

The Unshaven Thinking Classes

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Интеллигенция: intelligentsia

As the new school year begins, it seems like an appropriate time to ponder the fascinating and formidable Russian word that describes the thinking classes: *интеллигенция*. So difficult to translate, it has entered English as *intelligentsia*, which is defined rather vaguely as a country's educated and intellectual elite, especially those having artistic or political influence. It is a devilishly difficult word to translate, or even understand, since its meaning has changed over time and depends on the social and political convictions of the person using the term.

I think of *интеллигенция* as being such a quintessential Russian concept that I was astonished to learn how recently it entered the language. According to one source, it appeared in Russian via Polish in 1862. Russians seemed to argue about what it meant from the day it appeared. Some insisted that it referred to people of high intelligence (as its Latin derivation would suggest), while others used it to describe highly educated, cultured people.

At first, Russian aristocrats regarded the *интеллигенция* as what we might call Bohemians

today. One wrote: Это типичный интеллигент. Он не бреется каждый день, ест с ножа и дамам не целуют руки. (He was a typical member of the intelligentsia. He doesn't shave every day, he eats food off his knife, and he doesn't kiss ladies' hands.) Quelle horreur!

Then the word pingponged through the Russian collective consciousness, sometimes meaning the do-nothing, overeducated elite, or sometimes the country's leading intellectual lights. Along the way, интеллигенция acquired the sense of morally upright, progressive thinkers concerned with the common good.

Today the word интеллигенция is used in several ways. It can simply describe the intellectual elite. Sometimes the scientific elite is separated out as научная интеллигенция, but sometimes they are folded into the more general term: Сейчас интеллигенция (врачи, ученые) — это изгой общества (Today, the intelligentsia — doctors, scholars — are society's outcasts). Other writers specify the subset of творческая интеллигенция (literally, "the creative intelligentsia"): У нас собиралась творческая интеллигенция: писатели, поэты, артисты (The artistic elite gathered at our place: writers, poets and actors).

Still other writers stress the moral role of this social stratum in high-flown terms: Святая она, наша российская интеллигенция (Our Russian intelligentsia is truly saintly). When you read Russian essays about the United States, you can clearly see the notion of liberal values attached to the word. For example: Поражение во Вьетнаме американская интеллигенция рассматривает и как свою победу (American liberal intellectuals regard the defeat in Vietnam as their victory).

Sometimes the noun интеллигент and adjective интеллигентный simply refer to a member of the intelligentsia — a writer, philosopher, artist or intellectual. But more often today интеллигент is not so much a member of a social class as a type of person: cultured, moral, well-educated, tactful and considerate. Он — настоящий русский интеллигент, нетерпимый к великорусскому шовинизму (He was a truly cultured Russian who wouldn't tolerate Great Russian chauvinism). Мой отец — моряк, но вполне интеллигентный человек (My father is a sailor, but a very considerate and cultured man).

So over the years, интеллигенция has wended its way from intelligence to kindness. Not a bad path for schoolchildren to take.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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