Chapter 2

Is Russia different?

The political differences • Social institutions: Serfdom and collectivism • The burden of geography • The cult of unique destiny

In his notes for a planned history of Russia, Nikolai Gogol, the first of Russia’s great nineteenth-century novelists, jotted down this thought: "The character of the Russians is incomparably more subtle and more cunning than that of the inhabitants of all of Europe." In a poem rebuking those who had gone into self-imposed exile after the 1917 Revolution, Anna Akhmatova, one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, took exactly the opposite view, yet still concluded that Russians are unique:

There is no one on earth . . .
more proud and more simple than us.  

Ironically, this poem, which chides the exiles who fled the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, echoes remarks of Russia’s most eminent exile, the political scientist Alexander Herzen, who lived in Switzerland and London for much of the mid-nineteenth century. Compared with Europeans, he wrote, "We are simpler; we are healthier; we are incapable of any sickbed fussiness over food, we are no lawyers, no bourgeois."

Every country, of course, is unique in its own way. Each likes to
claim that some combination of history, language, culture, ways of behaving, geography, and so on distinguishes it from all others. And every country likes to compare itself with others; it is part of knowing yourself to know how you differ from other people.

Even so, Russia is unusual. Russia is famous for the wealth of its proverbs. Most such folk sayings express universal guides to behavior ("A stitch in time saves nine"); "Don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar," and so on). Some Russian proverbs are like that, of course ("Don't spit in the well, later you'll want to drink from it"), but an unusually large number are about how the country differs from others: "Foreign countries are like a stepmother. They don't stroke the fur the right way." "The German gets there with his brain, the Russian with his eyes." "Here it is not like in Poland; here we have bigger people."

Children in Russia are brought up on Turgenev's encomium to the Russian language: "... you alone are my rod and staff, O great, mighty, true, and free Russian tongue. ... It is inconceivable that such a language should not belong to a great people." What is known in all Western countries as World War II—an international conflict—is known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War—i.e., a national conflict.

Literature is the clearest barometer of this tendency toward self-definition. An unusually large number of Russia's best-known writers have taken as their subject Russia itself, at critical moments in its history: the struggle against Napoleon (Tolstoy's War and Peace); conflicts over the emancipation of the serfs (Turgenev's A Huntman's Sketches and Fathers and Sons); terrorism against the tsars (Dostoevsky's The Devils); the reign of Peter the Great (Pushkin's The Bronze Horseman); and the October Revolution (most of Solzhenitsyn's works from August 1914 to The Gulag Archipelago). Russian writers comparatively rarely identify what makes Russia special by comparing Russia with Britain or France or Germany. Their point of comparison is with Europe as a whole. As a result, Russia seems to emerge from books as a fundamentally different civilization rather than as a member of the European family of nations.

That is also what philosophers and politicians thought. "We do not belong to any of the great families of mankind, neither to the East nor to the West," wrote Pyotr Chaadayev, a contemporary of Turgenev and the most passionate and influential early advocate of the idea that Russia needed to learn from the West. In 1992, the then Speaker of parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov, wrote: "While [Peter the Great] imposed elements of European culture in Russia ... the spiritual and cultural fabric of the people remained untouched. As a result, we have Russia, which is neither Europe nor Asia but a very special, very peculiar part of the world."

The history of this peculiar part of the world is littered with the shattered hopes of reform. Russia has alternated between frenzied bursts of change and long periods of tyrannical sloth, rather like a Russian folk character, Ivan, who sleeps on top of a stove for seven years, gets up, gets drunk, briefly terrorizes the village with an axe, and then reverts to another seven-year nap. Over the past three centuries, Russia has seen five great waves of liberalization. On each occasion, the impetus to reform lasted no more than a decade before being crushed by renewed autocracy.

Russia's great attempts at modernization began with Peter the Great, the first Westernizing tsar, who made Russia a European power and who during his reign (1682–1725) transformed Russia in a way that few rulers have ever transformed this country. He created the first national army, fought his way to a warm-water port with Western Europe, and moved the capital from inward-looking Moscow to his new port with the ostentatiously un-Russian name of Saint Petersburg. He allowed foreigners to travel to Russia for the first time relatively freely; imported Dutch, Italian, and French technicians and teachers; founded Russia's Academy of Sciences; and cut off the beards of courtiers to make them look more Western. Russia's modern history begins with Peter. Herzen wrote that "Russia has once had a fundamental revolution: it was made by one man—Peter I." Yet Peter's "opening to the West" was slammed shut again by the welter of dynastic squabbling after his death in 1725.

Catherine the Great said that she had ransacked Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws, the sourcebook of enlightened government in the eighteenth century. But having attempted to introduce the Enlightenment into Russia during the first half of her long reign (1762–96), she reverted to repression in the second half after the crushing Pugachev's peasant uprising in 1774 (Catherine compared the leaders of the French Revolution with "Marquis Pugachev").
Nearly ninety years of repression were to pass before the third effort at modernization, that of Alexander II, the Liberator, who freed the serfs in 1861 and began various legal reforms that brought Russian law closer to that of Western Europe (he introduced trial by jury, for instance). But Alexander was assassinated in 1881, an event that began a period of conservative autocracy that lasted until the fourth wave began under Pyotr Stolypin, who tried to save the dying Romanov dynasty with a series of land reforms in 1906–11. Lenin said that had Stolypin succeeded (he was assassinated in 1911), the Bolshevik Revolution would not have succeeded. As it was, World War I and the 1917 Revolution were periods of chaos, reaction, and repression, interrupted briefly by Lenin’s own more limited attempt at liberalization, the New Economic Policy of 1921–24, which attempted to put Russia back on its feet after the Civil War of 1917–21 by encouraging some private entrepreneurship. Stalin put a stop to that.

The sixth wave began to swell under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s and was unrolled by Boris Yeltsin in January 1991, continuing through 1992. Prices were freed, elections held. Those reforms, for the first time, came from below. Russians were freed to do as they would, not told to do different things by an enlightened tsar. After five years, the reforms are hanging in the balance. On the one hand, more than 60 percent of the Russian economy is now in private hands, the press is uninhibited, and there is full freedom of assembly. On the other, the chaos and crime that have been associated with the reforms seem to be preparing the way for a repetition of the historical pattern. Parliament was shelled in October 1993. Far right wing nationalists won nearly 20 percent of the vote at the general election of 1993.

The damage wrought by these cycles, and Russia’s need to break free from them, were expressed in these lines from 1991:

*All my life I’ve rushed between hell and heaven, today the devil, and tomorrow God...*

*Stop.*

The man who wrote those lines was Ilya Krichevsky. On the night of August 22, he lost his life for Russia’s failure: He was one of three people killed during the failed communist putsch against Gorbachev. His death, his words, and the cycles of history that lie behind them alike serve as warnings of how difficult Russia’s task is. Will the sixth wave of reform fail like all the others?

The short response is that “history is bunk,” that the historical record provides no real guide to present behavior and that historically formed cultural characteristics do not necessarily stand in the way of a country’s ability to change. If culture is so important, how can they explain a culture’s success in one era and failure in another?

In the nineteenth century, a British traveler had this to say about Japan: “Wealthy we do not think it can ever be. The love of indolence and pleasure of the people themselves forbid it.” In the 1940s, few people thought that South Korea could ever be an economic success because of its history of political upheaval and the Koreans’ reputation for being happy-go-lucky. At that time, the Asian country with the brightest economic future seemed to be India, because of its competent administration, its democracy, its large middle and merchant class, and its English-speaking elite. In practice, for the past fifty years India has lagged far behind South Korea. China, on the other hand, seemed unpromising because of its communist rule and its long history of isolationism.

Consider Confucianism and modernization. For years, many scholars, notably Max Weber, argued that the Confucian tradition inhibited economic success: Obedience to parental authority discouraged competition and innovation, while the Confucian elevation of the mandarinate was assumed to suppress entrepreneurialism. By the 1980s the treatment of Confucianism had changed entirely. Now, what seemed important was Confucian emphasis on hard work and on cooperation toward a single end, and its encouragement of savings and investment. The moral is not that people have been unsuccessful at explaining countries’ behavior in terms of cultural characteristics; it is that cultures are so complicated they cannot be used accurately to predict behavior at all.

