In Search of Soviet Salvation: Young People Write to the Stalinist Authorities

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Abstract

Letters have always been an important medium between rulers and subjects in the Soviet Union and Russia. This article looks at letters from young people to Soviet party officials, newspapers and youth organizations, using them as texts in their own right rather than as sources for the events they describe. A close and detailed analysis of the letters' language, structure and style reveals the subjective universe of their authors and the function of letters both in the personal life of their writers and in the Soviet system overall. Particular attention is paid to letters that employ confessionary narratives. The eschatological trajectory of other Soviet autobiographical texts, which chart the inevitable progress from an unenlightened state to ideological conviction, is reversed in these letters, leading the reader from a happy Soviet life to a point of confusion and ideological doubt. While the crises, which are at the heart of these letters, reveal the difficulties of young people in making sense of the Soviet world around them, they also demonstrate the extent to which young people's norms, values and language were infused by Bolshevik thought. The process of letter writing was thus both an affirmation of the system and a testimony to its failings.

Letter writing was a quintessential Soviet activity. Letters were both an official and an unofficial way of expressing popular sentiment, circumventing bureaucracy and establishing a direct line of contact with the supreme powers. Letters were written collectively in honour of Stalin's birthday, for celebrating revolutionary anniversaries and for announcing socialist competitions and pledges of achievement. Yet letters were also written individually to ask for help, beg for clemency, express gratitude or share personal thoughts and experiences with those who were deemed wiser and more powerful. Letters were written to complain (mostly about housing and work) and to denounce (mostly those with whom the writer shared housing or work). Most letters had more than one purpose, the various components inextricably linked to each other. Letters were the space where the Soviet public and private spheres

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collided, turning the Soviet subject for a brief moment into a Soviet citizen. On the one hand they followed Soviet demands that individuals be in constant contact with the representatives of the collective good. They used the language of Bolshevism, thus identifying the writer as an active participant of the system. They repeated official ideological beliefs and contributed to the sustaining of communist mythologies by referring to Soviet idols, icons and legends. On the other hand these letters exposed the regime's weak points, the failures of its officials and the gap between reality and ideology. They used accepted forms of expression in order to criticise the uncriticisable. They misused and thus subverted Bolshevik terminology. They (often unwittingly) uncovered how ludicrously Soviet ideology and values were applied in practice and they gave testimony to the amount of hurt and pain the regime caused its people both materially and mentally. Writing letters was actively encouraged by the system through sample letters published in newspapers and collective letters initiated by class teachers, brigade leaders or Party activists. People who wrote letters were usually applauded – yet letter-writing could also be subversive. The Communist Party leadership considered the letters of Soviet people to be of such explosive significance that they had them filed in the secret part of their archives, restricting access to the tightest of circles. Here they were preserved side by side with all the other embarrassing moments of Soviet life – oppositional activity, suicides, terrible accidents, mass poisonings and major fraud.

Soviet letters have thus rightly been of particular interest for Soviet historians, who compiled, categorised and analysed them even before the opening of the archives revealed the thousands of letters hidden there.[1] Some have drawn parallels between the culture of appealing to the tsar and writing to the Soviet authorities, while others have pointed to the modernity of the phenomenon, with the media playing an important role in receiving and eliciting letters.[2] Letters have been used to gauge popular opinion, acquire information about everyday life and explore the mechanism by which Soviet state and society interacted. They have been labelled a 'long-distance

1 See, e.g., Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); Margareta Mommsen, *Hilf mir mein Recht zu finden: Russische Bittschriften von Iwan dem Schrecklichen bis Gorbatschow* (Frankfurt: Propyläen Verlag, 1987); Nicholas Lambert, *Whistleblowing in the Soviet Union: A Study of Complaints and Abuses under State Socialism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985); A. Inkeles and K. Geiger, 'Critical Letters to the Editors of the Soviet Press: Areas and Modes of Complaint', *American Sociological Review*, 17 (1952), 694–703; Inkeles and Geiger, 'Critical Letters to the Editors of the Soviet Press: Social Characteristics and Interrelations of Critics and Criticized', ibid., 18 (1953), 12–22; and Stephen White, 'Political Communications in the USSR: Letters to the Party, State and Press', *Political Studies*, 31 (1983). For more recent discussions based on archival research see Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 55, 1 (1996), 78–105; Fitzpatrick, 'Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s, *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996), 831–66; Vladimir Kozlov, 'Denunciations and its Function in Soviet Governance: From the Archive of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1944–53'; Fitzpatrick, *Stalinism: New Directions* (London: Routledge, 2000), 117–41; A. Sokolov, ed., *Golos Naroda: Pis'ma i otkliki riadovyikh sovetskikh grazhdan o sobytiiakh 1918–1932 gg* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998), 5–6; Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, eds., *Stalinism as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 7–8.

2 Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 83–93. Sokolov, *Pis'ma*, 5.

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conference and a form of mass communication',[3] 'a form of democratic political participation',[4] 'an essential element in Russia's traditional system of bureaucratic governance'[5] and an 'individual communication with the authorities on topics both private and public'.[6] Letters have been interpreted as 'performing a crucial feedback function' in a society that lacked other channels of upward communication and as a cunning ploy by their authors to sidestep bureaucratic procedures in obtaining scarce items and services.[7] They have been used to demonstrate the existence of dissent among the Soviet population as well as conformism and the adoption of Bolshevik techniques and language.[8] However, with the exception of written denunciations little attention has been paid so far to specific categories of letters, the stories of their creation and what their production meant to the individual who wrote them. An analysis of the relationship between writer, recipient and product will shed new light on the personal universe of the Soviet subject that seems to lie at the heart of so many questions posed about and by Soviet society.

