled with the aims and ideology of the Soviet regime, has been historically designated as "The New Soviet Man," the two terms are referred to synonymously in this historical investigation. The New Soviet Man was a medium through which the new party leaders attempted to extirpate old societal norms, which were lingering from the former regime, and replace them with a holistically Communistic society ruled by a national consensus and devoid of any individualism that may cause dissention. The party utilized several different means and operated through multifarious mediums to achieve this unification of social consciousness; some of these methods of transformation like propaganda or education guided under Communist values were directly implemented in social sectors to achieve immediate results, and other techniques sought to establish a firm grounding for the future New Soviet Man. These included the use of technological innovations and sciences along with a popular system of class promotion.

Within the discourse of the New Soviet Man the interpretations are abundant and diverse. It has been noted and examined that while many of these methods helped the Bolshevik cause of

creating a new psychological state within the Soviet populace, some programs were inversely detrimental because of the overarching social terror, totalitarian policies, and oppression of individualism under which the transformative methodology was formulated and carried out. It is necessary here in this investigation to explore the origins of the New Man Concept, the idealism that lay behind the veil of Bolshevik politics, the mass mobilization of citizenship under the umbrella of the New Man, and the public response as measurement of success or failure all in an effort to better understand the New Soviet Man as it was implemented under the Soviet regime.

### **Creation of the Concept**

The Bolshevik's conception of the New Soviet Man idea was truly an idealistic notion that had been nurtured over time through various different sources. The amalgamation of several viewpoints on the idea of a prevailing social identity ultimately led Lenin and the Bolshevik party to conclude that the only successful Communistic civilization was one transformed under a broad social psychology.

Beginning with Lenin's philosophical basis, Marx's and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, the necessity of a population completely altered under an inclusive value became obvious as Marx and Engels characterized the state of the world's social hierarchy as dismal and oppressive within the Bourgeoisie's ruling-class system (22). The authors claimed the only way to extinguish this atrocious injustice was to overthrow all existing social constraints and replace them with a unifying social condition free of class antagonism and emancipated from existing social supremacies (38-39). Lenin, taking into account the benefits of a unified national order outlined by Marx and Engels, saw the immediate allure of creating an objective utopian vision on which he could base his politics, and he also recognized the foundation of his new ideal community could "only be maintained if the very nature of man can be changed to conform to

the requirements of [his] new order” after the revolution (Alt and Alt 23). Through this purely idealistic vision that was taken from Marx and Engels, Lenin and his party carried out their utopian reforms in the hopes of recreating the perfect citizens.

Though the Bolshevik’s aims in their transformation of the Soviet society have been overwhelmingly attributed to the ideas of Marx and Engels, some scholars believe there was a large influence from another 19<sup>th</sup> century German Philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Bernice Rosenthal asserts that the Bolshevik’s revolutionary reforms resulted in a much less economically minded citizen than Marx’s and Engels’ model called for, and because of the significant change seen in the citizens psychological state and philosophical outlook, the New Soviet Man actually fits the Nietzschean model instead (192). This model, taken from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, was labeled as the “Übermensch” (translated to many different terms, usually Superman or Overman), and Rosenthal clearly sees Nietzsche’s “Übermensch,” in the figure of the New Soviet Man, whose features included “boundless energy, daring, hardness, physical vitality” (189). Nietzsche wrote about his Superman in terms of “those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be a sacrifice” or “him whose soul is overfull so that he forgets himself and all things are in him” (15-16). In comparison to these characterizations, Trotsky wrote about similar traits in the New Soviet Man as he stated that “Emancipated man will want to attain a greater equilibrium...in order to reduce the fear of death to a rational reaction of the organism towards danger” and, perhaps more importantly, “Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness...to create a higher biological type, or, if you please, a *superman*” (Trotsky, “Literature and Revolution” para. 49). Through the similarities seen between the philosophy of Nietzsche and the Bolshevik teachings, the physiological and psychological transition that

constitutes a New Soviet Man could very well be attributed to the Nietzschean myth of the Übermensch.

Within both models presented, that from *The Communist Manifesto* and also Nietzsche's idea of the Übermensch, there is convincing evidence that each had a compelling influence on the Bolshevik's vision for their New Soviet Man and the society built around him. Regardless of which philosophy may have been more important to the Bolshevik party, it is more accurate and appropriate to present both as large contributing factors to the New Man concept, and as these two ideologies are better understood in their philosophical and historical contexts, especially their stake within the formulation of Soviet idealism, the New Soviet Man becomes less mystical and complex in its examination.