*The role of destruction.* Other countries have been able to change because of defeat in war or internal collapse. In Germany and Japan, military defeat discredited the fascist regimes and provided popular support for a new group of politicians determined to begin again. In China, the self-inflicted chaos and destruction of the Cultural Revolu-
tion provided a similar impetus for Deng Xiaoping and his economic reformers. In Poland, as throughout Eastern and Central Europe, the sweeping away of the old communist government provided the opportunity for a new generation to steer the country back toward its earlier alignment with the West.

Some people have argued that Russia has not suffered a sufficiently traumatic defeat to repeat the experience of other countries. Former communists are still in charge, and there has been relatively little bloodshed associated with the transfer of power. That is a one-sided view. While it is true that there has been no wholesale change at the top, in most respects Russia has experienced enormous and destructive change throughout the twentieth century.

It has fought two world wars and a civil war, losing more of its citizens in World War II than any other country. (Most recent estimates put the total loss of life near 20 million.) In 1917 and 1991 it experienced revolutions in its system of government and, on both occasions, lost its empire. Stalin's industrialization has transformed Russia from a largely rural, peasant economy to an industrial one, with the demographic attributes of an advanced Western country: 99 percent of the population can read and write (a rate higher than Britain's); 96 percent go to secondary schools. With such changes, the old patterns of thought die out. Russia is no longer the overwhelmingly peasant country it was when Stalin began his iron rule.

In the 1990s, at the level of government Russia, like East and Central European countries, saw old communists swept from office and a new generation brought in, albeit briefly, in 1991–93. It had experienced the psychological shock of "losing" lands that had long been part of the Russian empire (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan). That was a big challenge to Russia's sense of itself as a nation. Without those countries, many people were faced with the question, What does it mean to be Russian? To many Russians, and not only those on the communist left and nationalist right, the collapse of the Soviet empire was akin to defeat in war. Considering that Russia is facing these problems while simultaneously trying to build up a democracy and a free market, it is more likely that, in the 1990s, the country was experiencing too much strain, not too little.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Russia was a clean slate in 1991; no country ever is. But it is hardly excessive to say that almost anything was then possible in Russia. And this, too, was historical. " Interruption," wrote Nikolai Berdyaev, the greatest of Russian philosophers between the first and second world wars, "is a characteristic of Russian history ... the last thing it is, is organic. ... It is quite possible that there will be yet another new Russia." 11

And what might a new Russia be like? That is a question that cultural characteristics can help answer. Though Japan's traditions did not prevent its modernizing, they have helped make it a very different country from other industrial economies. Clearly, countries have followed many different routes to modernity, often from a starting point as unpromising as Russia's. What, then, are the distinctive features of Russia's history and culture, and how have they changed?

There are really four main features. First, there are political ones. Russia has an unusually long tradition of autocracy. "His Majesty is an absolute monarch who is not obliged to answer for his actions to anyone in the world." Peter's military regulation of 1710 proclaimed. 12 That was still in force in 1900. The Communist party then took over this function, proclaiming itself to be "the leading and guiding force of Soviet society." It was still doing so until 1990. And it was not just the government that was undemocratic, so was the opposition: Russian opponents to autocracy tended to be revolutionaries and terrorists rather than reformers and democrats. It seems as if Russia somehow has a predilection for anarchy, which has to be suppressed.

Next come the social features. Russia is a land of serfs, of collectivism, not individualism, of a weak and introspective church, and of a curious philosophical-cum-intellectual system of beliefs called Slavophilism. It has been bypassed by many of the formative influences of the West (it had no Renaissance, for example) and as a result has no tradition of the rule of law, no private property. That, it seems, makes Russia bad at business.

Third, there are geographical features. The country is unimaginably huge; its land is also poor (agriculturally) and sparsely populated. Long cut off from the mainstream of Western and Central Europe, Russia seems to have as much in common with Asia as with Europe. In short, it is not "really European."

And fourth, putting all these together, are the cultural features.
Russia has been in the grip of a "cult of unique destiny," which justifies the most dreadful misery and failure on the grounds that Russia is somehow above the petty materialism of other nations and has been lifted up above them by suffering.

The political differences

In 1973, when Soviet communism was at its height and the West was struggling with the impact of the first oil crisis, a Hungarian historian, Tibor Szamuely, compared the eyewitness accounts of Russia by two famous Frenchmen. The first was the Marquis de Custine, who wrote The Empire of the Tsar in 1839; the second was Andre Gide, whose Back from the USSR appeared in 1939.

Like his contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville, Custine was the son of one of the great noble families of France and the product of the aristocratic world of post-Napoleonic Europe. His mother had been confidante to one great statesman, Chateaubriand; he himself had been aide-de-camp to another, Talleyrand. "I went to Russia," Custine admitted, "to seek for arguments against representative government." His father and grandfather had both been guillotined.

Gide, on the other hand, went, as he put it, to glorify "more than a chosen land, an example, a guide... where Utopia was in the process of becoming reality." The son of a Protestant merchant, Gide was a product of the years of intellectual ferment on either side of World War I: Champion of the poor, and strong supporter of equal rights for women, the great poet and novelist was the foremost literary champion of communism in Western Europe.

Both men were treated as honored guests in Russia. Custine had a private audience with Tsar Nicholas I. Stalin allowed Gide to stand with the Soviet leaders above Lenin's tomb surveying the May Day parade, the first foreigner to have that privilege.

Yet both men returned to France in bitter—and identical—states of disillusionment. "The more I see of Russia," wrote Custine, "the more I approve the conduct of the Emperor in forbidding his subjects to travel, and in rendering access to his own country difficult to foreigners. The political system of Russia could not survive twenty years' free communication with the rest of Europe." One hundred years later, Gide concluded that "The Soviet citizen has been persuaded that everything abroad and in every department is far less prosperous than in the USSR.... For them outside the USSR, night begins."15

The salient features of Russian politics were the dominance of autocracy and the instruments of tyranny. "The empire is the emperor," Custine concluded. "His health, his movements, the project with which he is ostensibly occupied, such are the only subjects worthy of the thoughts of a Russian who thinks at all." "Stalin's effigy is met with everywhere," Gide reported. "His name is on every tongue; his praises are invariably sung in every speech."16

"In the USSR," Gide continued, "everybody knows beforehand that on any and every subject there can only be one opinion. Every morning Pravda teaches them just what they should know and think and believe... So that every time you talk to one Russian you feel as if you were talking to them all." "I marvel," Custine remarked a century before, "at the prestige which the Russian government exercises over minds. It obtains silence not only from its own subjects—that were little—but it makes itself respected even at a distance by strangers escaped from its iron discipline." Or, as Gide put it, "an attempt is being made to obtain an approval that is not mere resignation, but a sincere, an enthusiastic approbation. What is most astounding is that this attempt is successful."17

The one result was apparent to the two men. "I doubt whether in any other country in the world, even in Hitler's Germany, can thought be less free, more bowed down, more fearful, more vassalized," Gide wrote. "Fear," wrote Custine, "produces everywhere the same result—peace without tranquillity... In that immense empire, the people, if not tranquil, are mute; death hovers over all their heads." "There is nothing like a stay in the USSR," Gide said, "to help us appreciate the inappreciable liberty of thought we still enjoy in France." One hundred years earlier, the same thought had forced itself upon Custine: "If ever your sons should be discontented with France," he concluded in a savage peroration, "try my recipe; tell them to go to Russia. It is a useful journey for every foreigner: whoever has well examined that country will be content to live anywhere else."18

Yet things can change, and change fast. When Custine compared Russia unfavorably with a France animated by a spirit of liberty, he
was doing so a mere forty years after his native country had been plunged into the terror and confusion of the French Revolution, and little more than a century after the doctrine of absolute monarchy propounded by Louis XIV ("L'Etat, c'est moi"). In the twentieth century, Germany, Spain, Austria, and Italy have all adopted and abandoned authoritarian forms of government, many of them as extreme as Russia's. All those countries have overcome their historical disadvantages and thrived. Russia has no copyright on autocracy: Most European states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had monarchies that also claimed not to be responsible to anyone except God. Absolutism in many European countries seemed then just as deep-rooted as it does in Russia.

