



Political Discourse and Oppression – Influences on the Mentality and Culture of the Soviet Man

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Abstract. The culture and mentality of a nation is formed in a process of interaction between individual and environment, and, consequently, its behaviour can be influenced by the changes of the social and physical environment. Politics is one factor in this process, as it uses power to control people's thinking and behaviour through various instruments and techniques, and in this way, it can be regarded as a governmental extension on human actions. Using an imagological approach, the article's purpose is to highlight that oppression, along with political discourse, shaped the mindset of the Soviet people. Also, the regime attempted to shape Soviet society in order to achieve the image desired. The Soviet political apparatus was based on oppression, the technique of repetition, and the role models highlighted by the regime. All the measures taken influenced the mentality of the Soviet people and, implicitly, led it to a transformation and, later, an adaptation because people had to comply with all the rules, laws, and measures taken by the Communist Party. This will be analysed in the first book published in Romania by Vasile Ernu, *Născut în URSS* [Born in the USSR], and in two works by Svetlana Alexievich, namely *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Chernobyl Prayer*. By analysing these works, the reader learns how a society, its culture and mentality can be influenced by the social and physical environment. The three works present the transition from fiction to the non-fiction category, portraying authentic experiences and depicting the tangible impacts on people.

Keywords: mentality, culture, the Soviet citizen, politics, Vasile Ernu, Svetlana Alexievich

1. Introduction

When one says “culture”, one may address two conceptual clusters. Frederik Tygstrup states that the concept of culture comprises two distinct yet interconnected meanings. The first pertains to the field of anthropology, encompassing the ways

of life, customs, relationships, and interactions of a particular group of people (Tygstrup 2020: 155). The second relates to artistic production, which confines both human experiences and the modes or structures of perceiving and understanding the world. Moreover, it is directly linked to geographical space. Culture could not be described as completely abiding due to the fact that it can be shaped by numerous factors like geography, history, economics, and politics. Another term that is of interest in this study, as a consequence of its connection of culture, is mentality, which represents the mental attitude, beliefs, and values that characterize a society. Along with culture, mentality can be influenced by certain factors, and politics can again be mentioned as a consequence of its impact on the frame of mind of a society. As one will observe during this study, politics governs people's way of thinking and behaviour through some techniques and instruments. Both terms – culture and mentality – are the keywords when one discusses the way of living, social norms, behaviours, and the shared beliefs of a specific group, and narrative is among the things that can formulate a discourse about society.

The attention in this study will be focused on three books, *Născut în URSS* [Born in the USSR] (2006) by Vasile Ernu and *Chernobyl Prayer* (2016) and *The Unwomanly Face of War* (2017) by Svetlana Alexievich. Vasile Ernu, originally from Soviet Bessarabia, settled in Bucharest, wrote essays, chronicles, novels, and various commentaries on subjects enclosing literature, politics, and social life. Ernu is a distinguished writer as a consequence of his way of making literature, namely his ambitious and polemic subjects. Svetlana Alexievich, who is known as an eminent Belarusian journalist and writer, is also connected to Russia and Ukraine. She was born in Ukraine, grew up in Belarus, and wrote her books in Russian; in this way, she is a writer of all these three nations. Besides her recognition as a valuable writer, she is an interesting personality because of her love of and solidarity with people. Alexievich, through all the voices that were not heard and were lost throughout time, depicts an entire history, but also the destiny of a country – Russia. I had these two authors in mind on account of their elaborated topics, but also because their approach to Soviet culture and mentality. Through the authentic experiences, the reader is enabled to see the effects of politics on mentality, behaviour, and culture. In the books, there is not just a story presented about the Soviet people; their writing involves biography and autobiography, and it goes beyond fictional representation, also including the transition to non-fictional literature.

