Abbott Gleason on Discovering Russia

Russia became a focal point of my interests in my sophomore year. Eliot House for some reason was full of professors interested in Russian things, one of numerous clusters of people with common interests in the Harvard house system. No doubt the cluster had taken shape gradually over several years. There was the great literary critic, Renato Poggioli; there was my future friend, Adam Ulam, then embarking on the remarkable career that would make him such a celebrated student of twentieth century Russian and Soviet history and international relations; there was Hugh McLean who wrote on nineteenth-century Russian literature. All of these were then unmarried, so I and my roommates saw them often at dinner in Eliot House. Most immediately for me then, there was James Billington, who became my tutor for several years and had a large impact on my developing Russian interests. But he was married, so we saw him socially only at occasional lunches or when he invited us over to his house, which he generously did from time to time.

My interest in Russia developed on two tracks. The Cold war had made Soviet-American relations a constant subject of family conversation, although my father was always the soul of discretion about that he told his family. But then I was overwhelmed by Russian literature in college, particularly by Dostoevsky and by James Billington's mysterioso skill as a lecturer. He was melodramatic on the podium, occasionally dropping his voice to a whisper, as he intimated that he was approaching some finally inexpressible romantic truth. I joked about him with my roommates, but he had snared me. And the other Russianists in Eliot House fanned the flames. The subject was vast and mysterious. I got more and more deeply involved. Russia had everything I then needed: underdogs, mystical philosophy, revolutionary terrorism, extremes of wealth and poverty and suffering. "God how sad our Russia is," remarked Pushkin, after reading a notorious critique of Russia by his famous friend, Peter Chaadaev. I began, not very systematically, to learn the language.

Adam Ulam was a man of considerable size and leonine good looks. He was switching his research interests from English socialism to Soviet politics and foreign policy when I met him--leaving, he liked to say, an empire in decline for one on the ascendant. As I later learned he could be a devoted friend, but he was awe-inspiring to me as an undergraduate, and I didn't get to know him very well. I do have a vivid memory of him, rather full of wine, shaking his head and saying over and over again, "no! no!" at a fancy Eliot House dinner where George F. Kennan was the speaker. Kennan, as sometimes was his wont, was suggesting that Americans might not be morally up to their increasingly awesome global responsibilities, a view from which Adam dissented vigorously. Adam had a low tolerance for what he regarded as pious or moralistic rhetoric, and Kerman's earnest style offended Adam's worldliness.

Martin Malia, the historian, probably paid more attention to the undergraduates than any of his distinguished colleagues, a tendency he decisively reversed in later years. He was just completing his great biography of Alexander Herzen, which was a landmark in the cultural history of Russia and one of the best books ever written in English about Russia. Malia was then far more liberal than he became after enduring the `sixties on the Berkeley campus, but he was a Catholic who believed in natural law, and he was witty and compelling in debate, and minded to teach us how little we knew about European history.

I encountered James Billington in the classroom as well as over the lunch table. He was handsome and charismatic and outfitted himself in a self-conscious aura of Russianness in a way that neither Ulam nor Malia nor any of the others did. He chose to regard our group of roommates as radical Russian intellectuals of the nineteenth century and was in the habit of asking us the famous questions

of that day: "what is to be done?" and "who is to blame?" This treatment created a mix of amusement, interest and disapproval in our group, most of which had a much more contemporary notion of identity in mind, which anticipated the ideas of the American 1960s rather than harking back to the Russian 1860s. Billington's jocular treatment of us may nevertheless have supplied me with the germ of the comparison I later made between the two eras in my second book, Young Russia. Billington's lectures on the cultural history of Russia pulled me deep into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Billington was then engaged in the book that became his masterpiece, a giant canvas treating the early modern and modern phases of Russian culture, entitled The Icon and the Axe, eventually published several years after I had graduated from college. Because Billington's interests were at that time (1959-60) focused on the spiritual contours of Russian culture among the mystically inclined romantics of the reign of Alexander 1, he suggested to me for an honors thesis a rather specialized and difficult topic in which he was interested: the influence of a Catholic counter-revolutionary Bavarian philosopher named Franz Xavier von Baader on a variety of Russian contacts around the time of the defeat of Napoleon. Baader was an important early figure in the transmission of German anti-revolutionary messianism to Russia. I agreed to the topic because of its general significance, without knowing to what I was agreeing, and was struggling with the topic early in my senior year. At just that point, I had the great good fortune to meet a young Polish scholar named Andrzej Walicki who was spending the semester at Harvard. He was at that time twenty-nine and I was twenty, but he was considerably more than nine years ahead of me in his reading, his focus on Russian intellectual history, and his methodological maturity. He had his first book out in Poland, and he was dividing his time between Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley in a kind of postdoctoral year. It was his first trip to the United States. He was tall, gawky, shy and a bit ill at ease upon first acquaintance, but we soon became good friends.

