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Classical Liberalism in Russia

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Eamonn Butler (2015, 3–11) remarks that classical liberalism is “a presumption in favour of individual freedom,” which is guaranteed through “limited and representative government...the rule of law...spontaneous order...property, trade and markets...civil society...[and] common human values.” According to Butler, “classical liberal freedom is essentially *negative*” (ibid., 34). It is distinguished primarily by its support for freeing people from governmental incursions on their persons, property, and freedom of association. Positive definitions of freedom, by contrast, emphasize the individual’s ability to do or to be certain things. Classical liberals care about human flourishing, too, of course, but human flourishing is not their definition of freedom or liberty. Expansive positive definitions of freedom are often associated with modern liberalism or social liberalism, which is more favorable to activist government. In this article I speak of various liberalisms, but with a mind for distinguishing among them.

Butler’s definition of classical liberalism identifies two levels of analysis: one is that of basic principles, above all, freedom; the other is that of the institutions—representative government, property, markets, etc.—that are supposed to maintain those principles. When we examine the intellectual history of Russian thinkers identified as ‘liberal,’ we observe ongoing interest in ‘freedom,’ but we also find a diversity of views about institutions. Those in Russia who have self-identified or been identified by others as liberals have desired to expand personal liberty. But they have not always regarded representative government, free speech, free markets, and the like as the best mechanisms for doing so. They have supported some of those institutions generally considered liberal while rejecting others—promoting the expansion of civil liberties, for instance, while rejecting political liberties, or promoting political liberties while viewing free markets with

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some suspicion. Meanwhile, those considered ‘reactionary’ have in some respects on occasion been closer to the tenets of classical liberalism than those considered ‘liberal.’

In the 1860s and 1870s, for instance, the so-called ‘aristocratic opposition’ demanded the introduction of representative government (with a limited, property-based franchise), the abolition of the peasant commune, and the reorganization of the rural economy along free-market lines. All this, they reckoned, would guarantee the aristocracy’s continued dominance of Russian society. Liberals, meanwhile, rejected most elements of this program—for the same reason, that it would cement the power of the aristocracy (Robinson 2019, 94–95). Historian Daniel Field thus notes that in the circumstances of mid-nineteenth century Russia, “Doctrines naturally clustered together in Western Europe were in conflict in Russia. . . . The espousal of constitutionalism or laissez-faire economics was regarded, often correctly, as an attempt to perpetuate the dependence of the peasantry and the dominance of the nobility. . . . [A reformer] could not. . . embrace the whole bundle of liberal doctrines. Different men, grasping different parts of the bundle, naturally came into conflict” (1973, 60).

One can see a somewhat similar phenomenon in later periods. In Russia, liberal ideas have often combined with non-liberal and illiberal ideas in ways that are perhaps unique to it. The result is that there is considerable dispute as to who in Russian history deserves the liberal label. Some historians have claimed that key figures and institutions in the history of Russian liberalism such as political philosophers Konstantin Kavelin and Boris Chicherin and the pre-revolutionary Kadet Party were not actually liberal at all, while at the same time applying the liberal label to people and institutions who were not in their own time considered liberal but revolutionary or reactionary, such as the writer Alexander Herzen and the pre-revolutionary Octobrist Party. All this points to the difficulty of defining liberalism in a Russian context.

One reason for this confusion may be that from its earliest days Russian liberalism has rested on a rather different social base than its Western European and North American counterparts. As Pavel Miliukov, the leader of late Imperial Russia’s main liberal party, the Kadets, put it: “Russian liberalism was not *bourgeois*, but *intellectual*” (Miliyukov 1906, 226). Liberal ideas arrived in Russia long before a large bourgeois class came into existence, and when the latter did emerge its members tended to be quite conservative due to the dependence of merchants and industrial producers on state orders and the consequent tight links between trade, industry, and the state. Liberalism, whether in the ‘classical’ sense or a more ‘modern’ or ‘social’ sense, became the ideology of that segment of the aristocracy that had taken up professional work—university professors, lawyers, doctors, and so on. Later, in the Soviet Union, liberal modes of thinking were associated

primarily with a narrow elite within the scientific community referred to as the technical intelligentsia (Lipovetsky 2013, 109–139). Nowadays they are commonly associated with urban professionals, or what are sometimes called the creative classes—journalists, artists, academics, IT workers, and the like. Russian liberalism, in the broad sense, reflects this group’s culture and interests, which have often been widely at odds with those of both the state and the mass of the Russian population.

The intellectual classes who have dominated Russia’s liberal movement have tended to be highly Westernized individuals, who speak Western European languages, have studied Western European philosophy, and go to Western Europe for their holidays. Such characteristics have separated them from the bulk of their fellow countrymen. Liberals have also often been positivist and rationalist in outlook, viewing human society as driven by scientifically determinable rules, regarding history as an inexorable process towards a known end—that being a liberal society in line with Western models.

Consequently, Russian liberalism, in the broad sense, has been, and still is, as much a cultural as a political or socioeconomic phenomenon. Its aim is to culturally transform Russia so as to make it what is often called a ‘normal’ country, by which is meant a Western one. “The Russian liberal is a thoughtless fly buzzing in the ray of the sun; that sun is the sun of the West,” said philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev in the early nineteenth century (quoted in Gutorov 2017, 11). Similar criticisms can be heard today. This pronounced Westernism has had some negative consequences. It has alienated liberals from the less pro-Western majority of the Russian population and saddled liberalism with the reputation of being an anti-national force. This helps to explain its political failure.

