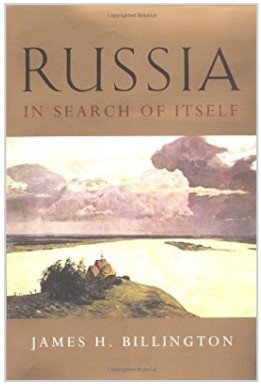

Russia in Search of Itself

By James H. Billington

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In the turbulent decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union, conditions have worsened considerably for many Russians, and a wide-ranging debate has raged over the nature and destiny of their country. In *Russia in Search of Itself*, James H. Billington, the Librarian of Congress and a noted expert on Russia, examines the efforts of a proud but troubled nation to find a post-Soviet identity. The agenda has not been controlled from the top-down and center-out as in Russia's past. Nor has it been set by any intellectual giant such as Sakharov or Solzhenitsyn.

Billington describes the contentious discussion occurring all over Russia and across the political spectrum. He finds conflicts raging among individuals as much as between organized groups and finds a deep underlying tension between the Russians' attempts to legitimize their new, nominally democratic identity, and their efforts to craft a new version of their old authoritarian tradition. After showing how the problem of Russian identity was framed in the past, Billington asks whether Russians will now look more to the West for a place in the common European home, or to the East for a new, Eurasian identity. Billington sees three elements shaping Russian culture: Orthodox Christianity; a special feeling for nature; and an intermittent, sometimes excessive passion for imported innovation. Out of this mix, he suggests, Russia must find its own moral anchor for its venture into democracy if it is to avoid falling back on a negative and authoritarian nationalism in order to recreate some sense of common purpose in society.

The prospects for world peace in the twenty-first century depend in large measure on the way Russians decide to define themselves in the next few years. Drawing on his vast knowledge of Russian history, his frequent visits to Russia in the past decade, and his longstanding relationships with Russians from many different regions and segments of society, Billington provides an authoritative exploration of one of the world's most pressing issues.

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Editorial Review

Review

Russia has been in search of itself for a long time. For the present state of the old vs. new debate there is no better guide than this short book by James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress since 1987.

(Walter Laqueur *The Moscow Times.com*)

A fond, eccentric mix of deep knowledge and fresh information. This is clearly a book for the cognoscenti.

(Richard Lourie *Washington Post Book World*)

One of our foremost historians of Russia... He is acutely aware of how culture can influence political developments.

(Joshua Rubenstein *Opinion Journal*)

Takes a close-up look at one of the world's most pressing issues, the turbulent conditions of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the efforts of Russia to find a post-Soviet identity.

(*Forecast*)

Modest in scale (but not conception)... *Russia in Search of Itself* ought to be required beach reading for the administration's policy-makers... Most political prognostications benefit from being qualified and hedged. Mr. Billington, guided by the extraordinary history of the land and people he knows so well, here courageously opts for the opposite approach.

(Martin Sieff *Washington Times*)

A valuable overview of current thinking on the Russian national idea.

(Kathryn Pinnick *Survival*)

If you want to be ahead of the crowd in understanding it [contemporary Russia's intellectual ferment 'in spite of the growing repressiveness of the current regime'], read James Billington.

(*Times Literary Supplement*)

The author's exposure to the ideas and interests of the young Russian intelligence has enriched his book with unique material.

(Serhy Yekelchyk *Nationalities Papers*)

This book is valuable primarily for its thorough survey of various contemporary Russian opinions about the country's past and present identity and what it should be in the future.

(*Choice*)

The style is in many ways more literary than political science, but its content treads confidently across today's Russia.

(Edwin Bacon *Political Studies Review*)

An engaging look at Russian identity formation through the lens of intellectual history.

(Alison Rowley *Canadian Slavonic Papers*)

Russia in Search of Itself ought to be required beach reading for the administration's foreign policy-makers.

(Martin Sieff *Sunday Times*)

A slim but extraordinarily useful survey of the main currents in Russian thought and letters in the post-Soviet era.

(Martin Walker *International Affairs*)

About the Author

James H. Billington has been the Librarian of Congress since 1987. The originator and guiding force of two major Russian-American bipartisan initiatives in Congress in the 1990s?Meeting of the Frontiers, a bilingual, online educational library; and the Open World Program, which has brought more than 7,500 emerging young Russian leaders to America?he also founded the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in 1974 as director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. A foreign member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, he is the author of five books on Russia, including, most recently, *Russia Transformed* and *The Face of Russia*.

From The Washington Post

A seventh Russia is being born. It will echo all the previous six Russias -- pagan, Kievan, Mongolian, Moscovite, Imperial and Soviet -- but will also contain fresh elements that could not have been predicted on the basis of past and precedent. What form Russia will take is of major significance for the world, but of course no one is more interested than the Russians themselves, who are already busily attempting both to divine and determine that future.