### **Methodology of the Soviet Psychological Consensus**

The measures taken by the Communist regime to thoroughly instill their idea of the New Soviet Man into the mind of the populace were ubiquitous in nature, for it was apparent to Lenin in his ideological idealism that society must fully repudiate all principles from a former regime before it can move forward into a new, pure Communism, which included a wide-spread social consciousness. This mass mobilization of thought was characterized by the Soviet scholar Andrei Sinyavsky in his book *Soviet Civilization* as a "persistent and moral coercion" of the population's ingrained social philosophy (114). This upheaval of former principles in the public sphere fit in well with Lenin's politics because the promotion of his New Man "would require the creation of utterly new conditions of existence" (Sinyavsky 114). The newly established conditions within Soviet Society were essential to the success of the New Soviet Man, and with the successful creation of a new communal psychological state, the Soviet regime could continue its existence and power indefinitely.

Lenin and his party began their societal re-invention to pave the way for the New Soviet Man in the schools. The Bolsheviks uprooted the former education system and replaced it instead with a Marxist-based, propaganda-infused educational arrangement, in which the formerly uneducated class were taught specifically under an umbrella of Socialist values. This “propaganda state,” as Peter Kenez classifies it, “had to win over people for the new [government’s] goals: social construction, and the creation of a socialist human being” (122-123). By enhancing the working-classes with a new education and establishing a single minded “Proletkult” (proletariat culture), the Soviets believed they could create a chain reaction of socialist permeation throughout society. It was within this new cognition of the proletariat and the “New Man” of the regime that ideas would spread and “bring about a spiritual revolution, renewing the consciousness of the working class” (Fritzsche and Hellbeck 315). In a way, the party’s aims within their educational reforms were to establish the New Soviet Man as a mere stepping stone in their long journey to diffuse Socialist values completely through society, and the New Man’s crucial role in the continuation of this new Soviet existence was reiterated by the party’s confidence in their ability to cause widespread Socialist cohesion within the USSR.

Another fundamental method the party used in its subversion of the established norms to aid developments of the New Soviet Man was to inculcate a rigorous nationalistic elitism into their citizens (Kenez 167). With its coercive tactics of propaganda and party promotion, the Bolshevik government instilled into the minds of the people a chauvinistic idea that Proletariat culture was the best culture. In other words, the strategy of the party’s policies was to implant the notion that the New Soviet Man was the best man, thus making any citizens who refused to engage themselves in the cultural reforms was disassociated as an inferior being and a dissenter. The program was predominantly implemented through the work of party propaganda and the



Soviets' Komsomol, an organization used in the recruitment and training of new Soviet members along with creating more incentives for citizens to buy into Socialist ideology, which was actualized by large-scale promotions of the working classes into lower level governmental positions, with the potential of moving up. The Komsomol was based in the core values of the proletariat spirit and though it was an outwardly open program, it usually only admitted those who were deeply entrenched with the new Soviet way of thought (Kenez 169). Therefore, its entry-level requirements compelled many neutral citizens to fully unify themselves with Soviet values. This potential for upward social mobility within the Soviet society and the promotion to bureaucratic positions helped the party's New Man experiment in that it enticed a large portion of the working class population to strive for a New Man status through political education, and then the politically educated began to mobilize their fellow workers, once again creating the ideal chain reaction of Communist revolutions (Kenez 122). Through their broad recruitment and reeducation the Soviet Party converted huge amounts of men and women to their side of the political and social spectrum, and their propagandistic system of social conditioning that stressed the superiority of the new believers in Communism over those who held tightly on to the former values of aristocrats and bourgeoisie was the final advertisement that brought many over to the side of the Party.

In their quest to convert the masses into perfect citizens the Bolsheviks also delved into the then-emerging fields of Science and Technology. These measures extended as far as some actual attempts at eugenics. They believed in their scientists' abilities to alter the genetic compositions of their test subjects in order to create an ideal genetic pattern. This pattern would carry all the traits of a perfect Communist. The justification for this action in the Soviets' minds was that eugenic sciences were actually very "compatible with Marxism" (Rosenthal 195).

Though the idea of eugenics was widely accepted by Soviet scientists and leaders within the party, much of society was vehemently against this idea and it caused many of the workers within the industrial sectors and peasants in rural *kolhoz* (Soviet collective farms) to disapprove of the new Soviet system altogether. They did not want to be part of any “societal factory” because of their fears of potentially having their “‘privates lives’ [*i.e.* their sexual relations and child-bearing decisions] controlled by the collective” (Rosenthal 198). This program and its negative reception, was the beginning of what was soon perceived by a large portion of the USSR’s masses as an immoral approach to reaching the government’s goals, which was a political motivation most were not willing to exist under, regardless of its long-term benefits, which at that point were unsubstantiated and unseen. With this response, the idea of utilizing Science and Technology failed on a large scale, for no man or woman wanted to become a “good” Soviet by way of genetic alteration, therefore leaving a disdainful sentiment for Soviet collectivization and oppression.

