

THE IMAGE OF RUSSIAN IDENTITY:
on recent Western scholarship, D.S. Likhachov and the ‘cultural identity’ of
Russia

It is a curious fact – or at least I believe it to be so – that there is no true equivalent in Russian to ‘identity’ in the sense of, e.g., ‘national identity’. ‘Identichnost’, whose dictionary definition is quite different, seems recently to have been pressed into service to render this usage – but native Russian speakers who have been out of the country a few years do not feel happy with it: one such rather desperately proffered me the word ‘dusha’, soul, a term so loaded with mental and historical baggage that one could not dare use it. As it happens I do not know of any of DSL’s voluminous writings that refer to ‘national identity’, though what we might call ‘identity questions’ are implicit in much that he investigated. He prefers a different – if related – category, that of ‘culture’, or sometimes ‘national characteristics’.

My topic nonetheless is ‘The image of Russian identity’ as reflected in the work of some very recent [21st century] English-language historians; within that large topic, which I shall merely outline, I find a particular interest in the references to DSL – so this paper has two themes, though I trust they are linked. I should mention that I knew DSL personally, having met him several times in the 1960s–’70s and also corresponded with him; to commemorate his 70th birthday in 1976 I gave a paper to the British Slavonic Medieval Study Group [of which he was an honorary member] on ‘DSL as Cultural Historian’, which I sent to him, and to which he was kind enough to send a lengthy response. I published both documents only much later, in 2000, after his death. I do not claim any privileged insight into his achievement, but I can say that for research I was doing in the 1960s and ’70s I made it my business to familiarize myself with the main scholarly publications he had done up to that time. I notice that when DSL is quoted nowadays by Western historians it is usually his subsequent, publicistic or even journalistic, works to which they refer. I must add my opinion that these later, popular writings and interviews carry authority precisely because of the existence of his meticulous, scholarly, often ‘difficult’, wide-ranging earlier work, whose sharp focus on historical processes, on individual details of events or texts can justify his well-known later propensity for generalization.

Let us return to ‘national identity’. It is astonishing how, once they achieve a certain seniority, Western historians of Russia feel they need to tackle the problem of Russian identity. This was not always so: but academic interest in identity questions has recently become a growth area in the West, while the end of the Soviet Union has fuelled among Russians themselves a reassessment of their people and country, its place in the scheme of things [sometimes leading to bizarre nationalistic manifestations]. Western specialists often seem goaded by a sense that if only the key unifying factors could be isolated the character of a people and its 1200-year history – with all its dislocations and contradictions – could be explained or explained away. Of course the concerns are not new, even if the terminology has changed: identity-questions suffuse early Russian literature [specially the chronicles], recur in each new set of his-

torical circumstances, and were much discussed in the fin-de-siècle period that witnessed the popularization of that elusive entity, the ‘Russian soul’.

The four 21st-century English-language studies to which I refer [there may well be others that could have been mentioned] are: Orlando Figes’ lengthy so-called ‘cultural history of Russia’, ‘Natasha’s Dance’ [2002]; ‘National Identity in Russian Culture’ edited by Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis [2004]; the comparatively brief ‘Russia in Search of Itself’ [2004] by James Billington [author of the vast ‘Icon and the Axe’]; and ‘Russian Identities’ by Nicholas Riasanovsky [2005]. Relevant also – if slightly earlier – are Gertjan Dijkink’s ‘National Identity and Geopolitical Visions’ [1996], which devotes a chapter to Russia, and indeed my own book ‘The Russians’ [1997], though I thought of it as mapping a cultural history and did not, I think, use the term ‘identity’. All the others do so: and in so doing show up the remarkable variety of their approaches, indeed of their understanding of the term. Figes rather boldly claims to interpret Russian habits [usually 19th c. upper-class habits] to find the ‘unseen threads of a common Russian sensibility’: ‘using art and fiction, diaries and letters, memoirs and prescriptive literature, it seeks to apprehend the structures of the Russian national identity’. These are admirable ambitions, and some reviewers certainly welcomed the result enthusiastically, though in my view the ambitions are not achieved: the author simply bites off more than he can chew, makes continual factual mistakes and reaches no real conclusion. Despite his intentions he sticks largely to portraying aristocratic culture. Interestingly for the ‘identity’ theme, he often refers to the Russian ‘national myth’, without however managing to give this myth any coherent description.

The other three recent books have a sounder intellectual basis, though all have faults that are indicative of the difficulty of the topic of ‘national identity’ and the lack of any adequate methodology for approaching it. The volume edited by Franklin and Widdis is the most complex: starting with good, if brief, essays by the editors on ‘Russia in Time’ and ‘in Space’, it continues with a variety of other contributions most of which add little to the theme of ‘identity’; again it relates largely to ‘high culture’ and the arts. Billington by contrast is almost entirely concerned with ideas. He claims that ‘No nation ever poured more intellectual energy into answering the question of national identity than Russia’, and focuses his attention on the post-Soviet period, though putting it – very briefly – into historical context. He produces a rather nice term for what he is engaged in: ‘rossievedenie’. In contrast to all these authors, Nicholas Riasanovsky, famous for over 40 years for his excellent one-volume ‘History of Russia’, appears to see the ‘national identities’ of his title – which at times he rather strangely equates with nationalism – as largely conditioned by the sequence of events of political [to some extent spiritual] history, a story he has long experience of telling, and telling well. By way of a coda, I shall add that Dijkink sees identity in geographical or geopolitical terms, in the physical location of ‘self’ and ‘other’; while my own book attempted to describe cultural history in terms as inclusive as possible: i.e. both of ordinary people and the elite, with their interactions – culture both mental and material.