Letters and their senders

The volume of letters written by young people received by the Komsomol – Communist Union of youth, the youth wing of the Communist Party – Komsomol newspapers and other organs of Soviet power and press was certainly huge. The Komsomol central committee, just like the central committee of the Communist Party, had a whole section dealing solely with the reception and administration of incoming letters. Important Soviet leaders kept their own collections of letters, which included the small sample that made it through their administrative and ideological firewalls. Stalin's fund of letters, which again represents only a tiny fraction of the correspondence he actually received, runs into tens of thousands.[9] The files of the Ukrainian central committee of the Komsomol show an ever increasing amount of written correspondence, with more and more letters logged each year in the secret part of Party archive. While for the immediate postwar years only a few thousand letters can be found in the files, the years 1948–50 each accumulated more than 15,000 letters.[10] *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* received roughly 3,500 letters each month in

3 Sokolov, *Golos Naroda*, 5.
4 Fitzpatrick, 'Signals from Below', 833.
5 Kozlov, 'Denunciations', 118.
6 Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', 80.
7 Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 102–3. See also Sokolov, *Golos Naroda*, 5.
8 For dissent see Inkeles and Geiger, 'Critical Letters', 694–703; for (at least partial) acceptance see Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', 78–105; Kozlov, 'Denunciations', 117–41.
9 Rossiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), f. 558, op. 11. This collection includes 904 files, each of which contains a minimum of 20 letters. It is clear from the senders that these letters were the select few which actually reached the *vozhd*. Most of them are from important Soviet citizens, old acquaintances of Stalin, foreign dignitaries and other government members. Yet the occasional letter from an ordinary subject sometimes found its way into the file of letters presented to Stalin each morning.
10 This is an estimate based on the calculation that letters are kept in files of roughly 500 pages, with a letter running on average over two pages. There were about fifteen files for each year between

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1949, 4,000 in 1950 and 5,000 in 1952. In this last year of Stalin's rule the newspaper received 53,704 letters from young people all over the Soviet Union.[11] With the death of Stalin and the changes brought about by the Khrushchevite thaw, which many people interpreted as an encouragement from above to engage in a dialogue with the leadership, the number of letters simply exploded. By July 1956 *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* received more than 8,000 letters a month.[12] Letters came in all shapes and sizes. Some were handwritten on unconventional materials such as wallpaper or, in the case of letters from the formerly occupied territories in the immediate postwar period, on the back of German official announcements and other administrative forms. Some clearly aped the slightly sarcastic and off-the-cuff style of the Soviet paper's *feuilletons*. Some contained practical questions and concerns. Only a very small percentage (about a hundred letters a month) dealt directly with material *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* published. This number rose when the paper featured one of the topics that were at the heart of Soviet youth's concerns. Articles such as 'How To Be a Good Person', published in November 1952, raised the number of letters by over a thousand in December 1952.[13] Other items that were high on the response list included anything concerned with peer interaction, questions of the role of the individual within the Soviet collective, and discussions of personal feelings and how to deal with them in an adequate Soviet manner. The most popular article in October 1949 was a letter from a schoolgirl named Lilia Novikova with the title 'What Have We Done Wrong?', which put the spotlight on the dilemma of Soviet pupils as to whether to work with the teacher (and thus contribute to the common good) or to value more their personal relationships with their negligent, lazy or disobedient friends (and thus engage in inexcusable individualism).[14]

As has become apparent, personal narratives formed a significant part of many letters. These narratives were concerned with the subjective experiences of young people – their joys, pains, disappointments and ideological dilemmas – and often resembled confessions. Called 'letters of confession' by Sheila Fitzpatrick, confessionary narrative exists less as a genre in its own right, but as an important trope which appeared in a large variety of letters.[15] Confessions were rarely just that: people asked, complained and denounced at the same time as they confessed. Yet it is the confession that by its very determination to reveal the personal to the collective connects the private realm of the Soviet people with the public sphere of the Soviet

1945 and 1947. From 1948 to 1950 there were about sixty files for each year. Tsentral'nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Hromads'kuikh Ob'iednan Ukrainy (TsDAHOU), f. 7, op. 2 and 5).

11 Just like its older sister *Pravda*, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* published a survey each month of the volume of letters received. They also briefly discussed the items which had generated the largest response and provided statistics of the type and origins of letters. Unfortunately the Komsomol archive does not seem to hold a full run of these surveys. For the cited numbers see RGASPI M-f. 1, op. 32, d. 732, l. 6; f. 1, op. 32, d. 586, l. 217; f. 1, op. 32, d. 701, l. 124.

12 RGASPI, M-f. 1, op. 32, d. 821, l. 35–40.

13 RGASPI, M-f. 1, op. 32, d. 732, l. 2.

14 RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 586, l. 217. 'V chem. My nepravdy: Pis'ma v redaktsiiu', *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 15 Oct.1943, 3.

15 Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', 82.

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system, while at the same time demonstrating that in the Soviet mindset such a distinction did not exist. Letters with confessional narratives usually conform to a definite structure, which could vary in detail, but in essence followed the ritual of religious confession, incorporating self-identification, confessionary narrative, a quest for forgiveness and an offer of punitive redemption.[16] While Sheila Fitzpatrick has pointed out that this confession was mostly a 'complete explanation of one's convictions, thoughts and actions',[17] the tone and style of many letters demonstrate that they were also a confession in the sense of admitting guilt – guilt for the failure to have lived up to expectations both private and public. It is indeed the admission of guilt and the implicit quest for redemption that distinguishes a confession from a detailed petition or denunciation. As such, confessionary letters are closely related to another category of Soviet writing that has recently become an object of scholarly interest – the short Soviet autobiography, which, as Igal Halfin has pointed out, is structured as a confession recounting the writer's journey from 'darkness to light' and thus to the end of time.[18] Sharing the latter's vocabulary, structure and eschatological assumptions, letters of confession differed in only one crucial aspect: they told the story of personal enlightenment along the line of public progress in reverse, starting with a happy Soviet childhood, in which individual belief and outer reality were congruent, and descending to a more and more complex and clouded youth, in which personal development and collective norms were increasingly diverging. Structuring the letter chronologically and telling a story of mounting tension, the writer brings the narrative to a climax at the point of writing, thus making the letter itself both symbol and representative of the writer's crisis and a desperate plea for help to rediscover internal unity and a sense of belonging. In many ways the adolescent writer is giving expression not only to his or her ideological crisis, but also to the pains of growing up in general, yearning for the days of innocent childhood and intellectual simplicity.