Russia in Search of Itself, by James Billington, Librarian of Congress and author of the classic The Icon and the Axe, allows us to eavesdrop on Russia's national conversation, which ranges from the brilliant to the boozy (and wouldn't be Russia if it didn't). The discussion is a form of national therapy for the "cultural-

psychological nervous breakdown" the country suffered with the collapse of its ideology and economy. While redefining Russia's identity, the conversation is also "relegitimizing the exercise of authority within its reduced but still capacious borders."

Eurasianism, a philosophy that emerged from Russia's geography and, historically, from the Silver Age, a time of "artistic, religious, and philosophical creativity," whose early 20th-century flowering was halted by the Revolution, is popular again. Certain of its proponents argue that Russia, although situated in both Europe and Asia, must not partake of either but should "turn inward with strong rule in order to protect itself." A.S. Panarin, head of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, whom Billington calls "one of the most sophisticated of the Eurasianists," suggests that Russia has a mission to resist the "irresponsible consumer hedonism and comprador modernism" of the West. Eurasianism attracts both sober thinkers and those who consider intelligence an impediment to fantasy. The latter find Stalin a great hero, his purges being described by Oleg Platonov, "the most prolific of reactionary nationalists," as "the first step toward the salvation of Russia from Jewish Bolshevism." (A widely-reported poll conducted on the eve of the 2004 presidential elections found that 45 percent of Russians thought Stalin had played a positive role in the country's history, while 42 percent held the opposite view.) Mixing eschatology and science fiction, many extremists view America as the evil empire, going so far as to suggest that the planes that destroyed the World Trade towers were "swallows of the Apocalypse." Billington allots too much space to such colorful lunacies, although he does make the serious point that "Eurasianism may well be the last gasp of a depleted intelligentsia seeking to cobble together an ideology that could revive Russian power and give themselves a central role in its exercise." Younger, more pragmatic Russians view the search for a national identity as an "anachronistic indulgence," the "final talkathon of a dying intelligentsia." There are plenty of real problems to be solved, real dangers to be avoided. One impediment to Russia's progress is the lack of any genuine national dialogue on how to deal with the atrocities of the communist past, more difficult than ever when the country is being run by ex-KGB officials. But it goes deeper than that. It's an ingrained cultural problem. As writer Yuri Nagibin puts it: "The greatest guilt of the Russian people is their perpetual guiltlessness in their own eyes. . . . Everything that has been done in Russia was done with Russian hands and with Russian consent."

If Russia's experiment with capitalism and democracy fails, the country, according to one democratic reformer, could turn into a "Megaserbia," Russia taking one last " 'imperial lunge' before falling apart." The fears are extravagant, the hopes modest. In a sense, Russia's problem is simple -- it lacks a sense of "middleness." Historically a land of masters and slaves, Russia never has had much of a middle class nor a sense of middle ground. Everything was either/or, with a tendency to fly from one extreme to the other -- all of which made Russia, and the Russians, colorful but calamitous.

In Putin's first term the country became more prosperous, stable, predictable and at the same time less democratic and free. But compared to the Soviet years, the country is still reasonably free -- if you don't like it, you can leave, which Andrei Sakharov considered the first of freedoms. Putin has recentralized power, necessary for stability but dangerous to liberty. His second term will show clearly where he wants to take the country. In the meantime, Billington sees that "the only hope for real change in Russia lies in the emergence of people and organizations that can accumulate property and authority independent of central power -- and create thereby a 'political sphere' that has never before existed in Russia."

Billington's book is a fond, eccentric mix of deep knowledge and fresh information. This is clearly a book for the cognoscenti -- it has some 50 pages of footnotes to 160 of text, a high ratio by any standard. Yet at times the tone is soft, slack and condescending, as if the author were addressing an after-dinner audience. He overuses the matryoshka nesting dolls as a metaphor for Russian history, not the sort of thing you'd expect from someone who demonstrated so brilliantly in The Icon and the Axe how the levels of the Russian past interpenetrate one another. But the faults do not so much matter -- fresh material has been gathered, ordered

and illuminated.

It's too soon for answers. For now the questions themselves are interesting enough. Will the new Russia be grandiose and doomed? Or will it finally become sane, sober and productive? And, if so, will it still be Russia?

Reviewed by Richard Lourie

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Janet Steele:

Do you among people who can't read pleasant if the sentence chained from the straightway, hold on guys this particular aren't like that. This Russia in Search of Itself book is readable by means of you who hate the straight word style. You will find the info here are arrange for enjoyable reading experience without leaving possibly decrease the knowledge that want to give to you. The writer connected with Russia in Search of Itself content conveys the thought easily to understand by most people. The printed and e-book are not different in the information but it just different as it. So , do you continue to thinking Russia in Search of Itself is not loveable to be your top checklist reading book?

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