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In Defense of Russian Studies

Edward Cole

It was thought that the collapse of the Soviet Union would make possible a "peace dividend," which would result from diverting to domestic projects those funds hitherto devoted to defense. In fact, this wishful thinking, so reminiscent of the years of the Armistice and the Versailles Treaty, has proved already to have been an illusion. It is therefore strange and alarming that, in the name of petty savings at most, universities, the great communities of knowledge and wisdom, have begun dismantling the fine Slavic and Russian programs built up at great cost and sacrifice in the years of the Cold War.

Even if Russian Studies programs were merely national defense institutions, eliminating them would be a foolish course of action, for as Bismarck sagely observed, "Russia is never as strong, nor as weak, as we suppose," and Russia will soon return to our list of major worries. But our Slavic programs are much more, and in fact, their chief value lies in the humanistic nature of their content. It would be particularly unfortunate for Grand Valley to dismantle its interdisciplinary Russian Studies major, one of the oldest undergraduate programs of its kind in the country, one which commands widening respect at other institutions, and one which has been a part of Grand Valley since its inception.¹

II.

From the very outset the new university set its sights extremely high and aspired to give its students the best education possible. Our first president, a scientist, saw to it that Russian and German were the first modern languages to be taught on the new campus, for he correctly saw that in those days Grand Valley students needed

¹ Russian Studies offered a major and minor for the first time in 1972, making it one of the first undergraduate Russian Studies Program in the country. It is widely known and admired by faculty at universities boasting major centers of Slavic Studies, such as Columbia, Harvard, Georgetown, Michigan, California, Illinois, Indiana, and Kansas. In 1990, the program sponsored a tour through the collapsing USSR, visiting Russia, Estonia, Ukraine, and Georgia. In 1992, we began offering a joint summer study tour with Indiana, featuring four weeks of intensive language and culture classes in St. Petersburg, followed by two weeks of culture classes on the road to cities, ancient and modern. We plan another such tour for the summer of 1997. Our graduates have gone on to work in the military, charitable organizations, the law, academics, security services, and the diplomatic corps, one such having served as an advisor to three U.S. presidents. The program remains in the catalog, although, at the time this essay was written, the future of the program was in doubt, and although we have about twenty majors at present and prospects look good for a healthy summer school session in St. Petersburg, we still do not feel that we enjoy the solid administrative commitment so vital to a small liberal arts program such as this one, and are looking forward to incorporating a new faculty member in Political Science with a Russian specialty into the program.

access to the scientific literature of those two great national cultures. Our second president, Arend D. Lubbers, a historian, had personal experience of Slavic life and culture, and he encouraged and supported the expansion of the Russian program into the areas of literature and history. In the fullness of time, the faculty designed courses in political science and geography, and a full-fledged interdisciplinary major emerged.

This was all done at minimal cost, with no bureaucratic structure, and the results have been excellent by academic standards: 20% of the Russian students have been immediately accepted into programs of post-baccalaureate education, and two thirds of these have gone specifically into Slavic and Russian graduate studies. The program would seem to have justified the hopes of those who launched it. But now, after three decades of successful performance, what is its future?

III.

To be sure, times have changed since President Zumberge saw the necessity of accessing the scientific knowledge of the Russians. The Soviet empire is no more, and with it went many of our national nightmares. But it would be very unwise of us to forget about Russia, a country that still spans ten time zones, contains enormous natural wealth, and which by no means is able to settle down and become a "normal country." Just for a moment consider the very dilemma which faced the last Soviet leaders and which ultimately destroyed their system.

One path open to the Russians was that of a frank recognition of the failure of Communism leading logically to adoption of the "capitalist" ways, which were proving successful all over the planet. But this way also promised decades of social and political upheaval, because everything in the country would have literally to be torn down and built up anew. No one who has not actually seen it can imagine what it means to have an entire industrial system constructed according to the technology and engineering principles of sixty years ago. And then there are the problems of forming new elites and new institutions and implanting a real work ethic in a cynical population raised on falsehood and massively addicted to strong drink. Furthermore, unlike China, Russia has no successful émigrés to send capital back to the homeland. Nevertheless, all the essential ingredients for a successful market economy are present, even though much remains to be done.

