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Do Russians Have a “Slave Mentality”?

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Do Russians Have a “Slave Mentality”?



Do Russians really have a “slave mentality”? It is an ugly expression, and it is often used carelessly. But the stereotype did not appear out of nowhere.

Why do Russians so often tolerate things that would provoke mass protests elsewhere? Why do people obey rules they privately consider absurd? Why is it so common to complain bitterly about the government, the boss, or the system-and then conclude that nothing can be changed?

Even today, many Russians who hate what is happening around them prefer to keep quiet, adapt, find a workaround, leave the country, or simply wait for better times.

Does this point to some deeply rooted national psychology?

Today, we are going to take the expression “slave mentality” seriously-but not literally. We’ll look at where these patterns came from, how they are reinforced, why resistance can become so costly, and whether people behave differently when the system around them changes.

Here’s our roadmap for today.

Slave Mentality — what people actually mean when they use this expression, and what behaviors they are describing.

A Society of Unequals — how a long history of extreme hierarchy taught people that those at the top lived by different rules.

How to Raise an Obedient Person — how schools, workplaces, families, and the state teach people when silence is safer than initiative.

Why Don’t Russians Rebel? — why worsening living standards, injustice, repression, and even war do not automatically produce mass resistance.

Is There Any Hope? — whether these patterns are permanent, or whether behavior changes when institutions and incentives change.

Slave Mentality

So what do people actually mean by a “slave mentality”?

For someone raised in a modern Western society, personal freedom feels fundamental. You choose where to live, what work to do, what to believe, whom to criticize. Your boss has authority at work, but he does not own you. The government can restrict you, but it must justify those restrictions.

Then you look at a society where people obey absurd orders, fear their bosses, distrust the courts, and respond to injustice with: “What can you do?”

From the outside, it can look like a psychological defect.

But there are no nations born free.

Slavery and other forms of coerced labor existed across virtually every civilization. Greece and Rome had slaves. Medieval Europe had serfs. Societies across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East

used slavery, debt bondage, corvée labor, and other forms of dependency.

When land was abundant, labor scarce, and elites had enough force to prevent workers from leaving, controlling people could be more profitable than paying them. But coercion was expensive. Someone had to guard, punish, hunt escapees, and suppress rebellion.

And rebellion was always a danger.

So forced labor declined where conditions changed: free labor became more productive, political power shifted, enforcement became too costly, or institutions emerged that protected individual rights.

It has not disappeared. Millions of people still live under forced labor today. And in places such as North Korea, the state can determine where people work, severely restrict movement, punish dissent, and mobilize labor by force.

Freedom is not something stored inside a national character.

Put yourself inside such a system. You have no money, no connections, and no independent court to protect you. You know that challenging the people above you may cost you your job, your freedom, or even endanger your family.

How long before you learn to lower your voice?

How long before you stop saying what you think?

And after several generations, what would an outsider call that behavior?

A slave mentality?

Or an education in survival?

A Society of Unequals

The political system that became Rus emerged in the ninth century around Scandinavian Varangian military-trading groups operating among Slavic and Finnic populations. The exact origins of Rus are still debated, but Scandinavian involvement in its early ruling structure and trade networks is well established.

One of their most profitable commodities was people.

Eastern European captives were transported along the Dnieper and Volga to Byzantium and the Islamic world, where demand for slaves was high. The Varangians had ships, organized fighting groups, access to distant markets, and a system that could convert successful raids into silver, better equipment, and still greater military power.

In its basic economics, the system resembled what developed centuries later in West Africa. Foreign demand made captives valuable, while local rulers and intermediaries also participated in supplying them. In West Africa, some rulers eventually built military power around this trade; in Eastern Europe, tribute, warfare, commerce, and slavery likewise became intertwined.

The Varangians eventually settled, intermarried, adopted the local language and culture, and disappeared as a separate ruling ethnicity.

But something else proved remarkably durable: an enormous distance between those who ruled and those who were ruled.

Russian history repeatedly produced societies in which different ranks lived under very different rules.