During the later years of the 1920s the party took a different angle in their approach to create the New Soviet Man. Instead of trying to create huge social transitions like Lenin had attempted, Stalin instead focused on the industrial sector of society, in the hopes that by providing an example of perfect Soviets in the most productive sections of the country, a change will naturally trickle down into the other subsectors of the nation. Working together with its propaganda, the party used the Soviet Union’s growing industrial areas as a measurement of social coercion. In the propaganda of that time, the factory was overly poeticized and conveyed as an edifice of Soviet brilliance and the epitome of the new type of Proletariat Superman (Fritzsche and Hellbeck 315). This idea of using technological innovations and economic industrialization as a medium to help create a new psychological state for the citizens was taken

from Marx's and Engels' teaching that man is specifically the product of his social environment and that an appeal to "the class struggle, as well as their own surroundings, causes Socialists of this kind to consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms" (35). This sentiment was essential for Stalin as he took power because he knew that soliciting Communist values through the guise of productivity and industrial advancement could be an extremely beneficial way to persuade more citizens to join the party and take upon themselves the idealism and superiority that comprised the New Soviet Man. With the conveyance of industry as a large, rhythmic, and pure technological machine to run the economic sector of society, they could correlate the values of the new machinery into the psychological processes of society, ultimately molding "disorganized human individuals into a gigantic collective machine" (Fritzsche and Hellbeck 315). The giant social apparatus created within this policy of literal and figurative extensive industrialization was to become an expansion of the government in that the establishment of a majority of Communist supporters within the industrial sectors should have enhanced the Soviet's support within other areas of the country. This national permeation of Soviet values was clearly the eventual goal of this program, but because of the oppressive nature in which the government implemented this industrialization, which included terrible working conditions and massive repression of individualistic innovation within the workplace, its purpose as a way to convert workers into New Soviet Men was not fully realized, and, along with the aforementioned experiments in eugenics, it ultimately caused dissidence and created a sense throughout the ranks of popular opinion that the New Man experiment was inevitably doomed to fail.

The Soviet methodology in their emphasis on cultivating a prevailing social consciousness was, in its foundations, purely an aspiration to replace what the Soviets saw as a "historical backwardness" with a more developed, almost "utopian," nation whose citizens all

believed in a common cause. The Soviet's negative view of the former Russian Empire was basically an inherent rebellious attitude that had been brewing since their childhoods under the Tsarist regime, and they believed their new society was utterly necessary to "clear the way for envisioning a totally different future" (Fritzsche and Hellbeck 306). In the Soviet view of the future, they assumed themselves to be the pioneers of an imminent global rebellion against the former bourgeois individualism that created disproportional class structures, so in their methods, the necessity of successful social transformative efforts nullified any second thoughts of moral integrity, and this led to a communal backlash against the New Soviet Man concept and the policies supporting it.

### **Response to the Tactics of Creating Mass Consciousness**

Through our Western, Democratic, and plainly anachronistic perceptions of Soviet Russia, the tactics used by the Communist Regime during the 1920s and 1930s in an attempt to create a new, unified mass acceptance and support for party policies were obviously devoid of any attachment to morality in its conventional usage, and even to the citizens during the regime's control, this attitude quickly became commonplace. The public opinion, which was almost entirely driven by the working class because of the enormous purging of the Russia Intelligentsia under the Bolsheviks, quickly shifted from support to an almost unanimous opposition to the mobilization tactics. The citizens believed that to become a productive Soviet in the new system was to give up morality and to blindly do anything in the name of Communism. This caused a large rift in the rising social perception of the New Man as people began to lose respect for the idea, instead thinking that the "psychology of the Communist bears comparison to that of the terrorist Socialist Revolutionary who, despite the blood on his hands, was faithful to the revolutionary ethical norms," which were gross perversions of the established ethical rectitude

that still lingered in the people (Sinyavsky 120). For this reason, many potential participants and even fully instituted “new men” lost their respect for the idea of becoming/being the perfect Communist because of the Machiavellian methodology they were seeing in their nation’s leaders. The society at large could not accept the policies that they believed fell under the rationalization of “the ends justify the means.”

