McDaniel, Tim: *The Agony of the Russian Idea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996. ISBN: 0-691-02786-2; x + 201 S.

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Most serious students of any subject have probably had the experience of reading a book which was at once pleasing and irritating. But I at least have seldom read anything which from the start (and sometimes within one paragraph) alternated between being edifying, sophisticated, nearly brilliant on the one hand, and being grossly oversimplified, baffling, and arrogant on the other. Any work which claims to present 'The' Russian idea and then to maintain that it goes far to explain the behavior of Ivan the Terrible, the collapse of Imperial Russia, the rise of the Bolsheviks, the fall of the Soviet Union, and Yeltsin's failures is hugely ambitious and likely to draw fire from specialists at many steps along the way. More than a few H-Russia subscribers could write serious reviews shredding Tim McDaniel's latest book. But it seems to me that 1) we should step back a bit, recognize that the point of his enterprise is to challenge us to rethink a lot of territory and to reexamine whatever unifying concepts we have constructed for ourselves, and that we ought to do that occasionally; and 2) overall there is more benefit than agony in reading his book. It is pretty good.

The Russian Idea, McDaniel finds, is that the country has its own special worth, mission, and Truth that are all superior to anything the West has offered. In outlining this thesis and in most of his argument the author does not limit his discussion to Russian intellectuals but maintains that the Idea has had, and continues to have, a powerful grip on the minds of ordinary people. Although there have been many ideas discussed in the country, the notion that „the Western path can and should be avoided in the name of a harmonious and egalitarian Russian society based on a higher form of belief" (p. 31) has always won out.

McDaniel writes that the main cause of the failure of Russian governments to modernize, in the sense of promoting science, industry, mass education and mass politics, has been that the population's commitment to lofty ideals and to a moral vision has prevented a politics of moderation and compromise. Since no government can be one of Truth for long (more than an instant, perhaps), people have inevitably lost faith in their leaders. Successive regimes rotted from within as the gap widened between their deeds and the Russians' implacable faith in what should be.

The central problem for each regime in turn, including the present one, is that it tried to link „three elements that could never be assimilated to each other: the Russian idea, the despotic state, and the commitment to rapid modernization" (14). The impossibility of bringing these three elements together has plagued the country for more than 200 years. When any Russian state tried to reform itself and turn more toward modernization, it only provoked schisms within the body politic, sharp disagreements over how to reach truth, and its own demise as the populace embraced a new messianic vision in which, once again, society must be unitary. The new/old emphasis would be not on law, widely distrusted and rejected as foreign, cold, and simply too rational, but on personal relations and moral behavior.

In support of his argument McDaniel offers quotations from the usual suspects, especially Chaadaev, Dostoevsky, and Berdiaev, but also from a parade of recent political commentators, parents of prostitutes, firemen in provincial towns, and so forth. He has certainly been around a lot of Russia lately, and his ability to sound out Russians appears to be great.

All of this, and a good deal more, is neatly and elegantly laid out in a short space. Much of it will have heads nodding in agreement in our own unharmonious community of scholars of Russia, and in fact a considerable part of McDaniel's book has an eerily familiar ring to it, as though he had synthesized not the Russian Idea but the old IREX conversation in situ about why the locals never got things right.

Other points in 'Agony' are more subtle and thought- provoking, for example that the thorough arbitrariness of the social and economic system under Brezhnev not only provoked people to work around government dictates, it also „gave everyone a stake in the system" (141). Much was permitted just be-

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hind a public facade, and into the 1970s many people felt that the existing socio-economic structures were „ours“ and were better than the West's.

