Imagining Russia: Through the Lens of Muscovy

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The task of "imaging Russia" is essentially a political, not a scholarly endeavor. When we plumb Russian history for an "imagined vision," we are seeking a story that will inspire people. This is a different task than that of the historian, who seeks the particular and specific, not the generalizable. Not that it's a bad thing to do, but it's a different process than scholarly analysis, and the relationship of such visions to the historical past is often complex and ambiguous. I would argue that the closer an imagined vision of a state is to historical evidence, the better in the long run. Here I'd like to examine briefly how Muscovy has been imagined, and how that vision has been used, and then contrast that vision to the image of Muscovy being assembled around new research. What I have to say may not be as "usable" as some might like, but that's the tension between history and image.

We are all familiar with the habits of mind that Europeans and Russians have used to describe Russia over the past several centuries, starting at least in the sixteenth century and arguably before that as well. Those habits of mind, to put it briefly, apply the model of European historical development to Russia, a model based on such themes as the rise of democratic institutions and political pluralism, the rule of law, rights of the individual and Western learning and culture. This ideal model is in fact now at variance with contemporary scholarship. European historians in recent decades have been rethinking these concepts – about property they are finding a range of claims and usages that belies the concept of exclusive ownership, that finds personal connections and factions within supposedly "rational" parliamentary systems, that sees negotiated norms of conflict resolution rather than the letter of the law, and that sees moral economies defining ways in which society interacted with state. They are breaking down concepts such as feudalism or absolutism to show a more complex social reality. So expecting Russia to measure up to this model is anachronistic.

Nevertheless this standard of measurement is deeply embedded in our modern consciousness, and the conviction that Russia diverged from this path is equally firmly ensconced. That view can be encountered in reports of foreign travellers of the sixteenth through eighteenth, even nineteenth centuries, who regarded Russia as a despotism (see Marshall Poe's new book on this literature). Those benefitting from a classical education explicitly used Aristotelian terms to describe Russia as a "tyranny." They were impressed with the seeming great power of the ruler, his claim to control all authority. Conversely, they were appalled at the seeming slavishness of the populace, the people's willingness to

prostrate themselves literally and figuratively to the ruler. Those who were noblemen were shocked at the lack of power, status and social esteem enjoyed by the elite. Reflecting the religious turmoil of contemporary Europe, many criticized the Russian Orthodox terms in terms parallel to a Protestant critique of Catholicism, singling out its reliance on ritual and icons and the ignorance of clergy and populace of the Scriptures. Many foreign travelers came to Russia to expand and develop trade relations, and thus turned their attention, again critically, to Russia's merchant class. Here they universally condemned the lack of honesty and good business practice. Many even developed an ethnographic critique of the Russian people and their mores, calling them dirty, uncivilized, prone to drunkenness and loose morals. Many called Russia a lawless society, where the tsar's power was quixotic, the institutions of law corrupt and the people's respect for law non-existent.

Through a complicated evolution, this vocabulary of despotism with its stress on political power, personal slavery and ignorance has become a dominant theme in Western historiography of Russia in the 20th c., especially in the Cold War period. I have in mind Arnold Toynbee's theory of Russia's "Byzantine legacy" as messianistic and totalitarian; the debate about the "silence" of Russian history (Russia lacking the intellectual dynamism of Renaissance or Reformation); the association of Russia with Wittfogel's "Oriental Despotism" model; and Richard Pipes' condemnation of Russia as patrimonial, lacking the key Western elements of private property and individual rights.

Historians of Russia in the l9th and 20th centuries, of course, could not use the vocabulary of despotism. But official historiography with its dominant "statist" school paralleled the despotic model in emphasizing the power of the state, although it celebrated the state as a transforming agent in Russian history. In the early twentieth century the Eurasianists also celebrated the autocratic state as Russia's natural form of government.[1] Even Soviet Marxism deviated from what would expect of a Marxist analysis to make allowance for the reality of state power. Despite the best efforts of Soviet historiography to find a role for the people, the "memory" of Russia that was built up in Russian Imperial and Soviet history writing was of a strong state, an enserfed society and a weak bourgeoisie.

In post Soviet experimentation, these themes have come full-circle, with a

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[1]Dissenting voices there were, of course - Kliuchevskii tried to make the "people," not the state, the agent of change; numerous turn of the century scholars (Bogoslovskii, Miliukov, Got'e) explored interactions of local communities with the state; Pavlov Sil'vanskii argued for reciprocal "feudal" relations between nobility and state, and of course Soviet sought out evidence of popular activism and revolt.

vogue of theories of Russian civilization celebrating Russia's uniqueness from the West, lamenting the bifurcations of Russian culture or celebrating Russian nationalism. Other more pessimistically have bought into, or toyed with, the despotic or totalitarian model; post-Soviet historians have condemned Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great as "totalitarian," for example.

So where does that leave us? Seemingly with a populace in Russia today that has a confusing array of images of Russia before it: images that celebrate the nation, or its spiritual essence, or lament Russia's divergences from a Western path. They are conscious of the vocabulary of despotism and democracy and struggle to fit Russia into these categories. Many historians are particularly distressed by Russia's heritage of enserfment and lack of legal rights and rule by law. The question that arises for is whether the historical record might serve to put these generalizations in a new light, and perhaps change the terms of modern discourse.

Well, lest you hope for an optimist counter-narrative that argues for democracy, freedoms, self-determination and political pluralism in early modern Russia, let me hasten to disappoint you from the start. That particular metanarrative doesn't work well for early modern Europe any more either, and all the more so we shouldn't be seeking metamarratives at all. Today's historical thinking seeks to break down metanarratives into more complex, multi-sided understandings of the past, stressing the complexity, contingency and open-endedness of the past. This is a particularly healthy approach for Russian history.