All the features of Russian autocracy identified by Custine and Gide were changing in the early 1990s. A modern Gide or a Custine in Russia would find a Russia that has, for the first time in its modern history, an elected leader. In 1991, when he won 57.3 percent of votes cast in Russia's first-ever presidential election, Boris Yeltsin broke a chain that had been continuous in modern Russian history. Russia also has an elected parliament, though this was not the first (there had been one before 1917). But the modern Duma (the lower house), unlike the pre-revolutionary body after which it was named, actually has some power (to pass the budget, for example), which has been defined in a constitution itself voted upon by the population; before 1917, all power had been vested in the tsar, who delegated some authority to the Duma. And, far from being an over-mighty tyranny in which the state can do as it likes, it is so weak that it has only just been able to prevent the country from drifting into anarchy. When the head of government speaks, it almost seems as if no one is listening, not even his ministers. In the first four months of 1994, the Prime Minister complained, he had issued 296 instructions to his ministers; only 156 had been implemented.

As with tyranny, so with foreign influence, censorship, uniformity, and fear. Custine and Gide had found Russia closed to foreigners. The Soviet authorities had stressed Russia's special role in history and the Soviet superiority in everything; children were taught, for example, that a Russian discovered the laws of thermodynamics and invented television. But in 1991, for the first time since 1917, Russia had a government of young people who had worked or studied abroad and who knew foreign languages. The leader of the group, Yegor Gaidar, argued that Western investors should come to Russia because Russians were more friendly toward foreigners than most East European countries. One of his colleagues, Pyotr Aven, then the minister for foreign trade, who had previously worked in Vienna, argued that there was nothing unique about Russia from the standpoint of economic reform and that Russia needed to learn the lessons of other former communist countries, such as Poland.

Instead of censorship, there was a free, often biased, sometimes irresponsible, and always partisan press. Newspapers ranged in policy from strong support of the government to calling openly for its overthrow. Journalists became polarized: One camp wholeheartedly supported democratic reforms; the other regarded Yeltsin's government as an occupation regime bent on destroying the country. Because the press was politicized, the government continued to play a role in its activities as ally and (in the case of television and radio) part owner. But this was not the same as censorship.

The uniformity of having everyone think alike had been transformed into the mixture of chaos and anomy that occurs when no one knows what to think. The first years after independence were a period of extraordinary and often disturbing extremes in behavior. Stalinist nostalgics, tsarists, sharp-suited gangsters, Old Believers (schismatics who had broken away from the Orthodox church in the seventeenth century), entrepreneurial grandmothers, raucous casino owners, Cossack commanders, televangelists, public relations officers, private tutors, faith healers—all suddenly erupted into the new Russia. The wildness and extremism reflected an underlying uncertainty. From being a country in which nothing was allowed because everything was certain, Russia had become a country in which nothing was certain and everything was allowed.

Lastly, boundless fear of one thing—the state—had disappeared, to be replaced by anxieties and emotions about many things: crime, making ends meet, children's education. In February 1992 Russia's last ten political prisoners were released from a prison in Perm, a city formerly closed even to ordinary Russians. After nearly a decade of upheaval, turmoil, and miracles, in which everything amiss—from the
nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl to the ending of the Communist party's rule—was deemed "a catastrophe" and "a turning point," this reduction of the scale of Russia's problems itself marked a change. Russia was no longer a country of everyday miracles and disasters but of everyday, though manifold, problems. In its difficulties, as in other matters, it was becoming a more normal, workaday country.

Nowhere was that change clearer than in Russians' attitude toward their ruler. Fear of the ruler had begun to erode, then disappear, under Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1991 it was replaced by its opposite, adulation: Millions surged into the public squares of central Moscow to yell support for Boris Yeltsin. Lonelyhearted advertisements appeared in the classified sections of newspapers: "Lady seeks male companion. Only those who share the politics of Boris Yeltsin need apply." By mid-1994, both had given way to the condition of politics in the West in the mid-1990s: open contempt for the government. That became the period of dark disgust at Boris Yeltsin. Opinion polls had appeared in Russia for the first time in the late 1980s, and within a few years, faith in Yeltsin had dropped from 60 percent to under 10 percent. As Mr. Yeltsin himself put it in his memoirs: "The number one man in the government no longer possesses the magic of mystical, untouchable other-worldliness. And oh, how they lambaste me! I'm an Aquarius, which explains this, that and the other thing. I don't know how to work with people. I can only feel alive in a crisis. There is one reason for people's vexation. They can now imagine anyone in my place. The seemingly endless gulf between society and the government in Russia has now been bridged."  

The revolutionary tradition. Autocratic government had not been the only aspect of the Russian political character that acted against the development of an open, stable society. So had Russia's penchant for revolution. It was not just the traditions of government that were undemocratic; so were the traditions of opposition.

Though their names are little known in the west, the Russian revolutionaries—Alexander Herzen, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Pyotr Tkachev, Mikhail Bakunin, Pyotr Kropotkin, Grigory Plekhanov, and others—constituted a flourishing political school with its own theories and controversies. Pyotr Tkachev, for example, engaged in a long dispute with Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels, over the usefulness of revolutionary action in Russia. Tkachev argued that only revolution could effect change in preindustrial Russia, while Engels thought that Russia was incapable of revolution because it lacked an industrial proletariat.

Two observers from a different part of Europe from Custine and Gide were as forcibly struck by Russia's revolutionary tradition as the Frenchmen had been by the autocratic one. The first was Tibor Szamuely himself, the Hungarian historian who made much of the parallels between Custine and Gide. The second was Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, who became the first president of Czechoslovakia.

Like Gide and Custine, Masaryk and Szamuely came from different worlds. Szamuely, born in 1925, came of an eminent Hungarian revolutionary family, and his personal history symbolized conflict between Russia and the West. A Hungarian born in Moscow and educated in Britain (he was a pupil at Bertrand Russell's Beacon Hill school), Szamuely served in both the Soviet army and the Gulag prison camps, where his father, a prominent communist, perished. Escaping from Russia, he became vice chancellor of Budapest University and later a lecturer at the University of Reading in Britain.

Masaryk, born in 1850, was the son of a peasant family and had been apprenticed as a blacksmith. Like Szamuely, he also spent time in Britain, fleeing to London during World War I, when his homeland, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was fighting on the German side. He had little sympathy with revolutionary upheavals and condemned Hungary's 1919 revolution in which Szamuely's uncle played a prominent role. Masaryk's great book, The Spirit of Russia, appeared in 1913, in the final efflorescence of the late tsarist empire, just before its destruction by world war and revolution from above. It was one of the first serious studies of Russia by a foreigner. "I have no hesitation in saying that Russia was and is the most interesting country known to me," he wrote.

"Russia has been in a chronic condition of revolution," wrote Masaryk, "and the problem of the revolution is one of the leading interests of all philosophers of history and statesmen in Russia." Szamuely agreed. "The idea of revolution had come to stay," he wrote of an attempted coup by army officers in 1825. "Russia was never again to be free of its presence."
Both historians were fascinated by the personal qualities of the revolutionaries themselves. "Their ardent devotion to intellectual and political freedom, their self-sacrificing enthusiasm for the folk, their reckless disregard of their personal interests and of their own lives, their fidelity toward their comrades—these are brilliant characteristics," Masaryk contended, "which cannot fail to arouse respect and sympathy for individual revolutionists and for the Russian people from which they sprang." Szamuel, more aware of the dark side of the revolutionaries' activity, could nevertheless barely contain his admiration for the early revolutionaries, who "possessed, in the highest degree, those heroic qualities which went such a long way toward creating and nourishing the sanctity of the Russian revolutionary myth: selflessness, courage, manliness, devotion—and a readiness to meet death." He argued that later revolutionaries "reveal all the familiar qualities of youth through the ages ... its boldness and exuberance, selflessness and optimism, generosity and idealism, its spirit of revolt, intellectual curiosity and general high-mindedness. But also the flaws that go to make up the essence of youth: ... the arrogance and the credulity, the impatience and the implacability, the ruthlessness and fanaticism." 24

Both were struck by the role terrorism played in Russia's revolutionary movement. "In no other country was terrorism the deliberate strategy of an organized political party," Szamuel asserted. "Russia was the only country where the terrorists enjoyed general sympathy among the educated and well-to-do classes." Masaryk called terrorism "a typical feature of the Russian revolutionary movement." 25