Under the tsars, birth mattered enormously. Under the Soviet system, formal hereditary nobility disappeared, but access depended heavily on position inside the party-state hierarchy. After the Soviet collapse, that hierarchy did not simply vanish. Research on Russia's political elite finds that even in 2010 and 2020, roughly 60 percent of top political elites either had Soviet nomenklatura backgrounds themselves or were their children.

Today, status increasingly comes from a combination of money, official position, and proximity to the people who control coercive power. Family succession is becoming increasingly visible as well: children of senior officials and regime-connected businessmen are taking prominent state and corporate positions.

The people with the least status and bargaining power can be recruited into assault infantry and sent into operations so costly that even Russian pro-war military bloggers themselves use expressions such as "meat-grinder assaults."

A member of the elite can commit an outright crime and remain effectively untouchable. Someone lower in the hierarchy, meanwhile, can receive years in prison for words posted on social media.

The political signal is remarkably clear. If you rank low enough, your body can belong to the war, your words can belong to the state, and even a click on a screen can become its concern.

Hierarchy itself is nothing uniquely Russian. Human beings everywhere compete for status. The difference is how easily people can move through that hierarchy-and how many independent ladders exist.

How to Raise an Obedient Person

A hierarchy survives only if enough people have a reason to preserve it.

There are two basic reasons: opportunity and fear.

For those near the top, the system offers opportunity. Children of powerful families enter prestigious institutions, state corporations, ministries, and businesses connected to government. Their careers are built inside the vertical, often with the help of patrons. Contemporary Russia increasingly shows this kind of succession among elite families.

And this creates dependence.

High status is not just money. It is authority, connections, access, respect, and the expectations of everyone around you. If your entire professional life was built inside a ministry, state corporation, or security service, leaving may mean losing much of what made you important.

This helps explain one of the remarkable features of wartime Russia. Many highly trained technocrats stayed and kept the economy functioning after the invasion, even when they clearly understood the enormous costs ahead. Analysts who have interviewed members of this elite describe a system in which professional success depends on both competence and loyalty, while leaving can look like destroying your own career and betraying the people who promoted you.

Then there is clan pressure.

Russian elites are divided into networks built around ministries, security agencies, state corporations, industries, and powerful patrons. Your boss helps you rise. His allies become your allies. His enemies become yours. Without that network, you may have far less power than your title suggests.

At the bottom, the mechanism is simpler.

You learn early that obedience is rewarded and confrontation is expensive. Consider an ordinary schoolteacher working at a polling station. She does not need to love Putin or support the war to cooperate with electoral manipulation. She may simply know that refusing an order can cost her job. Russian teachers and other state employees have repeatedly reported being pressured by superiors around elections, while teachers who openly challenged official political instructions have faced dismissal and other reprisals.

And the education system increasingly teaches political conformity explicitly. Russian schools now hold weekly Conversations About Important Things, while state-approved patriotic programs present loyalty, military service, and duty to the country as central values.

This connects to an old Russian virtue: *terpenie* — endurance.

Russian culture is full of expressions praising the ability to bear hardship: Be patient, endure, things will pass. God endured, and so should we. Patience can be an admirable survival skill.

But politically, it can have another effect.

Researchers studying Russia after the Soviet collapse found that people often endured dramatic losses in living standards because they believed protest would achieve nothing and might make things worse. Patience became a rational strategy.

That is how you raise an obedient person.

You do not have to convince him that the system is good.

You only have to convince him that his safest future exists inside it-and that resistance offers no future at all.

Why Don't Russians Rebel?

One of the most common things I hear from Western audiences is: Russians should rebel.

But this judgment is usually made from Western circumstances, not Russian ones.

Take a former university classmate of mine. He runs the legal department of a major bank and earns an excellent salary by Russian standards. His wife does not work. He has a son at university and elderly parents.

What exactly should he do?

“Organize and rise up” sounds wonderfully simple from the safety of a bedroom in Washington or New York.

But what does it mean in practice?

Walk unarmed toward riot police? Stand alone with a sign? Attack an FSB building?

The likely result is not a beautiful revolutionary scene. It is arrest.

