

# SIMON ROBERTS

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## The Meaning of Motherland

by Rosamund Bartlett, 2006

*A person without a motherland  
is like a nightingale without song.*  
(Russian proverb)

You might say that the Russians like to make things difficult for themselves. Or perhaps it is just that they are exacting when it comes to concepts that are particularly important to them. After all, they distinguish between two types of truth (everyday *pravda* and immortal *istina*, as defined by Vladimir Nabokov in a 1940 essay on Russian literature), and they have as many as three words denoting 'native land'. *Otechestvo* is the literal word for 'fatherland', but it sounds high-flown and official to Russian ears, and is used mostly in poetry. *Otchizna* is a word that suggests fatherland and motherland together, cleverly combining the root-word for 'father' (*otets*) with a female ending, but is also little used. Like *otchestvo*, it has a role in the rhetoric of nationalist politics.

By contrast, *rodina* (motherland) is used by every section of the population, and its associations are far more intimate. If *otchizna* and *otchestvo* relate to the country in which one is a citizen, *rodina* is the place where one is born – a familiar place which has always been there. It is where one feels a sense of belonging, the warm hearth to which one returns. *Rodina* is identified, moreover, with the nation's soul. Mikhail Lermontov distinguished between the complicated feelings he had for the imperial might of his *otchizna* and the love he bore his *rodina* in his famous 1841 poem *Rodina*. This conflict is expressed in the first line – 'I love my *otchizna*, but with a strange love!' The two different words are deliberately juxtaposed.

*Rodina* might just about be the most emotive word in the Russian language. The fact that it is also impossible to translate adequately says something about its close relationship to questions of national destiny, the Russian sense of self and the enduring belief in the country's messianic future. The Russian motherland is something apart. 'Every nation has a motherland,' wrote the religious philosopher Georgy Fedotov in 1915, 'but only we have Russia.' The deepest source of patriotism in Russia accordingly lies not in pride in national achievements or military glory, but in love for the motherland, whose most visible expression is the extraordinary, almost physical attachment which Russians have for their native landscape – an attachment which they are often at a loss to fathom. What Lermontov declared that he loved about his motherland in his poem was the 'cold silence' of her steppes, the swaying of her 'endless forests' and 'her overflowing rivers, as large as seas', but he could not explain why. Nikolai Gogol's equally mysterious love for Russia, meanwhile, crystallized while he was in faraway Rome, and found eloquent expression in

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his 1842 novel *Dead Souls* (in which he addresses his country by its medieval name of 'Rus'):

Everything in you is open, empty and flat; your low towns peep out like dots or marks from the plains; there is nothing to seduce and capture one's gaze. But what is the incomprehensible, mysterious force that draws me to you? Why does your mournful song, carried along your whole length and breadth from sea to sea, echo and re-echo incessantly in my ears? What is there in this song, what is it? ... Rus! What do you want of me? What is that mysterious, hidden bond between us? ... What do those immense, wide, far-flung open spaces prophesy? Is it not here, is it not in you that some boundless thought will be born, since you are yourself without end? ... Oh, what a glittering, wondrous infinity of space the world knows nothing of! Rus!

When the exiled Sergei Rachmaninov wrote in a magazine article in 1931 that 'Russians feel stronger ties with the soil than people of any other nationality', he believed it was due to an 'instinctive inclination towards quietude and tranquillity'. If the essence of the Russian motherland is to be found in her boundless open spaces and huge skies, it is certainly also located in her more humble, meditative landscapes – clusters of spindly birch trees under cloudy skies, village churches next to modest ponds, and houses surrounded by snow. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Russians are prone to experience homesickness intensely. The great Soviet film director Andrei Tarkovsky, who never returned to Russia from exile, explores *toska po rodine* in his 1983 film *Nostalgia*, which he talks about in his 1986 book *Sculpting in Time*, commenting that it was a 'painful malady' he bore within himself:

I wanted to make a film about Russian nostalgia – about that state of mind peculiar to our nation which affects Russians who are far from their native land. I saw this almost as a patriotic duty in my understanding of the concept. I wanted the film to be about the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends; an attachment which they carry with them all their lives, regardless of where destiny may fling them.

The peculiarly strong bond that Russians have with their motherland can be dated back centuries ('Better to die in the Motherland than be honoured on foreign soil' is a phrase to be encountered in one of Russia's medieval chronicles). It stems partly from the fact that nature – unlike the state – has always meant freedom; this is another concept defined by two distinct words in Russian – *svoboda* and *volya* – whose different shades of meaning are roughly equivalent to the distinction between *pravda* and *istina*. Perhaps because of centuries of state oppression, Russians have traditionally cherished wide open spaces, their expansive spirit either something innate (which may have drawn them to the great plains in the first place) or conditioned by the geographical circumstance of living in such a vast country.