That two histories are alike might be explained simply by the facts of history. Yet the stress on the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition was not a staple of Russian historical writing, especially in 1913, when Masaryk published his work. As Szamuel says, "at the time [the revolutionary tradition] appeared to be only a very minor—indeed almost unknown—aspect of [Russia's] life." 26

Moreover, the parallels stretch to details such as the role of Pyotr Tkachev, a figure practically unknown in the West and a nonperson in Soviet Russia. Masaryk credits Tkachev with being the first to understand the need to seize power at the start and create the revolution later. Szamuel calls Tkachev "the essential link between Chernyhevsky and Lenin... Of all the skeletons in the Bolshevik cupboard, Tkachev's is the most embarrassing—it rudely intervenes into the apostolic success of Marx–Engels–Lenin... Unrecognized in his lifetime, unhonored after his death, he remains a central figure of the Russian revolutionary tradition." 27

To paraphrase what Szamuel said about Custine and Gide, "Two central Europeans, half a century and a revolution apart—two practically indistinguishable interpretations of Russian history." 28

Two contemporary worries stem from this revolutionary tradition. First, it was damaging in itself. The revolutionaries encouraged a sense that liberty, civic improvement, and modernization were all to be achieved not by compromise, nor by the interplay of interest groups or the inexorable pressure of popular action, but by violence, conspiracy, and terror. Custine argued that the impatient forces of revolution, along with the autocratic tradition, had denied Russia "an essential fermenting process, and the benefits of a slow and natural culture. The internal labor which forms a great people, and renders them fit to rule, has been wanting."

Second, the revolutionaries were damaging not just in themselves but for what they implied about the country and the temper of the Russians. Masaryk put it this way: "Russians are extremely revolutionary, but not very democratic." 29 The argument is that Russia's revolutionary tradition was a product of some warp of the national character that tolerates bloody and violent struggle, accepts violence for its own sake, and believes the pursuit of political aims through revolution to be more acceptable than seeking change peacefully. Vissarion Belinsky, the archetype of the nineteenth-century anti-establishment Russian intellectual, expressed a common view when he said, "A liberated Russian people would not go to parliament, but they would hurry to the pub to have a drink, to smash windows and hang the gentry." 30

Was he right? Is it actually true that Russians are so constituted that they are incapable of resisting autocracy except by revolution? The evidence is against it. The power of the tsar and the lack of powerful groups supporting evolutionary change (merchants or shopkeepers) made it impossible to oppose autocracy in any other way. Russian revolutionaries themselves were always clear on this point.

The clearest explanation of their view came from the Russian terror-
ist cell _par excellence_, which was called "Narodnaya Volya" (the People’s Will). This was the organization that, on its eighth attempt in 1881, blew to pieces Alexander II, the reformist tsar who had freed the serfs. Yet it was also the organization that, in the same year, published the following resolution on the assassination of President Garfield:

The executive committee, expressing its profound sympathy with the American people on account of the death of James Abram Garfield, feels it to be its duty to protest in the name of the Russian revolutionaries against all such deeds of violence as that which has just taken place in America. In a land where the citizens are free to express their ideas, and where the will of the people does not merely make the law but appoints the person who is to carry the law into effect, in such a country political assassination is the manifestation of a despotic tendency identical with that to whose destruction in Russia we have devoted ourselves. Despotism . . . is always blameworthy, and force can be justified only when employed to resist force.31

Even among some of the revolutionaries, then, there was a democratic impulse. And once tyranny was replaced by an elected government, as now, the democratic impulse could be expected to beat more strongly.

But there was a more important reason for doubting that the revolutionary temper of the Russians will determine the shape of the new Russia. It is that the revolutionaries did not represent ordinary Russians, as they claimed. That was clear to Masaryk and Szamuely. “A comprehensive survey of the entire period of reaction under Nicholas and his predecessors,” Masaryk wrote, “fills us with astonishment at the incapacity of the Russian revolutionaries. We recognize how little they were competent even to promote their own interests.” Similarly for Szamuely: “The Russian revolutionary tradition . . . remained estranged and remote from the Russian people whose cause it had espoused, but who responded to it with indifference.”32

In the "mad summer" of 1874, thousands of idealistic students dressed in smocks and carrying bundles of books walked out into the Russian countryside to convert the peasants to socialism. “Going to the People,” as it was called, was a crusade, an inverted version of Mao’s “learn from the peasants” campaign of the Cultural Revolution.

It was an ignominious failure. Porfiry Voïnarovskii, one of the campaign’s organizers, was arrested while haranguing his audience about the evils of the government; his listeners had summoned the police. Everywhere the student radicals went, they met with incomprehension, indifference, or hostility. Szamuely quotes one would-be revolutionary writing from the sticks: “They don’t take it to heart. It all goes in one ear and out the other.”33 That was characteristic of Russian “revolutions”: They never had popular support. The Bolshevik Revolution started as little more than a palace coup. In 1825, a group of idealistic army officers attempted to prevent the coronation of Nicholas I. When tsarist reprisals began against them, the reaction of the ordinary people who were supposed to benefit from the uprising was: “At last they’ve started to hang the nobles.”34

Social institutions: Serfdom and collectivism

It is one thing to say that Russians have not responded to revolutionary appeals in the past and have now gotten rid of autocracy. It is quite another to say that Russia is ready, socially and institutionally, for democracy. Many people have doubted that it is and point to the historical record as evidence: Russia was not affected by three of the formative experiences of Western Europe. They also point to Russia’s history of serfdom and to its strong collectivist traditions, which militate against private property, the prerequisite for a market economy.

Russia was never part of the Roman empire. “We never had feudalism, the more’s the pity,” Pushkin said. “There was no Renaissance among us” the philosopher Berdyaev pointed out.35 Those were the three defining historical experiences that passed Russia by. The second, feudalism, was arguably the most important. The feudal system, with its complex structure of obligations and rights, its powerful landed aristocracy, and its bulwarks against tyranny, was fundamentally different from Russia’s absolutism-plus-serfdom. Feudalism paved the way for a society in which ruler and ruled were bound to each other by reciprocal rights and responsibilities. The Russian system produced a country in which everybody except the ruler was a slave, including, said Custine, the aristocrats.

But the significance of those three preindustrial features of Russian
history seems remote. Types of feudalism varied all over Europe; so did the influence of the Renaissance. It is not clear whether those differences can be related to contemporary ones. Germany and Scandinavia were not parts of the Roman Empire; Romania, Libya, and Turkey were. This does not tell you all that much about the modern conditions of those countries.

If being outside the influence of Rome still means anything, it is that Russia is part of the Orthodox tradition of Christianity. Some Russian reformers have accused the Orthodox church of obscurantism and complain that Orthodoxy tended to accord the state precedence over the individual. But if Orthodoxy is to be considered a misfortune, it is certainly not uniquely Russian: Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece are all Orthodox. More important, the hold of the Orthodox church over Russia seems to be eroding. Despite the huge increase in the number of those who call themselves "Christians in general" (from 22 percent in 1990 to 52 percent in 1992), the hold of the Orthodox church has plummeted: Only 9 percent claim to belong to the Russian Orthodox church, which dominated Russian religious life for centuries.  

Insofar as any of those early historical features make a real difference now, it must be that they affect two things: first, the law and attitudes to the law, and second, Russia’s collectivist traditions, which have discouraged individual responsibility and private ownership. Sergei Witte, the finance minister who oversaw Russia’s first burst of industrialization in 1892–1903 and who became its first prime minister in 1905, wrote in that year: “Russia in one respect represents an exception to all the countries of the world. . . . the exception consists in this, that the people have been brought up over two generations without a sense of property and legality.” Was he right?

. . . It is true that from the eighteenth century, Russian attitudes to law came to differ from those of the West. In the early nineteenth century, Count Benckendorff, chief of Nicholas I’s secret police, wrote: “Laws are written for subordinates, not for authorities.” A few decades later, a group of Russian philosophers called Slavophiles taught that the basis of a well-ordered state is the moral welfare of the people, not the law or institutions. In the twentieth century, some communists preached that the law, along with the state, would die away. In the 1930s a Marxist legal theorist, Pashukanis, proposed abolishing law altogether and replacing it with administration. As a peasant saying puts it, “Where a court is, there truth is absent.”