2. The impact of politics on culture and mentality

By using an imagological approach, I will present how culture and mentality can be influenced by politics, but also, I will underline that some books can depict the

life, culture, and mentality of a specific group or society. According to Luminița-Mihaela Iacob, imagology deals with the study of the perception of nations, including the way they represent each other and how they imagine themselves. I have chosen this approach as a consequence of my interest in analysing the Soviet society, how they perceived themselves, how their mentality and culture was shaped by different factors, but also, how books managed to represent this specific society. The two authors mentioned previously introduce the reader to the Soviet culture, presenting people's way of seeing and understanding the world, but, at the same time, their books portray how some transformations in their culture and mentality were produced as a result of the changes in their social and physical environment (Iacob 1996: 40). People changed the image of the state, of themselves, but also their habits and behaviour, all these being the effects of oppression. Due to the fact that the image of a society represents part of social representations (Chiciudean & Halic 2008), these literary creations can help one mentally portray Soviet society through the images created from perceptual foundations.

2.1. *On Stories*

In the book *On Stories* (2002), Richard Kearney pleads for the contribution of stories in understanding the world, but he also reveals the way in which narrative could provide a form of individual and collective identity. For Kearney, the act of telling stories is related to people's need for unity, but, at the same time, they serve as documents that provide information about different subjects, including the description of societies, cultures, and mentalities. From this perspective, we can consider that literature could be regarded as a reflection of culture or, at least, as a tool used by readers to get in touch with the culture and mentality of others. Narrative, as the author explains, manages "to *humanise* time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a *mythos*" (Kearney 2002: 4).¹ In some cases, literature gives a chronological order so that we can comprehend the succession of the events, portraying, at the same time, the everyday life of a specific group and its attitudes towards different events.

The individual is a social creature who cannot live outside the different relations created in society, but also, it is important to take into account the social and physical environment. Dmitry Mikheyev states that "[m]an is in a state of permanent interaction with the environment, both physical and social. This interaction involves the changing of both the person and the environment [...] Interaction with the environment starts with orientation in it. Man's orientation involves perceptions of himself as both a physical and a psychological entity" (Mikheyev 1987: 497). Both people and society are interconnected: people

1 Emphasis in the original.

influence society, and society influences people. The individual can identify himself through his position in society and through his interactions with others. Each person was raised with a specific set of rules and values belonging to the culture of that area. As it was presented earlier, politics is one factor that can shape the environment, and as a result, it affects society and its culture and mentality. Some of the ways through which they are influenced by politics are the following: laws, propaganda, education, and social norms. An influential period when politics shaped the mindset and the way of living of society was during the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. All three works depict different periods when politics had an impact on society.

2.2. Born in the USSR

Născut în URSS [Born in the USSR], built up of several short texts, drafts “a kind of archaeology of everyday life in the Soviet Union” (Ernu 2006: 8).² They can be read as vignettes, partly essays, partly narratives, trying to portray the culture and mentality of the Soviet citizen. Ernu introduces topics that are directly linked to the daily life of Soviet citizens, and some that are worth mentioning are education, youth culture, hobbies, clothes, propaganda, consumption, politics, and so on. Through this collection of short texts, the author enumerates several national stereotypes of the Soviet society, giving examples or offering his personal experience so that the reader can comprehend the mindset and habits of that society. Each text can be read as a stand-alone text, but they make a puzzle – as the author mentions on the first pages –, and if the reader combines all the pieces, s/he will be able to obtain the image of a common Soviet citizen. A fundamental detail about the present work is subjectivity – all information is passed through the personal filter of the author. Readers are meeting only his personal perspective on the topics, or, in other words, a “self-image” (Iacob 1996: 40), implying in this way the image created by the author about the society he was part of. As a consequence, all the characteristics and features introduced by Ernu represent, in fact, auto-stereotypes. Besides being presented from the author’s point of view, education, youth culture, hobbies, and so on are observed and analysed through his personal filter; no second opinion is implied.

