ARTICLES/СТАТЬИ

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THOUGHTS ON THE ENLIGHTENMENT 
AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN RUSSIA

Historians of communism and the former Soviet Union intuitively trace the origins of modern revolutionary and totalitarian ideologies back to Enlightenment thought. In Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization, Stephen Kotkin writes:

The main reason the USSR needs to be incorporated into European history is that Stalinism constituted a quintessential Enlightenment utopia, an attempt, via the instrumentality of the state, to impose a rational ordering on society, while at the same time overcoming the wrenching class divisions brought about by nineteenth-century industrialization. That attempt, in turn, was rooted in a tradition of urban-modeled, socially oriented utopias that helped make the Enlightenment possible. Magnitogorsk had very deep roots.¹

Abbott Gleason invokes a similar connection in Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War:

Along with the pervasive loss of faith in the statist Left has come, in recent years, a more subtle loss of faith in revolutions to accomplish major and lasting social change in the world, especially through the application of state power. This kind of disillusion is connected to the loss of faith in “modernist” eschatologies more broadly, especially among intellectuals, and their loss of faith in the historical European Enlightenment. There is presumably a connection between the collapse of political, especially leftist utopias and the recrudescence, around the world, of fundamentalisms of all kinds. If there is

no “political” utopia in the future, there must be a golden age in the past that can redeem individual lives or revitalize the world.2

To a post-Gulag, post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima mind, Enlightenment ideas about open-ended progress, human perfectibility, and the natural harmony of the universe suggest an attitude of arrogance and optimism contradicted by harsh historical reality.

Such judgments echo widely among scholars of modern Europe and Russia, but they do not do justice to either “the Enlightenment” or its eighteenth-century practitioners. Any number of objections can be raised, one of the most obvious being the removal of the Enlightenment from its old regime social and political context. “Modernist” readings of the Enlightenment tend to exaggerate its utopianism and reliance on reason, and they almost always ignore the religious, or at least providential, sensibilities of many Enlightenment thinkers. Even if the rationalist instrumentalism described by Kotkin and Gleason is traceable back to Enlightenment ideas, it in no way represents an essential Enlightenment principle. Regardless of how scholars interpret the Enlightenment, the instrumentalist trajectory is just one possibility in a multifaceted cultural phenomenon.

There are, of course, good reasons to read the Enlightenment in a modernist vein. Almost any educated person in today’s wider “European” world — Anglo-American, Latino, or European (including Russian European) — recognizes that he or she is a child of the Enlightenment. Broadly cherished features of European or “Western” modernity — civil liberties, legal equality, social mobility, economic opportunity, respect for the dignity of the individual human being, and liberal democratic government — can in their current articulations be traced back to Enlightenment thought. Across the globe, the Enlightenment heritage of modern liberal democracy is undeniable. Still, as scholars long have recognized, the notion of a single Enlightenment with an identifiable outcome or trajectory of development is highly problematic. Historians therefore speak of multiple Enlightenments: an Early Enlightenment, a Late Enlightenment, a Radical Enlightenment, a moderate mainstream Enlightenment, a Counter-Enlightenment, a High Enlightenment, a popular Enlightenment, national Enlightenment(s), religious Enlightenment(s), and of course a form of monarchy referred to as enlightened absolutism. Often equated with “philosophical modernity” in a European context, the Enlightenment defies