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Thugland

by [Gary Saul Morson](#)

On *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia*, by Lesley Chamberlain.

Lesley Chamberlain

Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia.

Overlook, 352 pages, \$35

Western critics display an endless fascination with “the Russian soul,” the “spirit of Russia,” or what Lesley Chamberlain, the author of *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia*, calls “Russia as Motherland and Otherland.” Whenever Western intellectuals seem disillusioned by our “bourgeois” values, by technological progress, or individualist pursuit of personal goals with no overarching moral imperative for society as a whole, they turn to Russia as an alternative. The horrors of the twentieth century, of course, make such an alternative more than a bit suspect. Communism was a disaster, and post-Communist Russia, as Gary Kasparov has observed, is now little more than Thugland, the best guide to which is the novels of Mario Puzo.

In fact, there is a great deal to learn from the Russian experience, both negative and positive. When *Time* magazine named Einstein as the “Man of the Century” just past, they clearly had it wrong. Surely the most influential person of the twentieth century was Lenin, the inventor of totalitarianism, a system that dominated some dozen-and-a-half countries and more than a third of the world’s population. It caused deaths running into nine figures. Without Lenin there would have been no Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, Castro, or Kim Il Sung. One question Russian history evidently raises is: what led to, and might again lead to, the ideological tyranny that made the twentieth century the bloodiest in world history?

So far as I know, only one person foresaw totalitarianism and predicted that, despite liberal progress in many places, much of the world would get a lot worse, and that even in liberal societies a romance with the new tyranny would arise among the elite. In *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky described the essential features of totalitarianism in detail and was regarded as mad for doing so. Surely this novelist’s epilepsy was getting the better of him! How could it be that a movement would claim “a hundred million heads” (as the radicals in *The Possessed* gleefully anticipate), or that, in the name of equality, talent, and intelligence would themselves be regarded as enemies? In Dostoevsky’s novel, Pyotr Stepanovich, the leader of the radicals, proclaims: “Cicero will have his tongue cut out, Copernicus will have his eyes put out, Shakespeare will be stoned... . Complete equality! ... Only the necessary is necessary.” I remember thinking of these lines when, during the Cultural Revolution, China’s Chopin-competition pianist had his hands broken and when, during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, literacy or even wearing eyeglasses was enough to warrant execution.

Dostoevsky guessed what would happen because he understood the mentality of the radical

intelligentsia, to which he had once belonged. His novels explore both the dangerous mentality of the radicals and the cowardly psychology of liberals who ought to know better but who fawn upon the very people who would destroy them. And here we come across the second of the great Russian negative contributions to the world: the intelligentsia (or the intelligentsia “in our sense,” as the ex-radical Peter Struve called it).

“Intelligentsia” is a word we get from Russia, where it was coined about 1860. The word was used in broader and narrower senses, and changed its meaning from generation to generation, but the core group to which it referred—the “true” intelligentsia that belonged to every definition—was emphatically not a group of “intellectuals,” if by that term one means people who think for themselves. On the contrary, a true *intelligent* (member of the intelligentsia) was expected not to question intelligentsial tenets. His job was not to think creatively or even logically but to engage in propaganda, not to be original and least of all skeptical but to save the people. Or rather, he was to save the idea of the people, the people as they would someday exist, not those currently alive, who might be sacrificed for the cause.

Given such a definition, no one would have called Tolstoy a member of the intelligentsia. After all, he used his title of Count, believed in God, was opposed to revolution, and expressed utter contempt for the *intelligents*, whom he regarded as ridiculous and pitiable. The critic Mikhail Gershenzon, an ex-intelligent, observed that “in Russia an almost infallible gauge of the strength of a Russian writer is the extent of his hatred for the intelligentsia,” a comment that is largely true if we think of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. There is an obvious reason why: one cannot produce great art as formulaic propaganda, the way the intelligentsia demanded. Anyone of real ability would have to “step on the throat of his song,” to use Mayakovsky’s phrase, if he was to please the intelligentsia.

A few salient characteristics defined the intelligentsia. To begin with, an *intelligent* was expected to identify first and foremost *as* an intelligent. Before the birth of the intelligentsia, and in societies without an intelligentsia, a well-educated person might regard himself first of all as a nobleman, a scientist, a Christian, or an Anglophile, but to be a Russian *intelligent* one had to renounce all other identities or, at least, regard them as secondary. For an intelligent, revolution, not his profession, was his true calling: thus the joke in *The Possessed* when one character asks whether it is wise to hire an engineer committed to universal destruction.