There should be mentioned the connection between politics and memory due to the fact that the regime mastered what people remembered. Alexievich stated that “our memory is far from an ideal instrument. It is not only arbitrary and capricious, it is also chained to time, like a dog” (2017: 22). By using the word “time”, she is referring to *Zeitgeist* because people tend to be influenced by it. Through propaganda, the Communist Party was constantly promoting some information, an act that can be called the technique of repetition. This topic

2 The translations from Romanian are made by the author throughout the article (A. I. A.).

was also developed in my Master's Degree thesis (Arsene 2022: 64–65), where I indicated that, according to Gabriel A. Radvansky (2017), a piece of information that has been heard repetitively by an individual will be more straightforwardly remembered than something heard or seen just once.

One of the texts is entitled “Reclamă versus Propagandă în URSS” [Advertisement versus Propaganda in the USSR] (Ernu 2006: 77), in which the author relates that the Communist Party had monopolized them, and thus each advertisement had to be approved of by the Party. The advertisements started to appear all over the Soviet Union, and they were promoting different ideas such as the relation with the enemy, rejection of capitalism, encouraging people to be volunteers in the Soviet Army or to enrol in the Communist Party. The author outlines the strong images with simple phrases from the advertisements; the reason for this simplicity was that all the citizens should be able to understand the message. Also, he describes them as Soviet propaganda advertisements, confirming that these campaigns were created to achieve some political aims. Through the advertisements, the regime tried to transfer a set of messages to society.

In accordance with the advertisements, there should be mentioned the concept of the “effect model”, which leads to the idea that through mass media audiences can receive some messages. As a consequence, these messages can have a significant impact on the way people think and behave. Thomas C. O’Guinn states that advertising was initially not regarded as a way of communicating something; the “effects model” had never before included social consciousness of any type. According to this theory, social actors – media, individuals, cultural influences, institutions, governments, communities – matter at least as much as the communication message itself. Since advertising was a form of mass communication, it was expected to have an impact on people (O’Guinn 2001: 186). The advertisements portray people that are good citizens, are volunteers in the Soviet Army, are enrolling in the Communist Party, and so on. The aim of those advertisements was to present some “role models” and to encourage people to do the same things portrayed there. There were highlighted some personality traits and characteristics that the regime expected to be present in all the citizens. In this way, politics manipulates people through the discourse, and all those advertisements were, in fact, one of the measures taken by the regime to introduce certain principles and values in the mindset of people – being implied here the transformation from advertisements to propaganda.

On the one hand, the Soviet man was excessively exposed to certain principles and values promoted by the Communist Party; on the other hand, people’s access to information and culture from outside the Soviet Union was converted into a Soviet replica. This aspect can be spotted in Ernu’s book. The first example is Buratino, known by every Soviet citizen, a copy of the Italian Pinocchio. This cartoon character was “adapted and retold in a Soviet manner” (Ernu 2006: 26)

and became one of the cult figures of the Soviet society. Another such character is Max Otto von Stirlitz, who is a replica of the American James Bond. Stirlitz was a hero for the Soviets, and what makes a difference between him and James Bond is that he was not considered a fictional character but a real one. The Soviet spy, besides the fact that he was intelligent, handsome, and funny, served the country, and due to this reason, he could be a model to follow in the real life.

By using these two examples, I return to the notion of “self-image”, referring to its three levels of understanding. According to Chiciudean and Haliuc, the first level relates to an intuitive image of a society about itself – for example, the image represented by Ernu în *Născut în URSS* [Born in the USSR]. The second is linked to the self-image retrieved from the foreigners and progressively appropriated as the only truth one can say about that particular society – but this aspect is not the focus of this study –, and the third one pertains to the image that a society wants to create and communicate about itself. For the last level, one can take into account the example with the advertisements and with the two fictional characters – Buratino and Stirlitz (Chiciudean & Haliuc 2008: 11). As I mentioned earlier, the stories of the two characters were retold in a “Soviet manner”, and thus some of their traits were connected to the image of the ideal Soviet citizen. Both of them were good citizens who loved their homeland and who were behaving in accordance with the values promoted by the Communist Party. The regime had in mind a certain image of the Soviet citizen and the Soviet society, and through the advertisements, the fictional characters, and the rules, they were trying to implement a specific discipline and way of life. It was expected from all the citizens to be “good” citizens, to have faith in the regime, and to respect all the norms and rules implemented by it. All those measures were implemented so that the Soviet society should reflect those images.

