Eighteenth-century Russia saw a rapid and wide-ranging assimilation of West European techniques and values, including a heightened appreciation of classical antiquity, which was increasingly perceived not simply as a preparation for Christianity but as an impressive civilization in its own right. One of the best-read Russians of his day, Aleksandr Radishchev was attracted to ancient Greece and Rome from his student days at Leipzig University (1767-71) to the last years of his life. His interest extended to all phases of that rich epoch—its literatures, social development, despots, cycles of growth, corruption and decay, its heroes and martyrs in the cause of liberty.

We learn of Radishchev's early interest in the classics from his biography of an older classmate in Leipzig, Theodor Vasil'evich Ushakov, who had left a promising career in St. Petersburg's bureaucracy and the protection of one of Catherine's favorites, Privy Councillor Grigorii Nikolaevich Teplov, to study at the foreign university. Ushakov was something of a model for the young Radishchev and perhaps the high-minded and determined former official who rejected a career of ease and privilege—and who defied the brutal Russian supervisor of Catherine II's protégés in Leipzig—may be considered the earliest prototype of the Russian intelligentsia.

Ushakov drew strength from reading Latin classics—"not the flatters of the Augusti and the fawners upon Maecenases attracted him, but Cicero thundering against Catalina, and the biting Satyricon which did not spare Nero." These were readings in addition to the course work. The rising sun "often found him conversing with the Romans." Radishchev found him filled with Romans' spirit of freedom and resilience, and the student leader was "an example of courage" for his classmates and for Radishchev "my teacher in fortitude." His bravery while dying in physical agony could be compared to Socrates, whose "drinking poison before his friends best of all taught them the lesson which he could not in his whole life." Radishchev regretted that he could not treat Ushakov "as Tacitus had treated Agricola."1

Although Radishchev, like his Russian and West European contemporaries,

was less drawn to ancient Greece than to Rome,² his first published work concerned ancient Greece. In 1773, soon after his college years, he translated Abbé Gabriel Bonnot de Mably's Observations sur l'histoire de la Grèce: ou des causes de la prospérité et des malheurs des Grecs in the 1766 edition.³ The historical lessons which Mably expounded were congenial to Radishchev and most of them were to reappear in Radishchev's polemical writings as well as his unfinished Historical Poem, probably written in the last year of his life: happiness comes only through virtue, particularly civic virtue or service to the community; those who resort to greed and selfishness, whether peoples or despots, degenerate and bring ruin.

In the case of Sparta, a great Law-giver, Lycurgus, ended a lawless condition in which the Spartans had confused licence and liberty. In the other Greek states, "always government given over by turns to tyranny or anarchy went with zeal from one extreme to the other." Lycurgus "forced the Lacedaemonians to be wise and happy" by prohibiting accumulation of wealth and "the luxury always linked with it." Lycurgus' laws—"exceeding in wisdom all laws given to men"—were kept for six hundred years with the greatest fidelity: "What other people, so attached to virtue as the Spartans, gave examples so great, so constant in moderation, patience, courage, magnanimity, restraint, justice, scorn for wealth and love of liberty and fatherland?"⁴

Mably did not ignore the Spartans' oppression of the helots, but neither did he condemn it. Radishchev accepted Mably's presentation. Many of his contemporaries simply suppressed any consciousness of Spartan brutality toward helots.⁵ Most philosophes focused their attention on the Spartans' admirable scorn for luxury, a scorn which enabled them to escape the corruption which brings despotism and slavery.

². "Until the Hellenism of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Greek authors were known but were less frequently turned to as sources than Roman. Virgil not Homer was the model for the classicist epic ... not Theocritus, but Virgil again, was assumed to be the greatest ecologic poet ... Seneca not Aeschylus or Euripides was deemed the flower of classical tragedy; Juvenal was to be consulted on satire, Martial on the epigram, Tibullus on the elegy ... Horace dominated the Lyric." Harold B. Segel, "Classicism and Classical Antiquity in Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature," in J. G. Garrard, ed., The Eighteenth century in Russia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 49-71, esp. p. 55. See also Hans Rothe, "Marginalien zum 'griechischen Geschmack' in Russland 1780-1820," Festschrift für Margarete Woltner zum 70. Geburtstag (Heidelberg: Carl Winter-Universitätsverlag, 1967), pp. 205-18.


⁴. Ibid., pp. 234, 235, 237, 326.

⁵. For a recent scholarly survey of the enduring fascination of Sparta, see Elizabeth Rawson, The Spartan Tradition in European Thought (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), esp. chs. 15 and 16, "France in the eighteenth century," pp. 220-67. She finds that the later eighteenth century in France was "the great age of modern laconomaniac," with the two main figures Montesquieu and Rousseau. Ibid., p. 227.