This notion of the using atrocious tactics to achieve some idyllic objective was rejected even by Trotsky when he stated: “Let us admit for the moment that neither personal nor social ends can justify the means” (Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours” para. 9). But, alongside this sentiment, Trotsky also adds in the same essay that the Bolshevik objectives of creating the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people simply “signified that those means are moral which lead to the common welfare as the higher end” (Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours” para. 17). As they proclaimed the moral incertitude of certain deeds, yet justified their own, the Bolsheviks essentially aimed to change the entire ethical spectrum that ran through the mind of the populace, therefore pushing more for the New Soviet Man to become so entrenched with Soviet support so that even immoral acts would not sway him otherwise. This act provoked more opposition within the country and individuals began to act out against the Soviet’s policies.

Criticisms of the New Soviet Man took many forms; most, like political cartoons, pamphlets, or actual meetings, were censored or eradicated extremely quickly. But the medium for criticism that played the largest significance was Soviet Literature. Almost all works were immediately censored, for they usually did not adhere to the newly-inculcated Soviet Realism, which was the government’s push in the arts that led to the propagation of false conveyances of “real” Soviet life, ranging from strange paintings of Stalin overseeing happy proletariat worker to regurgitated literary works that all derived from one “master plot.” Within this literary medium

of criticizing the New Soviet Man, the most noteworthy and indicative work was not even published in the Soviet Union until 1987, over 60 years after it was completed; this exposition of the New Soviet Man experiment was the book *Heart of a Dog* by the famous Soviet satirist of the 1920s, Mikhail Bulgakov.

Bulgakov's book, *Heart of a Dog* is now the most widely recognized satire of the New Soviet Man concept as it investigates the experiment of social transfiguration in an absurd and very literal way. The work's plot centers around Professor Preobrazhensky's (taken from the Russian "преобразование" (pre-a-braz-o-vah-ee-ye) meaning "transformation") experiment of replacing the pituitary gland in a dog with a human's pituitary gland. The dog begins to acquire human traits, and after many weeks of evolution, the new walking and talking human, named Sharikov, becomes a devout party member. Though the discovery is quite remarkable, Preobrazhensky quickly realizes that Sharikov is a detestable and incorrigible person, ultimately leading to the climactic scene in which Sharikov threatens his creators with a revolver (Bulgakov 117-118). After this, Preobrazhensky and his assistant re-transplant the necessary organs, returning the human character Sharikov to his lowly existence as a canine companion (Bulgakov 122-123).

The extent to which Bulgakov's satirical novel is a criticism of the New Soviet Man is prevalent in the symbolism surrounding Sharikov. In dog form, Sharikov is Bulgakov's representation for the uneducated, unquestioning proletariat masses, and in this figure, Bulgakov compares the treatment of the dog to the treatment of the impressionable population when he writes, "by terror you cannot get anywhere with an animal, no matter what its stage of development... They are wrong thinking that terror will help them" (16). The transformed human Sharikov is utilized as a satirical representation of the Soviet experiment and its subjects,

essentially the New Soviet Man. Sharikov's character become autonomous very quickly after his transfiguration, which Bulgakov adds as a way to show the transition stages of the New Soviet Man from dependent and helpless proletariat (the dog) to self-sufficient, human mechanism of the system (Chapple 43). As Sharikov develops into a more uncontrollable person, Preobrazhensky realizes his colossal mistake in tampering with something as delicate as the brain of a dog, and as Sharikov eventually turns on his creators, Bulgakov overtly attempts to emphasize the horrid nature of the "new breed of Soviet citizen" (Natov 44; Chapple 33). For Bulgakov, the New Soviet Man is a narrow-minded party member whose desires to act according to the Communist doctrine replace any sense of morality, and this becomes apparent in Sharikov's behavior as a human. Just as many Soviets condemned the old aristocratic class struggles, Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* condescendingly demeans the New Soviet Man as "not yet housebroken" and indicates that in the New Man's condemnation of old values, he is simply a repackaged version of the old philistine, denouncing all principles that do not coincide with his indoctrination (Chapple 85). By the end of the novel, as Preobrazhensky must change Sharikov back because of his outrageous behavior, Bulgakov stresses his final point that "reversal is imperative, since the social experiments, much as the new Soviet man in *Heart of a Dog*, do not live up to expectations" (Chapple 63). In this sense, Bulgakov's satire not only serves to expose the blatantly dangerous nature of the Soviet's ideal Communist, but also utilizes Sharikov's fate as a vehicle of emphasis on the eventual necessity of ridding the nation of mass Soviet consciousness, which actually happens on a small scale after Stalin's death and on large scale during the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. This book, along with the social opposition that arose after the negative effects of the party's tactics for spreading Communistic values on a national scale, provides great insight into the dynamics of what the New Soviet Man may have meant for

society, especially those who disapproved of the concept, and also what the New Soviet Man could have been like, not in theory, but in reality.

