

## CURRENT BOOKS

# *The Great Other*

*RUSSIA UNDER WESTERN EYES*

By Martin Malia. Harvard Univ. Press. 514 pp. \$35

by *S. Frederick Starr*

If you read only one book on post-Soviet Russia, this might be it. Not because the author lays out the intricate developments since 1991; he scarcely mentions them, and even passes over Gorbachev's perestroika era in a couple of pages. The value of this study, rather, is at a more fundamental level. Through a series of striking historical essays, the author helps European and American readers understand how they think about Russia, and the ways in which that process shapes what they think of the country.

Martin Malia, a historian at the University of California, Berkeley, is as much at home in the history of European politics and philosophy as he is in Russian history, which he has been studying for four decades. He is one of the handful of Western students of Russia whom the events of recent years have stimulated and recharged intellectually rather than overwhelmed or defeated. Here, he begins with the indisputable truth that the Western image of Russia has shifted radically over the past three centuries. In an engaging series of chapters, Malia defines four archetypal Western notions of Russia's identity.

In the 18th century, Russia was seen as an integral part of Europe—its easternmost country, to be sure, and one that happened also to extend into Asia, but a thoroughly European “enlightened monarchy” nonetheless. Never mind that Russia was vigorously expanding its empire and extending the institution of serfdom to provide the money to pay the army. This was typical of the absolutist states that held sway in France, Prussia,

and Austria at the time.

Western philosophes loved the fact that Catherine II was introducing enlightened legislation at every turn. Inveterate enthusiasts such as Voltaire and Diderot can be excused their hyperbole, but even the sober English jurist William Blackstone and the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham held this optimistic view, as did Thomas Jefferson, who went so far as to install a bust of Tsar Alexander I in the entrance hall at Monticello.

During the first half of the 19th century, this benign image gave way to the view of Russia as “the great Other,” the westernmost country of despotic Asia, extending ominously into Europe. “Scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tartar,” one overexcited French visitor declared in 1838. Karl Marx long shared this view, and expressed it like a true cold warrior in writings that later communists preferred to suppress.

In the Western mind of the 1850s, a third Russia arose—one that participated fully in the great work of liberal reform and economic modernization sweeping Europe, a Russia that was gradually converging with the rest of Europe. This “modernizing Russia” had defects galore, but wasn't the government in St. Petersburg in the period 1856–1864 introducing reforms modeled after those introduced earlier in Prussia? And didn't Russia abolish serfdom two years before the United States abolished slavery, and with none of the bloodshed of the American Civil War?

Finally, in the decades before and after



*Catherine II (left) dividing Poland with Frederick II of Prussia*

1900, a fourth image emerged, this one shaped by Russia's great writers and philosophers. This was the Russia with "soul," a distinct and profound land whose leading thinkers understood better than other Europeans the claims of the irrational and the limits of reason. As the works of Dostoyevsky, Berdyaev, and others reached Western readers, backward Russia emerged as a kind of antidote to Europe's infatuation with liberalism, capitalism, science, and the cult of reason.

After presenting this schematic but thoroughly credible overview, Malia then drops a bomb: "Russia's behavior offers only a partial explanation for the uneven response to her presence in Europe since Peter; . . . the full explanation must be sought in forces acting within the body politic of the West. Russia has at certain times been demonized or divinized by Western opinion less because of her real role in Europe than because of the fears

and frustrations, or the hopes and aspirations, generated within European society by its own domestic problems."

Restated in the currently fashionable terminology, Malia is arguing that the West constructed its images of Russia, and that with the exception of the third image—of Russia in the late 19th century as a European country gradually converging with its western neighbors—all these constructions depend on gross overstatement and outright distortion of Russia's actual behavior. Catherine II's Russia was not as nice a place as her promoters in Paris and London claimed, and the Russia of Nicholas II was far less threatening to Europe than Russophobes claimed, more paper tiger than bear. The enthusiasm about Russian "soul" told

more about the mentality of the disciples of the nihilist philosopher Nietzsche, the irrationalist writer Stefan George, and the sociologist Ferdinand Toennies than it did about most Russians.

All well and good. But what about Lenin, Bolshevism, and the mass horrors of the Stalin era? Surely these attest to Russia's "otherness," if not its fundamentally despotic and "Asiatic" essence. Not so, argues Malia. Instead, he offers two striking lines of explanation for the Soviet era, both of them highly controversial.

First, he insists that Lenin's philosophy of dictatorship was thoroughly European, for it was the natural and inevitable expression of Marx's messianic and utopian dream. Russian radicalism, the author points out, was "in constant symbiosis with German and French radicalism." The very equation of freedom with equality, which Lenin used to rationalize his party dicta-

torship, had its roots in the European Enlightenment. Lenin's "achievement" was to take seriously the romantic and Promethean element in Marxism and push it to its logical conclusion. Stalin merely followed Lenin. Whatever the differences between Stalinism and Nazism, which Malia recounts in an interesting if overlong aside, they must both, for better or worse, be accepted as expressions of fundamentally European impulses.

Malia's second line of argument flows from his discussion of Stalinism and Nazism. Together, he suggests, they constitute the "great blind alley of our century," and the Soviet experiment as a whole is a "hiatus in Russian and world history." Of course, it is too early to judge whether this hopeful obiter dictum is correct, but it clears the way for Malia's very brief yet trenchant concluding discussion of Russia today.