Another feature separating Russian and Western classical liberalism is the former’s attitude towards the state. Classical liberalism has sought to carve out a zone in which individuals can act independently of the state. It has therefore aimed if not to minimize then at least to severely limit the state’s competencies. Russian liberals’ relationship with the state has been more complex. On the one hand, liberals have often deeply disliked the Russian government of their time, regarding it as an oppressive force that must be opposed. At the same time, though, liberals have generally accepted the reality that in Russia it has been the state that has historically been the primary driver of reform and Westernization. While distrusting the government, Russian liberals have rarely shared classical liberalism’s distrust of the state *per se*, but instead have looked to the state as the means by which liberal values and institutions will be advanced. Furthermore, liberals have also generally supported the Russian model of a highly centralized system of authority, with power concentrated in the hands of the executive branch of government. Overall, Russian liberalism is considered to have a “statist orientation” (Poole 2015, 170).

Western liberalism has opposed political radicalism. It has generally presupposed an equality of subjection under a law-based government, and proposed mere policy reform (liberalization), not constitutional reformation. In Russia, liberals' vision of the state has been a centralized but more law-based government. Referring to the Imperial period, Andrzej Walicki says that "the main concern of Russian liberal thinkers was the problem of the rule of law, and the most precious legacy of Russian liberalism was precisely its contribution to the philosophy of law." Law, says Walicki, was "the core value in the liberal view of the world. ... It is no exaggeration to say that the entire history of liberal thought in Russia revolved around the problem of the rule of law and the rule-of-law state" (Walicki 1992, 1, 3, 402). To a large extent this remains true today. Marc Raeff (1959, 223) notes, however, that the establishment of the rule of law in the Western sense has been impossible within the confines of the existing political order, given its rejection by successive rulers. Consequently, "introduction of real legality could only mean the overthrow of the existing regime." The result has been a "blurring of the line between radicalism and liberalism," and led some liberals in both the Imperial period and today into the revolutionary camp.

Early Russian liberalism

The origins of Russian liberalism date back to the reign of Catherine II in the late eighteenth century. An often cited starting point is the *Instruction* issued by Catherine early in her reign, which, it has been said, "opened the doors in Russia to the liberal ideas of the European Enlightenment" (Novikova and Sizemskaja 1993, 126). Catherine soon pulled back from the promises of reform made in the *Instruction*, but the document did provide an opportunity for Russians to come forward with ideas which might merit the liberal label. An example was a response to the *Instruction* written by a professor at Moscow University, Semyon Desnitsky, who had studied in the classroom of Adam Smith in Glasgow, and who recommended the establishment of a permanent advisory body, the Senate, that was to be elected by landowners, merchants, artisans, and teachers in higher educational institutions (Hamburg 2016, 589). Desnitsky also proposed the introduction of jury trials and suggested that judges be appointed for life (*ibid.*, 590). As Desnitsky's Senate was to be advisory only, his proposal left the absolute monarchy in theory intact. Nevertheless, it represented an attempt to blend elements of Russian absolutism with liberal institutions such as representative government.

Desnitsky was among those who propagated Smith's ideas. Gary Hamburg (2016, 595) remarks that, "the degree of Smith's influence on Desnitsky's economic

thinking was striking: hostility towards consumption taxes, preference for progressive taxes, the desire to avoid a heavy state presence in economic life, and the concern for production as the source of national wealth.” Desnitsky did not propose abolishing serfdom, but did suggest that peasants be given certain property rights, such as the “right to buy and sell moveable property” (ibid., 692–693).

The first translation of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* appeared in Russia in four parts from 1802 to 1806, and is said to have influenced Russian government thinking in the first decade of the reign of Alexander I (Bennett 2013, 20). Nikolai Mordvinov (1754–1845), appointed head of the Department of State Economic Affairs in 1810, drew on the model of England, where he had studied and had fallen under the influence of both Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Mordvinov wrote that “Property is the cornerstone. Without it, without the permanence of the rights that guarantee it, neither laws nor the fatherland, nor the state can be of use to anyone” (quoted in Leontovitsch 2012, 34, 36).

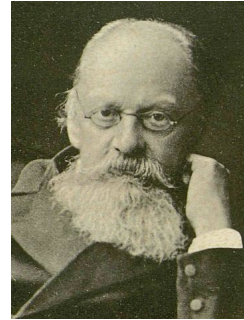
Another admirer of Smith was Alexander Kunitsyn, who taught at the Lyceum in Tsarskoe Selo, and whose students included the poet Alexander Pushkin (Berest 2011, 45). “Kunitsyn’s classes,” says his biographer Julia Berest, “undoubtedly contributed to opening the minds of his students to liberal ideas” (ibid., 42). According to Berest, “Kunitsyn taught his students that man’s primary natural right is the right to one’s person, by virtue of which ‘every individual can demand from others that they treat him not as a mere tool to their ends but as a person endowed with reason and will’” (50). To Kunitsyn, the purpose of the state was to secure peoples’ freedom. “Freedom,” he wrote, “is the right of each person to act according to his will in all matters that do not harm others” (quoted in Berest 2011, 78).

Both Desnitsky and Kunitsyn promoted the concept of natural rights. Desnitsky, for instance, argued in a 1768 lecture that justice required recognition of such rights (Hamburg 2016, 603). Meanwhile, in his 1818 book *Natural Law*, Kunitsyn argued that the most fundamental right “is the right to one’s person,” which presupposed “the right to exist,” “the right to act,” and “the right to achieve well-being” (quoted in Berest 2011, 147). Since human desires varied, so too did understandings of well-being. Kunitsyn concluded that “each person has a right to choose the way of life and occupation which he finds conducive for his well-being” (ibid., 148). Following from this, Kunitsyn argued that the state should limit its activity to providing security and justice. “The subjects agree to obey the supreme power only for the sake of safety; therefore in all their private matters they remain free,” he wrote (ibid., 157).