It is not my intention here to offer a critique of these authors’ very different general approaches, though I do think they should all have given more discussion to the

conceptual problems involved. Their books of course have somewhat different aims from each other, even if 'identity' is at their core. Rather I wish now to look in more detail at how each of the four volumes makes reference to, represents or even misrepresents the words and ideas of DSL. These references are quite indicative of the authors' ways of thinking.

In Franklin and Widdis, the only time DSL is quoted he is oddly described as a 'critic', but is used in fact to establish an excellent general point, highly relevant to national identity, concerning the link between the words 'freedom' and 'spaciousness' ['volya', 'prostor'] in the Russian conceptual world. Figes too makes just one quotation from DSL: 'From Asia we received extraordinarily little', and says reprovingly that that is all DSL has to say on the Mongol legacy in his 'Russian Culture'. Actually he said more on these things elsewhere, but Figes is using him to pursue a special agenda of his own: that the Russian 'national myth' claims the Mongols or Tatars left no permanent trace, and presumably that DSL is conniving at perpetuating such a myth. We could object that it is 200 years since this myth, if it existed, had any force; but more fundamentally this chapter of Figes' book, called 'Descendants of Genghiz Khan' [!], is deeply flawed, showing no sense of the processes of cultural transmission [that DSL so well understood], standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Napoleon in believing 'Basil the Blessed' to be 'mosque-like', uncertain even where 'Asia' is located [he includes the Komi and the Chuvash within it], but sure the Russians have a 'taboo' on mentioning it.

Riasanovsky is on an altogether more scholarly plane, but he too quotes DSL in a negative context. In his new book [but not in his 'History'] he worries a good deal over the question of 'double faith', 'dvoeverie'. He seems disappointed that DSL dismisses the concept rather summarily, accusing him of avoiding contrary evidence and arguing unconvincingly. But modern research has posthumously vindicated DSL: though the word itself is ancient, 'dvoeverie' never meant what romantically-minded 19th c. historians and their successors wanted it to mean, i.e. the coexistence of pagan and Christian belief-systems among the people. Much later in the volume, Riasanovsky interestingly points out that while DSL was [in his view] a nationalist of impeccable credentials, he asserted 'in the ongoing ideological battle' that there was no special Russian idea or historical mission.

Billington, who has more references to DSL than all three of the others put together, justly points out however that DSL was not a nationalist in any ordinary sense, considering nationalism an artificial and negative ideology. He paints an admiring portrait of him as a public figure in his later years, though to my mind it is a little sentimentalized: he oddly turns DSL and Joseph Brodsky into a pair of 'truth-telling holy fools'. In general, Western commentators on Russia use the term 'holy fool', 'yurodiviy', much too freely [Shostakovich, DSL's coeval, regularly gets called this] – risking its turning into a patronizing cliché. The one point at which Billington's positive attitude to DSL becomes mild criticism is rather significant. It concerns the 'Igor Tale' [12th c.], to which, of course, DSL devoted much scholarly attention [as well as assisting the poet N.A. Zabolotsky in his major translation of it]. It has become as much an orthodoxy in the USA to doubt the 'Tale's' authenticity as it was in the USSR to uphold it [Riasanovsky, significantly, drops the references to the 'Igor Tale']

that he had liberally used in his ‘History’]. Whether this is out of contrariness, or philistinism, or a sort of shadowy continuation of an intellectual Cold War, or simply the pervasive influence of the sceptical historian Edward Keenan, I cannot say. But DSL’s reputation has been quite severely and unjustly impugned across the Atlantic by the assumption that he deliberately suppressed the publication of sceptical arguments by Zimin in the 1960s. Actually this is the opposite of the truth – DSL called for a fair argument, with all views published – but the accusation resurfaced in the obituaries of DSL in the AAASS online newsletter, and here we may sense an echo of it.

The references to DSL in these volumes cannot, of course, be expected to add up to a coherent reflection of his achievement. They leave me once again with the feeling that had some of the authors known more of DSL’s work before his late flowering in the 1980s they would have had a better comprehension not only of the basic facts of Russian cultural history, but of the dynamics of cultural change, the possibilities and impossibilities of cultural transmission, the changing senses and significances of nationality.

National identity is a slippery, ungraspable topic. It overlaps with, but is not the same as, other better-analyzed concepts such as nationalism, group or personal psychology, patriotism, culture. Modern scholars have written as if it were largely a thing of the mind, of ‘invented communities’: I see it as much more down-to-earth, physical, however [a *Guardian* writer recently reported a Faroese man saying ‘when we eat whale-meat we do not eat to enjoy: we eat to remind us who we are’]. It seems to have been deliberately invented in the Enlightenment or early Romantic period; Franklin nicely quotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau: ‘...every people has, or must have, a character: if it lacks one, we must start by endowing it with one’. In a timely recent article, ‘Culture and Identity Politics’ [*British Academy Review* 9, 2006], the British scholar Adam Kuper has reminded us how tied up with ideology the concept has been, both at its origins and in its recent academic treatment. Marxists frown upon the very idea – hence, presumably, the lack of any equivalent term in the Soviet Union; for very different reasons existentialists too disapprove of it, on the principle that human beings are endlessly capable of reinventing themselves, if not obliged to do so. But identity-questions are as old as human society: we cannot argue they are ‘unreal’, given that the man or woman in the street is never hesitant to voice opinions on the subject. What would DSL have made of the whole problem? With his big-heartedness, his openness to cultural debate, I think he would have enjoyed it. He might well have resisted the terminology; I feel he would have enjoyed ‘russiology’, however.

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