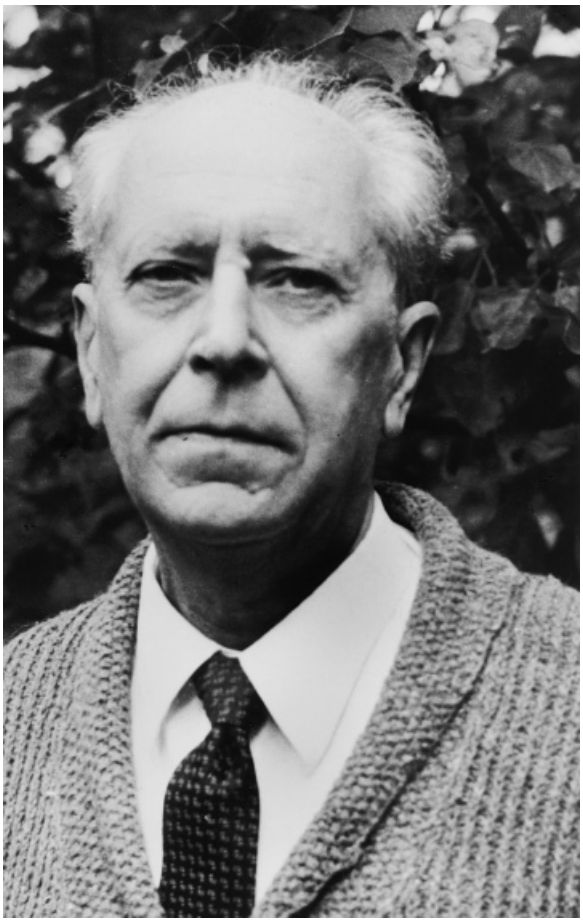
DMITRI SERGEYEVICH LIKHACHEV



COURTESY OF VERA TOLZ, GRANDDAUGHTER OF DMITRI LIKHACHEV

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DMITRI LIKHACHEV's life was almost coterminous with the twentieth century, but he remained, throughout the convulsions his country experienced, an example of the best of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia. His character survived the degradation of Stalin's slave-labor camps, the privations of blockaded Leningrad during World War II, and decades of assaults on his intellectual and moral integrity by minions of a totalitarian system. But he did more than survive with his honor intact; as the Soviet Union became more open with Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, he took the lead in teaching his countrymen about their own nearly forgotten past, campaigned for the preservation of traditional Russian culture, and warned the public of the dangers of national chauvinism and ethnic hatred.

Likhachev was born in St. Petersburg of a well-to-do family. His father was an electrical engineer who worked in state enterprises such as the post and telegraph office and the printing office. His parents had the means to frequent the theater, buy books, summer in comfortable dachas near the coast of the Gulf of Finland, and send their two boys to the best schools. The family took no part on either side during the Bolshevik Revolution and the civil war that followed, and Dmitri was admitted to Leningrad University in the early 1920s, despite his lack of the "proletarian" legacy that was officially favored at that time. At the university he studied not only Old Russian literature, which became a dominant passion for most of his professional life, but also modern Russian and foreign languages and literatures. The two diploma theses he wrote, one on Shakespeare in Russia, the other on stories about a seventeenth-century saint, illustrate the breadth of the interests that continued throughout his lifetime.

While at the university he participated in a student club that in any rational society would be considered politically innocuous. However, the group's lighthearted parodies served as pretexts for arrest. In February 1928, Likhachev was taken in custody, charged with possession of anti-Soviet literature, and kept in a prison cell in Moscow for six months of interrogation. He was then sentenced, and sent to the camp on the Solovetski Islands in the White Sea, from which he was transferred for more than four years of slave labor on the notorious Baltic-White Sea Canal. In his memoirs, he recounted in matter-of-fact terms the brutality of the guards and wardens and the unspeakable degradation to which the prisoners were subjected. Even so, most of his attention was directed at the people he met and the natural beauty of the Russian Far North. In fact, he considered his experience in prison and labor camp the most important part of his education. He explained in the memoirs he published in 1995: "When you consider, our jailers did

some strange things. Having arrested us for meeting at the most once a week to spend a few hours in discussion of philosophical, artistic and religious questions that aroused our interest, first of all they put us all together in a prison cell, and then in camps and swelled our numbers from others in our city . . . while in the camps we were mixed with a wide and generous range of such people from Moscow, Rostov, the Caucasus, the Crimea and Siberia." Subsequently, he paid much more attention in his writings to the remarkable people he met at "Solovki" than to his own sufferings.

