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Vladislav Zubok. *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. 451 S. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03344-3.

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V. Zubok: Zhivago's Children

One of the most striking characteristics of recent scholarship on postwar Soviet history is the prominence of generational tropes. Nearly two decades after the Soviet human-rights activist Ludmilla Alexeyeva coined the epithet âthaw generationâ to describe friends and colleagues who were galvanized by Nikita Khrushchevâs reforms, scholars have proposed a number of alternate labels to underscore the important social and cultural changes that occurred in the Soviet Union after 1945: âSputnik generation,â âStalinâs last generation,â and âlast Soviet generation,â among others. Ludmilla Alexeyeva / Paul Goldberg, The Thaw Generation. Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era, Pittsburgh, 1993; Donald J. Raleigh, Russiaâs Sputnik Generation. Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives, Bloomington 2006; Juliane FÃ¼rst, Stalinâs Last Generation. Post-War Soviet Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism, Oxford, forthcoming in 2010; and Alexei Yurchak, Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation, Princeton, 2005

Perhaps the most elegant contribution to this catalog of generational labels comes from Vladislav Zubok, who has titled his engrossing and epic history of the late-Soviet intelligentsia Zhivagoâs Children. The title has two meanings. It refers narrowly to the hundreds of people who gathered in the village of Peredelkino on June 2, 1960 to attend the funeral of the writer Boris Pasternak. Because Pasternak had been in official disgrace since the controversies surrounding the publication of Doctor Zhivago in Italy in 1957 and the Nobel Prize in 1958, and because his death had merited little mention in the Soviet media, Zubok calls the public outpouring at his funeral âthe first sizable demonstration of unofficial civic solidarity in Soviet Russiaâ (p. 19).

Zubok also uses the title to refer to a broader group: members of the intelligentsia who began, in the postwar years, to strive for âintellectual and cultural emancipationâ and to identify with âhumanist individualismâ (pp. 19-20). In Zubokâs formulation, Zhivagoâs children included the physicists Andrei Sakharov and Lev Landau; the sociologist Boris Grushin; the journalist Anatoly Agranovsky; the historian (and advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev) Anatoly Cherniaev; the poets David Samoilov, Boris Slutsky, and Joseph Brodsky; the bard

Bulat Okudzhava; the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich; the theater directors Yuri Liubimov and Oleg Yefremov; and many others.

By virtue of their birthdates, which ranged from the final years of the tsarist period to the eve of the Second World War, these individuals lacked formative, intimate contact with the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. Yet Zubok argues that they came to view âthemselves as the descendants of the great cultural and moral tradition that Pasternak, his protagonist Yuri Zhivago, and his milieu embodiedâ (p. 20). Like their forefathers prior to 1917, Zhivagoâs children were bound by ârevolutionary-romantic idealismâ (p. 356) and by a sense of duty to spread enlightenment. They were not a chronological generation, but a philosophical cohort that traced its moral and spiritual ancestry to the pre-Soviet intelligentsia.

As a group, Zhivagoâs children embodied one of the chief myths of the late-Soviet intelligentsia: namely, that the violence of revolution and civil war, the bittersweet refuge of emigration, and the terror of Stalinism interrupted the noble intellectual and cultural traditions of the past. After Stalinâs death, it was possible to reconstitute an authentic intelligentsia only because its ideals were indestructible, even if the people who bore them were not. It also helped that a few members of pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, like the writers Ilya Ehrenburg and Pasternak, and the scholar Dmitry Likhachev, survived against all odds. They were vessels of an uncorrupted past.

As Zubok notes, there is much that is lacking in this view of the intelligentsia. Even during the 1930s, many cultural figures found common ground with Soviet power, particularly in the latterâs reverence for the classics of Russian literature, its promotion of conventional artistic forms, and its commitment to mass enlightenment through education. And like its pre-revolutionary counterpart, the postwar intelligentsia was hardly monolithic in outlook. Indeed, Zubok is most incisive when describing the less benevolent characteristics of the intelligentsia, like the anti-Semitism and xenophobia espoused by the former Ã©migrÃ© professor Alexander Kazem-Bek, the journalist Ivan Shvetsov, and the dissident writer and Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn. (If Zubokâs book promotes a more balanced understanding of Solzhenitsyn than the near hagiographic image that predominates in the West, it will have been well worth the effort.) Ehrenburg and the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko (author of âBabi Yarâ) often denounced anti-Semitism and xenophobic Russian nationalism as a betrayal of the old ideals of the intelligentsia. Yet anti-Semites among the intelligentsia had to look no further than Fyodor Dostoevsky and Ivan Bunin for their intellectual roots (pp. 226-58). Without question, there were many black sheep in Yuri Zhivagoâs extended family.

Nevertheless, the central figures in Zubokâs book were at the opposite end of the cultural and political spectrum. They were devotees of American jazz and fashion. They idolized Van Cliburn and Yves Montand. They read translations of Ernest Hemingway and Erich-Maria Remarque. And they toted copies of the most daring literary journal of the 1950s and 60s, Novyi mir (New World). Politically, they were a mixed bag. Some were western-style liberals who came to despise all things Soviet. Many others managed to fission their enduring commitment to socialism from their critical views of Soviet politics.

Zubok argues that this outward-looking, politically progressive cohort played a central role in the collapse of communism. After having their hopes for a more tolerant political system dashed by the vicissitudes of Khrushchevâs thaw and Brezhnevâs soft repression, Zhivagoâs children cast their lot with the young reformer Gorbachev. To help revitalize the Soviet system, Gorbachev granted them the âautonomy to create and the freedom to speak and engage in civic activitiesâ (p. 357). And with these newfound liberties, Zhivagoâs children helped destroy both the communist system and, unwittingly, their own raison dâÃªtre.

Of course, it does not take a Marxist to see that there was a dialectical quality to the fate of Zhivagoâs children. Like the candle that flares up before going out, Zhivagoâs children appeared to be ascendant at the moment of their ruin. Paradoxically, they perished not because of revolutionary violence or Stalinist terror, but because of the democratization for which they had long pined, and because of the realities of a free-market economy about which they were largely ignorant.

Zubokâs book thus has all the makings of a tragedy. But it is uncertain whether Zubok sees the demise of the intelligentsia as something to be mourned, or whether he views the intelligentsia as a âhistorical anachronismâ whose very existence stemmed from Russiaâs political backwardness (p. 360). This debate about the intelligentsia, which has only just begun, will likely persist for a very long time. Scholars of Russia and the Soviet Union â now blessed with the new and elegant generational label, Zhivago's children â will have Zubok's fine book to thank for that.

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