

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE BROOKINGS CLASSIC EDITION

These stories just go to show the degree of blindness of the Russians about what actually goes on in the outside world.

Isaiah Berlin<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, when this volume was first published, a comparison of the political culture of the Russian Federation with that of the Soviet Union seemed to reveal at least as much continuity as change. Another decade of autocratic rule by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has not provided obvious grounds to adjust this perception significantly.

Part of the continuing usefulness of Isaiah Berlin's beguiling analysis of the mindsets of rulers and ruled under Soviet Communism is that it enables us better to understand the politics of today in the territory of that previous empire. Berlin always insisted, rightly, that careful empathetic understanding should precede and inform critical judgement, even if it does not replace it; and the essays in this volume make a substantial contribution to understanding the post-Soviet Russian regime. Western liberals are apt to find the attitudes and behaviour of former Communists opaque in a way that can distort their responses in potentially dangerous ways; and the same is perhaps even truer in reverse. Berlin analyses the nature

<sup>1</sup> p. 175 below.

and origins of the Soviet mentality—for example, its tendency to filter experience through deeply distorting ideological preconceptions, and its markedly opportunistic relationship to objective truth (of which Putin’s regime is such a striking exemplar)—and what he tells us has lost none of its power to illuminate the contemporary Russian political landscape.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore entirely appropriate that this collection should find a place in the Brookings Classic series, and be given a new lease of life thereby, reinforced by an updated version of Strobe Talbott’s invaluable foreword.

When I was invited to contribute these additional remarks to the new edition, I asked myself whether there was anything that could fittingly be added to the volume, by analogy with the new appendices in a series of eleven revised editions of other books by Berlin published by Princeton University Press in 2013 and 2014. There was already a list at the end of the book of other published writings by the author that bore upon the themes addressed within it, but none of these seemed irresistible candidates for reissue in this company. However, there also existed in Berlin’s papers two unpublished items which it seemed worth resurrecting for this occasion. Both, like ‘Why the Soviet Union Chooses to Insulate Itself’,<sup>3</sup> show him giving talks on the USSR not long after his 1945 visit there, reminding us that he was widely seen as an expert in this area, for all that this is a status that he would have disowned.

The first is a comparatively neglected transcript of an extempore talk delivered by Berlin at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, in 1952,

<sup>2</sup> In this sense *The Soviet Mind* is a sequel to his account in *Russian Thinkers* (see pp. 245–6) of the nineteenth-century Russian ideas out of which, in part, Soviet Communism grew. (Berlin often made explicit comparisons between the two periods, not least in these two collections. Notes taken during two lecture series at Harvard provide further examples. Speaking on ‘The Development of Russian Revolutionary Ideas’ in 1949 he asks: ‘What would nineteenth-century Russian thinkers say of the USSR today?’ And in a 1951 course on ‘The Development of Social and Political Ideas in Russia 1825–1920’ he observes: ‘The four Soviet saints are Belinsky, Herzen, Chernyshevsky and Plekhanov.’)

<sup>3</sup> pp. 85–91 below.

and of the succeeding discussion. The letter of invitation<sup>4</sup> provides the relevant context:

Bryn Mawr College  
Russian Department

December 6, 1951

Dear Mr Berlin,

Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges are this year conducting a Russian study group of qualified students and faculty members, as part of the Three-College Russian program under a grant from the Carnegie Corporation.<sup>5</sup> The group meets about twice a month, to hear a visiting specialist on some aspect of Russian life in a talk of thirty to forty minutes, followed by discussion. The general theme of the series is 'Continuity and Change in Russian Life', with an attempt to see how the heritage from the Russian past has influenced present attitudes and institutions, what elements of stability or rapid change may be noted in the Soviet Union, and what prospects may exist for the emergence of attitude[s] and policies that would permit co-operation with the West.

We should very much like to hear you in this group, and hope that you will accept this invitation to speak and lead the subsequent discussion, on Wednesday, February 20. [ . . . ]

It may be helpful to note the speakers and general subjects preceding this meeting in February. Mr George Kennan opened the series, speaking from the point of view [of] his article in *Current Affairs* of last April.<sup>6</sup> The other visiting specialists

<sup>4</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Berlin 129, fols. 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> The Carnegie Corporation of New York was funding a five-year programme for the expansion of Russian studies at the three colleges: *Bryn Mawr College Calendar: Report of the President to the Board of Directors, Issue for the Year of 1947–1948* (December 1948), p. 5; online in *Annual Reports of the President of Bryn Mawr College*, book 8 (1945–51), <[http://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmc\\_annualreports/8](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmc_annualreports/8)>, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> George Kennan, 'America and the Russian Future', *Foreign Affairs* 29 no. 3 (April 1951), pp. 351–70.

before February include Mr [Vladimir] Gsovsky on Soviet law, Professor [Merle] Fainsod on the Communist Party, and Mr Alex Inkeles for a sociologist's analysis.<sup>7</sup> All the students in the study group have had some previous training in Russian History and Soviet Institutions, so that the subject can be presented in a more advanced style than is usually possible in a lecture to a general audience.