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Russian idealization of their *rodina* is also attributable to the associations it inspires. At its root lies the word *rod*, which has to do with birth (*roditsya*, *rozhdenie*), and gives rise to other words: *narod* (people), *priroda* (nature), *rodnoi* (native), *rodnik* (spring) and *rodstvennik* (relation) are all suggested subliminally by *rodina*. The fundamental association, however, is with motherhood. *Rodina* means literally 'birth place', rather than the more generic-sounding and impersonal English motherland – hence 'Mother Russia', 'Mother Volga' and 'Mother Moscow'. The relationship Russians have with their mother earth is a deeply visceral one. Thus Sonya in Dostoevsky's 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment* tells Raskolnikov that he must kiss the ground he has desecrated by committing murder in order to begin the process of expiating his crime.

Personifying the nation is certainly not exclusive to Russia, but worship of female divinities has always lain at the heart of its popular religion. The matriarchal nature of early pagan Russian society was pronounced, and the veneration of mother earth was simply transferred to the Virgin Mary once Christianity arrived at the end of the 10th century. The central 'mother' church of Russia, where all the tsars were crowned from the early 15th century, was accordingly the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the Moscow Kremlin. The most popular icon in Russia, meanwhile, copied over and over again, was not just that of the Virgin and Child, but one showing the representation of their mutual 'lovingkindness', as Leonid Ouspensky terms *umilenie* (another untranslatable Russian word). The 'protecting veil' was both a physical reality, expressed in the many blue-painted domes of churches with their frescoes of the madonna with outstretched arms, and a metaphorical ideal. Somewhat paradoxically, given the otherwise misogynistic stance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the link between the Church and the motherland was further strengthened after the fall of Constantinople in the mid-15th century, when Russia became the heir to the Byzantine legacy. Called upon to liberate the Orthodox East, and convinced of her special destiny, both the land and the people now became known as 'Holy Russia', represented by the newly powerful state. But it was at this time that the state's increasingly masculine face began to show itself, and so threaten the delicate equilibrium that was established through the promise of successive tsars (referred to familiarly as 'fathers' by the people) to defend the motherland.

The replacement in the 17th century of the icon of St George, traditional protector of Holy Mother Russia, by a secular portrait of the tsar, initiated a process which culminated in Peter I declaring himself emperor of an absolutist secular state. The submissive motherland had passively to watch as *Matushka Moskva* was supplanted by the distant foreign-looking and foreign-sounding city of *Sankt-Peterburg*, centre of a new fatherland whose persona was equally contrived. The division that this created in the Russian soul was not lost on the alienated sons of this new fatherland, amongst them Gogol, who wrote in an 1836 essay:

Moscow is feminine, Petersburg masculine. Moscow is all brides, Petersburg all bridegrooms ... Petersburg likes to tease Moscow for her awkwardness and lack of taste. Moscow reproaches Petersburg to the effect that he doesn't know how to speak Russian ... Russia needs Moscow; St Petersburg needs Russia.

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Over the course of the 19th century, educated Russians became gradually aware of the gulf separating them from both their oppressive rulers and the enslaved, suffering people, with whom they by now had little in common. They were exiles in their own country. The growth of nationalism, however, stimulated them to re-discover their connection to the beleaguered motherland, and consequently reject the myth of the fatherland, together with the official patriotism it projected. Predicated on autocracy, censorship, a church devoid of moral authority and the suppression of all that the *rodina* stood for, this was not a patriotism with which they could identify.

In their different ways, Russian writers, artists and musicians in the 19th century were consumed by a desire to sing hymns to the *rodina*, and at some level to atone for their complicity in the institution of serfdom, which represented its long-suffering, scarred face (and was only abolished in 1861). Painters began to celebrate those features of Russia which distinguished her from the West, for the first time seeing beauty in her humble landscapes. Ivan Turgenev endowed the peasants he wrote about with a quiet dignity never before encountered in Russian literature, and affirmed with pride a common brotherhood. In their song, he writes in his *A Hunter's Sketches* (1852), 'there breathed something as familiar as our birthright, and so vast that no eye could encompass it, just as if the Russian steppe were being unrolled before us, stretching away into an endless distance'. Dostoevsky wrote novels about Russian youths fatally poisoned by Western individualism and rational thinking, and in a famous speech characterized Tatyana in Alexander Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin* (1833) as the incarnation of the Russian motherland. She was also a 'rejected soul', but her connection to the soil endowed her with unique regenerative powers.

