

Russia and the Russians: A History from Rus to the Russian Federation

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Author:

Geoffrey Hosking

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History on this scale is a daunting task, not just for the breadth of scholarship it requires but also because it lays before the author the powerful temptations of platitude and over-generalization. Geoffrey Hosking, as he has amply shown elsewhere, is a historian who can draw a big picture without losing his curiosity, his feel for detail, or his capacity for concise but penetrating summary. Despite the need to make reasonably brisk progress through more than one thousand years of history, this book is not in a hurry. *Russia and the Russians* is intended to be accessible to a reader with little or no prior knowledge of the subject, and it meets this requirement without oversimplifying the analysis or patronizing the reader. Less expert readers will be grateful for the strongly articulated narrative complemented by numerous thematic subsections. Professional historians will find new information, and food for thought, on periods and topics that lie outside their main research. Hosking has read widely and provides an illuminating synthesis of Anglo-American, Soviet, Russian and German scholarship. The quality and clarity of the writing, and of the organization of material, meet the standards he has set in his earlier work.

But readers familiar with this earlier work will expect more than information, intelligence, and clarity of exposition: they will take up the book anticipating big ideas as well. Here, too, *Russia and the Russians* does not disappoint. It offers not merely an account but also an interpretation of Russian history; not so much a textbook as a fabric of interwoven arguments. In this sense, the book is in the vein of Richard Pipes's combative *Russia under the Old Regime* (1974) rather than that of Nicholas V. Riasanovsky's sober and scrupulously even-handed *A History of Russia* (1963, and several subsequent editions).

One of Hosking's main ideas follows on from his previous book, *Russia: People and Empire 1552-1917* (1997). In that work he argued that Russia's empire-building mission should be held responsible for much of what is commonly held to make the country distinctive (and, in many people's eyes, defective). The absence of civil society, the persistence of authoritarian rule, the weakness of the market and of economic development, the failure to achieve technological innovation in all but a few areas, the deep divisions between rulers and educated elite and between both these groups and the common people: all these regrettable phenomena should be seen primarily as resulting from Russia's incessant striving to acquire more territory in the Eurasian land mass and then to defend and maintain that territory. The most significant casualty of this imperial destiny, in Hosking's view, has been a sense of Russian nationhood. Russians were relentlessly pressed into participation in a multi-ethnic service state instead of receiving a secure and sustainable basis for social solidarity, cohesion and identity (be it through ethnic or through civic nationalism). As a result, Russian society was less active, productive and stable than was good for it.

Russia and the Russians presents this argument again, but in a slightly different light. Most obviously, the chronological boundaries are pushed back at both ends -- and this matters. *Russia: People and Empire* was a historian's cliffhanger: it left the reader wondering not what would happen next but what happened before. If given the opportunity to write another book, would Hosking trace back the causes of Russia's imperial mission even further? Surprisingly for such a long and conceptually ambitious book, *Russia: People and Empire* gave the impression of plunging *in medias res*: it started in 1552 with a specific campaign, the Muscovite conquest of the Khanate of Kazan'. With this blow, its first annexation of a non-Russian sovereign state, Muscovite Russia was launching itself on the imperial path -- a path that, in Hosking's account, leads, without too many deviations, to the bloodbath of the revolution and the civil war. But how exactly did Russia arrive at Kazan'?

The first sentence of *Russia and the Russians* already indicates what the answer will be: "The north Eurasian plain is not only Russia's geographical setting, but also her fate." Any major state that established itself in Inner Eurasia was likely to be strong and resilient: it would have access to such enormous resources and would command such a territory as to seem almost indestructible. Yet it would also face extraordinary difficulties: the natural obstacles to efficient and economically beneficial communications with the wider world, the near-impossibility of policing all the frontier zones, and the huge task of governing effectively a multi-ethnic and widely dispersed population. This "paradoxical combination of colossal strength and almost crippling weakness" (p. 3) has left its mark everywhere in Russian history: in the struggle to push back and maintain the borders of the Russian Empire, in the creation of a multi-ethnic ruling class, in chronic economic underdevelopment, and in religious and ideological conflict. In later chapters, Hosking shows these problems persisting all the way through to the present day. He first explains how a major state did establish itself in Inner Eurasia, and why that state proved to be Muscovy. He shows the imperial and state-building imperative in action through the Romanov period, and then takes the story beyond 1917. The enduring problems of society under empire were, if anything, exacerbated by the Soviet period, where the policy of 'indigenization' adopted in the 1920s prepared the way for subsequent ethnic tensions and imperial overstretch, and where perennial economic and political habits remained more or less intact.

