

# Comparing Cultural Systems: Comparative Analysis of Russian and American National Mentalities

**Natalia Prokopishina**

Culture and Design Department  
South-Russia State University of Technology  
Novocherkassk 346406, Russia  
email: motechka2001@mail.ru

## Abstract

A comparative approach is most successful in identifying national mentalities. This paper describes Russian and American national mentalities. Mentalities are a key to understanding national identity and hence to future successful relationships among states. The peculiarities of societal phenomena forbid the use of the experimental method. These two countries share some geographical, historical and philosophical factors but differ in others. A better understanding of how the features of national mentality have changed over the last three hundred years will enhance our understanding of cultural systems.

## 1 Theoretical Background

Enormous diversity of races, cultures, religions and languages are the main traits of Russian and American cultural systems. It is a challenge to find a true description of Russian or American cultural unity. Do they have a notion of cultural unity? If “no”- for how long will these countries exist? But if “yes” – what does it mean, American or Russian unity on the basis of diversity?

Comparative analysis, which is a very popular method today, is essential to any real understanding. Scientists all over the world compare national economies, societies, cultures, and languages for better interpretation of world processes. It is possible to compare national identity as well.

The USA and Russia are good examples for comparison. America and Russia have a lot in common: they are multinational, multicultural countries, with similar Christian values, interracial marriages, colonial history, and they are both huge in geographical size.

The collapse of the Soviet Empire left the United States with a profound crisis of national identity. As George Soros noted, “We have learned to think of the world in terms of two super powers confronting each other and we have had

no difficulty in casting ourselves in the role of the good guy confronting the evil empire.” [Soros, 1996]

In the eyes of the whole world the US looked like the defender of the free world, but now it is necessary to have new thinking. Russia today suffers from both an economic and a spiritual crisis. This began in 1985, with the period of “identity confusion”: unpatriotic behavior on a mass scale, self-abasement, and disbelief in one’s own potentialities, the loss of spiritual values, and the absorption of not always the best western values.

The American crisis of national identity is much less acute than that of Russia, but American scientists are concerned about new thinking as well. America is becoming more and more multicultural; the problems of race, gender, class, and ethnicity have become more debatable and painful. In this situation people have begun to speak about national mentality. This term has become very popular in our speech and scientific publications. The popularity of this term explains the world concern about national identity.

According to the American definition, mentality is “1. Mental power or capacity: learning ability, intelligence. 2. Mode or way of thought, mental set or disposition, outlook,” [Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of English Language, 1993] “cast or turn of mind, the sum of a person’s intellectual capabilities or endowment,” [The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1992] “the distinctive characteristics of mind in conscious life abstractly considered. Applied particularly to the different grades of mental endowment, as exhibiting more or less mentality.” [Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, 1960]

According to the European and Russian meaning, mentality is “the combination of different traditions, beliefs, habits, ideas which characterize the society, its mode of thinking and actions of the whole nation.” [Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopedique Larousse, 1989; Worterbuch Der Deutschen Gegenwartssprache, 1978; Sovremenniy Filosofskiy Slovar, 1997].

So in the European understanding this term is more sociological, historical, cultural and philosophical than

psychological or cerebral, as it is in the US. This is one of the reasons why this term has different accents in the European and American meanings.

In the 1990s in the US and in Russia some discussions about a new definition of “national character” took place. In 1995 in an electronic discussion Michael Barton asked the question: “What is it possible to say today, with a straight face, about the concept of an “American national character”? Should we dump the concept or redefine it? Can we still use the phrase “American character?” This theme was continued in many other discussions, articles and books. In that process of redefining this notion different variants were suggested: “common core idea”, “national identity”, “cultural identity”, “group identity”, “shared values”, “a core set of American beliefs”, “behavioral models”, “cultural patterns”, and “belief attitude complex.” [Barton, 1995]

Russian scholars in similar discussions suggested different terms as well: “cultural matrix,” “psychological, cultural and social space,” “psycho-cosmo-logos,” “active social reflection,” etc. [Makhlaev, 1995] If we added many conferences and electronic discussions on this topic, we could see that the problem of definition is still being debated. In Russia the term “mentality” is used as a control term, but in the US the term is “cultural patterns”. In this sense the theory of national mentality is an umbrella concept, which does not have only one empirical referent. Thus, in order to define meaningfully the target of the research program, one should make a conceptual choice.