Russia now has more than 1,700 people classified by Memorial’s project as political prisoners, and people receive long sentences for peaceful activism and anti-war expression. Russian detention facilities have also been repeatedly documented for abuse, ill-treatment, and denial of adequate medical care.

For my classmate, imprisonment would not affect only him. His income disappears. His wife loses her support. His son’s future changes. His elderly parents lose the person they depend on.

So when we ask why he does not rebel, we are really asking why he is unwilling to gamble the lives of several people on an action that has almost no chance of succeeding by itself.

At this point someone usually says: But Ukrainians did it.

Yes. Ukrainians showed extraordinary courage during Maidan. More than a hundred people were killed. But courage was not the only difference.

Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovych did not possess the same consolidated coercive system that Russia has today. During the crisis, government authority fragmented across regions, the Party of Regions began to disintegrate, and eventually the ruling coalition collapsed.

That matters enormously.

Research on authoritarian regimes consistently finds that mass protest becomes much more dangerous for a ruler when elites defect or security forces stop acting as a unified instrument of repression. Conversely, highly personalized and loyal security forces make large uprisings less likely to begin and more likely to be suppressed.

Today, a Russian standing alone against the state faces an enormous imbalance of power.

Beautiful revolutions happen mostly in movies. Real revolutions usually need something else: an opening.

That opening might come when an economic crisis weakens the state's ability to pay and reward the people who protect it. It might come when the security apparatus fragments or can no longer be deployed effectively. A major military defeat can also produce elite conflict and undermine confidence in the center.

None of these things automatically produces a revolution. But historically, authoritarian systems become vulnerable when the people enforcing obedience begin to doubt that obedience is still in their own interest.

Until then, refusing to sacrifice yourself in a hopeless confrontation may look like cowardice from outside.

From inside the system, it looks like common sense.

Is There Any Hope?

So are these patterns permanent? History suggests they are not.

People often mistake behavior produced by circumstances for national character. A population may appear passive for decades because resistance is dangerous and ineffective. Then the circumstances change, and suddenly the same people behave very differently.

East Germany is a good example.

For decades, the communist state had an enormous security apparatus, extensive surveillance, and very little tolerance for political opposition. Most East Germans adapted.

Then, in 1989, something changed.

Small demonstrations in Leipzig began to grow. Every week, more people saw that others were willing to come outside too. Most importantly, they began to see that the state was hesitating to use massive violence. Participation became less dangerous, and the demonstrations expanded into hundreds of thousands of people. Researchers describe this as an informational cascade: once people realized how many others shared their dissatisfaction, behavior changed extremely quickly.

The people had not suddenly acquired a German “freedom mentality.” The opportunity structure had changed.

Something similar happened in South Korea.

In 1980, the dictatorship crushed the uprising in Gwangju with deadly force. Seven years later, huge demonstrations again challenged the government. This time the middle class joined students and workers, repression became politically much more costly, and the ruling elite concluded that another violent crackdown was no longer a viable solution. The regime conceded direct presidential elections.

Spain offers another version.

For decades under Franco, political opposition was dangerous and tightly restricted. Yet as the regime weakened, labor organizations, opposition groups, and civil society expanded. After Franco’s death, the country moved within a few years from dictatorship to competitive elections and a democratic constitution.

We even saw this inside the Soviet Union.

For decades, Soviet citizens were described as politically passive. But once Gorbachev reduced repression and opened political space, movements appeared with astonishing speed.

None of this means that authoritarian habits disappear overnight.

People carry fear, distrust, and learned caution with them. Democratic institutions can fail. New authoritarian systems can emerge. But survival strategies are not fixed personalities.

If speaking is dangerous, people whisper.

If organization is punished, people avoid organizations.

If loyalty brings security, people demonstrate loyalty.

And when those incentives change, behavior can change too.

If you enjoy my writing, you can find my books on Amazon.

If you’d like to support my work directly, here’s the PayPal link.

And one more thing: let's answer Russia's attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure in the most practical way possible. As winter approaches, those strikes will leave people without electricity and heat. Galina Itskovich is raising money for sleeping bags, and 100% of the money raised goes directly to people who need to stay warm. The donation link is here: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/kyiv-needs-sleeping-bags-now>

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