Kavelin, Chicherin, and conservative liberalism

In the mid-nineteenth century, the predominant strain in Russian liberal thought was what is often called ‘Right Hegelianism.’ The most notable Right Hegelians were Konstantin Kavelin and Boris Chicherin, both of whom followed Hegel in viewing history as a process involving the gradual expansion of liberty, culminating in the institution of the modern state. In 1847, Kavelin produced an essay entitled “A View of Juridical Life in Ancient Russia,” in which he argued that history involved the gradual development of the autonomous individual, or as Kavelin (1989, 23) put it, the “principle of personality.” Russian history, he claimed, passed through various stages—communal, tribal, and family—before reaching the era of the state. In the earliest stages, strong blood ties meant that people did not distinguish between themselves and others (*ibid.*, 22). By contrast, “The appearance of the state was a liberation from an existence based purely on blood, and was the basis for the independent action of the person” (*ibid.*, 48).

Kavelin (1989, 65–66) argued that as this process developed, “The Russian and the foreign have merged into one to carry Russia forward... The boundaries between the past and the present, Russian and foreign, are being destroyed.” The progression was not a matter of Russia copying the West. The process of moving towards the state and the principle of personality was a universal phenomenon, not something specifically Western. Thus, concluded Kavelin (1989, 66), “The difference [between the West and Russia] lies solely in the preceding historical facts; the aim, the task, the aspirations, the way forward are one and the same.” Certain universal goods were ‘Western’ only in the sense that the West was the first to approach them.



Kavelin

In the mid-nineteenth century context, representatives were nearly always elected by means of a property-based franchise that gave disproportionate influence to the wealthy (Walicki 2015, 453). Both Kavelin and Chicherin believed that in Russia representative institutions would serve the narrow class interests of the nobility rather than the interests of the people as a whole. In an 1875 article, Kavelin argued “the government has lost all our respect and trust” (Kavelin 1996, 89, 92). The solution did not, however, lie in parchment constitutional reforms, including the creation of an elected parliament. Kavelin wrote:

A constitution only makes sense when a well organized and authoritative wealthy class supports and protects it. Without such a class a constitution is a worthless scrap of paper, a lie, a prelude to the most dishonest and

dishonorable deceit. ... By itself, a constitution doesn't give or guarantee anything, absent these conditions it is nothing, but a harmful nothing because it deceives with the external form of political guarantees. (Kavelin 1996, 108)

Kavelin's conservatism extended also to economic affairs. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 left intact the peasant commune as the main institution governing the lives of Russian peasants. Kavelin viewed the commune as a counterweight to the process of social radicalism that he believed resulted from industrial development. He also argued that progress did not require the transformation of communal property into private property. "Private property...is a source of movement, of progress, of development; but it becomes a source of death and destruction, it corrodes the social organism when its extreme consequences are not moderated and balanced by other landowning principles. ... I see communal landowning as one such principle," Kavelin wrote (Gorlov 2012, 47).

Kavelin's beliefs may be described as a conservative liberalism that looked to the autocratic monarchy as the driver of progress and sought to initiate political change at the local level, only gradually moving up to the national level as the necessary political culture developed. This conservative liberalism is even more strongly associated with Chicherin.

Chicherin (1998a, 117), in an 1858 essay entitled "Contemporary Tasks in Russian Life," which has been published in this journal ([link](#)), argued that, "Government activity must not preclude the autonomy of the people, for popular autonomy is a basic precondition of public life. ... For the government to establish norms of behavior and opinion and to bend everything to these norms, to render the people voiceless and silent before the government, is to kill any life and to destroy one of the fundamentals of society." "We need freedom!" wrote Chicherin. "We want the opportunity to freely express and develop our thoughts, so the Tsar will know what Russia is thinking and can govern us with a clear understanding of social and economic conditions" (1998a, 133–134).



Chicherin

"Liberalism! This is the slogan of every educated and sensible person in Russia," wrote Chicherin. In practice this meant, "freedom of conscience," "emancipation from servile status," "freedom of speech," "freedom of the press," "academic freedom," "publication of all government activities," and "public legal proceedings." "In liberalism...is Russia's future; it alone can awake Russia to new life," he concluded (1998a, 134–139).

In an 1862 article, Chicherin identified three types of liberalism: "street liberalism," "oppositional liberalism," and "*okhranitel'nyi* liberalism," the last of

which may be roughly translated as “protective liberalism.” Chicherin favoured the last of these. “The street liberal,” he complained, “feeds on irreconcilable hatred of everything that rises above the crowd, of all authority. It never occurs to him that respect of authority is respect of thought, of labor, of talent, of everything that gives mankind higher reason” (Chicherin 1996, 41–42). Meanwhile, oppositional liberalism “doesn’t seek to achieve any sort of political demands, but takes pleasure in the glory of the oppositional position” (*ibid.*, 44). By contrast,

The essence of *okhranitel’nyi* liberalism consists of reconciling the principle of freedom with the principles of power and law. In political life its slogan is ‘liberal measures and strong government,’ liberal measures that enable society to act independently, that guarantee the rights and personhood of citizens, that protect freedom of thought and conscience, that allow one to express all lawful desires; and strong government, the guardian of state unity, that connects and restrains society, preserves order, severely ensures obedience of the law, and punishes any breaches of it (Chicherin 1996, 49).

Chicherin did not believe that Russia was ready for constitutional government, and he therefore supported the retention of the autocratic system, albeit with expanded civil liberties (Chicherin 1998c, 365). In his book *On Popular Representation*, Chicherin (1998b, 162) argued that political liberty was dependent upon the existence of the appropriate political and legal culture. This culture, he believed, was a product of owning property. Thus, he wrote, “There is therefore nothing ethically troubling in denying political rights to poor people.” Chicherin (1998b, 206) concluded: “Under a given set of circumstances, and taking into account the political sophistication of a people, one must decide whether the advantages [of political liberty and representation] outweigh the disadvantages. The conclusion will not always be the same, and, for this reason, representative government is not always appropriate.”