## 2 A Comparative Approach

Our research will not be complete without describing the latest methodology for the comparative analysis of nations. Our research requires this methodology for better interpretation of the similarities and differences between nations. The American scientific schools prefer an empirical approach in this analysis but Russian scholars prefer mostly generalizations. The golden medium is the combination of these two positions. We need to display the facts, data, and different sources. But at the same time binary analysis is one of the strategies of comparative research which least needs statistics. As Mattei Dogan, a famous comparativist, noted, “The chariot of science is drawn by three horses: theory, data and method. If the three horses do not run at the same speed the chariot may lose its equilibrium. The theoretical horse is very individualistic. He doesn’t like statistical hay.” [Dogan, 1994]

In cross-cultural analysis one can assemble a lot of facts, charts, and data, but they won’t explain the core of culture. A cross-cultural analysis of nations is first of all a theoretical analysis. The main question is not “how”, but “why.” The internal diversity of countries is less significant than differences between them. For the analysis of intra-national diversities statisticians and geographers long ago elaborated adequate indices, an index of inequality, translated into Lorenz curves and coefficients of dispersion.

But some social phenomena cannot be explained by national averages. Many of the most significant aspects of cultural life cannot be treated in statistical terms. In this kind of research the data are very specific, they are comparisons of definitions and concepts (what we have already done), judgments of reliable experts, conceptual homogenization of heterogeneous fields of research, and sometimes it is a matter of degree. The comparative approach provides the path to understanding, explanation and interpretation of the mentality phenomenon. It is not possible to say what is similar and what is different in social conditions without comparison. This method will help us to realize where and when the same social phenomenon in different countries works differently. We can get more results if we try to compare not only the cultural phenomena in some societies, but also some of them in combination: geographical, historical, cultural factors for example. Only then can we see how the cultural system works.

## 3 Geographical Aspect

It is commonly known that geography is one of the major factors influencing every national culture, that culture incorporates differences in climate, landscape, nutrition, habits and customs and expresses their features in a specific style of living, cultural patterns, and value systems.

The US is a relatively young civilization, but the influence of geographical factors is quite perceptible in this culture. First of all we can see it in such characteristics as the long distances from traditional cultural centers, geographical location, climate, diversity of the landscape, and “frontier” and “wilderness” phenomena. The geographical *distantness* from traditional cultural centers, as well as economics and politics developed the sense of a special and selected role in history. America began as a distinctively different country in the minds of the Europeans who intentionally created it. This sense of difference was originally grounded in those European conditions that in the 16th and 17th centuries sent explorers, settlers, religious reformers, prisoners, refugees and others seeking a new life. Immanuel Wallerstein, the Director of the Fernand Braudel Civilization Research Center, pointed out, “We always believed that America is an exceptional country... The idea of exceptionalism is the marrow of every civilization of this world.” [Wallerstein, 1995]

Another interesting aspect is the “*frontier phenomenon*”. The famous American historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his book, *The Frontier in American History*, presented a “frontier thesis” that continues to influence historical thinking even today. He was convinced that the existence of the area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development. The “frontier” promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people; a “frontier” is productive of

individualism. “Wilderness” created practical, inventive turns of mind and encouraged mastering material things. The colonists had to be pragmatic idealists because in the wilderness things must be made to work. Yet idealism is required to reinforce the courage to confront that wilderness. So the nation’s founding became an urge for security versus a desire for adventure in a new world, a love of individual freedom competing with collective needs, concern for material success combined with the nebulous idealism in which most Americans believe. The process of conquering nature we can see in the American national character: interest in everything new, experiments, and great importance given to education. One can be surprised at the American love of energy, speed, convenience, industriousness and a great desire to be the first in the city, in the state and in the world.

Geography had a strong influence on Russian national character as well. Similar geographical factors but in different combinations created the Russian mentality. *The location between two civilizations* Western and Eastern created the peculiar Russian view of the world. Russian culture as well as Russian behavioral patterns is a combination of western and eastern values. The combination created the vision of a selected role in the world. We can find the idea that Russia is the third Rome in many Russian historical sources.

*The endless Russian borders* shaped the idea of collectivism and strong state power. The idea of the boundlessness of space created the Russian idea of the endlessness of human spirituality and was one of the sources of the Russian passive, contemplative attitude toward life.

The Russian landscape is not as diverse as the American, so *monotony* created such features of Russian character as a special attitude to the beauty of shapes and the beauty of what is. Spiritual values dominate in Russian culture more than material objects. So music, literature and

painting are more outstanding in Russian art than sculpture, architecture, and consumer culture [Stepun, 1997].

The famous *cold Russian climate in combination with the boundlessness of the territory* is the reason for the slow pace of development and results in conservatism of thinking.

The Russian *colonial history* was less painful and tragic than the American. Russian settlements did not face the fierce resistance of aborigines. So the Russian “frontier” did not develop special features of national character in the process of colonization. However, the eastward Siberian colonization, like the westward American colonization, developed the will to personal freedom, individualism, an active attitude to life, and an aspiration to material values at that historical period.