Culture and information were not only locally converted but, in some cases, also denied. Politics exercised its power over both of them through censorship. Therefore, the control over information was used to promote the communist ideology. In the article “The Roles of the Censor: New Perspectives on Censorship in Nineteenth-Century Russia”, Zavlunov and Zubkov define censorship as an idea, a practice, an act, a goal, and an end result. Therefore, censorship encompasses “self-censorship (conscious and subconscious), on the one extreme, and total external social control that suppresses (in whole or in part) or directs a creative endeavour, on the other. In the latter form, censorship is closely connected to all kinds of authority and power that manifest themselves through state institutions” (Zavlunov & Zubkov 2020: 1). Furthermore, the activities performed by the censor imply a deep involvement in literary and artistic matters; it is not reduced only to a simple set of rules. The censor has to pay attention to the form and content of the texts, but also to disseminate the works and to have complex interactions with the different participants in the creation (Zavlunov & Zubkov 2020: 2).

Mass media and the entire public discourse were monitored, so any criticism of the regime or ideas that contradicted the rules and values encouraged by the Communist Party were censored, and in such manner, they tried to suppress the dissent. According to Samantha Sherry, the instrument of the Soviet censorship apparatus was the Main Administration of Literature and Publishing – abbreviated Glavit –, and its responsibility was to set norms and to implement censorship over all the printed items (Sherry 2015: 45–46). The arts were also included here: literature, fine art, cinema, and circus. The period when censorship had the most power was under the leadership of Stalin. Several important Russian works were censored and even banned due to their promotion of dissenting ideas through literature. The writers were persecuted, faced exile, imprisonment, or even execution. Some of the most important authors politically oppressed were Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Boris Pilnyak,³ Mikhail Bulgakov, and Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn.

In addition to the aspiration to maintain control over information, the Communist Party wanted to suppress the dissent. Media and all the narrative forms – articles, novels, drama, poetry – were thoroughly analysed due to the fact that they could incite protests or rebellions, but also, through the dissenting voices, they could promote opposition movements or alternative political ideology. Through the process of analysis and dissection, the Communist Party could eliminate the negative images and ideas about the state, and, at the same time, it could portray an ideal image. Media and all forms of art, as well as advertisements, were transformed into propaganda and created a system of messages that had the aim of transferring to society the characteristics and traits of an ideal Soviet citizen, but also to create the image of the state as a perfect state.

After Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's assumption of power, there followed a period when the apparatus that controlled information diminished. This period was generally described as "the thaw", and Ernu states: "the Soviet culture was unleashed in an exemplary manner" (Ernu 2006: 162). Those events were regarded by people with hope because they implied a re-discussion of the principles of socialism. Some literary texts were reprinted, and people were offered access to some banned authors such as Sergei Yesenin, Anna Akhmatova,⁴ Mikhail Zoshchenko,⁵ and Mikhail Bulgakov. Furthermore, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was published (Ernu 2006: 162). The Communist Party made people reach a sense of disbelief bound up with the cultural freedom offered. It was a paradox on account of the restrictions that appeared during this period of supposed freedom. Ernu notes: "the taste of freedom is only felt when strong enough restrictions

3 Boris Pilnyak was a Soviet writer of novels and stories, prominent in the 1920s.

4 Anna Akhmatova was one of the most significant poets of the 20th century.

5 Mikhail Zoshchenko was a Soviet satirist and writer.

appear” (Ernu 2006: 163), and after a short time the limitation of liberty showed up. On one side, it was offered the liberty to express, to create, and to criticize the regime, but, on the other side, politics tried to control this process, and some books were banned.