Just as early Christian conviction held that in order to find salvation one had to reveal oneself as a sinner in public, so Bolshevik ideology encouraged public confessions and redemption as a sign of ideological maturity.[19] Without a basic conviction that their letters contributed to personal betterment and the good of the collective, authors would not have picked up their pens. Letter-writing was

16 The idea of Bolshevism as imitating religious practices has been advanced by the Russian émigré Nicolas Berdiaev, who saw Bolsheviks perverting the popular energies traditionally engendered by the Orthodox faith. The idea of interpreting Bolshevism as a political religion recently resurfaced in the writing of Oleg Kharkhordin, who points to the congruence between Orthodox theological thought and the Bolshevik worldview. Nicolas Berdiaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 158–88, Oleg Kharkhordin, 'Reveal and Dissimulate: A Genealogy of Private Life in Soviet Russia' in Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kraner, eds., *Public and Private in Thought and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 333–63.

17 Fitzpatrick 'Signals from Below', 82.

18 See Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2000).

19 See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I (London: Allen Lane, 1979), Introduction. For Bolshevik ideology see Igal Halfin, *Terror in my Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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inextricably linked to participating in, not rejecting, the regime. The fact that confessions could only be elicited from a believer indicates why young Soviet people of the late Stalinist years made some of the most interesting letter writers. They were extensively exposed to Soviet propaganda, becoming the group most likely to evaluate themselves self-consciously and confront discrepancies in their belief systems. As members of the celebrated community of 'youth' they were continuously reminded that with them lay the future and that they were responsible for making socialism – and, even more, communism – a reality.[20] As those whose childhood had been spent entirely in the Soviet Union, they had grown up believing in father Stalin and the happiness of their childhood – beliefs that had to stand the test of questioning in subsequent years. It is worth remembering that the term 'youth', as used by the Bolsheviks, was less applied to the years of biological adolescence than to early adulthood, when intellectual maturity was believed to meet in fruitful union with youthful enthusiasm and spontaneity.[21] The fact that young people's letters frequently refer to their duties as members of 'Soviet youth' demonstrates the extent to which this concept of youth had been accepted and internalised by young people themselves, but also indicates the pressure such high demands put on them.

Structures, narratives and language

It has become apparent that the motivation for writing, the process of production, the letter's content and the writer's private and personal life were inextricably interlinked. A sample of confessional letters written in the Stalinist war and post-war years – those under examination were all written between 1941 and 1953 – show the senders as exclusively those who identified themselves as young or, judging from the content of the letter, were involved in activities typical of the young, such as school or Komsomol universities. When the letter was addressed to the Komsomol or *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, the principal newspaper of the Soviet youth league, it was assumed that the writer was a young person. The letters are located in various archives. Some were addressed to Soviet political dignitaries and found their way into personal files, now located at the former Party archive (RGASPI). Others were used in *buro* or meetings of the Komsomol secretariat and are located in the central archive of the youth league.[22] Inexplicably, what should have been a very rich source for letters by young people, the *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* archive, claims to have only a handful of letters from the 1980s. Similarly, the Komsomol archive has no trace of the letters processed by its sizeable letter department. The fact that letters received by the Komsomol and its outlets were catalogued and kept, however, is demonstrated by the holdings of regional archives such as that of the Communist Party and Komsomol of the Ukraine. It is from the files of this archive (TsDAHOU) that the majority of letters analysed in this article are drawn. Letters sent directly to the central committee of the Ukrainian

20 On Soviet ideologisation and mythologisation of youth see Corinna Kuhr-Korolev, *'Gezähmte Helden': Die Formierung der Sowjetjugend 1917–1932* (Essen; Klartext, 2005).

21 Kuhr-Korolev, *'Gezähmte Helden'*, 94.

22 RGASPI, M-f.1, op. 3 and 4.

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Komsomol and communications to *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and other national and local papers seem to have been typed and sent in copy to both the regional Komsomol committee of the writer and to the administration in Kiev. The original presumably remained with the newspaper, which makes the 'loss' of letters by *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* even more inexplicable. While letters in the central archives came from across the whole Soviet Union (contrary to expectation neither Moscow nor Leningrad figures prominently), those in the Ukrainian archive originated locally. Neither urban nor rural letters dominate, while there is only a smattering of communications from the new territories in western Ukraine. This fact seems to confirm the assumption that letter writing was an ideological act of participation, which required a certain acceptance of Soviet values – values which had not yet permeated the Western borderlands.

The first thing that strikes readers of Stalinist confessional letters is their homogeneity in style, structure and vocabulary. While the similarity of openings and endings, the repetition of the same words in each letter to describe the writer and his life, and the frequent employment of quotations from Lenin and Stalin as well as other Marxist-Leninist thinkers, indicate the considerable skill of Soviet youth in 'speaking Bolshevik',[23] they also demonstrate the desire of young people to belong. Young Soviet letter writers formulated their Soviet selves through the process of expressing their thoughts in writing and aligning their personal reality with the belief system that was their frame of reference.[24] Writing a letter to the Soviet authorities was a way of both expressing one's identity as a Soviet citizen and of creating and fashioning it at the same time. The symbolic meaning of using well-known phrases and expressing oneself in an accepted language was even more important to those youngsters who for some reason or other had lost their sense of Soviet identity and were trying to regain it precisely through the act of writing a letter. Quotations from Stalin such as 'The son does not answer for the father',[25] phrases such as 'I actively endeavoured to show that I am worthy of membership of the Komsomol'[26] and the often expressed desire to be 'useful to Party and Motherland'[27] were not mere slogans to please the

23 This term was coined by Stephen Kotkin in *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Kotkin expressively emphasises that 'speaking Bolshevik' does not necessarily mean believing Bolshevik ideology. His term refers solely to the language, which might or might not reflect the speaker's mind. For Kotkin language alone is already an act of participation. The term is used here in precisely this definition. The fact that young authors 'spoke Bolshevik' does not mean that all of them believed in all facets of Stalinism, nor does it mean that a letter in non-Bolshevik language was necessarily subversive.

24 This idea was first advanced by research into Stalinist diaries and their authors' construction of their Soviet 'selves' through the act of writing and verbal self-fashioning. See Jochen Hellbeck, *Tagebuch aus Moskau 1931–1939* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996), 9–29, and his 'Laboratories of the Soviet Self: Diaries from the Stalin Era', Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1998.

25 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5. d. 679, l. 83.

26 Ibid., d. 638, l. 54.

27 See, e.g., RGASPI, M-f. 1, op. 2, d. 131, l. 273; TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 622, l. 206. This was a theme often taken up in letters written to authors of patriotic Soviet novels. See also Rossiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva (RGALI), f. 363, op. 1, d. 132 (letters to Ostrovskii); f. 1628, op. 1. d. 621, 622 (letters to Fadeev); f. 1814, op. 4, d. 774 (letters to Simonov).