So, let us look afresh in Russian history at key issues raised by the old narrative. One might inquire into the ways in which individuals and groups interacted with the state; one might look at the extent of the state's power in practice, not just in theory; one might look at legal practice. One might explore individuals' concepts of identity, how they defined themselves. One might interrogate their concept of their connection to the larger society, and to the tsar. One might explore what the formulae surrounding dependency meant, that is, when gentrymen called themselves "slaves" and peasants "orphans" of the tsar. One might explore the cohesion of the state in practice as well as theory. One might explore Muscovites' belief systems, and how they acted on them.

What you would find is a much more complicated picture than that of a despotic autocracy. Take concepts of identity – Russians from at least the sixteenth century (when case law history survives) evidence a keen sense of personal dignity, which they defended in court against verbal insult and humiliating assault. That sense of dignity or "honor" applied to all members of the society and they all indeed litigated, from the highest boyar to the lowliest slave. When you explore what their honor consisted of, it sketches out a world

in which people are embedded in networks of family, social status, religion and loyalty to the tsar. One's honor was by and large a collective honor, associated with any of the various collective groups that individuals belonged to. Muscovites prided themselves on being loyal servants of the tsar, whether fighting men or taxpayers; they took pride in being honest citizens and religiously observant; they took offense when their social status, whatever it was, was insulted, and they took offense when their mothers, fathers, ancestors, wives and other kin were insulted. This adds up to a society, like medieval European and other traditional societies, where individuals found social stability and cohesion in their connections and dependencies on kin, church and tsar.

Take the concept of society and empire – not until the late eighteenth century did Russians commonly think of themselves as members of a collective entity, a state, nation or society. Until then, they mobilized in the name of the tsar, the church, various saints, the Christian people, their regions, but not the secular state. Thus the fact that Russia was an empire did not factor into self-consciousness. The empire was loosely integrated; pluralism and diversity were tolerated in dependent areas, and Russia's laissez-faire "colonial" policy lasted well into the eighteenth century.

On the concept of legality. My work and George Weickhardt's shows that Muscovite law was standardized in its procedures and tenets. Litigants as well as judges knew the law and cited it by statute, particularly after the 1649 Law Code was widely disseminated in printed form. Yes, the system was unequal, meting out different punishments according to social class. And it was inefficient – judges had great disincentives to resolve a case locally, litigants had great opportunity to drag cases on through appeals, the Center often insisted that cases be remanded to the center for resolution. But, justice was available to all and as a rule the system worked to resolve disputes, to provide recompense for loss, to maintain social order.

Work being done on local government, echoing the great generation of turn of the century historians, also shows that Russians were deeply involved in their own government. They staffed the local police, the judiciary and courthouse staffs, they served as bailiffs and tax collectors. Local communes acted as liaisons with communities to their landlords, or in the northern borderland and Siberia with the governors. Admittedly, these were not self-determining organs of local government; they were mandated and controlled by the Center. But they do constitute a vivid record of civic involvement in local government.

Turning to the concept of belief, recent work by Eve Levin, Isolde Thyrêt, Georg Michels, Robert Crummey and others on popular belief show that Russians actively adapted Orthodox belief, as most Christian cultures did. They

integrated folk deities and celebrations, they opted for the Old Belief to satisfy personal needs ranging from religious conviction to economic and political grievances. Popular culture was dynamic, as evidenced in religious practice, belief, humor, lubki, etc..

Take the concept of dependency, the trope that Muscovites called themselves slaves of the Tsar. This doesn't mean that Muscovites believed they had to claims on the tsar, but rather that they found refuge in the concept of dependency. Valerie Kivelson has recently argued eloquently that Muscovites distrusted the concept of freedom, or individuals' self determination, which they considered a disruptive, threatening element. They recognized their dependency to the tsar both as an obligation and an entitlement; it entitled them to the tsar's favor in hard times, to his protection through the legal system, to rewards for service done well, to social stability and physical protection. This runs counter to our Western celebration of individual liberties, but it made sense, as Kivelson argues, in a society where personal bonds were determining, where society lived on the edge of subsistence.

What does this all add up to for the early modern period? A Russia whose past refuses to be pigeonholed into neat categories of autocratic, despotic or absolutist, a past in which the state was limited in its claims to power by constraints imposed by geography, tradition and local custom. A Russia populated by people who sought their own understanding of religion, who forged regional cults, who defied the state; a Russia that was a stable, multinational empire, with a relatively mild colonial policy well into the eighteenth century (save, perhaps, for Ukraine). You see a Russia that struggled against bureaucratic inefficiency and judicial corruption, striving, sometimes with success, to make a workable legal system work for them. You see people resourceful at getting the system to work for them, even while they never, seemingly, envisioned radical, revolutionary change to force it to encorporate them in power.

So we don't see, of course, emergent democracy, we don't see a free and industrious peasantry, we don't see educational institutions, printing and widespread literacy. But we also don't see a frozen autocratic monolith, incapable of change or a passive, disengaged people incapable of serving their own needs. If we choose to "imagine Russia" in a way that is both historically accurate and politically useful, then we need to envision a Russia that is has the capacity to change, that empowers individuals to some degree to act in their own self-interest, that has a state that seeks to serve society, no matter how ineptly it carried out that job. One won't – at least in my view, based on the sources – find a heroic, inspiring metanarrative of democracy, freedom and the norms of Western civilization. But we can take inspiration in the fact that in the intervening centuries Russians have come to value those elusive aspects of the Western vision – freedom, self determination, and democracy – and they can

find the necessary evidence of resourcefulness, tolerance of diversity and change that are prerequisites to create a new society.

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