Intelligents were also expected to share a set of beliefs. To be sure, these beliefs varied from generation to generation and allowed for some diverse positions, but, until the twentieth century, they always included a commitment to materialism, atheism, socialism of some sort, and revolution. As the government had its censorship, the journals controlled by the radicals had their own “second censorship” to enforce orthodoxy. Chekhov deeply resented that pressure. “Under the banner of science, art, and oppressed free-thinking among us in Russia,” he objected, “such toads and crocodiles will rule in ways not known even at the time of the Inquisition in Spain,” a prediction that, of course, turned out to be a gross understatement.

Chekhov took as his theme a third characteristic of *intelligents* that disturbed him, their cultivation of a habit of living that reflected their beliefs. In imitation of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, the critic and utopian novelist who served as the intelligentsia’s patron saint, *intelligents* cultivated a particular kind of bad manners. Chernyshevsky, the son of a poor priest, came by his crudeness honestly, but we have amusing stories of noblemen taking lessons to learn his less than appealing behavior. In a famous letter to his brother, Chekhov, who had a nose for the fake and the indecent second only to Tolstoy’s, angrily recommended the opposite virtues. The genuinely cultured, he wrote,

respect the human personality, and are therefore forbearing, gentle, courteous, and compliant... . They are sympathetic not only to beggars and cats... . They respect the property of others and therefore pay their debts... . They are pure of heart and fear lying

like fire. They do not lie even in small matters... They don't say "I'm misunderstood."
... If they have talent, they respect it... They develop an aesthetic taste. They cannot bring themselves to fall asleep in their clothes ... or walk across a floor that has been spat on.

What you need is constant work.

Respect property? Pay one's debts? Develop an aesthetic sense? Chekhov was a petit-bourgeois intellectual, and I mean that as a high compliment. Above all, he valued truth-telling and work, two values that became key issues separating the intelligentsia from some of its critics.

In 1909, seven ex-*intelligents* produced a collection of essays attacking the intelligentsia and calling for educated Russians to become not *intelligents* but intellectuals. *Signposts: A Collection of Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia* became the greatest publishing scandal since *The Possessed*. Assuming that every educated Russian read it, one scholar has used its circulation figures to calculate the size of the educated classes. The contributors, who soon found themselves utterly isolated and condemned even by the liberals to whom they directed their appeal, adopted Chekhov as a hero.

They called first of all for respect for the truth. Nicholas Berdyaev argued acidly that Russian philosophy, if it can be called that, selects ideas not on the basis of evidence and reasonable argument, but on "the almost insane tendency" to claim as true whatever best suits a radical political purpose.

Love for egalitarian justice, for social good, for the people's welfare paralyzed love for the truth and almost destroyed any interest in truth... [The intelligentsia] succumbed to the temptation of the Grand Inquisitor [in *The Brothers Karamazov*], who demanded the renunciation of truth in the name of man's happiness. The intelligentsia's basic moral premise is summed up in the formula: let truth perish if its death will enable the people to live better and will make men happier; down with truth, if it stands in the way of the sacred cry, "down with autocracy."

From here to the Soviet rejection of scientific theories (like genetics) when they contradicted Communist ideology was no step at all. We see a similar tendency all around us today, when the serious discussion of ideas is hampered by a fear of saying something politically incorrect.

For two reasons, the *Signposts* contributors also approved of Chekhov's counter-intelligentsial devotion to work. First, as Semyon Frank pointed out, what is the point of redistribution of wealth when there is so little of it? "It is time we finally understood that our life is not simply unjust, but is primarily poor and squalid, and that the poverty-stricken cannot become rich if they devote all their attention to the equal distribution of their few pennies." It is a problem that socialists face everywhere: by destroying incentives for production, they offer the poor not increased well-being but less difference from others. Rather than satisfy their needs, they feed their envy.

Chamberlain misses the other reason to value work when she, like so many others, treats Marxism as the theory that most respects work. On the contrary: work is most meaningful and least "alienated" when people can invent careers for themselves, as those with a passion to start their own business or practice their own profession can do in our society. Against socialized medicine, one might argue not only that it delivers poor and rationed health care, but also that it hinders physicians from practicing their profession according to their own best standards and pursuing the goals that made them choose medicine in the first place. Socialism, as the *Signposts* contributors saw, is part and parcel of the same impulse that denies artistic creativity for the sake of propaganda. Instead of inventors, we have distributors.

