

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE ON THE WORLD IS NOTABLE

Steven Marks



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RJ *You are the author of the book "How Russia Shaped the Modern World". Usually, histories tend to be written about the influence of the West on the world. You have chosen the opposite approach in your research, namely focusing on Russia's influence on the West and the world. How did you arrive at this concept?*

Several different of my thought processes merged to produce the idea for this book. 1991 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of publisher Henry Luce's article "The American Century" in *Life* magazine. In that piece, Luce called for the United States as a global power to project its influence on the rest of the world. Retrospective assessments of Luce's article on this occasion led me to think about the origins of various trends in art, politics, literature, and economics, etc. **In each case, it**

struck me that Russian influences were as great, if not greater, than those emanating from the USA.

Furthermore, the book was also conceived in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Once Russia was no longer an existential threat for the USA, the number of students enrolling in Russian language courses plunged at most universities. Coverage of the events concerning this country in the mass media also rapidly declined. As someone who loves Russian art and literature, these trends offended me. Russia had been our ideological enemy, but, at the same time, it had also developed one of the most vibrantly creative cultures in history, and it seemed to me that it was intellectually shallow to stop paying attention to Russia simply because the Cold War had ended.

RJ *What is so unique about Russia that it has managed to "shape the modern world"?*

It boils down to a combination of internal and external factors. Why the world was so interested in Russia largely had to do with its industrialisation, urbanisation, and imperialism, all of which were processes that very rapidly disrupted traditional ways of life and created a yearning for alternative ways of development. Russia seemed resistant to the forces emanating from the West, as evidenced by its large communal peasantry and the oppositional sentiment among the intelligentsia. Of course, both then as now, people outside the country ignored the more complex realities (e.g. many Russians supported the processes that the intelligentsia critiqued; cities, industries, and the bourgeoisie were growing rapidly in the 19th century). Why Russian culture was so vibrant and original is a harder question to answer, but I think in part it stemmed from its fusion of European and native Russian forms (and this was all

falsely perceived outside of Russia as exotically Oriental, which appealed to those seeking alternatives to Western values). Also, the extremes and contradictions of Russian society—modern and anti-modern, rural and urban—called forth a rich variety of intellectual and artistic responses. Finally, the wealth of Russian elites, both those who were aristocratic and bourgeois, were also contributing factors by patronising the arts and fostering a cultured milieu.

RJ *In your opinion, how can modern Russia contribute to the modern world? Do you see any new impulses originating from Russia — in the spheres of art, literature, philosophy or maybe even religion?*

If we consider that almost all the major theoretical mathematicians in the US are from Russia, the potential is remarkable. The only living Russian writer I can think of who is truly well known in the world is Boris Akunin and, as wonderful as his detective novels are, he is not Chekhov. I am not sure whether serious Russian literature or philosophy of any kind, which is currently read by a declining percentage of the American population, will ever have the kind of influence it once did. I do not follow religion closely, but I have not noticed any movements in the sphere of Russian religious life that would speak to the world in the way that Tolstoyism once did.

Russia's influence in the world, even in the pre-Soviet period, had always been considered to be of universal significance. Unfortunately, today the situation has changed — Russian ideas are acquiring an increasingly nationalist spirit and they appeal exclusively to Russia, but by no means to the whole world. ■

Steven Marks was speaking with Dmitry Uzlaner