In this framework, would you be interested in talking on some topic connected with the development of revolutionary ideas and theory in tsarist Russia and the USSR?<sup>8</sup> Or would you suggest some subject of special interest to you which would find a place in our general plan?

Sincerely yours,

Bettina Linn

For the Three-College Russia Committee

A subsequent letter<sup>9</sup> records Berlin's acceptance of the invitation and date, and records his title as 'The Influence of Marxist versus Non-Marxist Ideas on Soviet Policy'.

Unfortunately the transcript of Berlin's session, made from a lost recording, is seriously garbled at many points, and sometimes frankly incomprehensible. In addition, Berlin prefaced his remarks with the following (albeit somewhat unconvincing) apology: 'I am afraid I haven't an idea of what I am going to talk about as regards this subject, "Marxist versus Non-Marxist Ideas in Soviet Policy", but I will try to put a few ideas down before you in the order in which they come to my mind.' However, the challenge of creating an intelligible

<sup>7</sup> The one speaker in the series not mentioned here is Alexander Gerschenkron, who addressed the session before Berlin's.

<sup>8</sup> This suggested topic harks back to Berlin's 1949 Harvard lectures (p. xlvii above, note 2), notes on which find an echo in the present talk: 'Marxism is the only cement holding the USSR together. Through iron discipline in beliefs, Marxism is stressed at the expense of nationalism.'

<sup>9</sup> Letter of 29 December from Bettina Linn to Berlin, loc. cit. (p. xlvii above, note 4), fol. 62.

text of the talk seduced me, with the result to be found in the appendix below.<sup>10</sup>

It has to be admitted that this text remains noticeably rough-hewn, which for some would constitute a case against inclusion. It also overlaps to some extent with the more carefully composed essays in the original book. But it also contains information<sup>11</sup> and observations not to be found elsewhere, and so long as it is taken for what it is, uninvested with extraneous pretensions, it provides an intriguing additional window into Berlin's understanding of the USSR in 1952, and into the manner in which he spoke of it at the time, informally, to experts in the field. For these reasons it seemed to me worth rescuing.

A summary of the talk was published in the weekly *Haverford News*:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> My conjectural editorial restorations are often uncertain: sometimes I have had to alter the sense radically, or even reverse it; even so, the sequence of thought remains at times less than pellucid. But I doubt whether Berlin's meaning is anywhere seriously traduced. I have had considerable experience of turning nonsensical transcriptions of Berlin's lectures by uncomprehending typists into intelligible prose, though I admit that in the present instance much greater creativity has been required, and I am far from claiming editorial infallibility. For this reason I have posted the raw transcript as part of <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/haverford.pdf>, and suggestions from readers for improving the edited version will be gratefully received. I should like to thank Terrell Carver, Roger Hausheer, Geoffrey Hosking, Derek Offord, Tatiana Pozdnyakova and Josephine von Zitzewitz for invaluable help in reconstructing Berlin's meaning; Christa Oldham at Haverford and Evan McGonagill at Bryn Mawr for ready archival assistance; and Betty Colquhoun (1928–2016) and Esther Johnson for skilful transcription.

<sup>11</sup> The passage about Soviet suppression of Tatar nationalism is uncannily reminiscent of Russia's attitude today to non-Russian cultures within the territory of the former Soviet empire.

<sup>12</sup> 26 February 1952, p. 4. Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections (Haverford, PA). The last paragraph seems to be based, perhaps too loosely, on the discussion period, not included here. The article provides a striking illustration of the inaccuracy of the original transcript, which, where the article reports Berlin as referring to 'an irreducible Marxist deposit which the years haven't rubbed out', reads 'an irreducible Marxist "product" there that has been more or less rubbed out'.

MARXIST IDEOLOGY STILL GUIDES REDS

*Berlin denies 'opportunism' is core of Soviet policy*

'An irreducible Marxist deposit which the years haven't rubbed out' is still the basis for Soviet action in the world today, Professor<sup>13</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, told the Haverford–Bryn Mawr–Swathmore Russian studies group at Haverford last Wednesday evening.

**Berlin differs**

In distinct contradiction to the opinions of five other experts on the Soviet Union who met with the Russian seminar group—most of whom have tended to regard Soviet conduct as essentially opportunistic—Dr Berlin stressed a fundamental, sincere belief in Marxist ideology as the dominant factor in Soviet policy.