**S**hocking though it may be in an era when academic historians like to think of themselves as dispassionate social scientists, Malia's book reveals him to be an unreconstructed and unapologetic moralist—a thorough researcher and elegant analyst, to be sure, but at bottom a moralist. He urges us to acknowledge that the "West" by which we choose to define ourselves is far broader, less rational, more contradictory, more filled with messianic ideology of its own, and, in the 20th century, more sinister than most of us would like to believe. And he challenges us to look into ourselves before peering into Russia. The very notion of "Russia versus the West" misstates the reality in a way that can only become self-fulfilling.

An unlikely comparison comes to mind, one that would probably make Malia wince. For all their many differences, Malia in *Russia under Western Eyes* and Edward Said in his study of Western constructs of the Arab world, *Orientalism*, have certain points in common. Both aim the flashlight at the perceiver rather than the perceived, and both argue that Europeans and Americans have failed to move beyond their own dreams and insecurities to comprehend the "Other" on its

own terms. Both are concerned not with the diversity and contradictions within that "Other" but rather with its supposed essence. Where they differ, of course, is that for Said the world of Arabs and of Islam truly is an "Other," while for Malia the world of Russia is simply a distinctive part of the European and Western self.

So how does all this bear on Russia today? Why should *Russia under Western Eyes* have any claim to our attention as a source of insights on the Russia of Yeltsin, Luzhkov, the oligarchs, and mafioso capitalism? First, because it cautions modesty. More often than not, the West has misread Russia—not because it is a "riddle wrapped in an enigma," but because we in the West have been too quick to impose our aspirations and anxieties on Europe's easternmost country as if it were a tabula rasa. Facile American claims to be fostering "democracy and free markets" are probably as naive as the various schemes that Bentham mailed off to St. Petersburg nearly two centuries ago. Similarly, confident assertions that "Russia has never known freedom" and "Russians only understand force" fly in the face of positive developments that preceded for three-quarters of a century before the tsarist state collapsed under the strain of World War I. The Russian reality today eludes both the West's utopian fantasies and its grim fatalism, just as it has for three centuries.

**B**eyond this, Malia draws a refreshingly positive conclusion from his overview of Russia's interaction with the rest of Europe since the era of Peter I. Leaving aside the "great blind alley" of communism, Russia's history since the early 18th century has been a process of drawing steadily closer to the rest of Europe. By the 19th century, its writers, scientists, and artists were making signal contributions to European culture as a whole, often leading the way. Nor should this be surprising, for Russia is, in Malia's words, "one national culture within European civilization." Henry Adams wrote of Russia's "receding ice cap" a century ago. After the long and tragic Soviet

hiatus, the icecap is again receding today, however slowly.

Here is Malia's epilogue to Russia's history in the 20th century: "Only eight years after Communism's demise it is clearly too early to assert that, this time, Russia will complete her real convergence with the West. But it is not too early to assert that, in

the normal course, she hardly has anywhere else to go." Assuming a clear-eyed and realistic understanding of what the West is, this may be about right.

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## *Freudian Mystique*

*DR. FREUD:  
A Life.*

By Paul Ferris. Counterpoint. 464 pp. \$30

*FREUD:  
Conflict and Culture.*

Edited by Michael S. Roth. Knopf. 272 pp. \$26

*OPEN MINDED:  
Working Out the Logic of the Soul.*

By Jonathan Lear. Harvard Univ. Press. 345 pp. \$35

by Howard L. Kaye

Sigmund Freud may have been the dominant intellectual figure of this century, but the last two decades have seen a serious erosion of our culture's regard for the man and his work. Once acknowledged as essential reading for an educated public and as an exemplary guide to living in a disenchanted world, Freud the therapist, the scientist, and the philosopher is increasingly met with either hostility or indifference. In light of the forceful criticisms that have been directed against Freud's character and the scientific value of his theories, how ought we now to assess the man, his work, and his cultural legacy?

In *Dr. Freud*, Paul Ferris approaches this question in the guise of a neutral bystander at the Freud Wars. Seeking neither to deify nor to vilify, Ferris, a novelist and biographer, purports to offer an even-handed, fair-minded account of Freud's life and the controversies surrounding his contributions. But this is merely a pose. Ferris's Freud is an ambitious, ruthless,

unscrupulous, sex-starved (and therefore sex-obsessed) Jew. Every charge, every piece of gossip surrounding Freud's life, however implausible and unfounded, is given credence here, because, as the author acknowledges, he finds such a man more interesting and "believable." When he finally runs out of rumors, Ferris the novelist simply invents new ones, such as his fantasy of sexual temptation between Freud and his early patient "Katharina": "Perhaps his celibate state sharpened Freud's curiosity in the girl of eighteen and her sexual history. Perhaps [Freud's wife] Martha caught a hint of this. . . . It is just possible that [Freud's friend Oscar] Rie . . . saw Freud and Katharina together and wondered. . . . Rie could have used the telephone installed at the inn to send a message [to Martha] . . . that she come at once and give Sigmund a nice surprise." So what if there is no evidence to support such a story? "The truth," Ferris insists, "is what you want it to be."

Beyond crediting Freud with encourag-