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Komsomol or other Soviet authorities, nor did their sole value lie in their content. Rather, they made the writer part of a larger community, signalling his or her general acceptance of Soviet life and giving the letter a structural division between the more formulaic opening and ending, which were usually written in familiar Bolshevik terms and phrases, and the personal story, which was told in a very individual style. An instinctive stylistic break did not signify a shift of mind. Rather than negating their sincerity by their personal outpourings, authors confirmed and verified their Sovietness – expressed in commonly accepted formulae – by juxtaposing their own language with that of the Soviet state in the same document.

Thus, despite the homogeneity in their choice of words, most letters of confession do not strike the reader as stories that carefully hold back the writer's true personality. More often they seem to be the outpouring of a troubled mind, indicating the position of trust Komsomol and Party leaders and other Soviet dignitaries enjoyed among the young. Writers were keen to establish their sincerity towards the addressee and the Soviet cause at the very beginning of their letter. Characteristically letters of confession started with a short apology for demanding attention and a reaffirmation of how important the addressee, or what he (or very rarely she) represented, was in the life of the writer. One young woman began her letter to the head of the Komsomol, Nikolai Mikhailov, 'I might upset you with my letter, but given the circumstances in the life of my sister, I cannot turn to anyone but you'.[28] 'I ask for forgiveness for taking your time', wrote a *komsomolka* to the Ukrainian Komsomol secretary Vladimir Semichastnyi, 'but to whom else can a Komsomol member turn in an hour of anguish!'[29] 'The Komsomol has more than once helped me to find myself and my place in life',[30] wrote another troubled Komsomol member to the same address. Even greater respect and adoration was reserved for writing to the highest of authorities – Stalin himself. 'I am more than convinced that they will not give you this letter from a simple Soviet schoolgirl to read, because you have more important things to do', was the beginning of a letter that was sent anonymously to Stalin. 'You are the heart of our state. You, dear comrade Stalin, have a lot, a lot of work. This we feel and understand'.[31] Even a child of the deported Chechen people started his letter from his place of forced exile with 'Dear father and teacher Iusif Vissarionovich, . . . I wish you good health forever. I heartily thank you for our happy childhood, for your heroic deeds in the terrible days of the war and for victory achieved by you and our party over the fascist enemy'.[32] Many authors already hinted at the personal drama that rested behind the decision to write the letter. 'I turn to you for help, and if you do not help me, then there is only the jump from the bridge into the water for me', wrote a distressed young Komsomol girl to Lazar Kaganovich.[33] Another girl opened her letter to *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* with the words: 'What shall I do? I am a young

28 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 612, l. 105.
29 Ibid., d. 603, l. 80.
30 Ibid., d. 638, l. 53.
31 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 904, l. 38.
32 Ibid., d. 899, l. 56.
33 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 610.

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girl on the brink of death'.[34] A worker from the Donbass turned to the 'comrades' of the Komsomol Central Committee with the words, 'I turn to you for help and advice, and if this is my last uttering in the search for truth and justice and you have to decide the fate of my honest life . . . I only have two solutions: either I live and fight with these negative elements [unjust superiors] . . . or commit suicide, but to live without fighting with these monsters or to wait until they finish me, that I cannot do'.[35] The fact that such dramatic expressions were not simply the exaggerations of a youthful mind is demonstrated by a letter written by a Komsomol secretary after his exclusion from the Komsomol due to his differences with his superior. Not being able to match reality with Soviet visionary ideology caused him to take his own life. His suicide note, a genre closely linked to the confessional letter, began: 'My clean soul, which always strove to perfection, could no longer stand such an unjust order and decided to find for itself quietness and justice'.[36]

Such dramatic openings usually led to a relatively unemotional description of the writer's life, reflecting the style and vocabulary of official autobiographies written for the Komsomol, the Party, school or any number of other Soviet institutions. Key points in this short self-description were the occupation of their parents, entry into the Komsomol, activity and location during the war and services rendered to the Soviet community. Since the Soviet people were the most highly decorated nation in history, such biographies could read very impressively and served both as an introduction to the addressee and as a reassertion that the writer had a right to bring forward his or her concerns. Often the autobiography seems to be the place where the writer gathers courage before plunging into the difficult matter of the narrative, just as the religious ritual of confession is preceded by a short formulaic exchange between priest and penitent. The type of biographical information supplied changed over time, with the early 1930s reflecting Stalinism's obsession with class, and late Stalinist letters concentrating on participation in the Great Fatherland War. In 1930 a young Leningrad student wrote to Stalin with the following introduction: 'I am a student of the Leningrad Pedagogy Technical Institute, a peasant by origin, my father has three cows, one horse and four hectares of land paying eleven roubles in tax'.[37] This strange self-description betrayed the writer's fear that he could be considered a kulak at a time when the Soviet leadership was literally at war with the countryside. His concern was certainly not unfounded, given that he was accused of treason because he had (he claims by mistake) hit a portrait of Stalin with a paper projectile that he had made.[38] By counting his father's cows the young Leningrad student is desperately trying to devise a Soviet letter written by a full Soviet citizen and thus worthy of attention. In contrast, the letter of a Komsomol member to Semichastnyi

34 Ibid., d. 680, l. 33.

35 Ibid., d. 611, l. 303.

36 Ibid., d. 427, l. 28–9.

37 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 717, l. 32.

38 This document is testimony to one of Stalin's rare displays of humour. He wrote back asking for clemency for the student concerned: 'If comrade Vasil'iev is such a good marksman, then he deserves to be admired not punished'. Ibid.

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in 1948 starts with 'From the Komsomol member and invalid of the Great Fatherland War Daliot Leonid, member of the Komsomol since 1944'.[39] Mention of the writer's war sacrifice before even declaring the length of his Komsomol membership indicates the dominant position war participation and experience had assumed in Soviet self-identification after 1945.[40] Active service gave a certain aura to a writer which could balance the negative aspects of the subsequent confession or complaint. Stating one's war service was not only a bulwark against a possibly negative reaction by the recipient of the letter, but also a statement of self-confidence typical of the time. The postwar demobilised writer brought a sense of entitlement to his confessions that had eluded his prewar peer group and was missing in letters from non-veteran youngsters. At the same time people with questionable pasts (such as former *Ostarbeiter*, prisoners of war or residents of the occupied territories) were keen to dismiss any suggestion of wrongdoing and treason in their opening paragraph, just as twenty years previously writers of peasant origin had been keen to renounce any suspicion of being considered a kulak.