*Unpredictable climate* is one of the main features of Russian weather. It created the idea of trusting the Lord rather than their own efforts. These and some other geographical factors created such famous features of Russian mentality as collectivism, irrationality, pessimism, cultural conservatism, passive aspiration to material values, and strong family relationships.

#### 4 Historical Aspect

The historical aspect involves seeing the process of national mentality formation through the key events of national history. These events create the basic values of the society, shape the national vision of the world, and dictate definite laws of social life on the basis of national interests. National state laws are the laws of survival. It is almost impossible to compare Russian and American histories. Their historical processes were so different in length and intensity, in their values and purposes. But the laws of social development are quite comparable. The two countries pursued the same goals: the foundation of a state,

The USA	Russia
Distance from traditional cultural centers developed the idea of exceptionalism	Location between Eastern and Western civilizations developed the idea of a special role in the world and a contradictory national character
Diversity of landscape created American regionalism, lacunas of different cultures in different parts of the US territory. Peculiarity of climate created different labor habits and attitude to slavery	Monotony of landscape created a Russian love of spiritual beauty. Mostly cold climate in combination with the boundlessness of the territory is one of the reasons for the slow pace of Russian social development and conservatism in thinking
Weather conditions and landscape created dependence on production techniques in the North and developed slavery in the South	Extremely unpredictable weather and a short growing season created irrationality, distrust of one’s own efforts, and instability in work processes
Dynamic development, love of change and experiments, a pragmatic perception of the world	Slow pace of social development, cultural conservatism, an artistic and emotional perception of the world
“Frontier phenomenon” developed individualism, social and spatial mobility, and an active attitude to life	Colonization of Siberia developed individualism, social and spatial mobility, and an active attitude to life at that historical period
“Wilderness” created practical, inventive turns of mind, love of experiments, love of individual freedom, concern for material success, and developed individualism	“Wilderness” and cold climate made people be active, creative, and pragmatic, but Orthodox beliefs led to spirituality more than pragmatism

**Table 1. Geographical factors and their influence on American and Russian national characters**

consolidation of the center and the borders, establishment of a hierarchy between the center and frontier areas, support of religion and culture, which are the mirror of national values. All these processes occurred in Russian history as well as in American history and molded the national consciousness of their multicultural nations. The historical process of state formation is simultaneously a process of national mentality formation. The following basic processes created the Russian and American nations:

- Formation of ethnic consciousness, and development and consolidation of specific national cultural patterns corresponding to social values,
- Adoption of the idea of the unity of all nations in Christendom,
- Preservation of the “national body” and creation of a powerful society.

These main ideas helped a social group to survive in the wilderness, in a hostile environment and to create a powerful state with a core set of behavioral models. In the US they were shaped during such historical processes as immigration, westward colonization, struggle for independence, slavery, the adoption of a constitution, the development of industrial capitalism, and creation of a multinational society on the basis of freedom, justice and brotherhood..

As for Russia, its historical processes were the adoption of Christianity, the unity of Russia under Moscow power,

the deliverance from the Mongol-Tartar yoke, the period of Peter the Great, and the period of communism.

## 5 Philosophical Aspect

Comparative analysis of the American and Russian philosophical systems can be an additional key to understanding their national identities and future relations between these two world powers.

The deep differences in their geographical, historical and religious environments have become the main sources of the differences in their national collective unconscious. The values of the Puritan society, Locke’s popularity and the Scottish heritage formed the foundation of the ideas of the American Enlightenment. The practical and rational nature of American society is clearly reflected in such phenomena as a “*philosophy of reason*.” It created a philosophy of rationalism and individualism, embodying a pragmatic perception of the world. Pragmatism is less a system of the universe than an attitude toward the universe. Geoffrey Gorer points out, “it (pragmatism) created the American attitude to the whole world as ...there is little inside America and practically nothing outside which would not be improved by being taken to pieces and remade to a more modern model. Material values completely dominate in the American mentality.” [Gorer, 1997]

The USA	Russia
Individualism, individual values, sense of individual justice predominate	Collectivism, collective values, sense of social justice predominate
Independence, belief in one’s own abilities, self-help concept	Strong dependence on social laws
Optimistic cultural core,	Pessimistic cultural core (suffering values, sense of self-sacrifice),
Future-oriented society	Past-oriented society
Culture of action, active attitude to life	Culture of inner fight and growth, contemplation of life
Mostly Protestant religious roots	Mostly Orthodox religion with firm pagan basis
Pragmatic perception of the world, active aspiration to material values and conveniences	Artistic, emotional perception of the world, passive aspiration to material values
Aspiration to individual material stability (American Dream concept)	Aspiration to individual peace of mind (Russian Idea concept)