When he was released from the labor camp, Dmitri Likhachev returned to Leningrad and found employment as a proofreader at the Academy of Sciences publishing house. While there he wrote a dissertation on literature in medieval Novgorod and then began research work on Old Russian literature at the Institute of Russian Literature, housed in an early nineteenth-century building on Vasilievsky Island called "Pushkin House." This was to be his professional home for the next fifty years. He stayed in Leningrad throughout the five hundred days of the German blockade, lost several members of his family to starvation, and dutifully took his turn on watch in the tower of Pushkin House to spot and fight any fires caused by the almost daily bombing.

Likhachev reached his stride as a scholar following World War II, and rapidly became one of the most prominent and prolific humanists in the Soviet Academy of Sciences. An annotated bibliography of his works published several years before his death contained more than three hundred pages of listings. He compiled and translated into modern Russian a critical edition of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, and prepared for publication many nearly forgotten Old Russian texts. He wrote some of the most penetrating studies of the culture of Kievan Rus and of early Muscovy. His interests were not limited to written texts and folklore, but ranged over the entire gamut of medieval Russian society and culture. He was equally at home and equally perceptive when he commented on art and architecture, folk holidays, government, law, religion, and—a special interest of his—gardens. He maintained his personal and intellectual integrity even under the most severe political pressure. When he refused to sign a petition critical of Andrei Sakharov in 1975, he was set upon and beaten by thugs, obviously on orders of the secret police.

As the ideological strictures on Russian scholarship weakened and fell away in the late 1980s, Likhachev began to play a prominent role in his country's politics, not as a partisan activist, but as a public philosopher. His chairmanship of the Cultural Fund supported by Raisa Gorbacheva and his membership in the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies elected in 1989 gave him platforms to campaign for the pres-

ervation of national treasures and for the restoration of the humane Russian traditions that had been buried under seven decades of Communist rule. In his maiden speech to the Soviet Union's first legislature not totally controlled by the Communist Party, he sounded an alarm:

> I will speak only about the condition of culture in our country. . . . I have studied the election platforms of our deputies. I have been struck that the word "culture" does not even appear in the overwhelming majority. . . .
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> The fact is, if society is without culture, it is also devoid of morality. Social and economic laws cannot function without elementary morality, instructions are not carried out, and contemporary science becomes impossible because, for example, it is hard to make sure experiments are reported accurately. . . .
>
> The low level of culture in our country degrades our social life, hampers the work of our government, and exacerbates ethnic relations. A lack of culture is one of the causes of ethnic hatred. . . .

After the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991, Likhachev spoke and wrote often about the meaning of Russia and the proper basis for Russian patriotism. He argued against the "Eurasianists" who claimed that Russian culture was essentially non-European, with a society more "collectivist" than those of Western Europe, and a tradition more conducive to autocratic than democratic rule. He argued vigorously that the Russian tradition was entirely European, formed on the North-South axis connecting Scandinavia with Constantinople. It had strong democratic elements, such as the popular assemblies and councils that advised the princes. Serfdom came late in central and southern Russia, and hardly at all in the north; individuality was never totally lost to collectivism.

With all of his pride in, and admiration for, the Russian tradition, Likhachev was emphatic in his rejection of all forms of chauvinism and claims of cultural superiority. He recognized the bad in Russian history, even as he endorsed those features he considered good. He was an intellectual opponent of the Slavophiles, and while he recognized the common roots and mutual influences among Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian cultures, he defended the integrity and independent values of each. For him, true patriotism could not be based on feelings of exclusiveness or superiority over other cultures.

Writing in 1991, S. Frederick Starr summarized Likhachev's contribution this way:

> Who, then, is Dmitri Sergeevich Likhachev? Philologist, scholar, historian, social philosopher, art critic, preservationist, cultural ecologist, activist, and patriot—these are among the many titles which fit

> him perfectly. Above all, however, Likhachev is a moralist. Speaking in universal terms, he pleads for his fellow Russians to affirm what decent people have always affirmed and to protect what decent people have always protected. "There are no little lies and big lies," he writes, since truth is indivisible and absolute. At a time of national renewal, he appeals to his fellow Russians to be honest with themselves and each other, both in words and deeds.[1]

Likhachev continued his spirited defense of the best in Russian culture to the end of his life. When he died, just short of ninety-three, in September 1999, Russian intellectuals spoke of the passing of an era and of the irretrievable loss to their nation, still in search of its soul. For the sake of his country, and of the humanity in all of us, let us hope and pray that he was not, as so many fear, the last of his kind.

Elected 1992

JACK F. MATLOCK, JR.
Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union

[1] Foreword to Dmitri S. Likhachev, *Reflections on Russia*, Nicolai N. Petro, editor (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), xxi.