But a lot of McDaniel's work, as I have suggested, will antagonize one person or another. My own periodic peeve is his condescending attitude toward Russians (but here again are echoes of the IREX conversation): „workers and peasants had no real understanding of the implications of revolutionary teachings“ (81); Nicholas II was „unable to comprehend“ what was happening around him, a question of his „capacity“ (84), which ignores the context in which he was raised and operated, the series of upheavals he had to deal with, and recent scholarship by Andrew Verner and Dominic Lieven. McDaniel finds that Brezhnev was also terribly limited and that, echoing Lenin, „Russian individual behavior“ was marked by „irresponsibility, laziness, passivity“ (124). McDaniel seems unaware of the patronizing text in which he sometimes operates, one developed at least from the time Sigmund von Herberstein wrote in the sixteenth century. His generalizations about what Russians think and are amount at times almost to nineteenth-century discussions of national character.

Sometimes history is left out of McDaniel's discussion of history. In particular, the massive destruction in Russia of World War I and the Civil War is given almost no attention, as though it had no effect on what people thought and did. Apparently the Russian Idea had an independent and higher life of its own. In this vein it is indicative that the jacket illustration is of a Russian woman crying behind barbed wire, implying that the people imprisoned themselves. Then we learn that the picture was taken from a World War II poster calling on soldiers to save people under German occupation. There have, after all, been many reasons over many centuries that would make Russians feel hostile to western ways and desirous of a unitary society. But we get little feeling for any of that.

Other examples of the lack of context are that Peter the Great is often mentioned as a modernizer but the problem that Russia was at war almost every year of his reign, and that he sought reform out of desperate attempts to raise money for military purposes and so that government could operate in his frequent absences, are points not mentioned. McDaniel, a sociologist, provides little information on the vast changes in Soviet society from, say, the late 1930s to the late 1960s. He can then conveniently tilt his analysis in favor of the recurrent victory of the Idea as a force per se.

McDaniel also often overlooks the continuing dialogue between western commentators and Russian thinkers on their country; this exchange which had much to do with any ideas which sprang from the Russian land at the very latest by the time Karamzin published his massive history in the early nineteenth century. Karamzin quoted Herberstein and Olearius, who were also read by Custine, who met with Chaadaev and also provoked responses to his highly critical 'Russia in 1839' from Herzen, Dostoevsky, and others. This is only one of many such threads which might be traced but are not, so that 'Agony' gives the misleading impression that the Russian Idea was purely homebrew. Along the same lines, it would have improved the overall argument to include something about the ways in which Russian thinkers have struggled with the problem that the West was indeed ahead in certain highly visible respects.

McDaniel repeats one erroneous point widely retailed in the West and now in Russia as well, that Stalin „sent Soviet soldiers who had been prisoners of war in Germany to labor camps so that they would not infect the rest of the population“ (117). Figures which have appeared in Russia in the last few years show that the vast majority of the rank and file returning POWs were processed by the authorities fairly quickly and then went back to military or civilian life–under a cloud of suspicion, true, but not in the Gulag. Returning sergeants faced more problems with Stalin's regime, while officers often found themselves in the position of having to prove their loyalty when captured, a nearly impossible task. In any event, McDaniel's logic, repeated so often in the literature, is faulty: if Stalin had wanted to prevent „infection," that is the dissatisfaction that having seen the West might produce among the populace, he should have arrested above all those soldiers who had 'not' been in German camps and had thus seen the

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West in a much more positive way. Instead, Stalin's behavior toward the former POWs is consistent with his efforts before the war to uncover, albeit by his own twisted lights, who the „real" internal enemies were.

But 'Agony' is well worth reading. It will not only stir up a good deal of controversy, it will force us to ask if we have understood much over the longue duree of Russian history. McDaniel does make a persuasive case for the power of Russian self-construction around certain ennobling ideas, and he does help explain recurring difficulties and collapses in governing the country. Given that he set out to reach a wide audience in a short space, much detail and background had to be omitted. But in a crisp way, McDaniel has led us effectively to rethink a lot of familiar ground, to link it to the present, to set much recent Russian experience into a larger picture than we usually do, and perhaps to return to the basic question of why, as he shows, so many Russian intellectuals and ordinary people have pondered the condition of their country for so long in similar terms.

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