Chicherin also played an important role in combating the dominant legal theory of the time—legal positivism—and promoting instead ideas of natural law. Chicherin argued that law was a means of limiting external freedom for social purposes. As such, it had no business intruding upon individuals’ inner freedom. Chicherin argued that “the essence of law...has a purely external character” (quoted in Yevlampiev 2009, 119). He wrote: “I am not in the least inclined to treat law as an expression of interests; on the contrary, I see it as a manifestation of the eternal principles of justice... I think, however, that the law of justice, which requires that everyone be given his due, should not be confused with the law of love, which demands sacrifice for the sake of one’s neighbours” (quoted in Walicki 1992, 154).

In other words, the law should enforce contracts but not moral obligations.

In Chicherin's eyes, although the rich have a moral obligation to help the poor, they should not have a legal obligation to do so. Chicherin similarly argued that workers should not be forced to contribute to health or unemployment insurance, as this would infringe upon their inner freedom of choice. He supported laissez-faire economics and opposed government-sponsored social welfare schemes. "Inequality predominates in human communities," he wrote. Inequalities were in part due to natural differences among humans, and in part due to the fact that freedom inevitably produces inequalities as a result of the different choices people make. According to Chicherin, "Freedom by its nature, leads to inequality. In the sphere of property this rule shows itself fully operative, yet one cannot destroy this inequality without destroying its root—that is human liberty" (quoted in Hamburg 2010, 122).

New Liberalism in late Imperial Russia

By 1900, both Chicherin's faith in the reforming potential of the autocracy and his preference for economic liberalism had fallen out of favor among Russian liberals. In the decades leading up to 1900, the conservative reigns of Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II, as well as international intellectual currents of the late 19th century, caused Russian liberals to demand that Russia be transformed into a constitutional monarchy with representative institutions and that the state play a more active role in the economy.

An important influence on liberal thought in this era was the writing of Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov. Like Chicherin, Solovyov helped to promote ideas of natural law, writing that "law is not determined by the concept of utility, but contains within itself a formal moral principle" (Soloviev 2000a, 136). "The rule of true progress," he claimed, "is this, that the state should interfere as little as possible with the inner moral life of man, and at the same time should as securely and as widely as possible secure the external conditions of his worthy existence and moral development" (*ibid.*, 459).

Liberal legal scholars such as Pavel Novgorodtsev and Leon Petrazycki picked up on these claims. Novgorodtsev, for instance, wrote of a crisis of legal consciousness that was the product of the domination of the theory of legal positivism. This had the effect of making people regard law as being law solely because the state had deemed it such rather than because it was based on any universal moral principle. Because people regarded the law as being entirely a product of force, they had no respect for it (Walicki 2015, 734). The solution, said Novgorodtsev, was a revival of natural law.

In line with the idea that law must be founded on morality, liberals concluded

that economic policy likewise must have a moral foundation, including providing everyone with the economic means to enable a dignified existence. This also owed much to Solovyov. In an 1897 essay titled “The Social Question in Europe,” Soloyov declared:

The principle of equality in its true sense is that all men are equal. ... Each represents intrinsic value and possesses an inalienable right to an existence corresponding to his human dignity. The *raison d'être* of society in relation to its members is to assure for each not solely a material livelihood, but moreover a *dignified* livelihood. Now it is clear that poverty beyond a certain threshold...is contrary to human dignity and therefore incompatible with true public morality. Therefore, society must insure all its members against this degrading poverty in securing for each a *minimum* of material resources. (Soloviev 2000b, 32–33)

Members of the liberal Kadet party, founded in 1905, took up this mantra. Novgorodtsev, who became a member of the party's central committee, wrote that:

Securing the right to a dignified human existence has in mind people who are suffering from economic dependency, from a lack of means, from unfortunate circumstances. ... The use of freedom can be completely paralyzed by a lack of means. The task and essence of law is the protection of personal freedom, but to achieve this goal one must care for the material conditions of freedom, without which freedom can remain an empty word. ... Thus, in the name of protecting freedom the law should be concerned with its material conditions; in the name of personal dignity, it must be concerned with defending the right to a dignified human existence. (Novgorodtsev 1911, 5–6)

Novgorodtsev (1911, 9, 11, 12) said the state should pass legislation to protect workers, for instance regulating sanitary conditions in the workplace, providing insurance for illness and old age, and legalizing trade unions. Novgorodtsev was a great admirer of British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852–1928), whose Liberal Party government at the start of the twentieth century exemplified what was known as ‘New Liberalism.’ This abandoned the *laissez-faire* principles of classical liberalism in favor of a more interventionist approach. Kadets such as Novgorodtsev rejected state ownership of the means of production, but at the same time expressed an indebtedness to socialism as well as a belief that liberalism and socialism shared much in common. As Miliukov put it: “In studying the history of the liberal and socialistic currents, we have found that the chasm existing between them at their inception was perpetually narrowing...the utopian element...slowly but steadily vanishing from the socialistic programs” (Milyoukov 1906, 561).

In some respects, the supposedly reactionary late Imperial state was arguably closer to the tenets of classical liberalism than new liberals were. Under Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin, the government introduced a reform allowing peasants to withdraw from the commune and consolidate their land into a single block that would be their own personal property. Stolypin argued that “The Government wants above all to promote and enhance peasant land ownership. It wants to see the peasant earning well and eating well... But for this it is necessary to give opportunity to the capable, industrious peasant... He must be given the chance to consolidate the fruits of his labor and consider them his inalienable property” (1964, 462). Some liberal economists, such as Boris Brutzkus, supported this reform. But most liberals rejected it. Fearing that the reform would create divisions between rich and poor peasants and so inflame revolutionary tensions, the Kadets accused Stolypin of imposing a foreign form of land ownership without respect of Russian traditions (Egorov 2010, 2010). They proposed instead the expropriation of noble and church property and its consolidation into a national land fund from which peasants could lease land for their own use. Novgorodtsev justified this by saying:

Adherents of the old dogma that derives from the principle of holy and inviolable property see this presentation of the problem [i.e., the expropriation of land] as a perversion of the idea of law. But the legal consciousness of our time places the rights of the human person above property rights and, in the name of this law, in the name of human dignity, in the name of freedom, rejects the idea that property is inviolable, and replaces it with the principle of public-legal regulation of acquired rights with necessary compensation for their owners in the case of alienation. (Novgorodtsev 1911, 10–11)

What made Russian liberals of this era ‘liberal’ was not, therefore, their economic policies. The meaning of ‘liberal’ had drifted.

