Dmitry Likhachev (1906–1999), born in St Petersburg, was one of the most prominent Russian intellectuals of the twentieth century. His life spanned virtually the entire century – from Tsarist rule under Nicholas II via the Russian Revolution and Civil War into seven decades of communism, followed by Gorbachev’s Perestroika and the rise of a new Russia. In 1928, shortly after completing his university education, Likhachev was arrested, charged with counter-revolutionary ideas and imprisoned in the Gulag, where he spent the next four years. On his release, he was able to return to his home city only to endure the ordeals of Stalin’s Great Purge and the Siege of Leningrad (St Petersburg).

Witnessing history in the making, Likhachev developed a unique insight into the plight of Russian culture under communism. After Stalin’s death in 1953, Likhachev began to play a crucial role in the restoration of the cultural life of his country. In doing so, he influenced the way millions of Russians looked at their heritage. His scholarly and public mission, which gradually turned him into an iconic figure in Russia, was to repair the damage caused by totalitarianism, combat Russian nationalism, and above all to overcome cultural alienation between Russia and Europe. In this, the first biography of Likhachev to appear in English, Vladislav Zubok provides a thoroughly-researched assessment of an extraordinary and influential thinker who became a kind of ‘conscience of Russia’.

Vladislav Zubok

Vladislav Zubok is Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He has previously taught at Temple University and has served as a fellow at the National Security Archive, a non-government organization at the University of George Washington. His publications include A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev and Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia.

‘Dmitry Likhachev, who narrowly escaped death in the Gulag, was as much revered by Russians as Alexander Solzhenitsyn. But unlike that Old Testament thunderer, he spoke with the voice of scholarly reason. He passionately believed that Russia’s history and culture were an essential part of a wider European tradition. In his fluent and meticulous account, Vladislav Zubok reminds us both of a significant historical figure, and of an enduring truth about a great country which is contested both by today’s noisy Russian nationalists and by those who denounce them in the West.’

– Sir Rodric Braithwaite

‘Dmitry Likhachev’s biography is a journey through the twentieth century, taking us from pre-revolutionary Petersburg to the Gulag and the blockade, the rediscovery of old Russian culture, the reframing of national identity, and the commanding heights of cultural politics. Vladislav Zubok does full justice to the life of this remarkable representative of the Russian intelligentsia.’

– Michael David-Fox, Georgetown University

‘Dmitry Likhachev was an astonishing figure: unique in his long, goal-directed life, his rather abstruse scholarly endeavour that somehow developed into a public role, yet at the same time an exemplary personality, telling us much about Russia itself. Vladislav Zubok’s balanced, well-rounded and non-sentimentalized book should do him full justice.’

– Robin Milner-Gulland, Emeritus Professor of Russian and East European Studies at the University of Sussex

‘Amidst the whirlwinds of war, revolution, and state terror, few Russians did more to maintain the finest traditions of “Old Russia” and to assert the inviolability of the individual than Dmitry Likhachev, brilliant scholar, cultural preservationist, and public intellectual. Vladislav Zubok’s masterful biography of the man dubbed “Russia’s conscience” not only recounts one of the most remarkable Russian lives of the twentieth century, it offers a timely reminder that even during its darkest hours Russia has been home to indomitable defenders of humanism and democratic values.’

– Douglas Smith, author of Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs