The Russian language has two words to convey the concept of enlightenment in the generic sense: prosvetitel'stvo and prosveshchenie, which share the root svet, indicating light. In common parlance the two are frequently used interchangeably. Two specific shadings of the concept are, however, expressed by the word prosveshchenie exclusively. The first is that of public education, the Ministerstvo Prosveshcheniiia of Russian/Soviet institutional lineage perhaps serving as the most prominent instance. The second, and more relevant to the purposes of this survey, is that of the phase of eighteenth-century European intellectual history known as the Enlightenment, conventionally rendered in Russian as vek or epokha prosveshcheniiia. With its suggestion of light, the term reveals a usage parallel to that of Central and West European languages: die Aufklärung, l’illuminismo, le siècle des lumières, the Enlightenment.

Traditionally, Russian as well as Western scholars have been reluctant to apply the term Enlightenment in its more restrictive second sense to eighteenth-century Russia, preferring instead to confine its application to lands west of the Elbe. Since World War II, however, Soviet scholars have manifested a strong penchant for identifying a Russian Enlightenment, labelling it a russkoe prosveshchenie in order to establish parity with its Western counterpart. Placed within the same chronological parameters as its better-known counterpart, it has been endowed with similar qualities, which serve to distinguish it from preceding periods of Russian intellectual history. And since there can be no Russian Enlightenment without promoters of enlightenment, much Soviet investigation of eighteenth-century Russia has focused on the search for enlighteners [prosvetiteli], Russian equivalents to Voltaire, Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach and other paladins of the Western Enlightenment. Predictably, their quest has not proven futile, although their findings have given rise to controversy concerning the precise characteristics a Russian enlightener—and the Russian Enlightenment, for that matter—should exhibit.

Not surprisingly, the frame of reference and categories utilized by Soviet scholars are derived from the tenets of Marxism-Leninism. Friedrich Engels

*The author would like to thank Professors Samuel Baron and George V. Taylor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Professor Marc Raeff of Columbia University for their careful and considerate reading of preliminary versions of this article.
purported to detect in the Enlightenment two distinct threads, one philo-
sophical and the other political. The philosophical was materialism, and its
origins could be traced back to the British thinkers of the late sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries: to Bacon, Hobbes and Locke. A decisive step forward
was achieved in mid-eighteenth-century France, where the *philosophes* aban-
doned idealism once and for all for the sake of mechanical materialism,
thus paving the way for the discovery of dialectical materialism in the next
century.¹ Unwilling or unable to break cleanly with the religious outlook
inherited from the Middle Ages, the *philosophes* expressed their materialist
philosophy in cautious religious terminology, through the medium of deism,
described by Marx as a transitional form bridging theism and true atheism.²
This philosophical revolution, in its turn, prepared the ground for the classic
bourgeois political revolution of modern times, the French Revolution.

A precondition for the success of these two revolutions was the rise of
capitalism, that socio-economic formation from which emerged philosophical
materialism and bourgeois democracy. Rightly or wrongly, Marx assumed di-
rect correlations between the rise of capitalism and the rise of the bour-
goisie, and between the bourgeoisie and the enunciation of philosophical
materialism, the intellectual underpinning of the Enlightenment. As the ter-
minology itself reveals, Marx’s analysis was drawn from the economic expe-
rience of Great Britain and the political experience of France, with the politics
crowning the economics. Marx made no attempt to extend his analysis to
any other part of Europe. Nowhere, implicitly or explicitly, did he refer to
a German contribution to the Enlightenment, much less a Russian contri-
bution or Russian enlighteners. Marx’s Enlightenment was exclusively a
French affair.

It fell to the writing of V. I. Lenin to fill the gap by identifying Russian
participants in the schema. Ostensibly it was the mid-nineteenth-century
Russian liberal critic of the peasant emancipation Skaldin (F. P. Elenev)
whom Lenin sketched in the following manner:

By the nature of his views, Skaldin may be termed a bourgeois enlight-
ener *[prosvetitel’]*. His opinions resemble quite closely those of the
eighteenth-century physiocrats (allowing of course for corresponding re-
fraction through the prism of Russian conditions); the general “enlight-
ened” nature of the “legacy” of the [eighteen] sixties is reflected in him

¹. See Engels, “*Anti-Dühring*” [Anti-diuring], in Karl Marks and Fridrikh Engel’s, *Pol-
noe sobranie sochinenii*, 2nd ed., 49 vols. (Moscow: Gos. izd. politicheskoi literatury,
1955-74), XX, 17, 346; see also IV, 426 and XIX, 189-92.
². Karl Marx, “*The Holy Family [Sviatoe semelstvo]*,”” in *ibid.*, II, 144. For a general
overview of the perspective of Marx and Engels on the Enlightenment, which stresses
their concern with materialism, consult Guy Besse, “Marx, Engels et le XVIIIe siècle fran-
çais,” in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 24 (1963), 155-70.