Sherry provides an explanation for the paradoxical measures taken by the regime after Stalin’s death: “the Khrushchev period was characterized by ‘Glavlit’s shrinking authority,’ as its responsibility for censorship practices was transferred away from official censors towards editors and editorial boards, facilitating a move from a system of external censorship to one predominantly characterised by editorial or self-censorship” (Sherry 2015: 47). Thus, we get in touch with the migration from censorship to self-censorship. In the Stalinist period, people were exposed to specific actions – political persecutions, arrests, purges, and so on –, and as an effect of the repression and control over the media and all printed materials, people engaged in self-censorship. It created a culture of fear owing to the fact that people preferred to remove from the texts the parts that looked potentially problematic to avoid the punishment of the authorities.

2.3. *The Unwomanly Face of War*

In Svetlana Alexievich’s book, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (Alexievich 2017), there are three chapters entitled “From the discussion with the censor”, and the author describes how self-censorship made the book’s publication more difficult. This book was finished in 1983, but it was not published until 1985, as she faced many obstacles. The author had encountered problems in publishing the book because she wrote about “trifles” instead of the “Great Victory”, and even in the first pages, she mentioned that it had been already two years since she was rejected by the editors (Alexievich 2017). The reason was that she chose to write about one face of the Second World War which was not known to the wide world until then – a war full of horror, without an emphasis on the Communist Party and having in view a Soviet woman who was portrayed as an “animal” rather than a saint. She was accused that she promoted ideas which did not belong to the Communist Party because she decided to show the misery of the war and the harshness through which the victory was gained. She should have written about the “History of the Victory” rather than the small things experienced by women. All they wanted was heroism and great deeds, not the simple and terrifying stories of the common people. Another matter she was accused of was that she told a “lie” due to the fact that she had not described the heroes of the war and had not presented the Soviet woman as a heroic one but as a usual one who had passed through harsh times.

Furthermore, women were not allowed to mention that they were on the front, but in the first instance, it was not even stated. One of the witnesses declared that

it took several years for an article written by Vera Tkacenko to be published in the newspaper *Pravda*, stating that women joined the Second World War (Alexievich 2017: 108). Afterwards, the fact that women were at war was not a highlighted subject. After the war, few people talked about women who were on the front and how they felt, and even fewer mentioned that they lived alone and that they did not make it in life. The reason for this is that the Soviets had in mind a certain portrait of the woman, and after the war, not only did they think that women had in their mind an inappropriate image of the war but also that they were not real women.

Marginalization, according to Bradley T. Cullen, can have political effects at both micro and macro scales (Cullen 2000: 216). Thus, Soviet women who took part in the Second World War were marginalized because their stories were in contradiction with the image created by the regime about the “Great Victory” and “The Great Patriotic War”. Not only that their credibility diminished, but they were also avoided by other people and, what is more, forgotten. In the case of women who went to war, the concept of “alterity” can be mentioned – alongside “marginalization” – because those women were seen as “others”, they were not the same pure and saint Soviet women; they were different. Through the book, several men are mentioned who said that they would not marry a woman who went to war because it changed her, and she did not remain the same saintly and pure Soviet woman. Even the women themselves observed that they were different; however, for them, it was not about a change but more like a habit that they were trying to get rid of. As a consequence, many of them were afraid to talk about the war or their experiences.

The examples mentioned above represent just one face of self-censorship; the other one is related to common people and how their way of life and behaviour was affected, how they managed to limit themselves. As it was stated at the beginning of this study, each society has its own culture and mentality, which are strongly connected to the environment, and Mikheyev describes this as follows: “Mentality is formed in a process of interaction between an individual and the environment, during which both change. All participants – the individual, the physical and social environments – should be considered as active players” (Mikheyev 1987: 499). Politics and all the techniques and instruments used – rules, laws, censorship, marginalization, and so on – had an impact not only on the mentality of the Soviets but also on their culture because one of the effects on people was the establishment of a culture of fear. Alexievich depicts this very well in both *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Chernobyl Prayer*. In an interview for BBC Newsnight (2016), Alexievich referred to her works as “novels in voices”, the reason being that she mainly used the method of close interrogation. First of all, Alexievich started as a journalist, her specialization being the interview. Hence, the hundreds of interviews merged into collections of oral histories. By using the points of view of different people of different ages, she shows several individual

perspectives, which are different from the perspective of grand history. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, the author states that she writes a history of feelings and that she does research on individuals of a specific time who went through specific experiences (Alexievich 2017: 16). Therefore, the testimonies gathered by the author are not just real stories told by people, but they also display how politics and the culture of fear led to a change in their way of thinking.