**Table 2. Historical factors and their influence on American and Russian national character**

The USA	Russia
Personal control over the environment, people believe that every one can make a contribution	People do not believe in personal control over the environment, they believe that the government is responsible for it
Achievement is a must in American society, losers are less respected and winners are admired	Achievement is measured morally, people sympathize with losers
Materialism and practicality as values are connected with achievement and embodied in a realistic approach to the future	Materialism and practicality have negative connotations for many Russians. Even now people try not to display their wealth, because it is still considered opposite to spirituality
Active attitude to life is a great value	Russians are dreamers rather than doers
Informality is based on the idea of equality	Informality may characterize peer relations, formality is preferred in social relations

**Table 3. Some new traits of modern American and Russian societies**

American “philosophy of reason”	Russian “philosophy of heart”
Pragmatic perception of the world, inductive thinking	Artistic, emotional perception of the world, deductive thinking
Logical, rational thinking	Sensitive, irrational thinking
Main social values are freedom of will, intelligence	Main and eternal values are belief, hope and love
Mostly Protestant religious roots	Mostly Orthodox religion with firm pagan basis
Culture of action, active attitude to life	Culture of inner conflict and growth, contemplation of life
Results-oriented culture, love to experiment and make changes	Cultural conservatism and a spiritual-oriented culture
Aspiration to individual material stability	Aspiration to individual piece of mind and elementary material stability
Focus on applications of thinking, aspiration to concrete, qualitative data even in humanities research	Focus on abstract theory, preference for generalizations in humanities research

**Table 4. American “philosophy of reason” and Russian “philosophy of heart” and features of the national modes of thinking**

American philosophy placed reason at the top of human thought. Pragmatism received its initial, overt formulation by Charles S. Pierce. He was stressing the fact that statements or ideas had to be experimentally verifiable. Furthermore, the philosophy of pragmatism developed the theory of rational choice and analytical philosophy. All of them were the products of American rational thinking, a mechanical vision of the world, and a results-oriented society. Freedom of will, intelligence, and an active attitude to life became the crucial and vital values of the American national mentality.

Russia on the other hand had chosen the “*philosophy of heart*” and had created emotional, irrational thinking and an artistic perception of the world. That is why belief, hope and love are eternal values of the Russian national mentality. Its Byzantine heritage resulted in the fruitful works of Russian thinkers: F. Dostoevsky, I. Ilyin, P. Florensky, N. Berdiaev, and Vysheslavtsev. These men developed the idea of the heart being the center of human reason. In their understanding the heart is the locus of American philosophy placed reason at the top of human thought. Pragmatism received its initial, overt formulation by Charles S. Pierce. He was stressing the fact that statements or ideas had to be experimentally verifiable. Furthermore, the philosophy of pragmatism developed the theory of rational choice and analytical philosophy. All of them were the products of American rational thinking, a mechanical vision of the world, and a results-oriented society. Freedom of will, intelligence, and an active attitude to life became the crucial and vital values of the American national mentality.

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arbiter in the search for truth, but in Russian. philosophy the main arbiter is a sensitive and wise heart. “Mercy is the beginning of every case”, claimed a Russian manuscript of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Exactly in that understanding Christianity was grounded on the Russian soil. So it created an ignorance of law and social rules, ignorance of material values.

In Russian philosophy doubt or uncertainty is part of life, which doesn’t need rationality, systematization, and evidence. Fedor Dostoevsky believed that there was a special spiritual center in the human heart. This center manages our inner forces and directs our reason. He called this center the “Crystal Palace”. In this logic there is an explanation of Russian irrationality, an artistic perception of the world, a contemplative attitude to life, collectivism (sobornost) and the spirit of contradiction.

## 6 Conclusion

The geographical environment forms special biological codes, which affect human behavior, labor habits, modes of thinking and attitudes to the world. Historical necessity creates the social environment and develops spiritual practices in certain directions. A nation’s philosophical vision of the world is a result of the combination of geographical, historical, religious, cultural, and economic factors. All these factors in combination form the collective unconscious. The modern Russian philosopher Markov concludes, “ Some people believe that reason must rule human behavior, and they make rationality the arbiter of their life. Some people believe that only love, hope and belief which are located in the human heart are the basis of spirituality and the center of life. The real understanding of this world is in their golden medium.” [Markov, 1993]

A better understanding of how these two concepts work in American and Russian national cultures will enhance our ability to communicate effectively in practical and spiritual areas in other countries as well.

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