Yet Russia does not lack a legal tradition. Its first legal code was published in 1497, which was early by European standards. Later, the lack of an independent legal system showed the autocracy at work. Since Russia had an autocratic system of government until 1991, it is hardly surprising that it does not now have a strong independent legal system. But that seems to be changing, albeit slowly.

In 1976 the Soviet Union ratified two Human Rights Covenants, which said in effect: We have human rights; the state cannot remove them; that limits the powers of the state. Those covenants were incorporated into the 1977 Soviet constitution. In October and November 1991, the Russian parliament passed two resolutions spelling out what a “law governed state” meant. The first said that a citizen’s interests precede those of the state, that the law applies to citizen and government equally. The second reaffirmed that Russians have human rights to which the law must conform, including freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, and the right to a proper trial. The parliament established courts as the basic defenders of those rights and proclaimed their independence from outside interference.

In 1995 there were three more changes. Parliament passed a new criminal code, confirming private property rights. An independent Constitutional Court was set up as the supreme arbiter on legal matters, with judges appointed for life (and hence in theory free from political interference). And Russia held its first experiments with trial by jury since 1917. Most of these changes were largely declaratory at first. Legal changes, by their nature, take time to become established. But that is because of the nature of the law, not the nature of the Russians.

What about the other social differences between Russia and the West, its collectivist traditions and its history of serfdom?

Until serfdom was abolished in 1861, Russian peasants were little better than slaves. Serfs had virtually no rights. They could not own property, move, or, in some cases, marry and have children. Masters had virtually unlimited powers over their serfs, including impunity from murder. "Baptized property" was Herzen’s graphic term. The
main difference from slavery was that while slaves could be bought and sold in their own right, serfs were bound to the land and were supposed to be bought and sold only when the land changed hands.

The institution of serfdom is often said to have formed the Russian national character, leaving Russians without initiative and able to act only upon a master’s orders. Belinsky claimed that Russia would be freed only by the action of the tsar. Chekhov lamented that “we must crush the slave within ourselves.”

Yet this view is odd. Russia was certainly not unique in having serfdom. Romania, Poland, and some other parts of Eastern Europe had it. The southern part of the United States, of course, had slavery. Not all of Russia had serfdom: the northern half of Russia never adopted the system.

Serfdom was established in Russia after it had been established in the Baltic states and in the Carpathians. Restrictions on serfdom were introduced in 1797, which set three days a week as the maximum that a landowner could require of his serfs, and in 1803, when a law on the free tillers of the soil was passed. Serfdom was abolished in Russia earlier than in Poland and Romania and a year before slavery was abolished in the United States. This enormous social transformation was achieved peacefully in Russia, while in America there was a civil war.

None of this suggests that serfdom is an ineradicable feature of Russia and the Russian character.

Russia’s collectivist traditions, it is true, look as if they might be. Communism lasted longer in Russia than in any other country and transformed it more completely. In 1917, Russia remained largely a peasant country. Now, Russia is overwhelmingly industrial (more so, indeed, than so-called industrial countries like Britain and America, where services long ago became more important than manufacturing). Only Russia among communist countries underwent the transformation from peasant-based country to an industrial economy under communist rule (though China is following a similar path).

Moreover, communism’s roots ran deep into Russia’s pre-revolutionary past. Many of the economic arrangements of communism, in particular the denial of private property rights, the most basic of all, were based on tsarist arrangements. Imperial Russia did not know private ownership of land (though factories were often privately owned). After the abolition of serfdom, the freed serfs did not begin to farm the land to which they had been bound as chattels. They held it collectively. In the areas of the tsarist empire that constitute modern European Russia, communal landholding was almost universal. There was nothing like the small-holdings of Britain, France, or Germany, let alone like the cult of the independent small farmer of America, with its nineteenth-century Homestead Act, which granted parcels of land west of the Mississippi free to anyone who could farm it. The village held the land in common; village councils decided on how it would be farmed; periodically, it would redistribute the land so that a family who had been farming a field at one end of the village would suddenly find itself farming a different plot of land at the other. Ironically, perhaps, this preindustrial and collectivist attitude to property may have contributed to the success of the most ambitious program to create private property rights in an industrial country: Russia’s mass privatization program, which, looked at one way, was nothing more than one immense property redistribution, which the Russian tradition made familiar. In most ways, however, the tradition was economically damaging. In the West, the desire of a father to hand down to his son a more productive, better-run farm helped improve agriculture. That could not happen in communal Russia.

Communism, in short, was not the alien imposition in Russia that it was in Central Europe—in Poland, say, or Hungary, where those whose memories stretched back before World War II could recall a non-communist past; or even as it was in Ukraine, which harbored a memory of the independent Ukrainian state lost (it had seemed for good) in the mid-seventeenth century. Significantly, even now Russians lack a true equivalent of the verb “to own”; there are only verbs “to have” and “to possess.” But is it true that the collectivist tradition means Russians are bad at business because they are temperamentally averse to private property and private enterprise?

It does not seem that way. The reason that the commune system survived so long was that it suited the distinctive feature of Russian geography: It provided protection in a vast and empty land. With the next village often several days’ journey away, the communes formed little protective worlds of their own (the Russian word for commune, “mir,” is also the word for both “peace” and “world”).
There is absolutely no evidence that Russians, given a chance, are in some way psychologically unprepared for a world of competition and private enterprise; nor do they behave as if capitalism were an alien concept.

In the late nineteenth century Russia entered a period of racing economic growth comparable to that of early-nineteenth-century Britain, 1870s America, or China today. In 1880–1917 Russia laid more miles of railway track than any country in the world at that time; its industrial production grew at an annual rate of 5.7 percent over the whole period, accelerating in the four years before World War I to 8 percent. In 1883 its industrial production had been one-third of France's. Twenty years later it was overtaking France as the world's fourth largest industrial power. Such a thing could hardly have been achieved in a country congenitally slothful, anarchic, or capable only of varied forms of collectivism.

Now, Russians have responded to free-market incentives with a vengeance. In the beginning of 1992, a month after the Russian government finally destroyed the communist system of economic management, the center of Moscow was host to one of the strangest sights in the world: Knotted around a children's department store opposite the former KGB headquarters, tens of thousands of Muscovites stood all day long holding up for sale shirts, glassware, or shoes. There were few stalls. People simply stood around, their stock in a bag at their feet. Something similar had happened in Poland in 1989, after the collapse of the communist economic system, but not on this scale. Moscow's giant bazaars stretched for miles, their tentacles spreading into new alleys almost daily. On weekdays, seven thousand people were out selling; twice that number on weekends. On average, they earned about a dollar an hour, ten hours a day, making the market while it lasted one of Moscow's largest enterprises. All this came from nothing within three months: Before the economic system was changed, the market had not existed. It was a veritable explosion of entrepreneurial spirits.

Social science confirms that Russians are no more hostile to free markets, struggling for private gain, and competition than anyone else. The most extensive research on the subject was carried out by an American and two Russians, Robert Schiller, Maxim Boycko, and Vladimir Korobov, who compared America and Russia. Russians, they found, are just as tolerant of income inequalities as Americans are, and no more attached than they to the notion of "fair" prices; they have a stronger appreciation of the importance of economic incentives. Such differences do exist—Russians are less likely to count private businessmen among their friends—can be better accounted for by differing political experience than by deep social dissimilarities. There has been an enormous cultural shift toward entrepreneurship. Few things express that so aptly as a new proverb that became popular in 1994: "Those who do not take risks will not drink champagne."38

The burden of geography

What about the third set of reasons for doubting Russia's ability to reform, the "geographical" one?

The fundamental fact of geography, some people have argued, is Russia's single most important feature. "We are consumed with geography," Vyacheslav Ivanov, an eminent literary critic, writes, "and we have no real history."39 Geography matters for several reasons. It has overdeveloped several political institutions, notably the army. It has fostered a larger mentality among the Russians, who feel threatened on all sides by other peoples covetously eyeing Russia's empty and apparently indefensible spaces. And it has isolated Russia from Europe, making it a partially Asian country.