The liberals of this era insisted on the need for the introduction of a constitutional order, meaning a new law-based constitution including representative institutions. Indeed, it is noticeable that late Imperial liberals generally referred to themselves not as ‘liberals’ but as ‘constitutionalists.’ Convinced by the conservative reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II that the autocrat state could not be a source of liberal policies, they became full-fledged proponents of the need for constitutional reform and demanded a government that would be responsible to a representative assembly elected directly via a universal franchise. To pursue this goal, they allied with revolutionary forces and refused to condemn political violence, hoping that this violence would force the Tsarist regime to make the necessary concessions. At the same time, they refused to cooperate with the Russian state. In October 1905, for instance, the Prime Minister, Sergei Witte, met with leading members of the Kadet party and offered them positions in his

government. The Kadets turned down the offer, demanding that the government summon a constituent assembly and grant an amnesty to political prisoners (Enticott 2016, 152). Similarly, in January 1907, Stolypin offered to legalize the Kadet party (it had never been legally registered) if it publicly denounced revolutionary terrorism. The Kadets refused (Riha 1969, 140–141). One of the most prominent Kadets, Vasily Maklakov noted that the Kadet party “was created to fight *against autocracy*” (Enticott 2016, 178). “We believed that condemning political murders would mean allowing the authorities to believe that they were right,” he added (Egorov 2010, 205). The result was that following the 1905 revolution, Russian liberals passed on the opportunity to take a share of power and chose instead to remain in opposition.

Underlying liberals’ insistence that the Russian state must adopt a democratic constitution was a belief that once the Russian people acquired civil and political liberties they would abandon any revolutionary inclinations. As one of the leading liberal thinkers of the period, Pyotr Struve, wrote:

The only way to direct the enormous social movement presently stirring Russia’s urban and rural population into the channel of lawful struggle for their interest is to invite the entire population, on equal rights, to share in the political life—that is to institute universal franchise. Give political freedom and political equality, and life itself will freely sweep away all that which is premature and unrealizable in radical programs. ... Universal franchise...will bring no horrors and no miracles; the masses, called on to participate in political and social construction, will astonish us neither with their obscurantism nor their radicalism. ... Under the universal franchise, the masses, having become responsible members of their own destiny, will understand what is necessary and what is not. (quoted in Pipes 1970, 381–382)

Responses to the Russian Revolution

The events of 1917 suggested otherwise. After Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in March 1917, liberals briefly held the reins of power. The Provisional Government that ruled Russia from March to November 1917 contained a number of prominent liberal politicians. These included Miliukov (who was foreign minister from March to early May 1917), Prince Georgy Lvov (head of the Provisional Government until July 1917), and Andrei Shingarev (who served first as agricultural minister and then as minister of finance). This first experience of Russian liberals in government did not end well. Although there was no general vote or referendum involved in those events, the fact is that, when the governing structures of the Imperial regime were

leveled, the masses seemed to fall in behind the Bolsheviks. In that sense, they chose not the path of political moderation but that of radicalism. Liberals suffered terribly, with liberalism being almost entirely extinguished under the communist government that took power in November 1917. Such liberals as survived fled into exile, where many reassessed their beliefs. Faith in democracy collapsed, replaced by a belief that a post-communist Russia must by necessity undergo a period of dictatorial rule in order to restore order. As Novgorodtsev said in May 1919, “If nothing remains of our democratism, then that is an excellent thing” (quoted in Rosenberg 1974, 410).

Contemplating their own experiences in 1917, and observing the collapse of democratic states such as Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, many Russian émigrés came to the conclusion that the roots of communism and fascism were the lack of the spiritual values required to maintain a liberal order, such as faith in God, patriotism (rather than class identity), respect for the law, and so on. Novgorodtsev stated that “Naïve and immature political thought usually supposes that it is enough just to overthrow the old order and proclaim freedom of life, electoral rights and the constituent power of the people, and democracy will come into being all by itself” (quoted in Gusev 2001, 110). Reality was very different. To create a liberal order, there “must be a people that has matured to govern itself, knowing its own rights and respecting other people’s” (ibid., 111). This was only possible, Novgorodtsev argued, if democracy was guided by a “Higher Will,” by which he meant religion. He wrote: “The whole world is living through a crisis of legal consciousness. And the most important and fundamental thing in this crisis is a crisis of non-belief, a crisis of culture, torn from religion, a crisis of the state, which has become disconnected from the church” (ibid., 113).

Other notable émigrés such as Nikolai Berdyaev, Georgy Fedotov, and Fyodor Stepun, all of whom wrote for the journal *Novyi Grad* (*New Town*), agreed. Fedotov, for instance, blamed the rise of communism on Russia’s “abandonment of Europe’s high humanistic traditions” (quoted in Kara-Murza 2009, 206). Rather than appreciating the humanistic traditions behind liberal ideas, Russian liberalism, Fedotov complained, “has long been fed on journeys abroad, on superficial rapture at the wonders of Western civilization, accompanied by a total inability to link its enlightening ideals with the forces propelling Russian life” (ibid., 207). Liberals lacked roots in their own country’s history, he said. The result, he concluded, was “the illness of antinationalism. . . . Russia itself became an object of hatred” (ibid.). The solution, he believed, lay in a revival of Christianity. Likewise, philosopher Semyon Frank, once a passionate advocate of constitutional reform, in exile turned against it. “In Russian liberalism,” he explained, “belief in the value of spiritual principles such as nation, state, law and freedom remains philosophically unexplained and lacking in religious inspiration” (quoted in Kantor 2007, 857).