Sometimes the roots of the problem at the heart of the subsequent confession were already visible in the facts given in the brief autobiography at the beginning of the letter. Parents were described as dead or sick, life had been interrupted by living under German occupation or even in Germany itself, and jobs were judged to be hard or unsuitable. Mostly, however, the authors were keen to stress their unity with and usefulness to Soviet society, revelling in their achievements and achieved status. If authors felt particularly emotional about a certain aspect of their biography, they were likely to break the stern language of official writing reserved for the autobiographical part and recount the experience in detail and with emotion. 'And these words I will never forget for the rest of my life, that the team will be taken into the Komsomol for the successful liberation of the town', recalled a former Komsomol member in a letter questioning his exclusion.[41] In asserting their loyalty some letters used the kind of emotional vocabulary that is usually reserved for spiritual experiences: 'Comrade Mikhailov, I deeply believe in our Komsomol', wrote a young girl to the First Secretary of the CC VLKSM. Often a distinction is made between the positive self and the negative 'others': 'They [old bourgeois elements] do not believe in man. But I believe', wrote a young reader to Alexandr Fadeev, head of the Soviet Writers' Union.[42] His belief in man referred, of course, to the new Soviet man, the elusive species that inhabited socialist realist novels. If the writer felt that his or her autobiography was essential to the subsequent confessional narrative, this part could be extended and become enmeshed with the narrative of the crisis. Here the staccato language of the 'official' autobiography was replaced by a more personal tone, shifting often within the same paragraph. The Soviet credentials set out in the autobiographical part could also serve to convey the authors' sense of fulfilled

39 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 605, l. 6.

40 See Amir Weiner, 'The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity', *Russian Review* 55 (1996), 638–60.

41 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 637, l. 44.

42 RGALI, f. 1628, op. 1, d. 626, l. 10.

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duty and thus a claim to certain rights – rights which have been unjustly denied, thus triggering the crisis that prompted the letter. As mentioned before, this was particularly true for writers who been participants in the Great Fatherland War. 'Tell me, is it fair that I honestly fought for the Fatherland, proudly carried the title of a Komsomol member and was on the brink of death and now find myself outside the community?', a *frontovik* asked the Ukrainian Central Committee.[43] Academic merits could also serve as a source of a belief in entitlement. A young high achiever, barred from the Kiev law faculty because of her Jewishness, concluded the list of her impressive academic and social achievements with the remark, 'Alas, it seems to me that I have fulfilled my duty towards the Motherland, towards the Party and towards the Komsomol'.[44] Rather than considering themselves straightforwardly as victims, these writers understood Sovietness as a quid pro quo which required sacrifice but which also gave the right to expect certain rewards. Confessional letters were thus not necessarily pleas from subordinates to a higher authority, but could constitute a platform on which the dilemmas of daily life were brought into the open by citizens, who were assured that they had a right to do so and whose very act of writing confirmed them in their conviction of being valued members of a just community.

One particularly long letter to Lazar Kaganovich by a young female train-driver, detailing the heartrending story of how a perfect Soviet life had gone to pieces after the inexplicable arrest of her father, shall stand as a representative example of how confessionary letters were structured and phrased. Maria Gorbach's letter, written in May 1945, illustrates how easily authors switched between formal, rather pompous language and personal, emotional narrative – using both to the same effect of declaring their loyalty and strengthening their plight.

> Comrade Lazar' Moiseevich, I tell you about people who work honestly and how in turn they are treated. Dear and beloved to all train workers comrade Lazar Moiseevich, now that joy in our victory has embraced the whole nation of our country, on this happy day please allow me to share some things with you, the closest and most beloved to all railwaymen. On this day the multi-million nation of our country will strive to put its humble work towards the celebration of victory. Everybody understands that there is still much more work ahead, but the people of the Soviet country do not fear any challenges, they will always be victors, because they march in the steps of the great Party and the great Stalin. Nobody understands us railwaymen like you. Especially we female train drivers feel your daily attention and care for us. In 1939 you send a telegram to my brigade, in which you observed: 'You are the first female brigade that has worked with steam locomotives and you have shown good results, you moved heavy trains and excelled in terms of speed' . . . Difficult to convey the emotions this evoked among the brigade. After we received your telegram, we promised to work even harder.[45]

Gorbach's letter also demonstrates how the rendering of a service and the achievement of official rewards were seen as an experience of Sovietness – as an identity-building event, whose subsequent destruction (the crisis at the heart of the

43 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5. d. 761, l. 277.
44 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5. d. 610, l. 2 obo.
45 RGASPI, f. 81, op. 3, d. 419, l. 79–80. All translations are by the author; as far as possible colloquialisms and style have been preserved.

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letter) was therefore doubly damaging. Gorbach was once a celebrated shock worker, whose female train driver brigade had been featured in the *Omsk Oblast' Today* and *Kinokhronika* and awarded several government medals. In a later passage she sighed: 'This was long ago, but the day stays with you all your life . . . I cannot think of it now, being in such a situation – to learn of the fate of my brigade . . . after all, this was all that I possessed'.[46] For Maria the construction of socialism through hard work and the achievement of self-improvement merged into one. Her belief that one day she was to work with more advanced technology demonstrates her faith in the upward trajectory of socialist society and in the physical and ideological advancement of her own person.

> We, who worked on the locomotive, were fully devoted to it. Our goal was only one, to master the locomotive to its fullest potential and use its technology to the day when we would take on more advanced methods of technology. We worked much on ourselves [*mnogo rabotali nad soboi*]. Every drive brought new knowledge . . . I had it easier to master the work, since I have a technological education. My girls had it a lot harder. . . . Polia Plotnikova, stoker, entirely illiterate, came from the unskilled labour depot. She had to attend reading classes, but despite all difficulties she never stopped work. The girls worked hard on themselves. The results were very positive.[47]

Crisis came with the onset of war, when her hitherto unquestioned world of socialist success and personal bliss was shaken by an event that did not fit in her eschatological world view.