The challenges of capitalist reform in Russia are like those confronting a gardener who, with a few broken tools and a slim budget, is asked to reproduce in a sand pile the soils built up by millions of years on the forest floor. He will have to have better implements, substantial credit, and lots of help. So that is his problem, we say. But just ponder the consequences of his failure. Can they really be wished away or placed in some sort of diplomatic quarantine? The history of the twentieth century does not provide any reassuring answers.

Then there is the other path, the path of dictatorship and militant imperialism—under new names, of course. This way would provide a means for maintaining the outward order which is so attractive to the Russian mind. Perhaps the genie of

freedom can not be put back in the bottle, but that might well be attempted. An iron rule could be clamped on the country, ancient prejudices could provide a popular rationale for everything, and a military elite could selectively develop its sector of the economy. To be sure, the basic system would be that of a "third world" country, but Russia, after all, has repeatedly proved that a third-world economy can support a first-world military. The combined might of the Desert Storm Coalition has not broken the spirit of the regime in Baghdad, which always finds others to give it technological help. And enormous diplomatic possibilities abound. Impossible? Let us remember the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.

So we had better not get carried away by our own western fantasies of a happy, democratic Russia with a McDonald's in every village. That would be to expect too much, even of Russia. Russia is not America, and Russians are not Americans. Russia is going to provide us with plenty of challenges in the future, so it would well behoove us to stay ahead of the curve, to the extent possible. Without being unfair to the latest wave of Russian immigrants, it would not be a good idea to rely on them to any great extent, for most of these are not the noble political refugees and dissidents of the past, but people desperate to get out of that mess in Eurasia. Their motives are understandably materialistic in the extreme, and if the past is any guide, those who succeed are going to assimilate and forget Russia as fast as they can; just ask any acquaintance of yours whose Jewish or Polish grandparents arrived as refugees from the Russian Empire. Some others are going to prove to be one of our big national headaches: we already know that the Russian mafia is the most ruthless in America. To deal with all this, we need at least a sizable number of Americans who can use Russian and who understand Russian civilization.

IV.

It is Russian high culture which provides the humanistic and liberal arts content of every good Russian Studies program, including ours. Many of the mature scholars in the field were drawn to it by the greatness of Russian literature, while others began by studying an enemy power and, in the process, discovered a new world which only superficially resembles that of the West. Christopher Dawson's² working definition of a civilization as "a vast community of belief" is remarkably apt when applied to one founded by Greek Orthodox missionaries, who neglected to share the classical tradition with their new converts. Over the centuries, historical circumstances served to isolate the resultant culture and to accentuate its uniqueness.

When Tsar Peter the Great resolved to break out of this mold, Western forms were superficially copied onto the palimpsest, producing something which has deceived Westerners ever since. The biggest mistake anyone can make is to

² One of the leading historians and philosophers of history, and along with H.G. Wells, Arnold Toynbee, and William McNeill, one of the few historians to try to write a true world history. He is most remembered for a collection of seminal essays entitled *Dynamics of World History*. Dawson died in 1970 at the age of eighty.

assume that Russia and Russians will behave "like us." Our economic, sociological and political categories simply do not apply there. That is why, during the Soviet period, our social sciences, which have all but wiped out our humanities disciplines, failed so miserably to understand what was happening in the USSR. To discover the real Russia, one must utilize the windows provided by her civilization.

The windows of old Russia were her magnificent icons. Old Russian culture achieved much in history, architecture, and music; however, the way into the traditional Russian soul is provided by those images which were not art in the Western sense, but reflections of the transcendent. Reading and respecting icons requires a great amount of learning, including theological learning, not to speak of training. Only now, in the last few years, has this branch of knowledge been revived and assumed something of its former vitality. Fortunately, the corresponding window into the modern Russian mind is its literature.