Some people were covered by fear and preferred to hide the truth or their true feelings about the events, while others were led by an engineered communist mindset. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, one of the testimonies depicts both types. The author relates that she went to the house of a couple who had married during the war. Alexievich asked the husband to let his wife speak; he accepted but told her to tell the story without tears and without trifles. After the man left, the woman whispered that the night before, she and her husband studied “The History of the Great Patriotic War” because he was afraid that the woman would say something inappropriate (Alexievich 2017: 20). The man represents the individual who was led by a specific set of rules and values implemented by the Communist Party. He had a specific vision and version of “The Great Patriotic War” and “The Great Victory” – contrary to the woman, who possessed a different perspective upon the events and the terrific deeds done to win the war. Even though the woman did not share the same ideas as her husband, she was led by fear, and thus she had some reservations about telling the whole truth. Alexievich states that inside the soul of an individual there are two types of truth: “*two truths that live in the same human being: one’s own truth driven underground, and the common one, filled with the spirit of the time. The smell of newspapers. The first was rarely able to resist the massive onslaught of the second*” (Alexievich 2017: 100).⁶ Moreover, she explains how women, when surrounded by more “spectators”, were less sincere because self-censorship was playing its part, making them speak according to what the regime wanted them to present. In the presence of others, women were describing the general truth, but when they were alone with Alexievich, they were revealing the personal truth.

In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich depicts the culture of fear through the testimonies gathered from the women who went to war. The engineered communist mindset is present too, but in *Chernobyl Prayer* it is more highlighted, and readers also encounter the phenomenon of misinformation. *Chernobyl Prayer* also comprises a collection of oral testimonies gathered by Alexievich, but the difference from *The Unwomanly Face of War* is that the book also incorporates testimonies from male sources. Related to the Chernobyl disaster, Ion Valer Xenofontov – who was a University Lecturer at the State University of Moldova – reports that all information was kept secret, initially being claimed to be only a trivial accident. After Sweden and Finland had monitored the station,

6 Emphasis in the original.

the Kremlin had to admit it (Alexievich 2017: 152–155). One of the witnesses mentioned the words of the leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who said “there was nothing to worry about, comrades, everything was under control. There had been a fire, just an ordinary fire. Nothing that unusual. The people living there were getting on with their work” (Alexievich 2016: 173). Political discourse and censorship were again becoming instruments of oppression and were accompanied by misinformation and even the destruction of information. In this particular case, the leader wanted to shape and control people’s perceptions of the Chernobyl disaster. Furthermore, those who were witnessing the event were not allowed to divulge details about it because they could influence public opinion and could damage the image created by the regime of Chernobyl. The problem with misinformation was not only caused by the regime, which was trying to hide the details, but also by the newspapers through the invented stories they were presenting to society. Through the testimonies, people managed to talk about the disaster and revealed their personal perspective on the events and their experiences. The witnesses were asked to sign papers stating that they would not disclose the information and that they were not allowed to film or register. If one decided to divulge details, he was at risk of losing his job, party card, scientific title or to be prosecuted – which led to fear and self-censorship. As in the case of women from *The Unwomanly Face of War*, some people became afraid to talk about their experiences.