In an age of distance-shrinking telecommunications, it is hard to grasp the immensity of Russia. Driving south from Moscow, it will take all day to reach the Ukrainian border. The landscape of flat fields does not change. You will have driven through three once-independent princedoms. Kiev, the closest of the world's capitals to Moscow, is still another day's drive away. Yet this is a mere quarter-inch on a map a foot wide. When the sun is setting in Kaliningrad, an exclave between Poland and Lithuania, it is rising the following day in Vladivostok. It takes a week to travel by train from Moscow to the Russian Far East.

In 1993, the governor of Vladivostok said that when he wanted to forestall an unwelcome visit from officials in Moscow, "I just tell them
the airport is closed." No natural borders interrupt this expanse. The Ural mountains are high but slope gently like hills. The rivers are mighty but do not define international borders. Most of Russia is steppe, forest, or tundra stretching to a flat horizon.

This immense expanse is a fundamental and unchanging feature of Russian life, and the struggle to control it occupies a large part of Russia's historical experience. The parallel is with the Oregon or Santa Fe trails that led through the American West and fostered a frontier spirit of doughty independence. But while those who braved the Oregon Trail eventually reached the rich pastures of California, the Russian settlers reached only a Far East as featureless and barren as the East European steppe they had left behind.

While the settlement of the American West took three or four generations, the conquest of Siberia has taken four hundred years. The first settlements had their foundation in the late sixteenth century, when Tyumen was established in western Siberia (it is now the capital of the country's oil-drilling operations). Within half a century, in 1649, the Russians had established their first outpost on the Pacific, at Okhotsk. Yet three centuries later, the conquest of Siberia and the Far East remains unfinished. The second Siberian railway, the Baikal-Amur line (dubbed by Brezhnev the project of the century), was finished only in the late 1980s. And while the captured territory of the American West had to be defended from tribes and nomads, generation after generation of Russians have waged a relentless, life-or-death struggle against the poverty of the land and the hostility of the neighbors. Here, the parallel is with the Great Treks of Southern Africa, with their laager mentality of ever present danger, their expectation of arbitrary reversals of fortune, and their necessity of sticking together in adversity.40

The difficulty of defending these inhospitable lands was immense. Russia, like Germany and Poland, has no natural boundaries, no impassable rivers or mountain ranges. And it is surrounded by past and potential enemies or rivals, such as China or, in the past, Turkey and Poland. The difficulty of defending the land facilitated the growth of a dominant and over-mighty state. A huge army had to be raised to defend the invisible borders. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Prince of Muscovy maintained a standing army of more than 50,000 men to defend the state against the Tatar descendants of Genghis Khan, who would periodically swoop out of the East in raids reminiscent of the barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire more than a thousand years before. To raise 50,000 men was a staggering feat. Cromwell's contemporaneous New Model Army was smaller and was raised in a richer country fighting an all-out civil war. The largest fighting force that Western Europe had ever seen in feudal times—the army of the first crusade, which had drawn on the entire resources of Christendom—comprised only 30,000 men. Those were extraordinary efforts, which beggared the countries that made them. Russia's, in contrast, was a standing army, raised season after season, year after year, in a state scraping a meager living from the poor farmland around Moscow. It is hard not to see a parallel between that mighty effort and the later obsession of the Soviet Communist party with maintaining nuclear parity with the United States, a far richer country, or, even after the collapse of communism, Russia's decision to maintain an army of some 2 million men, by far the largest in Europe. The only way to raise such a huge force and to keep it together was through a strong, centralized power to which the army was loyal.

All those geographical features remain, but it is necessary to put them in perspective. Vast size is not unique to Russia. America, Canada, and Australia are all continental-size countries thinly populated by people of European descent. They do not thereby consider themselves to be anti-Western or antiliberal as a result. Poland, like Russia, lies on flat land unprotected by natural barriers; its borders have shifted throughout history even more wildly than Russia's. This is not usually taken as a reason for thinking Poland is doomed by its geography to autocracy.

Of course, Russia is larger than any of those countries (it is twice the size of Canada, the largest of them). Yet its immense size is somewhat misleading. The overwhelming proportion of Russians—60 percent at the last census—live west of the Ural mountains in European Russia. The rest of the country—more than 70 percent in land area but only 40 percent of population—is like an appendage. Rodric Braithwaite, a former British Ambassador to Moscow, likens Russia to a tadpole pointing left—mostly head, with a long trailing tail. The European part of Russia is smaller than Canada and America and about the same size as Australia.
What has made the difference for the cohesion of these huge countries is the development of modern communications, especially air travel and telecommunications. It keeps Russia together too. In 1991, the last year before it was broken up into separate companies, Aeroflot was the busiest airline company in the world, carrying more than 138,000 passengers and serving 3,600 destinations throughout the former Soviet Union. Russian planes were usually full to overcrowding. Families and businessmen were constantly shuttling back and forth between cities. Air travel and the telephone shrink distance and help tie the country together. No longer is Russia a country of isolated villages, several days' ride from the nearest town, like a huge archipelago of hamlets scattered across an ocean of steppe.

Indeed, it is not a country of villages at all. During the past thirty years, Russians have poured from the countryside into the cities in a way unprecedented in human history. In 1939 two-thirds of the population was rural and gained its living on the land (about the same share as in Morocco today). Now, over three-quarters of Russians live in cities. Many developing countries have seen explosions in their urban populations, but even they lag behind Russia's. Russia is now a country of cities tied together by airlines and telephones, quite unlike the ocean of island villages that made up the old Russia.

Just as the transport revolution helps tie the cities together, so changes in military technology have affected the need to keep an immense standing army. It is no longer all-important to occupy territory physically. Aleksandr Lebed, a popular general who resigned from the army to pursue a political career in 1995, pointed out that the Gulf War of 1991 showed it is possible to inflict a military defeat on an army in vast desert spaces through the use of high-tech airborne weaponry, which Russia possesses. Much of Russia is surrounded by exactly such deserts and open plains. Though Russia in 1995 maintained a large standing army, the changes in military technology would seem to reduce the need for a huge army in the long run. That should, in turn, speed up the demilitarization of the country.

"We are Asiatics, a slant-eyed greedy brood." What about the argument that geography has isolated Russia from Europe and made it a partially Asian country?

Until Peter the Great, Russia was said to be totally isolated from Europe. Actually, the person who said it most often was Peter himself, who fostered the myth of isolation to justify wars against Sweden and to achieve a "breakthrough to the West." In fact, long before Peter's reign Russian merchants had carried on substantial trade with the countries of Northern and Eastern Europe. Novgorod, the largest trading city of Russia's northeast until the late sixteenth century, was a member of the Hanseatic League, the German chain of city-states, which extended to Hamburg in the West.

Nevertheless, it is true that Russia later developed a strong sense of being a partially non-European country. What made it non-European was an admixture of Asian elements. The clearest expression of this is a cultural movement called Scythianism, which flourished in the years immediately before and after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Yea—we are Scythians!
Yea—we are Asians, a slant-eyed greedy brood,"

wrote Alexander Blok three months after the October Revolution in his last great poem, "The Scythians," which came to define what the movement was about. Scythianism was aggressively anti-European. Blok's poem contrasts vigorous, wild Russia with decadent, civilized Europe.

To welcome pretty Europe . . .
... We shall turn
To you our alien Asiatic face.

Russians, the Scythians claimed, were as much Asiatic as European; their qualities of spontaneity and fierce emotion came from the Asiatic side. Over the years, they argued, the purer Asiatic tradition had become polluted by a European strain, which, by the start of the twentieth century, had come to dominate the country. Blok and others welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution as a kind of Asiatic revenge upon European Russia. The Scythian, argued Yevgeny Zamyatin in a critical essay published in 1918, is the eternal nomad, in perpetual revolt against established order and the quintessential revolutionary.

On the face of it, there seems to be no obvious reason why the Asi-
atic strain in Russia’s makeup should make it harder to reform and modernize the country. Considering the extraordinary economic successes of Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and other Asian dragons, it might seem that Asian traditions should actually help Russia prosper. In practice, it is true, no one, including the Scythians, thought Russia was really an Asian country. They thought of it as a mixture of Asian and European, falling between the two and acting as a bridge between East and West. The so-called Eurasian movement, a group of Russian émigrés of the 1920s (that is, rough contemporaries of the Scythians), declared that “the Russian people ... are neither Europeans nor Asians. Merging with the culture and life that surrounds us, we are not ashamed to call ourselves Eurasians.” One of their number, Pyotr Savitsky, called Eurasia “a geopolitical civilization” of its own.