> On 15 June 1942, a wonderful summer day – yet hard for the country [Gorbach is referring to the war, not her own fate here] – a dark shadow fell on our family. My father Vasilii Grigorevich Gorbach was arrested, an old man and former train conductor . . . and they also took my brother Aleksei Gorbach, who worked as an engineer at the locomotive services of Eastern Siberia. . . . I will not describe all the tortures, of which there were more than enough.

Crisis, confession and salvation

After the autobiographical pages that prove the writer's Soviet credentials, the reader is taken into the complex realm of crisis, confusion and doubt. It is here that the eschatology that is supposed to form the trajectory of a Soviet person's life leading it from innocent childhood faith to the consciousness of a good Soviet adult citizen, is interrupted. It is in the confessional narrative that those things that have been set out in the autobiographical part of the letter as the pillars of the young Soviet person's identity are deconstructed and destroyed, leaving the writer with a strong sense of exclusion. Here the writer reveals why he or she is writing a letter. In essence, this reason consists of a crisis of belief about the rightness and justice of the system, triggered by either an external event or shifts of inner thoughts. More often than not the writer (wittingly or unwittingly) presented this crisis as a sin committed against the Soviet collective. The heart of the Soviet confessional letter thus contains both system-affirmative elements – through the writer's participation in the ritual of Soviet

46 Ibid., l. 88.
47 Ibid.

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communication – and system-critical factors – because of the writer's articulation of discontent and disappointment.

The negative influences triggering a letter of confession are manifold and vary greatly in intensity and duration. At the heart of many crises described in these letters was the painful process of 'growing up' – of being confronted with 'real' life, of experiencing doubt over hitherto unquestioned beliefs and of having to make difficult decisions. In the mind of the young writer such challenges were inextricably bound up with the achievement of perfection as a new Soviet citizen. Many of the insecurities and searching questions appearing in the letters resulted from the writers' attempts not only to make sense of their personal realm, but also to place their lives and identity in the wider context of Soviet society and socialist ideology. Questions such as 'What place will I occupy in life? Who will I be in my life? For what can I live?'[48] – here voiced in a letter to Aleksandr Fadeev, the author of the famous postwar novel *Young Guard*[49] – appear in many letters of confession, pointing to a tortured anxiety that formed the motivation for much confessional writing. In letters to authors young writers underlined their own perceived failure to be truly good Soviet citizens, comparing themselves with their literary heroes: 'Did I try to fight? After all, life has only just begun. What would Pavel Korchagin have done in my place?' wrote a girl to Nikolai Ostrovskii, the celebrated author of the classical 1930s youth novel *How the Steel is Tempered*.[50] The majority of letters of confession were triggered by immediate and personal calamities. Discrimination at school or at work, extreme poverty and exclusion from the Komsomol or other institutions all shook young people's self-perception to the core by removing aspects that had been crucial to their identity and instilling guilt for failing to live up to the collective ideal of the new Soviet citizen. A young woman removed from her job as a pioneer leader because of time spent as an *Ostarbeiterin* in Germany wrote to Ukrainian Komsomol secretary Semichastnyi after her dismissal: 'I go to the university and when I come back from the lecture, I do not know what will happen to me in the future. Soviet youth is always surrounded by attention and care, always clear and certain of its future. Soviet youth has a straight path to happiness. Why is it not like this for me?'[51] The harsh realities of life, especially for 'people with a blemish',[52] as one young writer described it, cruelly destroyed childhood illusions of a straight path to socialism for either society or the individual.

The letter of the young train driver, Maria Gorbach, indicates how such a rough 'awakening' could entirely change the way in which a person viewed the world. After her father's arrest she learns that he has been charged with counterrevolutionary activity (Article 58 of the Russian Criminal Code).

48 RGALI, f. 1628, op. 1, d. 621, l. 35.
49 Ibid., l. 102.
50 Ibid., f. 363, op. 1, d. 132, l. 80.
51 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 603, l. 80.
52 Ibid., d. 638, l. 54.

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Blood shot into my brain. I was not able to utter one single word. When I left the office, all powers left me, and I collapsed on the first available bench and did not know what to think. Slowly, my thoughts became more ordered . . . My father loves the motherland, he also loves us. He knows that we are communists and he believes in us. I understood that somebody had slandered him. But who and why did they do this?[53]

While before her father's arrest the world seemed just and to be progressing in the expected direction, Maria Gorbach starts to question the honesty and sincerity of the people around her. Her doubt and disappointment in the officials, representing the system, give the personal crisis a wider dimension. Socialist reality has failed to live up to its communist ideals. The result is a sense of social loneliness, confusion and bereavement: 'We two communists [Maria and her husband] found ourselves left alone. Morale was extremely low. I felt the looks – it was hard to take, but I survived'. The burden became even heavier when it transpired that the arrest was because her father had permitted her marriage to a man whose father, also a railway worker, had once been sentenced under Article 58 and was thus an 'enemy of the people'. In 1944 she found herself on a list of unreliable elements produced by the state security organs. 'My thoughts fell one over the other. I wanted to remember all my past – where could I have stumbled and when?' The local party officials started to discriminate against her and her family, despite the fact that her father had been released without trial. She was put on reserve and prevented from work – for her the quintessential participation in Soviet life. Her identity – her brigade – started to fall apart: one girl lost her hands in a tragic accident on the railway and now lived in squalor. Another girl, a highly qualified assistant machinist, was sentenced to many years in a forced labour camp for the theft of 11 kilos of coal. She, too, was not working in her speciality (*rabotat' po spetsial'nosti*) and was thus separated from the Soviet identity she had created for herself. Gorbach contrasts this case with the unbroken rise of a corrupt party official, whose dealings were defended by local party officials. The belief on which her worldview had rested – personal and collective betterment through work – is shattered. Her opening sentence, 'I want to tell you about people who work hard and honestly, and how in turn they are treated', indicates that she considers that the system not to be keeping its part of the bargain.[54] She concludes her letter, 'Of what are we guilty? Of the fact that we married, that we had many children, that we were never the last in our work, that we simply became superfluous?' Her despair tilted over into a more sinister rhetoric. Her confusion gives way to outward accusation: 'But maybe the reasons are much deeper and we simply do not know them. And to exist like this further we cannot do . . . We are clean in front of the party, the government. Why have we been treated so cruelly?'[55]