Abbot Gleason on writing Young Russia

As the Vietnam War drew to its dreadful close, the Brown campus nevertheless continued to be highly political, with a constant round of teach-ins and political speeches. Despite my developing revulsion at politics, I was still active on campus, but I noticed myself moving steadily away from the real Left into the sort of liberal position that I still occupy. I had generally occupied the right wing of the Left in the political position of the early `seventies, attacking the war, but basing my criticism on the proposition that George Kennan's policy of Containment could not be applied mechanically in Asia, scarcely a radical view. I was embarrassed in the company of colleagues who continued to assert what they thought of as revolutionary Marxist points of view, while living thoroughly privileged and tranquil bourgeois lives. My embarrassment at their unconscious hypocrisy was simultaneously permeated with guilt at my moderation and abandonment of critical spirit. A reaction against the most extreme elements of the `sixties was beginning to take shape all around us, and I was as usual divided. Part of me was simply appalled at the Weather Underground and part of me was afraid of what an anti-`sixties reaction would be like. My fears were to be amply justified.

Radical students and faculty passed around all sorts of books about American malfeasance and oppression, and of course male oppression of women as well. There was Norman O. Brown's Life against Death and Herbert Marcuse's One Dimensional Man. The point of "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" was that women didn't need men to have rewarding sex. Particularly for a historian of Russia like me, it was easy to draw analogies between what was happening around us and the beginnings of the Russian revolutionary movement a century earlier. The radical Russians in those days had books like that too, that were often more talked about than read, but that the hip were required to know about. And clothes were key symbols of who you were. Long hair and dark glasses were de rigueur at radical student parties in the Russian 1860s too, and working class (peasant) outfits. Then as now, radical professors mentored radical students. Who were the Marxes and Marcuses of the Russian 1860s? What was revolutionary social life like? The speed with which a radical left appeared after the Crimean War approximated the radicalization I had just lived through during the Vietnam War.

The comparisons I found myself using in class more and more--and then backtracking, trying not to over-generalize or collapse back into standup routines or troll for easy laughs--eventually led to a book about those parallels. Young Russia was a long essay which talked about the radicalization of Russia in the 1860s, as seen through the lens of the radicalization of the U.S. in the 1960s, as best I could discern it while it was unfolding. The book was a lot of fun to write and it was published and got me that more-or-less total job security, called "tenure." In the process of writing it I consciously tried to make my style more colloquial and less academic; I was helped in doing that by the services of one of the best editors around, Elisabeth Sifton, then of Viking Press, earlier a classmate of mine at Harvard. She helped me cut my first draft of the book by almost twenty percent and her shrewd guidance helped me to learn that I was a better raconteur than an analyst, but the two could really be combined, rather than being mutually exclusive as I had tended to assume. I tried to get more Orwell into my style and less Henry James.

Writing a book of this type raised, especially in those days, the issue of objectivity. Wasn't I merely writing a little essay which might be amusing, at best, but wasn't really history? By linking the two eras, wasn't I distorting "the facts"? My tactic, for better or for worse, was to deal with the objectivity question by stressing that I was not objective, and by admitting the personality and politics of the author as a factor in the book's viewpoint. By admitting one layer of subjectivity, of course, I was not dealing with the question of either unconscious or hidden motives at deeper levels. American

historians of Russia--especially writing during the Cold War--often had anti-utopian motives, for example, the semi-conscious goal of showing what happened when people who wanted to change society abandoned traditional ethical restraints. I was almost certainly part of that tendency, although I only gradually realized it--for the first time, vividly, during a lecture on Catherine the Great, of all people. In the years since then, writing more or less openly intended to demonize the Russian revolutionary movement has become quite acceptable, even de rigueur.

But I didn't want my account to appear simply as an attack on the Left or straightforwardly against utopianism. I was afraid that such an account would simply constitute a veiled defense of the existing order, something I was very anxious not to write. I wanted to be sure to saddle the Russian imperial government and society with their share of the responsibility for the extravagance of the Russian Revolution and its remarkable cast of characters. And this historical effort was connected to my personal desire to balance my critique of the radical Left in the United States with a critique of American society and official American policy that stemmed from my ambivalent attitude toward my own times. But what an involved, elaborate point of view. God, I used to say to myself. Do you have to qualify everything like this? Can't you make even one simple, straightforward statement about something?

At the time, then, I found a kind of relief in turning the times I was living through into a history book. But deep down I felt a little uneasy about it. I was not responding to the ethical challenges of my faltering belief in radical egalitarianism, but turning those challenges into an interesting game at which my cleverness helped me to excel. I found that I was beginning to feel quite at home in academia, which made me uneasy. I called the book Young Russia, but in looking back it is clear that I had begun to condescend a bit to youthful follies, although I consciously tried not to. I was becoming a middle-aged American writing about "young Russians" of a century ago. At times my own youth seemed almost as far away.