But insofar as Russia was Asian, it took from Asia elements that made it impossible to adopt Western forms of democracy and free markets. One such element was despotism. An émigré linguist, Prince Nikolai Trubetskoi, argued in the 1920s that the legacy of Genghis Khan was still alive for the Russians. In the 1240s the princédoms of northeastern Russia became tributary lands of the Golden Horde, a branch of the Mongols’ vast empire controlled by Batu Khan, Genghis’ grandson. For the next three hundred years, Russia lay, as the Russians call it, “under the Tatar Yoke.” Russia’s political institutions derive from the system of government set up by the Mongols. Many Russian words associated with taxation and the financial apparatus of government, for instance, are of Mongol origin: tamozhnya (customs office), kaznachei (treasurer), even the word money itself, denyi.

The way in which Russia’s non-European features were said to undermine its ability to adopt democracy, the rule of law, and other attributes of a modern state can be seen from a description by Masaryk of the beliefs of the Slavophiles, a movement of intellectuals who began from about 1830 to describe Russia in non-Western terms. “In its intimate nature,” Masaryk wrote, “Russia differs from Europe.... The Russian state has grown organically out of the commune, the mir; the European state originated through armed occupations and the subjugation of foreign peoples. ... Russian law, too, has developed organically out of the convictions of the people, whereas European law, imposed by the Roman conquerors, finds its climax in outward legalism and in the formalism of the letter.... In Russia property is communal ... for the individual has a value as such; in Europe, the individual is valueless—it is the soil which has value, not the individual.”

Many Russians (and some students of Russia in the West) still argue that Russia’s non-European features mean the country cannot adopt Europe’s market-oriented or democratic systems.

But is it actually true that Eurasianism is a defining characteristic of Russia? Does the country really fall between Europe and Asia, between East and West? Russia’s Asiatic influences might seem obvious when you look at the country from Europe. Yet within Russia matters look much less clear.

Russians may like to define themselves as different from Europeans, but they distinguish themselves from Asians just as readily. In the very part of the country where you might expect the Asian influence to be strongest, in Vladivostok and its surrounding province, the local governor has kept his local support strong largely by claiming to be a bulwark against China and by warning that, without him, eastern Russia would be overrun by the yellow peril. Ironically, despite their claim that Russia was partly Asian, the Scythians also saw Russia this way. As Blok put it in “The Scythians”:

We were the shield between the breeds
Of Europe and the raging Mongol horde.

Ordinary Russians seem not to have thought of themselves as particularly Asian. In the nineteenth century, when Alexei Khomyakov, one of the leading proponents of Russia’s supposedly “Eurasian” identity, took to wearing “traditional Russian” clothes of flowing, multicolored robes, he was laughed at on the street. The Russians thought he was dressing up as a Persian.

Russia’s religious traditions are Christian. Its culture is overwhelmingly European. It is hard to think of a single art form that developed in the West to which Russia has not made a large contribution: the novel (Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pasternak); drama (Chekhov), the art of acting (Stanislavsky), classical music (Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky,
Shostakovich), classical ballet (Diaghilev, Nureyev, Baryshnikov), painting (Chagall, Kandinsky), cinema (Sergei Eisenstein, Andrei Tarkovsky), and so on.

And despite the Mongol roots of some words, the influence of the nomadic tribes of Asia on Russia’s political and social arrangements seems virtually nonexistent. The argument that Russia’s autocratic traditions are Asian seems perversive when so many countries in Western Europe also had autocratic forms of government for so long. Insofar as Russia’s autocracy had features that were distinctively different from those of Western Europe, those features were the Orthodox church and a system of small communal assemblies, which regulated everyday life in the villages. The Orthodox tradition came from Byzantium (“eastern” to be sure, but Eastern Europe, not Asia). And the village assemblies, according to the Russian historian V. I. Sergeyevich, seem to have come ultimately from Scandinavia, not Asia.

Indeed, there is a good case for saying that the main geographic split in Russia is not between east and west but between north and south. In 1989, at the first real parliamentary session since 1917, the distinguished historian Dmitri Likhachev regaled the deputies with an erudite speech about Russia’s place in the world, arguing that the most important feature of Russia was that it lay between the Arctic and Scandinavian north and the Black Sea. “Scandoslavia,” he said, made more sense as a description of Russia than “Eurasia.”

Whether the Russian past points north, south, east, or west, the Russian present is not constrained by any particular geography. Cusine and Gide declared that suspicion and ignorance of foreigners were the norm. Now there are openness to foreigners, knowledge of them, and, if not friendliness, then at least a wary tolerance. In the years after economic reform started, the center of Moscow, like every other city in the world, became ablaze with the marketing of Western goods. As you walk down Moscow’s main street from the statue of Alexander Pushkin, Russia’s national poet, toward Red Square, the historic center of the empire, you pass shop after shop peddling the icons of Western consumerism. At the start comes McDonald’s, which, when it opened in 1991, was the busiest fast-food restaurant in the world. Next come the soft drink stands selling Coca-Cola and Pepsi, a showroom for Western cars, and a couple of casinos. Last, as you approach Saint Basil’s, Ivan the Terrible’s fantastic dream of old Russian architecture, comes a row of French perfumeries.

What glares brightly in Moscow is reflected more dimly all over Russia. The same limited number of Western products—cigarettes, soft drinks, and perfumes—are available in virtually every town in Russia; advertisements for them, often, for modernity’s sake, using the Latin not the Cyrillic alphabet, are papered on billboards, buildings, and buses. The soap operas that are the vehicles for advertising these goods in the West have seen extraordinary television successes. In the spring of 1992 millions of viewers a week turned on their sets for The Rich Also Cry, a television soap opera from Mexico about the agonies of the jet set.

In 1994 it was estimated that 200,000 foreigners were living in Moscow, by far the largest group of non-Russians ever to have gathered in the heart of the once-closed country. Their numbers increased dramatically in the first five years after the fall of communism (in 1989 there had been a few thousand in Moscow). From the sixteenth century to the early 1990s, foreigners had been forced to live in gilded ghettos, separated from the Russians around them. That isolation has left its physical mark upon the city. The so-called German quarter, where foreign merchants and emissaries lived, a district of large family mansions and leafy boulevards, is still among Moscow’s most gracious areas, retaining an air of bourgeois grandeur at odds with the proletarian gigantism of much of the rest of the city. It was the district in which the great westernizing tsar, Peter the Great, who tried to wrench Russia westward, developed his taste for things European.

As late as 1991 foreigners had no choice about where they could live; they could obtain a flat, and the necessary residence permit, only from a special department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Thus the Soviet government corralled foreigners into a couple of dozen state-approved, and state-bugged, apartment blocks.

Within three years, those age-old arrangements for separating Russians and foreigners had broken down. At first a few enterprising Westerners began to ignore the ministry’s demands, quietly making their own arrangements to sublet apartments from Russians. When communism collapsed, so did the ministry’s ability and willingness to police the old arrangements. Suddenly foreigners could begin to rent
apartments wherever they wanted. Of course, since Russia is poor and foreigners relatively rich, in 1991–92, they had their pick of Moscow’s districts and were not to be found in the poorest outlying areas of the city. But since Moscow, unlike Western cities, had few exclusive residential areas for the rich only—no Upper East Side, no Belgravia, no 16th arrondissement—within a few years, foreigners became far more widely scattered than they used to be. By 1993, for the first time ever, Russians and foreigners found themselves living cheek-by-jowl in the same buildings.

And Russians’ knowledge of foreign lands is not confined to seeing expensive Western consumer goods and expensive Westerners in their own cities. More important, they themselves are traveling to see other countries. In 1993, 9 million Russians traveled abroad, a development of potentially historic significance. For the first time in Russian history, a sizable share of the population (7 percent in a year) was able to see with its own eyes what foreign countries are like. And all this was achieved despite the high cost of travel (the cost of an air fare between Moscow and London was three times higher than the average monthly salary in 1994) and despite the endless inefficiencies and obstructiveness of the Russian authorities, who three years after Russia became independent were still issuing passports stamped “Soviet Union,” a country that no longer existed.

