Preface and Acknowledgements

The language of Soviet science always fascinated me. Working on my first course papers after coming from what then was the Soviet Union to the United States for graduate study in 1992, I quickly discovered that the dominant styles of academic discourse in the two countries were vastly different. While American academics preferred precise, unambiguous wording, Russians often valued more intricate and vague formulations open to multiple interpretations. Pondering the cultural roots of this phenomenon, I was particularly intrigued by the story of the Soviet cybernetics movement, which made a bold attempt to introduce “precise language” into Soviet science. In this book, I explore intellectual, social, and political tensions arising from the clash of different styles of academic discourse. Ironically, this book itself is an amalgam of different styles: I tried to make the narrative both strict and imaginative, both direct and subtle, both impartial and emotional. The story I am about to tell has many dimensions, and I tried both to make it comprehensible and to preserve its complexity.

From Newspeak to Cyberspeak began its life as a doctoral dissertation in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After defending my first dissertation at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow in early 1992, I could hardly imagine that a few years later I would write another one. When I was in Russia, my research focused on the United States; ironically, when I moved to the United States, I shifted this focus to Soviet science and technology. This book is the result of my geographical, cultural, professional, and linguistic transition into a new world. At the same time, this book is about the world I left: the country which since disappeared and the circle of Soviet intelligentsia which since dissipated into networks of post-Soviet intellectuals.
I still love that old world, but my feelings, like my thoughts and dreams, are now expressed in English.

My life changed after a fateful meeting with Loren Graham in Moscow in January of 1991, when he came to the Institute for the History of Natural Science and Technology to meet with young Russian historians. His great curiosity, vast erudition, and originality of thought have become my primary source of intellectual challenge and personal delight. As his research assistant for many years afterward, I benefited both from his material support and from his friendly advice. He encouraged me to come to the United States and did everything he could to ease my cultural shock. As my dissertation advisor, he trusted me to work in my own style, at my own speed, and never expected less than my best efforts. Finally, Loren himself has become for me a model of creativity and integrity in scholarship and in life.

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