Leo Tolstoy doggedly sat at home on his country estate, writing Rousseau-esque novels and stories with peasant heroes rendered as idealized symbols of a motherland seen as a paradise lost. And yet it was the peasants who had the least clear idea of the difference between fatherland and motherland, as earnest, radical-minded students discovered during the so-called 'going to the people' of the summer of 1874 at the height of the Populist movement. Far from being keen to jettison the precepts of the fatherland in the name of socialism, as the students wanted them to do, the peasants remained loyal to the tsar. Despite the fact that he was the very person responsible for the abject conditions in which they lived, they continued to regard him as semi-divine, a tradition begun when Holy Russia assumed the legacy of Byzantium. Popular literature, moreover, featured heroes who went into battle to defend the motherland, their 'tsar father' and the Orthodox faith. Only peasants conscripted into the Russian army dimly saw that there might be a difference between the motherland and fatherland when having to fight for their country in abject conditions.

In his operas, Modest Mussorgsky's theme was Russia's tragic destiny, and in 1872, amidst the celebrations which accompanied the bicentenary of the birth of Peter the Great, he wrote an extraordinary letter about what he saw as the rape of the motherland two centuries earlier, in which he referred to Mother Russia as his 'beloved'. Identifying her

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with the black earth of the fertile Russian south, Mussorgsky argued controversially that the 'alien' tools which had been used to plough Mother Russia in the late 17th century (by which he referred to the application of Western methods and to reformist ideas introduced by Peter the Great) had not in fact brought any kind of progress.

Mussorgsky was not the first to depict the *rodina* as a kind of surrogate wife or bride as well as a mother. This was a theme taken up in a classic Soviet song written in 1936 after Stalin had co-opted the idea of the 'motherland' into his great indoctrination programme. It gave him a justification for the weeding out all those 'rootless cosmopolitans' who refused to buy into the myth of the communist utopia. At the same time that millions were being arrested and sent to the Gulag, the refrain of *The Song of the Motherland* was being broadcast from loudspeakers into the streets:

Broad is my native land  
It has many forests, fields and rivers  
I don't know of any country  
Where a man breathes so freely

The Second World War may have been called the Great Patriotic or Fatherland War, as had been the war of 1812, but the Soviet Union needed the *rodina* to call her sons to sacrifice, as testified by posters depicting a stern-looking, darkly clad mother underneath the slogan 'Your Rodina-Mother Summons You!' And *rodina* was the name given to the 52 metre high stature of a mother figure in flowing robes erected to commemorate the battle of Stalingrad.

The close relationship between patriotism and nationalism in Russia was cynically exploited by Stalin, as dissidents took pains to expose. At best this resulted in the idea of motherland becoming a central totem of Soviet kitsch, which could simply be ignored as empty propaganda. But most Russians felt a deep sense of betrayal when everything to do with the sacred concept of *rodina* was co-opted into Stalinist rhetoric. In the pre-revolutionary past, *rodina* had always been something separate to *otechestvo*, and thus cherished by the Russian people precisely because it was nothing to do with the state, but now it too had been stolen from them. Those who survived World War II were left, moreover, not only with a sense of loss, but also a mounting anger, as harsh new repressive measures were re-introduced in the late 1940s. Amongst the testimonies in *The Gulag Archipelago*, for example, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's magnum opus about the Russian prison camp system, which was published between 1973 and 1978, we read:

And what do you do when your mother has sold you to the gypsies – no, worse, thrown you to the dogs? Is she really a mother any more? A Motherland who has betrayed her soldiers – can you really call that a Motherland?

Pondering questions of national destiny immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in his 1994 book *The Russian Question*, Solzhenitsyn argued that the character of the

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Russian people had been ‘continually oppressed, darkened, mangled during the entire Soviet period’ by the Bolsheviks.

Despite it becoming a cliché in the propaganda war waged by Soviet Russia, the idea of the *rodina* has not lost its currency in Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union forced its citizens to confront the unpalatable truth that their country, far from being a superpower, was in many respects a third-world country. The whole edifice of the USSR proved to be one gigantic Potemkin village. However, with new wealth created through its gas and oil reserves, Russia under Putin has once again started to become powerful, leading to the emergence of a new pride and a new kind of nationalist fervour. Due to the associations connected with its totalitarian past, and more recently with the ultra-nationalist party called ‘Rodina’ (founded in 2003), the Russian government is somewhat wary of returning the motherland to its vocabulary.

In his classic 1946 book *The Russian Idea*, Nikolai Berdyaev wrote: ‘First of all a person must love their native land, love it in all its contradictions, with its sins and faults.’ A focus group that explored the meaning of the word in 2001 revealed that most Russians continue to bear a strong emotional attachment to their motherland. ‘Take it away from me and I’ll die,’ said one respondent in Moscow; ‘*Rodina* is a mother you don’t choose.’ ‘Yes, it’s an inner feeling; when you come home, you get goose pimples,’ said another in St Petersburg. ‘Without love for his native land, a person is powerless to create anything.’ If the response of a citizen of Voronezh is anything to go by, it seems that that love has survived, against all the odds: ‘Whatever kind of place it is, the motherland I mean, you have to, you absolutely must love it, and defend it, and be proud of all its successes.’