The connection with the West produced an explosion of international telephone traffic. In 1994, Russians made 4.5 billion minutes’ worth of international telephone calls, a thirty-six-fold increase in just two years.45

Russia rejoined the world economy in 1992–93, taking membership in the various institutions that set the framework for it—the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—and applied to join the World Trade Organization. It also started to trade with Europe and America far more than it had previously. In short, Russia in 1991–94 began to break through the barriers of isolation, ignorance, and xenophobia, becoming awash with foreign influences.

The ending of seventy years of isolation was an important contribution to ending extremism. It has been repeatedly noted that workers in so-called isolated industries—miners, sailors, fishermen, lumberjacks, or shepherds—tend to give overwhelming support to left-wing politics. The requirements of the job produce communities in which everyone is engaged in the same occupation. Such isolation seems to reduce the pressures on such workers to be tolerant of other points of view. Such districts tend to vote communist or socialist by large majorities. If the country is cut off from the rest of the world by its rulers, the phenomenon can operate at the level of the whole country. That is what happened in the Soviet Union in 1917–89. And that is why Russia’s opening up is so important.

The cult of unique destiny

All these things together—the political and social changes and the changes in context that make the unyielding facts of geography less important—are combining to undermine what seems the most striking and, to outsiders, most peculiar feature of Russia’s national character, the cult of unique destiny.

There were two broad schools of thought in nineteenth-century Russia: Slavophiles who thought that Russia should return to its indigenous roots, and Westernizers who thought it should seek to learn from Western Europe. On most issues, the distinction between them holds good. Yet on the question of Russia’s place in the world, there were no real differences between them. Both agreed that Russia had a special destiny, an almost messianic redemptive mission to save mankind.

Alexei Khomyakov, one of the founders of Slavophilism, referred to Russia as “God’s instrument” and said that the Russians were ready to become the leaders and saviors of Europe, whose nations would follow Russia willingly. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote: “Our great Russia will speak its new word, a healthy word, not previously heard by the world, to all the world.” In a speech celebrating Alexander Pushkin, the great novelist declared that “the mission of the Russian people is certainly all European and worldwide.... To a true Russian, Europe [is] as precious as Russia herself.... What has Russia been doing these two entire centuries in its policy, if not serve Europe much more than herself?”

Such messianic views were held just as strongly by Westernizers. Chaadayev, the first of the Westernizers, who damned the Slavophiles
as obscurantists, nevertheless maintained: "We belong to those nations who are destined in the future to teach the world some great lesson." Nikolai Mikhailovsky, who translated John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte, and Karl Marx into Russian, wrote, "We believe that Russia can lay down a new historical path from that taken by Europe." A loud echo of this idea sounded over the crowds gathered outside the Russian parliament on August 24, 1991, to hear the celebratory speeches after the defeat of the attempted communist coup. "Russia," declaimed Boris Yeltsin, the victor of that hour, "has saved the world."

The really peculiar feature of this messianic vision was that Russia would save the world not by virtue of superior government or superior social organization, culture, or force, but by the moral qualities of the Russian people. In them lay the heart of Russia's uniqueness. In one of the best-known poems in Russia, the Slavophile Fyodor Tyutchev writes:

Russia can't be grasped by the mind,
Ordinary yardsticks will deceive.
Her nature is of a special kind—
In Russia one can only believe.

In the Slavophile view, the West was synonymous with rational and scientific inquiry and with self-interest. Those were inimical to traditional Russian values, which respected emotion more than reason. As long ago as 1784 an English visitor to St. Petersburg, William Richardson, observed: "They have certainly more sensibility than firmness. They have lively feelings; but having seldom employed their reason in forming general rules of conduct for the commerce of life, their actions, as flowing from variable and shifting emotions, are desultory, and even inconsistent... This is a character which you may often see exemplified in individuals: But I suppose Russia is the only country where it is so general as to become a leading feature in the national character."

In the extreme case, Slavophiles would reject reason and self-interest altogether. Here is Dostoevsky on the subject: "... a man, whoever he is, always and everywhere likes to act as he chooses, and not at all according to the dictates of reason and self-interest; it is indeed possible, and sometimes positively imperative (in my view), to act directly contrary to one's own best interest. One's own free and unfettered volition, one's own caprice, however wild, one's own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness—that is one's best and greatest good."

The "I" of that passage is not Dostoevsky but the anonymous narrator of a novella, Notes from Underground. This narrator was the great novelist's attempt to portray the "real man of the Russian majority."

So the character of the Russians themselves, as evinced by Slavophilism and the cult of unique destiny, seems to saddle the country with a most peculiar burden. Perversely blind to their own interest—indeed, glorying in acting against them—it is hardly surprising that Russians have failed to fulfill their potential. The word failure does not describe it: Russia has succeeded in avoiding those material achievements which other countries regard as beneficial.

New Russians, new values. That, at least, is how Russia's history seems from the point of view of the cult of unique destiny. Yet despite Dostoevsky's claim to be portraying "the real man of the Russian majority," what he was actually portraying was the viewpoint of a tiny minority, the Slavophiles, who seem so un-European. Like the intellectuals of the "mad summer" of 1874, there is no evidence that the Slavophiles were ever anything more than a few rarefied intellectuals who remained estranged from the people in whose name they claimed to be speaking.

If Russia ever was a country in which appeals to spiritual destiny and the importance of faith stir appreciation, it is no longer. A sense is growing that those qualities have failed Russia. A century after Tyutchev's famous quatrain, another poet, Maria Arakumova, metaphorically flung the line back in his face:

"Russia can't be grasped by the mind,
Ordinary yardsticks will deceive.
Her nature is a special kind.—
But just how much can one only believe??"

The nearest thing to a popular upholder of Slavophile views in modern Russia is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who returned from exile in
America in 1994 to travel across Russia by train from Vladivostok to Moscow. Respect for a great writer and a man who had always refused to bow down to communists brought thousands out at railway stations to meet him and hear his speeches. Yet Solzhenitsyn’s Slavophile political views, propounded in a speech to the parliament, failed to stir popular enthusiasm. Even he rejected the traditional Slavophile support for autocracy in favor of demanding a democratic system of elected village assemblies.

Few serious politicians these days advance the view that the Russian tradition means the country has a unique economy that must be reformed in its own way. The research of Schiller, Boycko, and Korobov has shown that Russians are no more hostile to business or private property than Americans are, nor are they more intolerant of income inequalities. Sergei Glasiev, the chief economist for the extreme nationalist opponents of Yeltsin’s government, whom you might have expected to stress Russia’s economic uniqueness, instead criticizes the government for failing to learn from Japan how to run a modern economy.

Above all, Russian nationalism has lost much of its appeal. Many leading Russians claim to be highly nationalistic. Russian politicians of every kind promote the age-old idea of a strong Russian state. Westerners point to the success of the xenophobic Vladimir Zhirinovsky as proof that Russian nationalism is reviving. Yet those who voted for Zhirinovsky hardly ever said they supported him because they wanted to take Alaska back or have Russian soldiers dip their boots in the warm water of the Indian Ocean, as Zhirinovsky promised. Consistently, they said they voted for him because they believed he would do something about crime.

Similarly, the evidence of the opinion polls does not bear out the assumption that nationalism is popular. It points the other way. Sergei Filatov and Lyudmila Vorontsova conducted a series of opinion polls in 1991-94. Their conclusion was that Russians feel not pride in their country, but contempt for it. Citing a “national nihilism,” they point out that less than one-third of young people see military service as a “duty and honor” and show that only 10 percent associate “fidelity to national traditions” with the main influence on matters of faith and morals. And they conclude: “People shun identification with this country and this nation.”

Such nihilistic attitudes may not survive long. They are best explained as the reaction to the failures of communist rule and the initial difficulties of reform. Sooner or later, Russians will start rebuilding their sense of nationhood. But they are likely to do so on a new basis, not on the rejected features of the old Russia—autocracy, communism, and unique destiny. The qualities they now respect have to do with civil rights: 74 percent of respondents advocated freedom of conscience; 70 percent endorsed full freedom of expression even for detested communists and xenophobes. Those are attributes not of a unique, messianic state but of what Russian reformers have long held up as their aim: a normal country.