In strict accord with the inevitable Marxist dialectic—the destruction of the bourgeois capitalist class by a revolutionary proletariat—the USSR regards the current East–West tensions as a manifestation of that struggle.

**Soviets see war**

To the Soviets, operating on their hypothesis of inevitability, future armed conflict between themselves and the Western world is unavoidable. Indeed, the refusal of the Soviet Union to take advantage of the 'good will' which the West extends towards her after the last war, according to Berlin, is evidence of her determination to prepare for an inevitable conflict. To have disarmed in 1945 would have been [a] misinterpretation of history for the Soviets.

The Soviet Union, according to Berlin, may be compared to a 'psychiatrist' quite aware of 'reality', in this case the inevitability of history, who is handling a patient, the non-Communist world, completely unaware of this 'reality' and

<sup>13</sup> Berlin was at this time neither Professor nor Dr, *pace* the *Haverford News*.

struggling against it. Soviet claims of ‘defense’ against ‘capital aggression’ are at least sincerely motivated and are analogous to a psychiatrist’s precautions against a ‘homicidal maniac’, according to Berlin.

### Hopes for peace

Acts of the West can only confirm the basic absolute Soviet hypothesis. If the Western nations advocate disarmament they are attempting to ‘delude’ the Soviet Union; if they take action, e.g. Korea, they confirm the ‘homicidal’ interpretation.

The hopes of the Western nations for avoiding war with the Soviet Union lie only in the possibility of continued factual refutation of the false Soviet hypothesis, Berlin concluded. The Soviets’ insisting on operating on set hypotheses rather than the factual picture will eventually bring about the weakening of continued authoritarian control in that State and conceivably a more open, sincere relationship with the other nations of the world, he added.

A ‘Report to the Carnegie Corporation on the Three-College Russian Program’ dated 15 April 1955, and covering the years 1949–55, has this to say about the 1951–2 seminar series in which Berlin took part:

These seminars were limited in attendance; faculty and students who already had some background in the subject matter were invited from the three colleges. An outside expert was invited to conduct each seminar. The series was given considerable momentum with the attraction of George Kennan as the first guest. Attendance averaged about 35 per meeting, making possible genuine discussion, especially when the guest expert was skilled at discussion leadership. There was a considerable nucleus of steady attendance and Professor Hunter<sup>14</sup> presided at all but one of the sessions.

<sup>14</sup> Holland Hunter (1921–2014), a specialist in transport policy in the Soviet Union, taught economics at Haverford College.

The level of discussion at these seminars was consistently high. The academic effects were enduring.<sup>15</sup>

The second unpublished piece is a summary by an unknown hand of a lecture on Communism given by Berlin to an unknown audience on an unknown date, though the late 1940s seem likely on various grounds. The summary is very short, and again overlaps with the main contents of this volume, but again not completely. Of particular interest is his definition of liberty as ‘the capacity of doing what you want to do’, by contrast with his later emphasis on ‘negative liberty’ as merely the absence of restraint by other persons.<sup>16</sup> The image of Stalin as a schoolmaster who flogs his pupils is also striking. At any rate, this item seemed to belong in the same company as the 1952 lecture, and joins it below. The language should not be taken as Berlin’s own, except, probably, where there are quotation marks; and I have drawn attention in footnotes to a couple of places where his meaning seems unclear.<sup>17</sup>

I conclude by clarifying the origin of the notion of an ‘intelligentsia’. On p. 136 Berlin says that the Russian intelligentsia ‘contributed the very term to the languages of Europe’. This is not strictly accurate, since the term was first used (and defined) by the Polish philosopher Karol Liebelt in 1844.<sup>18</sup> But the Russians certainly adopted the concept and transformed it, making the phenomenon of the intelligentsia, in Berlin’s words, ‘the largest single Russian contribution to social change in the world’.<sup>19</sup> In this sense Berlin is right to describe the word on p. 158 as ‘a Russian word and a Russian phenomenon’.

H.H.

June 2016

<sup>15</sup> Russian Department Records. College Archives, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library.

<sup>16</sup> See Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 188–9. As Cherniss points out (pp. 82–3), both pieces in the appendix represent a development of Berlin’s analysis in ‘Why the Soviet Union Chooses to Insulate Itself’.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Terrell Carver for help with this second piece.

<sup>18</sup> *On the Love of the Fatherland* (1844), in his *Samowładztwo rozumu i objawy filozofii słowiańskiej: część krytyczna* (Warsaw, 1967), pp. 61–2.

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia’ (1955), in *Russian Thinkers* (see pp. 245–6 below), 2nd ed., p. 133.