The very same mixture of anger, despair and confusion is visible in a letter by a young Donbass worker and Komsomol activist, who wrote in 1948: 'I, Kulakov

53 RGASPI, f. 81, op. 3, d. 419, l. 82.
54 Ibid., ll. 83–8.
55 RGASPI, f. 81, op. 3, d. 419, l. 85.

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Alexei Lukich, understood the importance of the coal industry for the fulfilment of the Five-Year-Plan and did not forget that the Komsomol has to be there, where it is difficult, and has to show the masses by example how to go forward'. His desperation that his devotion and sacrifice had not been honoured but, on the contrary, had been ignored and rejected is palpable. 'These days and in our time people are judged according to their outer appearance. If you are nicely dressed, then they see in you a good person'. Feeling persecuted and mistreated by his superiors, who disapproved of his activism on behalf of the simple workers, and considering himself betrayed by Soviet legislation, Alexei Kulakov concluded bitterly: 'To make it short, I expressed my views and the sufferings, but I could not tolerate this intolerable situation and I wanted to get justice and I did not find it and I was forced to resign'. In another part of the letter he expressed his frustration about the injustices of Soviet life 'And you, the innocent, become guilty!' while at the same time begging for help from precisely the system against which he is railing. 'But, if I am yours, please give me a goal in life, give me advice on how to fight'.[56]

Kulakov's letter demonstrates that feelings of frustration and failure were closely linked to a perception of uselessness and superfluity in Soviet society. Writers remark how all their achievements, so carefully outlined at the beginning of the letter, collapsed into nothing when crisis hit. A young woman, excluded from the Komsomol for marrying a man who as a child had lived on German territory, wrote bitterly of her long career as an activist: 'And all this was forgotten in one day'.[57] More damaging than their actual personal tragedy, however, was the perception that in the eyes of society they had been demoted. 'It was a very heavy blow for me that destroyed all of my dreams', wrote a young recruit excluded from pursuing a career in the higher ranks of the military. 'But heavier than everything was the awareness that I was not trusted, that I was considered not worthy of the title of a Soviet officer'.[58] The fall from grace and the subsequent confusion about personal and public identity was often a shock to young people who had devoted their life to building socialist society and now experienced its often arbitrary exclusion mechanism. 'I was active already in 29/30, liquidating the kulaks as a class and in the organisation of *kolkhozes* and now I am pushed down to the status of a petit-bourgeois, an empty and sordid girl', complained an older Komsomol activist who had disgraced herself by having a child out of wedlock.[59] Having lost their role and their place in society, their own identity as Soviet citizens was breaking down. 'If I am indeed a superfluous person in our country', wrote a young girl threatened by deportation because of her German family name, 'why did they let me give all my youthful years to political life? Why was I allowed to be in the forefront? And now without any reason they destroy all a person's ambitions and beliefs!'[60] Similarly, a young woman convicted of fraud and desperate to regain a place in society turned to Kaganovich, expressing her belief that

56 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 611, l. 503–5.
57 Ibid., d. 640, l. 142.
58 Ibid., d. 638, l. 55.
59 Ibid., d. 628, l. 92.
60 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Riazan'skoi Oblasti (GARO), P-f. 366, op. 2, d. 276, l. 47 obo.

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being barred from participating in and thus identifying with Soviet society made her as good as dead: 'It means that there is no place for me in the Soviet Union. And what purpose is there then to live under the sun?'[61]

It is because of such sentiments that most letters of confession ultimately contain an element of admission of guilt. 'In October 1948 I committed an act not worthy of a member of the Komsomol and student of higher education', wrote a distraught student, who had been expelled for copying verses of the defamed poet Margarite Aliger.[62] Even in those letters that ask accusingly what the writer has done wrong, the mere act of writing the letter and the raising of the issue of guilt reveals an underlying sense of failure and wrongdoing on the part of the writer. This becomes particularly clear where angry outbursts about injustice and failure are followed by pleas for forgiveness and offers of acts of redemption. In some cases the request for forgiveness and the promise of betterment appears directly and unveiled. 'I have already been punished too hard for my mistake', concluded the young fraudster in her letter to Kaganovich, 'and now I would rather die of hunger than repeat my crime'.[63] Maria Gorbach, the angry and desperate train driver, wrote of her desire to serve the Motherland again: 'To live and work for the good of our beloved Motherland and now more than ever one wants to stand up in all one's human grandeur . . .'.[64] More often admission of guilt and offers of redemption can be read between the lines. Admissions of guilt often came as an acknowledgement that the writer had not yet fully grown up and was stuck in a metaphorical Soviet adolescence where doubt and ignorance clouded his or her judgement and actions. To apply Khakhordin's analogy, the writer's 'unenlightened chaotic soul' had not yet achieved 'higher conscience' and thus 'conversion'.[65] The assumption underlying the confessions is that the writer knows too little, rather than too much. There is a lot of talk about needing advice on 'questions about socialist ethics',[66] 'finding truth',[67] and being 'at the beginning of life'.[68] The solution to problems and conflicts and the return to the comfortable days when belief and reality coincided were to come with heightened Soviet consciousness. 'Even though I am not a member of the Komsomol any more, I will anyway work on myself', wrote a freshly excluded *komsomolka*.[69] Promises of intellectual betterment and pledges to work harder concluded the majority of letters of confession. The writer had abandoned the individual and personal narrative at this point and reverted to official phrases and slogans. Maria Gorbach finishes her letter in the pompous language of Soviet announcements. She gives an imaginary speech to a group of assembled youth. The tale that precedes it gives sincerity to this rather

61 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 610.
62 RGASPI, M-f.1, op. 46, d. 78, l. 106.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., f. 81, op. 3, d. 419, l. 88.
65 Khakhordin, 'Reveal and Dissimulate', 340.
66 RGALI, f. 363, op. 1, d. 133, l. 4.
67 GARO, P-f. 366, op. 3, d. 205, l. 34.
68 TsDAHOU, f. 7, op. 5, d. 623, l. 157 obo.
69 Rossiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv (RGVA), f. 9, op. 30, d. 81, l. 10 – 10 obo.

