

Remembering Academician Dmitrii Sergeevich Likhachev

BY DANIEL C. WAUGH

The death of Academician Likhachev on September 30 at age 92 deprives us of one of the last of the traditional intelligentsia and one of the most eloquent defenders of old Russian cultural values. He experienced the worst consequences of the Revolution when he barely survived incarceration in the Gulag on the Solovki Islands in the White Sea. Even after he was rehabilitated and had launched a distinguished academic career, his open profession and practice of Orthodox Christianity played a role in delaying the receipt of honors he deserved. With the end of the Soviet era, he became something of an icon in his own right as a kind of cultural conscience of the nation. Unlike Solzhenitsyn, who may be seen as an Old Testament prophet in a country not wanting to listen to his message, Dmitrii Sergeevich was widely hailed as one of the most respected Russians in an era when, it seems, few merited or in any event received respect. His career can be followed in other accounts (for example, the obituary in the *New York Times* on October 1, 1999). My comments here are primarily a personal perspective, since I was fortunate to have had some personal interaction with Dmitrii Sergeevich.

My first meeting with Dmitrii Sergeevich was in 1968, when as a rather green exchange graduate student in Leningrad I was invited to attend the regular meetings of the Division of Early Russian Literature which he headed in the Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian Literature. For me, those meetings were an essential part of my education regarding study of old Russian culture and, perhaps more importantly, the often contentious scholarly traditions involved in that study. It seemed that Dmitrii Sergeevich possessed a unique understanding of those traditions, intertwined as they were with his own long career. He could, for example, evoke the tragedy of circumstances in which personal relations among scholars prevented their effective communication on the eve of the siege of Leningrad, which he lived through but they would not survive. Where his

colleagues in the late 1960s might become strident over differences that probably were much deeper than purely academic principle, he would attempt to mediate. Presentations which might have seemed arcane somehow became important in the clarity of Dmitrii Sergeevich's lucid summaries that closed each session.

His passion in defending what he valued as the "texts" defining old Russian culture might at times lead him to positions with which I could not necessarily agree. He played a key role in orchestrating what was really a vicious and unequal battle to condemn the views of the otherwise much respected historian Alexander Zimin, whose sin was to question the authenticity of the famous medieval epic, "Igor' Tale." A few years later Andrei Tarkovskii's film "Andrei Rublev" provoked controversy. I happened one day to see a *Stengazeta* (bulletin board "newspaper") in the Institute of Russian Literature, in which various of its scholars expressed their opinions about the film. Dmitrii Sergeevich was unhappy about the film, at least in part because he could not accept its depiction of so much filth (*griaz'*—I think this was to be construed both literally and morally) in the Russia of Rublev, who was one of his cultural heroes. And a few years after that, he was uncompromising and brusque in his dismissal of Edward Keenan's heretical views about the authenticity of the "Correspondence" between Tsar Ivan IV and Prince Andrei Kurbskii. Although Dmitrii Sergeevich wrote the "Bible" of textual criticism for old Russian literature (in the second edition of which, I noted with some pride, he added material with reference to a small contribution I had made), it seemed nonetheless that he was willing to violate his own rules where it served his purpose of strengthening Ivan's credentials as an author.

On the eve of my departure from Leningrad after a second year there in 1972, I visited Dmitrii Sergeevich at his dacha, near which his remains have been laid to rest under the birches and pines. He was genuinely grieved by the fact that

the poet Joseph Brodsky, who would later receive the Nobel Prize, had been just exiled from the Soviet Union. And he used the occasion to lament more generally the way in which Old Russian culture had suffered under the Soviet regime. I was very much touched by his willingness to share with me some of his deepest concerns. I felt privileged that while in Leningrad as a mere graduate student, he had accepted me as a colleague among scholars whose accomplishments to this day are beyond my grasp. When later I published my first book, he agreed to write a foreword to it that was overly generous in its praise.

In 1975, when I was on a brief visit to Leningrad, I met him in his office at the Institute of Russian Literature. This was the first time, I believe, that I had noticed on his desk a plaque indicating that it had previously been the desk of the greatest student of Russian chronicles, A. A. Shakhmatov. In a very real way Dmitrii Sergeevich laid claim to Shakhmatov's legacy, since he himself was a prominent student of Russian chronicles. This served as yet one more reminder of the depth of the scholarly and personal traditions which we must understand if we are to appreciate the human context for the often complex academic life of the Soviet era. During that visit, even though I had no "official status," merely by picking up the phone Dmitrii Sergeevich was able to gain unprecedented access for me to the inner sanctum of one of the local archives. He had faith that my project would contribute in important ways to our knowledge of old Russian manuscript collections; in fact his influence may well account for its subsequent publication by the Academy of Sciences Library at a time when foreigners were rarely so published in the Soviet Union.

One might wonder whether Dmitrii Sergeevich's intense nationalism was always compatible with the traditions of scholarship, which he fought to maintain

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in often difficult circumstances. Yet he left a remarkable legacy both in the cultural breadth of many of his own writings and in the stimulation and support of others whose work might otherwise have languished without strong advocacy. I found him to be a gracious and generous host who had the ability to inspire aspiring young scholars and, as we now know, a much broader public. His death is a loss to all of us.

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