Boris Brutzkus's criticism of economic planning

In this way, classical liberalism came under attack as lacking in spiritual foundations and as such being unable effectively to protect liberty. Insofar as classical liberalism survived in exile, it was among economists, notably Boris Brutzkus. Brutzkus's book *Economic Planning in the Soviet Union*, which contained a foreword by Friedrich Hayek, is seen by some as having influenced Hayek's own denunciation of socialism *The Road to Serfdom* (Wilhelm 1993, 343–357).

In opposition to Marx's labor theory of value, which argues that value is a product of the amount of labor expended on producing something, Brutzkus (1935, 25–26) argued that value is a product of social need, as reflected in prices. According to Brutzkus, to replace the guidance provided by prices the socialist state would have to resort to a huge bureaucratic apparatus dedicated to collecting statistics about the population. But this apparatus would never be able to determine the subjective tastes of millions of distinct individuals (*ibid.*, 44). Lacking proper information, investment decisions in a socialist economy were bound to be divorced from economic realities. The result would a considerable waste of resources (Kojima 2008, 127).



Brutzkus

Surveying the first Soviet five-year plan (1928–1932), Brutzkus (1929, 430) commented that the Soviets had destroyed the “spontaneous regulators of economic life.” He wrote that “it would be completely wrong to think that any sort of stable compromise can be found between communism and capitalism. . . . In order for Russia to escape from the dead end into which it has fallen, communism must be finally overcome and all traces of it eliminated from national life” (*ibid.*, 474).

Perestroika: Socialism with a human face

In due course, market liberalization would return to the Soviet Union and thereafter help to guide the government of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR. Prior to that, a form of what one might call ‘Soviet liberalism’ did manage to emerge following Stalin's death in 1953, but it owed little if anything to classical liberalism. Instead it found its inspiration in socialist thought and its aim was ‘socialism with a human face.’ In the economic sphere, it took the form of ‘market socialism,’ a concept that retained state ownership of the means of

production but sought to improve its efficiency by giving enterprises more leeway to determine their own output, set their own prices, and so on.

One of the most prominent proponents of market socialism was Tatyana Zaslavskaya of the Novosibirsk Institute of Economics and Industrial Organization. Zaslavskaya (1989a, 162, 168) argued that the Soviet economy could no longer expand by means of increasing inputs but needed instead to improve productivity. The improvement, she said, would require that workers and enterprises be given “a sufficiently wide margin of freedom,” while the economy as a whole needed “far more active use of ‘automatic’ regulators in balancing production, linked to the development of market relations.” Zaslavskaya (1989b, 123) stated that “we must have economic pluralism—not just state ownership, but also cooperative and individual ownership.” Nevertheless, she rejected the idea of large-scale private ownership of the means of production and so fell far short of endorsing free-market capitalism.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s program of perestroika in the late 1980s constituted an attempt to put socialism with a human face into practice. Perestroika was chiefly a program of liberalization of speech, association, and political activity. Nearly all restrictions were removed. Contrary to Gorbachev’s hopes, however, such liberalization did not have the effect of boosting the economy and strengthening the state. On the contrary, the Soviet economy, which had not yet been significantly privatized or liberalized, imploded, while social, political, and interethnic tensions skyrocketed. According to one report, by late 1989, “only 11 percent of 989 consumer goods monitored by an economic research organization were readily obtainable. Almost entirely absent from stores were televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, most household cleaning products, furniture of all sorts, electric irons, razor blades, perfumes and cosmetics, school notebooks and pencils” (Taubman 2017, 450). Given this reality, by 1990 it had become clear to most people that socialism with a human face had failed.

Shock therapy: Lifting controls and privatizing resources

Looking for an alternative model, Russian intellectuals moved *en masse*, and in a very short period, to what was seen as the most successful alternative available—that of Western-style liberal democracy and free-market economics. The suddenness of this intellectual shift meant, however, that Russians were in many cases intellectually unprepared for what lay ahead, having only the slightest education in liberal theory and practice, and their understanding of democracy

and free markets was sometimes rather unsophisticated. They tended to view democracy as a system in which “democrats” held power and to be relatively unconcerned with issues of checks and balances (Sauvé 2019, 226). As for free markets, they tended toward the view that all that one had to do was enact economic freedom and all the country’s problems would be solved. Concern for the institutional underpinnings of a free-market economy were almost entirely absent.

Perhaps the first Soviet intellectual to unequivocally declare herself a believer in free markets was economist Larissa Piyasheva. “My views are based on the theories of the Chicago school, and I believe that all attempts to find a ‘third way’ [between socialism and capitalism] are headed for a dead end,” she wrote (Piyasheva 1991, 293). Journalist Igor Svinarenko described her views as follows: “Piyasheva talked a lot about the invisible hand... I couldn’t at all understand what kind of mechanism it was. But she kept on and on about this hand, which would immediately bring order everywhere, and that everyone would begin living a happy and rich life. I asked Piyasheva then, how could happiness just suddenly appear—after all, don’t needs and troubles always intensify at the start of any new capitalist period? She explained that problems occurred if you didn’t start out building the system correctly, but that if you did it right, there wouldn’t be any problems” (Koch and Svinarenko 2009, 193).

Such optimism was widespread among the liberal reformers who took power in Russia in the early 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin. One-time deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov, for instance, remarked that “I believed that our main job then was to kill communism. If we managed that, we thought that we would live like the Americans, maybe in six months, perhaps nine months. ... We thought things would work out in a short time” (Nelson and Kuzes 1995b, 141–142).

Underlying this optimism was a belief that Western economic and political models were products of universally valid social rules and could therefore be planted in Russia without much, if any, consideration of local conditions. As Pyotr Aven, Minister of Foreign Economic Relations from 1991 to 1992, put it: “There are no special countries. All countries from the point of view of an economist are the same” (Appel 2004, 167).