### **Looking Back on the New Soviet Man**

The large interpretative dilemma in examining the experiment of the New Soviet Man is primarily centered on the question of whether or not it was successful. Sinyavsky wrote that, with our historical hindsight, it is plain to see “the State could not have survived as long as it [did] without the support of a man of new social and psychological type” (114). When defining the prolongation of the USSR in terms of the abundance of transformed men within the population, it appears as a definite success. Other historians see nothing but a failed experiment and, instead of the creation of a collective set of values, the deterioration of social repose as the Soviet policies of mass psychology-building only led to “crime, mental illness, divorce, and many other forms of personal and social disorganization” (Alt and Alt 284). These deconstructive consequences of the party’s politics appeared as evidence of the New Soviet Man’s failure, and paved the way for totalitarian control in order to suppress the aftermath of the Bolshevik’s social experiment.

One way of analyzing the success or failure of the New Soviet Man is to gather up any type of concrete evidence that may have been documented on the Soviet civilization’s transformation, and this is found in those who were actually said to have lived up to the model of the perfect Soviet citizens, who, in the Soviet period, were only depicted by Lenin and Stalin. The problem with this interpretation is that if the New Soviet Man can be characterized as “an embodiment to strive for” instead of a “set of given empirical qualities,” then these two leaders could certainly be considered successfully transformed New Men, but in the practical application of New Man values, ordinary citizens could never equate themselves on the same Communist



plane as Lenin or Stalin, because that would be insubordinate to the rulers' status (Fritzsche and Hellbeck 326). Therefore this understanding of the New Soviet Man would be a failure because of the inability of citizens to actually attain that position, which was the purpose of the entire project in the first place; proletariats can forever strive to reach that esteemed standing, but eventually, their failure to live up to the concept's creators will push them back into meager disappointment.

When examining the outcome of the party's attempts at creating a mass consciousness, the oppressive control that the government inaugurated in its efforts seem to prevail as one of the biggest verifications of failure. In fact Sinyavsky, who wrote about the benefits that the experiment had in extending the Soviet's rule, also wrote that one of the worst outcomes of the Soviet methods was the Cheka, the secret police, whose installation was used as a means to coerce the population to assimilate themselves with Communist values through fear; he wrote the organization was truly a "perversion, a sort of pathology of the new society" who proved the Soviet's reversal of moral codes in light of the Communist way of thinking, thus showing that, even though many New Soviet Men were "created," it was actually a disgusting distortion of societal values and humane morality (125). The usage of Soviet propaganda that suggested leaders of the party, depicted as perfect Communist, also maintained this moral subversion in that the Cheka never turned their suspicions towards a party leader, for it would have been ludicrous to even propose. Also, it has been noted by historians that the methodology by Soviets to disseminate their teachings through society had a direct influence on the tactics later used by Hitler in his construction of the Nazi party in Germany, for in the exaltation of men like Lenin and Stalin, the Soviets created a unreachable degree of perfection, just as Hitler would adorned his special unit, the SS, on a level of unscathed beauty (Fritzsche and Hellbeck). The comparison

here clearly depicts the bias placed on an idea that was used to promote equality, and, in this contradiction, the massive dissatisfaction stemming from the spread of such an idea could only lead to failure.

As more evidence becomes available to the public in Russia, the myriad of assessments dealing with the New Soviet Man seems to find no end, and numerous interpretations will continue to draw upon the different mediums and aspects of this concept to try and conclude a definite answer to the questions surrounding its validity, practicality, and success. For now, when studying the available resources such as the Soviets' strategies in creating a New Soviet Man and the public response through Literature and other outcries, the discursive eyes of history inevitably rest their gaze on the definite failure of the experiment. Through the Marxist and Nietzschean idealism, the promising efforts by mass tactics like the Komsomol, or even the initial fictional magnificence of Preobrazhensky's experiment, the New Soviet Man appeared as an integral piece of an attainable Utopia, but upon seeing the eventual consequences that arose, it becomes obvious that while a massive measure of societal change may appear ideal and perfect at its inception, it can ultimately turn into an illuminating testimony of how treacherous and unequivocally corrupt a regime and its policies can be.

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