Chamberlain's book offers what she calls "a philosophical history" of Russia. She is particularly

interested in what makes Russian thought distinctive. As Isaiah Berlin and others have pointed out, one distinction is that philosophy, in the sense of rigorous argument, respect for logical coherence, and caution against saying something is true simply because it would be nice if it were so, hardly exists in Russia. A twenty-first century analytic philosopher could read Chamberlain's history and not find a single real philosopher. The Russian tradition displays instead something looser and more imaginative: great thinkers like Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, and several profound theologians.

In Chamberlain's view, one reason for the absence of formal philosophy is the Russian assumption that philosophy must be guided by ethics, that there is something wrong with looking for the truth irrespective of where the search may lead. An ethical perspective must shape what one sees. It is not hard to see how such a perspective might seem attractive to many, but would also lead to a culture of lies. There is a reason Orwell's reflections on Russia led him to formulate the ideas of "doublethink" and "collective solipsism" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Chamberlain is torn between a recognition of the dangers of such a stance and a desire to defend its benefits.

To be a culture without reason is like being a mammal without a backbone. But what Russia set in reason's place ... was a moral quest, and this ethical gain has to be offset against the rational loss. Russians wanted to find a moral way of being, what philosophers would call a moral ontology, and this is what above all marks out Russia's "long tradition." The Soviet experiment was only part of that quest. The Communist idea was also, lest we forget, a moral idea.

But one cannot offset a rational loss with an ethical gain if in fact there is an ethical loss. The disrespect for truth, the willingness to tolerate or endorse lies so noted by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, contributed to the disasters of the Soviet Union, where one heresy was "bourgeois objectivism" (inconvenient truth-telling). Devotion to the truth is itself an ethical ideal, and any set of ethical values depends on a knowledge of how things really are if there is to be any hope of making them better.

The very term "Soviet experiment" is itself morally questionable, because it seems to apologize for all Communist brutalities as if Lenin were some sort of social scientist. But it is precisely on moral grounds that one does not "experiment" with the lives of millions of human beings.

Chamberlain's heart is in the right place. She wishes that the liberal aspects of the Russian tradition had flourished, and she gives welcome attention to those who respected the individual personality, denied the existence of ironclad historical laws, and embraced belief in religion or philosophical idealism. Some of these topics, which Chamberlain discusses in a generally fluent style, rarely appeared in histories of Russian thought written during the Cold War. She alternates helpfully between treating Russian thought as it appears to Russians (Russia as "motherland") and as it appears to outsiders ("otherland").

She has nevertheless made one unfortunate choice: to write a book that "is mainly a story of hope and belief, not a series of arguments." But to show the profundity of ideas one must explicate arguments. The result of outlining thinkers' hopes instead of their reasoning is to make all ideas equally shallow. Motives and aspirations substitute for an indication of what makes some ideas sound or original. It is therefore easy to overlook important distinctions and, for instance, treat Russia's great literary and linguistic thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin, as a postmodernist and poststructuralist (as if to do so were to pay a compliment).

Most unfortunate of all, this choice leads Chamberlain to confuse nihilism with skepticism and anarchism with freedom. She imagines that denial of all norms is somehow the answer to dogmatism and authoritarian repression. This book, she writes, "considers a world prey at one extreme to

appalling tampering with the real lives of diverse human beings and at the other, to anarchical rebellion to save real lives from just such tampering.”

But the alternative to absolute certainty is not absolute denial of all knowledge. These two opposing positions are just mirror images of each other. Nor is anarchism the alternative to totalitarianism. The Russian anarchist Bakunin famously wrote: “the will to destroy is also a creative will,” and he wound up justifying the demonic and totalitarian murderer Sergei Nechaev, the person on whom Dostoevsky’s Pyotr Stepanovich is modeled. Begin with absolute freedom, and end with absolute despotism.

The real alternative to totalitarianism is freedom under law. And the real alternative to both Russian extremes is the willingness to value, as Chekhov did, the middle realm of the ordinary, the practical, moderate, and the always less than perfect choices that each person faces. Dostoevsky once commented that a Russian *intelligent* is someone who can read Darwin and promptly decide to become a pickpocket—for the good of the people, of course. The great Russian writers saw Russian extremism as the danger, and recommended, above all ideology, the prosaic virtues of everyday life.

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