On 1 January 1992, the post-Soviet Russian government began a policy of rapid economic reform known as ‘shock therapy.’ Led by deputy prime minister Yegor Gaidar, this policy began by freeing prices on the vast majority of products and by removing most restrictions on private trade. The positive result was that goods began to appear once again in shops. The negative results included hyperinflation and a huge rise in crime and corruption. Between 1992 and 1996, Russia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by 40 percent, industrial production by 50 percent, and real wages by 26 percent (Kazakevitch 2010, 128). The sudden

appearance of an unregulated market provided enormous opportunities for organized crime to extort payments from new businesses. This in turn led to demands for a restoration of state regulation, which in turn created opportunities for corrupt officials to demand bribes in return for trading licenses or for withholding licenses from competitors (Åslund 1995, 143–145). Well-positioned individuals whose contact with state officials gave them preferential access to rare resources were able to become phenomenally rich almost overnight by purchasing the resources cheaply from the state and then exporting them at world market prices (Åslund 1995, 150, 169).

As for the privatization process that followed, most enterprises found their way into the hands of former managers or well-placed individuals who were able to exploit their position to buy valuable companies at rock-bottom prices (Freeland 2000, 87). A few acquired so much wealth in the process as to acquire the label of ‘oligarchs.’ These then used their newfound wealth to acquire political power, further corrupting the system as a whole.

Some liberals opposed shock therapy and proposed instead a form of ‘social liberalism.’ An example was the leader of the Yabloko Party, Grigory Yavlinsky, who argued that the “neoliberal-monetarist doctrine” did not fit Russia’s circumstances, because it “assumes the presence of a functioning market economy. ... The special feature of the economies of the countries in the former socialist camp are such that standard monetarist methods yield different results there than they do in a developed market economy” (Yavlinsky 1992, 10). According to Yavlinsky, freeing prices in a highly monopolized economy, with few small businesses and a lack of property rights and other free market institutions, was a recipe for inflation (Nelson and Kuzes 1995b, 95). “Earlier, Moscow fixed prices; now the monopolist does it,” he said (Nelson and Kuzes 1995a, 42). According to Yavlinsky, the government should have demonopolized and privatized before freeing prices.

Another point of difference between the shock therapists and the social liberals was their attitude towards democratic institutions, with the former often regarding them as an obstacle in the way of reform. Rather simplified, social liberalism went hand in hand with political liberalism, whereas free-market liberalism often went hand in hand with a type of liberal authoritarianism. This indicated once again how different aspects of classical liberalism have often not gone together well in Russia.

The basic conundrum was expressed in 1990 by the future head of privatization under Yeltsin, Anatoly Chubais. Chubais noted that “There is a fundamental contradiction between the aims of reform (the forming of a democratic economy and society) and the means of their achievement, including measures of an anti-democratic nature” (ASEN 1990). ‘Shocking’ reforms are

bound to have very negative consequences for many people. Democratic processes may therefore be unlikely to reform effectively, and perhaps not reform significantly at all.

Despite their declared favor for market liberalization, the shock therapists in some ways reflected their Marxist upbringing in that they tended to view economics as the substructure on which everything else depended. Liberalize economic activity, and everything else, including democracy, would naturally fall into place. As one prominent liberal intellectual, Igor Kliamkin, put it, “If we pretend that economic and political reforms advance in parallel, we know nothing (or don’t want to know) about the entirety of world history” (Kliamkin and Migranian 1989, 126). This logic dictated that anything which stood in the way of economic reform had to be resisted, including, if necessary, democracy.

Contemporary Russian liberalism

By 1993, popular opposition to shock therapy had grown considerably, and the Russian parliament sought to slow it down. In the face of this opposition, in October 1993 Yeltsin issued an illegal decree dissolving the parliament. In response, the parliament impeached him. Yeltsin, however, retained the support of the army and sent troops to blast the parliament into submission. That done, he then issued a new constitution that concentrated powers in the hands of the president. Most liberals applauded. But as Gaidar (1996, 252) noted, “It immediately became clear that the first casualty was democracy itself. On the morning of October 3, President Yeltsin was still only one of many players on the Russian scene. . . . On the morning of October 5, all the power in the country was in his hands. We had leapt from the gelatinous *dvoevlastie* [dual power] into a de facto authoritarian regime.”

A handful of contemporary liberals still stick to liberal authoritarianism. That attitude stems sometimes from a suspicion that Russian people are inherently reactionary and not to be trusted with power. An example is outspoken journalist Iuliya Latinina who argues that “It’s not enough to be a dictatorship, it’s necessary to be a good dictatorship, like in Singapore or Chile and not like in the Philippines or Haiti” (quoted in Gel’man 2010). This, though, is nowadays very much a minority view. Highly centralized power was acceptable as long as it was in liberal hands. For the past 20 years, however, it has been in the hands of Vladimir Putin, whose government has gradually pushed liberals out of public life and restricted civil liberties such as freedom of speech and association, especially since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This fact has convinced many in the liberal camp that it would be better to have a system with more checks and balances.

Consequently, a consensus has emerged among liberals in recent years in favor of replacing the presidential system created in 1993 with a parliamentary one. As journalist Vladimir Inozemtsev (2017, 8) comments: “The only way to deal with the current situation is to dismantle it completely—to make Russia a parliamentary instead of a presidential republic; to restore federalism in its true form and delegate powers to regional and local authorities.” Liberal political parties share this view. For instance, Yabloko (2016) declares that: “Fundamental political reform is necessary, changing the balance between the executive, the president, and the parliament in favor of the latter.”