V.

One of the biggest mistakes educated Westerners make is to assume that Russian literature is just like ours, only in another language, or that, because we, in a sense, have moved beyond the age of literature, so have they. In Russia, literature performs a much different function than in the Western lands. Something of this is caught in the following quotation from N. G. Chernyshevsky:³

In countries where intellectual and social life has attained a high level of development, there exists, if one may say so, a division of labor among the various branches of intellectual activity, of which we know only one—literature. For this reason, no matter how we rate our literature compared to foreign literatures, still in our intellectual movement it plays a much greater role than do French, German or English literatures in the intellectual movement of their countries, and there rests on it heavier responsibility than on any of the others. As things stand [Russian] literature absorbs virtually the entire intellectual life of the people, and for that reason it bears the duty of occupying itself with such interests which in other countries, so to say, have come under the special management of other kinds of intellectual activity. . . . In Russia, literature has retained a certain encyclopedic importance which has already been lost by the literatures of more enlightened peoples.

This is a very succinct description of the nature of literature in Russia in both this century and the last. History has not permitted Russia to achieve that enlightenment which Chernyshevsky so admired and envied, and there, in consequence, literature,

³ Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, 1828-89, was a radical journalist, political thinker, literary critic, novelist, revolutionary, and a martyr to the cause of socialism. Although he preached a thoroughgoing materialism, he nonetheless appreciated the value of Russian literature. His most famous work is the novel *What Is To Be Done?*, which became a handbook for revolutionaries; it was Lenin's favorite book.

the Word, has remained of supreme importance. The finest Russian literature yields insights into the nature of humanity which are, quite simply, second to none, a fact which is now universally recognized and needs no further comment. The finest wines grow from the poorest soils, and the greatest cathedrals rose on the most challenging sites. No one can even begin to understand modern Russia without an understanding of her literature. It is also true that, once entered into, this literature will lead one to unexpected discoveries about oneself and one's fellow human beings. Russian literature, quite simply, teaches the dignity of man, and for that reason alone it should be made available to all of our students.

VI.

Russian history, the terrible context within which Russian civilization has evolved, has not permitted the great Russian writers the moral liberties, shall we say, of our western *literati*. As one of our own professors noted, "western literary theory speaks about 'the death of the author,' but in Russia they quite literally kill the authors." One of the reasons that Russian Studies must constantly fight for existence is that Russian realities compel a seriousness about the humanities which has long been lost in the West. Perhaps the old Slavophiles were correct when they predicted that their civilization would save ours. Politically, theoretically, and pedagogically, it seems, Russian Studies must perforce be "incorrect." And for that reason, their treatment is a moral litmus-test for academic freedom and for the university.

And this brings us again to the students, because the day that we forget that the university exists for them is the day of doom for sure. We have a responsibility to offer them the world's real treasures, which are not vaults of gold or techniques of domination over one another, but rather, things of the mind and of the spirit. Real university life is an intellectual adventure open to those who can and will enter into it. A recent study shows that the students who are attracted to Russian Studies are, for the most part, real students, motivated by intellectual curiosity more than anything else. Although they cannot be many, they are remarkably tenacious, especially when they acquire a taste for what Russian civilization has to offer them through the medium of humane letters. Certainly Grand Valley Russian Studies students fit this description perfectly. Many of them also prepare for careers in business, science, communications, etc. At the end of their baccalaureate years most of them find that the skills they have had to perfect in order to master the difficult Russian language, to know the Russian land and its past, and to unlock the incomparable treasures of icons, and above all, of Russian literature, are the kinds of skills the world expects and needs from educated people. Whatever these students go on to do, they have been lifted up, and exalted, by one of the greatest intellectual adventures the university can offer them.