One of those interviewed relates that he was working at Chernobyl, and he had to take the employees there. He explains that they had a device that measured how many roentgens each had, but the number was a military secret. After a while, he was trying to find the documents correlating with his duty there, but with no results: “Though I tried. Made requests through the appropriate channels. I got three answers, which I’ve kept. First answer: the documents were destroyed upon expiry of the three-year statutory storage period. Second answer: the documents were destroyed during the post-perestroika downsizing of the army when units were disbanded. Third answer: the documents were destroyed because they were radioactive. Or maybe they were destroyed so nobody would ever know the truth?” (Alexievich 2016: 89).

Another man relates that when his wife called and he explained that he had just come out from near the reactor, the call ended, the discussion was interrupted by the KGB (Alexievich 2016: 187). Several testimonies report that the phone calls were monitored, the cause being the avoidance of the distribution of information about Chernobyl. All those fragile details about the disaster were censored, hidden, or destroyed because they could reveal an image that was not correlated with what the regime wanted to present.

Even though some witnesses described their fear of the regime and its injustice, others relate that people were not so scared and that they were not

forced to engage in tasks such as working at Chernobyl, concealing information, or removing the contaminated soil. Some of the testimonies managed to portray the national character of the Soviet man, an individual who has no fear, who is used to work hard and to be obedient but also whose values and mentality were shaped by the engineered mindset of the Communist Party. A teacher relates that the school asked them to come with shovels to remove the contaminated soil, and besides two young teachers, all of them accepted without objecting. He explained that inside them there abode the obedience and duty for their country (Alexievich 2016: 171). A chemical engineer who was working at Chernobyl relates that the employees were not afraid: “There was no whingeing. If this job had to be done, someone had to do it. The Motherland had called, commanded. That’s the way we are” (Alexievich 2016: 184). Thus, not only the culture of fear shaped the mentality, beliefs, and behaviours of the Soviet man but also their faith in the Communist Party and in all the values encouraged by it. These people were communists, and all of them were raised with a specific party discipline. They were led by this mindset, were “contaminated”, using the words of one of the witnesses. The political discourse and, implicitly, oppression and its various methods changed the way of thinking of the Soviet people and introduced certain principles and values that affected their behaviour.

3. Conclusions

As a conclusion, the Communist Party had overused its power over society, and censorship was one of the instruments used to control information. In the first place, one can perceive censorship as a direct action on people’s discourses because they were not allowed to talk about some subjects, were forbidden to divulge details, or were not capable of publishing some texts because of the topics covered. But I have also introduced the self-censorship, and, through it, I tried to highlight the fact that this can be a governmental extension on human actions. One aspect is related to fear: people were afraid to speak due to the consequences, implying in this way the implementation of a culture of fear.

The other aspect is connected to the culture and mentality of that society, the obedience and the faith in the party being part of their nature, and thus people did what they were told to do without protest or thinking about it. The Soviets’ behaviour was an effect of the technique of repetition of political discourse due to the fact that all the traits and characteristics were implemented in their culture and mentality through the messages transmitted through media, advertisements, and all the printed items. Moreover, by using those specific techniques and instruments, the regime managed to create and to implement an ideal image of the Soviet citizen and of the state.

Culture and mentality are two interconnected concepts, and both of them are linked to the social and physical environment. Politics plays a central role in shaping the environment, and, as a consequence, society is affected and changed. Mikheyev mentions two crucial concepts, namely adaptation and transformation (Mikheyev 1987). Therefore, in this process, when the environment is transforming, society should adapt and behave according to that transformation. As we have seen in this study, literature can be the key that opens the door to the culture and mentality of a specific society. Literary texts depict human experiences, but also perspectives on seeing and understanding the world. The two authors discussed managed to show how the regime implemented an engineered communist mindset that changed the culture and mentality of the Soviet society. On the one hand, Vasile Ernu portrays the culture of the common man who lived in the USSR, highlighting the influence of the Communist Party upon the way of seeing and understanding the world. On the other hand, Svetlana Alexievich shows – through the hundreds of interviews taken – how the regime used its powerful techniques and instruments to control information. In this way, a governmental extension on human actions can be observed as a result of the “contamination” of people’s consciousness through political discourse and oppression.

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