



**Martin Malia.** *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism.* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965. ix + 486 pp.

**Reviewed by** David Burrow

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## Martin Malia and the Birth of Russian Intellectual History

Martin Malia's tasks in his 1961 work are threefold: to understand why socialist thought emerged in Imperial Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, prior to the economic conditions emplotted by Marxism that were supposed to produce a socialist movement; to "explain the extraordinary impact of post-Kantian romantic idealism in Russia;" and to explain the contemporaneous emergence of "ideological nationalism" (p. vii). His method is to examine "the 'social psychology' of ideas. . .how ideological patterns emerge from, or express in transposed form, the social, political, and historical pressures of a given period" (p. vii). He places ideas in a psychological context, a critical act which provides much of the enduring power of this work as well as proving the source for much of the controversy it raised. Malia puts forward psychological assumptions as certainties. For example, he proposes as an essential element of human nature that "men are never 'influenced' by ideas they do not already hold in embryonic form" (p. 38). Thus, ideas are neither borrowed nor merely influential; ideas that are adopted always correspond with circumstances and deep inner needs. For Herzen and his like-minded contemporaries, the "men of the thirties and forties," their circumstances were life in the over-regulated, arbitrary, militarized state of Emperor Nicholas I. According to Malia, their reac-

tion was a feeling of profound alienation from that state and the need to resolve it.

Malia examines most extensively the effects on Herzen and his generation of Schiller, Schelling, Georges Sand, and Hegel. Schiller attracts the youthful Herzen with the compelling depiction of the possibility of self-fulfillment in an alienated environment. Aesthetics, friendship, love, and egotism--all emphasized by Schiller--remain basic tenets of the psychological makeup of the "men of the thirties." Schelling's idealism links an inflated self-consciousness to the organic structure of the universe. Idealism thus flourished because it addressed alienation. It is Herzen's reading of Hegel, however, that provides the impetus for resolution. Hegel is the "algebra of revolution," in Herzen's famous phrase, because the dialectic provides for an end to alienation. The dialectic "rendered less satisfactory all ideal 'reconciliations' [with a flawed reality], and turned the disabused dreamer to a hardheaded recognition of reality in all its imperfections" (p. 235). The dialectic linked the fate of the frustrated intellectual with the fate of Russia; to solve Russia's existence as a captive of autocracy was to resolve one's own dilemma.

Georges Sand provided a model for love partnerships, however flawed those relationships turned out to be in real life. But what form were unalienated relations to take on a national scale? Herzen found the answer in socialism, and the

presumed innate egalitarianism of the Russian peasant. Socialism in Malia's interpretation is a reaction against hierarchical old regimes. Its core tenet, according to Malia, is to completely negate capitalism, and thereby solve the enduring problem of human inequality. Logically, then, socialist thought emerged in Russia as a reaction against the most dogmatic of the old regimes. That it did so in an extreme, "maximalist," form is a tribute to the strength of the repressive circumstances within Russia. For Malia, the varied and particular programs of socialism are less important than its central impulse to reject the old and make the world anew.

While focusing on Herzen, Malia paints a psychological portrait of Herzen's entire generation of the intelligentsia. He is cognizant of the splits between them--prominently the dispute between the Slavophile and Westernizer camps--but he rightly emphasizes their essential unity. Both react to alienation: the Slavophiles' anti-modern ideology arises from the same debates and same bases as Herzen's socialist orientation. The Slavophiles, the "virulent nationalists," are the obverse side of the alienated coin.

Malia's argument set the mold for much of Russian intellectual history. He reified alienation as the salient characteristic of the early intelligentsia. While there is no consensus among Russian historians as to a sociological definition of intelligentsia, there is little doubt Malia has weighted that definition toward one of consciousness.[1] Malia's championing and discerning analysis of Herzen's autobiography *My Past and Thoughts* has made that work indispensable for understanding Herzen and contributed to its popularity in describing a generation. Malia contributed an indelible impression of the "gentry revolutionaries," providing an excellent depiction of their social world. While his description of the inherent psychological impulses of mankind has not been fully accepted, his psychological characterization of a generation has.

In hindsight, *Alexander Herzen* can be seen as the first salvo in Malia's long-term project of explaining the impossibility of utopian experiments bent on totally reshaping societies and human nature.[2] Malia posits that private property, the market, and profit are normative. The socialist project of negating these, and all other aspects of capitalism, was wrong-headed from the start. Thus, the undercurrent in *Alexander Herzen* is to understand the emergence of the Soviet Union, and socialist and communist states throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Intentionally or not, then, Malia has also contributed to the prevailing view of seeing the Russian intelligentsia in terms of a developmental continuity running from the Decembrist rebels of 1825 to the Bolsheviks.[3] While this view is understandable given the prerogatives of cold-war history, it has also helped block alternative views of the intelligentsia and their intellectual development.

*Alexander Herzen* is also significant because in it Malia affirms the importance of intellectual history. He posits that "social radicalism" in Germany and Russia emerged through "metaphysics rather than in direct examination of the ills of society" (p. 229). In other words, ideas were more powerful than the reality of serfdom and repression in inspiring radicals. Socialism as an idea, not a political program, developed in intellectual circles rather than in conditions of open politics. The intellectual intransigence that resulted from this separation from real-world politics was exacerbated by the intransigence of old regime opposition. German and Russian "social radicalism," then, in their maximalism and unfeasibility, were thus permanently marked by their origins in metaphysics. The many ramifications of that maximalism are still under investigation.[4]

Malia's more controversial proposition concerns the relevance of individual freedom for the generation of ideologies. While he makes it clear, quite convincingly, that Russian socialist thought developed as it did in conditions of repression

and alienation, a much larger question remains: how do ideas develop in different contexts? An important implication of Malia's work is that ideas cannot genuinely develop under unfree conditions. Imperial Russia (and more clearly its successor the Soviet Union) serves as a test case to demonstrate the folly and the cruelty of denying individual freedom and the conditions that anchor it, private property and the market. But the corollary can be seen only by implication. Malia has been reluctant to explore or explain the underpinnings of free market ideologies.[5] Seemingly, inequality and the disadvantages imposed by private property must simply be endured. Malia is not blind to these problems, but he believes all societies will develop towards the market and private property.[6] It is this belief that not only underpins *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, but all of Malia's work.

#### Notes

[1]. See the debate and conclusion that the Russian intelligentsia must be defined as a "subjective, normative category. . . a form of conscious identification or positive self-identity" in Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997, pp. 88-91.

[2]. See *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*. New York: the Free Press, 1994; *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999.

[3]. This continuity was encouraged and developed by the Bolsheviks themselves, and has proved longer lasting than almost all of their other creations.

[4]. For a fascinating discussion of subjectivity and identity in the Soviet context that takes very seriously the question of how Soviet ideology was absorbed and understood, see Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: the diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9" in *Jahrbcher fr Geschichte Os-*

*teuropas*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1996, pp. 344-373. Reprinted in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 77-116.

[5]. Yanni Kotsonis, "The Ideology of Martin Malia," in *The Russian Review*, vol. 58, no. 1, January 1999, pp. 124-130 and Malia's "A Reply to Yanni Kotsonis" in *The Russian Review*, vol. 58, no. 4, October 1999, pp. 676-7.

[6]. *Russia Under Western Eyes*, p. 419.

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