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formulaic coda. The official language connects her personal story once more with that of the country. This image of youth harks back to that of herself in her prime as a young and successful train driver. Such imagery also indicates Gorbach's intense desire to be integrated again into the mainstream of Soviet society. By pretending to speak to an audience of young Soviet railway workers she acts as if her crisis has been resolved, looking ahead to what she hopes her letter will achieve:

> Dear girls and boys, we live with you in a country in full bloom and in a great epoch. The history of mankind has never known the full freedom and independence that have been given to us by the party of Lenin and Stalin and which has been saved for us by the great and never-beaten Red Army. Our victorious country has embarked on the path of peaceful construction and every one of us has to bring his modest work to the altar of victory. I am a locomotive driver of a Soviet-produced locomotive made according to the latest technology in one of our national locomotive factories, on Soviet benches, of Soviet material, made with the hands of progressive people and with the progressive thoughts of our Soviet engineers . . . I call upon you to raise transport into unknown heights, so that we can fulfil the maximum demands of our country.[70]

These words tapped into the fundamental beliefs of the Bolshevik world. Education and work were the two routes to enlightenment and redemption – and thus the realms of Soviet self-identification. As Maria Gorbach explained earlier in her letter, 'For us work – that means to create, develop and live with all one's power in this country'.[71] At the end of the long road of permanent betterment – at the maximum point – stood the new Soviet man – the *homo Sovieticus* – who would live with ease in the communist world he had created. He was the symbol of the ultimate paradise, the promise of Soviet salvation.

Letters of confession have proved to be an interesting entry into the mental world of Soviet youth. They demonstrate deep integration of young people into the Soviet value-system, which caused them not only to perceive their personal physical and intellectual maturing as being intrinsically linked to their attainment of Soviet consciousness, but also to regard the Komsomol and other authorities as the omniscient helpers and confidants to whom they turned in their hour of confusion, doubt and crisis. They drew on familiar vocabulary, practised in other autobiographical texts, but resorted to personal expressions in describing their point of crisis. Youngsters reaffirmed in and through their letters their commitment to a life that made the private public, and the public a personal matter. They desired an individual identity in union with Soviet norms and society, and equated their personal adolescence with growing up as a Soviet citizen. Young people's letters, however, also show that becoming a fully conscious Soviet citizen was a difficult rite of passage from childlike faith to cognitive acceptance, which more often than not threw the writer into despair. Writing often served as a cleansing ritual, ridding the writer of his or her bad thoughts and asking the state for forgiveness and further enlightenment. Letters of confession are not only a powerful testimony to the uniqueness of the Soviet habitat, which managed to create its own language, framework of references

70 RGASPI, f. 81, op. 3, d. 419, l. 88.
71 Ibid., l. 85.

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and system of values, but also a strong indication that the Soviet world adopted pre-existing rituals and manipulated them to suit the new conditions. The Soviet letter of confession follows the principle of religious confessions in so far as it incorporates elements of contrition, confession and redemption. This analysis does not imply that the Soviet confessional letter is a direct imitation of Orthodox or other church practices. Rather it points to the complexity of communication in the Bolshevik state, which was by no means restricted to oppressive orders from above. The existence of the elaborate Soviet system of letters demonstrates that the Bolshevik state was finely tuned to the individual's need to confess and to the integrating and affirming purpose of encouraging, receiving, and at times, answering such communications. Just as religious confessions performed several functions within a church community, so these letters confirmed the Soviet political elite in their leader status, created and furthered Soviet ritualistic acts and, at the same time, served as a channel providing invaluable information to the Soviet authorities.

There is no clear evidence as to how the Soviet authorities reacted to these letters. Most letters show no evidence of a reply or follow-up – yet this could simply indicate that replies were filed in a different location. Official guidelines stipulated that all recipients of letters from the public had to file them and respond to them within a certain timeframe. However, several letters, including that from the train driver Maria Gorbach, refer to multiple attempts to contact their leaders without success. The files of the central and Ukrainian Komsomol archive are full of admonishments to tardy local secretaries, journalists and other officials charged with dealing with the growing flood of letters. Sometimes copies of responses are in the same file as the original letter. They rarely engage with the writer, consisting mostly of a few banal phrases about the duty to work hard and study diligently. Yet at other times lengthy reports testify that letters not only received a response but also triggered a full-scale investigation into the circumstances described by the writer. A few writers received full satisfaction, giving credence to the survival of old belief in the 'good tsar' and his bad bureaucrats. Tamara Korensvit was admitted to Kiev State University despite her Jewish ethnicity on the order of Semichastnyi.[72] Maria Gorbach's case was taken up by Lazar' Kaganovich, who demanded that she be given proper living and working conditions.[73]

While the letter of confession seemed thus to serve an integrating function, there is evidence that rather than realigning the personal self with the collective, the act of writing had an emancipating and liberating effect by constructing a subjective reality. In several instances investigators following up confessional letters were surprised to find that the writers denied all knowledge of either letter or problem, indicating that they considered the matter to be closed. Many members of anti-Stalinist youth organisations recalled that the process of writing a confessional letter, which spelt out their doubt and confusion over the contradictions that surrounded them, had

72 TsDAHOU, f.7, op. 5, d. 610, l. 16.
73 RGASPI, f. 81, op. 3, d. 419, l. 98.

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convinced them to resist rather than seek enlightenment from the authorities.[74] As believers in the eschatological trajectory of Soviet adolescence, young people could deconstruct the notion of Soviet salvation only by realising its impossibility. Like keeping a diary, writing a long personal letter bestowed a personal identity that was separate from the official norms. While youthful letters of confession lead the reader from the light of the writer's childhood to the darkness of their adolescence, for their authors they often meant a journey from an identity rooted in the official collective to a self-perception that was more individual. Letters of confession, like so many other Soviet traditions and rituals, thus had an element of potential self-destruction, making Soviet authority vulnerable precisely at the moment when it seemed to succeed. The search by young people for Soviet salvation demonstrates the strength for Stalinist youth of the idea of a Bolshevik utopia. Yet such a search was ultimately destined to reveal the void between the Soviet dream and its reality. Rather than the collective paradise, writers often found a different kind of enlightenment – they discovered a private world that lay outside the framework of Soviet eschatology.

74 Interview with Isaak Dinaburg, St Petersburg, March 2001; interview with Kommunella Markmann, Moscow, January 2001; RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 216, ll. 142–3. See also Juliane Fürst, 'Prisoners of the Soviet Self? Political Youth Opposition in late Stalinism', *Europe–Asia Studies* 54 (3) (2002), 353–75.

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