



## IN MEMORIAM

Martin E. Malia  
Professor of History, Emeritus  
Berkeley  
1924 — 2004

Martin E. Malia, distinguished historian of Russia and shrewd interpreter of the political dynamics of the modern world, died on November 19, 2004, at the age of 80, in a convalescent hospital in Oakland, California.

Malia was born on March 14, 1924, in Springfield, Massachusetts, but grew up in Hamden, Connecticut, where he attended public schools. In 1941 he entered Yale University. The following year he enlisted in the Navy V-12 Program, which assigned him to remain at Yale under an accelerated, year-round schedule, enabling him to graduate in January 1944. He majored in French, a language he had begun to study in high school. With his remarkable gift for languages he attained total fluency as well as a broad knowledge of French literature. He also began the study of Russian, though in a wretchedly designed course.

After graduation Malia attended Midshipmen's School at Cornell University, was duly commissioned ensign, and assigned to learn Russian more seriously at the Navy Language School in Boulder, Colorado. Completing the course early in 1945, he was sent to Dutch Harbor, Alaska, where he acted as liaison officer with Soviet cargo ships plying between Siberian and American ports. Wartime circumstances made it possible for Martin to have frank conversations, often lubricated with vodka, with Soviet officers, many of whom were disaffected from the Stalin regime. They told him about such things as the terrible forced labor camp at Kolyma. Thus before he had seriously studied Russian history, Martin was well insulated against any illusions about Soviet realities.

Following demobilization Martin pursued graduate study at Harvard University, soon moving from Russian literature to history. His chief mentor became Michael Karpovich, from whom he assimilated a "sane," dispassionate view of the Russian past, avoiding excesses of either right or left. Karpovich believed that the difference between Russia and the West was one of degree, not of kind, an idea Martin later developed and expanded as the "cultural gradient." Malia also became friendly with Isaiah Berlin, who visited at Harvard during this period. Berlin and Karpovich helped direct Martin's interest toward Alexander Herzen, who became the subject of his dissertation and first book. Another important influence was Crane Brinton, who helped engage Martin in broader, quasi-global issues of historical development.

Contacts made in France led to a critical event in Martin's life: he was accepted as the first American *élève étranger* at the *École Normale Supérieure* and spent two formative years at that ultra-elite institution. Several of his fellow students later became leading figures in French intellectual life. Most of them were then communists, and Martin was thus challenged to think through the big questions of socialism, class struggle, historical destiny, and the Russian Revolution, these set against what he had learned from his Navy experiences. For a time he became something like an anti-Soviet Marxist. Most of all, he developed a remarkable cultural and intellectual breadth.

During this time Martin finished his dissertation, received the doctorate in 1951 and was appointed instructor at Harvard. Martin was given very responsible assignments, including a pioneering course on Russian history in the Soviet period and later the standard course on Renaissance and Reformation. In 1955 Martin took leave and accepted an assignment to be sent to the USSR as representative of the Library of Congress to negotiate book exchanges. It was his first trip to Russia, and he made the most of it, not only in his official capacity. He traveled widely and met many people not officially designated to deal with him, some famous, like Boris Pasternak.

Back at Harvard, Martin began transforming his dissertation into the celebrated book on Herzen. It was far from ready for publication, however. He was therefore passed over for permanent appointment at Harvard despite Karpovich's recommendation and instead accepted a tenured appointment at the University of California, Berkeley (1958). Though at first he felt exiled, he later concluded that he was freer and better off at Berkeley, with more stimulating colleagues. Martin and Nicholas Riasanovsky together inaugurated a famous course in Russian intellectual history. Martin also kept up his French connections, beginning with a teaching Fulbright Fellowship at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, an assignment later repeated.

In 1962 Martin received a Guggenheim Fellowship and made another extended trip to Russia, ostensibly to work in archives on a book about the intelligentsia. But again he spent much of his time meeting prominent figures, among them Kornei Chukovskii and Anna Akhmatova. His boldness eventually exceeded the limits of the authorities' tolerance. He was denounced in Pravda and subsequently denied further access to the country. He did not revisit Russia until 1988. On the way home he made his first contacts in Poland, relationships that proved fruitful later.

During the "Free Speech" turmoil of the 1960s Martin became actively engaged, concerned, as he later put it, by the "collapse of the University." In 1968 he witnessed similar events in Paris and fitted both scenes into a general theory of failed revolutions. All this activity deflected Martin from the planned book on the intelligentsia, and he was further diverted by the intense preparation required to teach a general course on European intellectual history. Yet another distraction, in the 1980s, was the situation in Poland. Martin early perceived the "Solidarity" movement there as a fatal crack in the Soviet system, and he had to be there to watch it develop, becoming one of the most perceptive Americans reporting on the Polish drama.

Martin Malia was both a cultural historian and a social scientist, devoted to both these not easily compatible approaches to reality. He loved to deal with ideas and with high culture in general, including the writings of such giants as Voltaire, Schiller, or Hegel. His French was perfect, his Russian nearly so; he was fluent in German and competent in other European languages. He profited richly from the splendid international education outlined above. For a number of reasons Malia could be classified with elite-centered, old-fashioned cultural historians.

Yet Martin Malia was also a social scientist, from his graduate school days and ever after. Of course, there are numerous kinds of social scientists, many of whom would not endorse Martin's work. Martin, in turn, strongly objected to social science "jargon," not to mention its practitioners' frequent ignorance of history. Still, broadly speaking, the resemblances are more significant than the differences. Martin wanted clear answers to questions and precise solutions to problems, whether he was dealing with intellectual life in Russia in the 1860s or Stalin's purges. Moreover, and increasingly, specific occurrences were made to fit a general model.

Inspired by such remarkable scholars as Crane Brinton and Harvard economist Alexander Gerschenkron with his postulation of an East- West gradient in the economic development of modern Europe, as well as many other influences, Martin spent years, even decades, working out his own version of the nature and course of modern Russian and European history. After the first brilliant book, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855* (1961) and a few related articles he published next to nothing during that entire time. His teaching and conversation indicated that his views did not change fundamentally. The only important shift was an increased stress on ideas and ideologues together with a full realization that these could be irrational and utopian and thus not subject to common sense. In fact, the Soviet world became in Martin's eyes essentially "surreal."

Publications did finally come. First in time was *Comprendre la Révolution russe* (1980), a course of lectures transcribed at the initiative of his French colleagues, who in the process obtained publication rights. (Martin himself referred to the book as "my somewhat inadvertent essay"). Two major books on two major subjects eventually followed. *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (1994) provided a comprehensive account and evaluation of its central topic; in line with its argument and its power it has been

both eulogized and condemned. *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, although published in 1999, had been written and rewritten ever since 1961. It has received general acclaim as a splendid contribution, as much or more to European as to Russian history. At the time of his death Martin had almost completed yet another large volume, this time on revolutions as the driving force in modern European history. It is expected to be published posthumously.

More surprising than even this outstanding academic output was the fact that the collapse of communism in Europe, in particular in Russia and in Poland, transformed Martin Malia the isolated scholar into an indefatigable journalist and commentator, in a sense a part of the events he described and assessed. In any case, the famous article signed "Z" (1990), which explained that Gorbachev would fail precisely because he remained too much a communist, produced a sensation in the United States and the West (in part because of its mysterious provenance, Martin at first refusing to acknowledge his authorship).

Malia never married. He is survived by a niece and four nephews.

Hugh McLean  
David Engerman  
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