The desire to change the balance of constitutional power reflects most liberals’ dislike of the Russian state, and represents a shift away from the historical preference for strong centralized state power as a necessary prerequisite of liberal reform. Nonetheless, a few so-called “systemic liberals” have chosen to continue working within the state system, particularly in the realm of economic policy. The most prominent of these is Alexei Kudrin, who was finance minister from 2000 to 2011, and head of the Accounts Chamber (in effect the chief auditor of Russian government expenditure) from 2018 to 2022. Kudrin has long been critical of the political and economic course pursued by the Russian government, arguing that heightened tensions with the West deprive Russia of much needed invested funds (Litvina 2017). Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, he called for reductions in defense spending, increased investments in health care and education, and the privatization of remaining state-owned industries (Lomskaya 2017). The Russian government has not followed his advice. Kudrin’s support of large-scale state investments in health care and education reveal him to be not a proponent of minimal government but rather someone who sees an important role for the state in creating the conditions for economic growth. This reflects a more general shift among Russian liberals, who have generally turned away from the radical free-market ideas of the early 1990s towards the precepts of a mixed market economy and social liberalism.

Until its dissolution in 2008, the main political force promoting classical economic liberalism was Union of Right Forces party, led by Nemtsov. Its 2001 manifesto stated that “Rights and individual freedoms have no sense or value where people lack the means to secure themselves and their families by honest labor and profitable enterprise on the basis of private property, where the institution of private property is not recognized and respected... The liberal response to this challenge consists in affirming property rights as sacred and inviolable” (Soiuz pravyykh sil 2002, 484).

Few voices can now be heard speaking of property as sacred and inviolable. Political activist and former world chess champion Gary Kasparov (2015, 150) remarks that “those like me who favor free markets and an open, Western-leaning

society, learned to accept the need for the social and economic stability programs touted by the left.” Likewise, exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky (2020, 57) comments that “Russia must say goodbye to the dream of ‘a small state.’” Khodorkovsky advocates for social supports to be maintained or raised (*ibid.*, 62). “It’s utopian to imagine that one can come to power by democratic means by proposing a right wing, even extreme right, partly libertarian agenda, advertising the charms of a ‘small state’ and the potential of the ‘free market,’” he says (65).

This shift reflects an understanding that the negative experience of the 1990s has thoroughly damaged the popular appeal of free-market ideas. While Russia’s economic reformers did manage to create the basis of a market economy, for many Russians this achievement involved personal hardship from hyperinflation, skyrocketing crime rates, and the like. This hardship discredited both liberals and liberalism in the eyes of the great majority of the Russian population.

Worsening Russian-Western relations are another factor standing in the way of a liberal recovery. Russian liberalism’s strong association with Westernism means that as tensions with the West have increased, popular dislike of Russian liberals has risen too, particularly because of the tendency of some liberals to take the West’s side in its struggles with the Russian Federation. This became particularly noticeable following the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea. For many liberals, the Maidan Revolution’s talk of making a ‘civilizational choice’ in favor of the West exactly reflected their own aspirations. They therefore supported it, condemned the annexation of Crimea, and opposed the anti-Maidan protests that erupted in Donbass. In liberals’ eyes, the problem was not much that the annexation of Crimea was a breach of Ukrainian sovereignty as that it led to a collapse in Russia’s relations with the West, destroying their dream of a Western future for Russia. As Yavlinsky put it, “The main consequence of the current policy towards Ukraine is the strengthening of Russia’s course as a non-European country” (quoted in Golovchenko 2018, 202).

This attitude put such liberals in sharp opposition to the bulk of the Russian people, nearly all of whom welcomed the annexation of Crimea. They have suffered the political consequences. As a member of Yabloko’s political committee, Anatoly Rodionov, told his colleagues during a party debate on the topic: “Russian society has said ‘No, Crimea is ours, and Yabloko is not ours.’ You understand, this is what has happened. We shouldn’t fool ourselves. We have crossed a red line separating society’s understanding...from society’s hostility. ... I think there’s been a sort of ethical glitch. We’ve taken the enemy’s side” (Redchenko 2017, 218).

Concluding remarks

In Russia, those who have been considered ‘liberal’ have generally adhered to certain key tenets of classical liberal theory, above all a belief in the rule of law and expanded civil liberties. But they have varied considerably in their adherence to other key tenets, such as representative government, free markets, and reluctance about government provision of services. Consequently, classical liberals in the pure sense have been rare. When large-scale liberalization has occurred, such as the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and Gorbachev’s perestroika in the 1980s, it has been initiated by the state for reasons that have had little or anything to do with classical liberal theory. The one exception is the economic reforms enacted by Russian liberals under Yeltsin in the early 1990s. This was probably the only period in Russian history when those governing the country professed classical liberalism across the spectrum. Even then, though, liberals’ commitment to democracy was rather weaker in practice than it was in theory. Furthermore, the perceived negative consequences of their policies have served to discredit them ever since. As Gulnaz Sharafutdinova wrote in 2020: “The widely shared belief that the Russia of the 1990s was a place of disorder, criminality, impoverishment, and a very weak, collapsing state, functions today as a cognitive frame that colors political imagination and shapes Russian citizens’ political judgment. This frame underpins societal fears of liberal and any other reforms and shapes popular preferences for stability and non-revolutionary political change” (Sharafutdinova 2020, 105–106).

Liberalism—from classical to social—has not fared well in Russia. By the time of writing, in the midst of Russia’s war in Ukraine, Putin’s government has largely driven liberals either into silence or into exile. The government has forced liberal civil society organizations, many of which have depended on foreign funding, to register as ‘foreign agents’ and made it increasingly hard for them to operate. The government has also forced liberal media outlets such as the *Novaia Gazeta* newspaper and the *Ekho Moskvy* radio station to shut down, and has arrested some critics of the war in Ukraine.

Some unexpected event may occur that once again breathes life into the liberal cause. As things stand, though, Russian liberalism is in a very poor condition, repressed by the state and despised by most of the Russian people. As one survey concludes, the words most associated with liberalism in Russian eyes are: “West, transition, chaos, oligarchs, foreign, unpatriotic, non-conformists, artists, and no respect for Russia’s values, traditions and history” (Simionov and Tiganasu 2018, 142).

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