The other main way in which this book expands on *Russia: People and Empire* is in its extensive and well-informed treatment of non-Russian ethnic groups, religions, and territorial and political units. Hosking is acutely aware that 'Russia' has meant many things for many people, but that only rarely has it been understood in mono-ethnic terms. The reason that Russia has been "one of history's great survivors" (p. xi) is precisely that it has been omnivorously inclusive of non-Slavic ethnicities (not for high-minded motives of cultural tolerance but for hard-headed imperial *raison d'état*).

Although empire-building is a prominent topic in *Russia and the Russians*, it is not the only, or indeed the main, focus of Hosking's attention. Unlike *Russia: People and Empire*, this is not a book with a single thesis. It aims not to explain what went wrong with Russia, or what made it the way it is, but rather to understand the way Russia is and has been. Hosking's approach to his subject is sympathetic rather than forensic: if Russia has insatiably swallowed up territory and oppressed its own and other peoples, it needs to

be explained, not diagnosed or indicted. This makes for an instructive contrast with Richard Pipes's *Russia under the Old Regime*. Pipes made no bones about what was driving his inquiry: he set out to explain "why in Russia – unlike the rest of Europe to which Russia belongs by virtue of her location, race and religion – society has proven unable to impose on political authority any kind of effective restraints". He found the key to this question in the relationship between 'ownership' and 'sovereignty'. Unlike in western European states, which managed over many centuries to distinguish between "authority exercised as sovereignty" and "authority exercised as ownership", political authority in Russia was exercised as "an extension of the rights of ownership". The result was a "patrimonial state" that was increasingly riven by internal tension as it came into greater contact with states that enjoyed a different political and legal culture.

Hosking's is a more expansive, less political and less single-mindedly analytical account. Pipes began his book with a chapter on 'The environment and its consequences', which starts with low agricultural yields, the collective character of farming, and the geopolitical colonizing impulse, and goes on to consider the implications of all these for Russian statehood. Hosking's concerns are more wide-ranging, as is suggested by the subtitle of his introductory chapter: 'Geopolitics, Ecology, and National Character'. The first subsection, 'Agriculture, habitation, and diet', follows Pipes and others in citing low yields as a powerful determinant of Russia's economic and political history, but also considers the long-term effects of the Eurasian terrain in other areas: peasant architecture, food, and (especially) drink. The next section moves on to discuss what Hosking sees as the two 'key concepts' of the Russian mentality: *mir* and *pravda*. Both these concepts are expressions of the 'community solidarity' to which Russians have always been inclined, given their geopolitical vulnerability and the unfavourable agricultural conditions that have confronted them. *Mir* (literally 'world') refers to the community itself, while *pravda* denotes the spirit that infuses it: a synthesis, in our terms, of truth, justice and morality. The final section of the introduction presents another, related, characteristic of Russian culture: its 'binary nature', or the "tendency to seek extreme solutions to problems and to lurch from one set of cultural patterns to their diametrical opposite" (p. 22). Russians, in other words, have seen the world in terms of a stark opposition between that which lies inside the *mir* and that which lies outside it; between paganism or Western Christianity and Orthodoxy; between the archaic and the modern; between Heaven and Hell; or between West and East.

It is one thing to assert the existence of a Russian 'national character'. It is quite another, however, to show how this character was formed and maintained by social and political institutions and practices. To make the connection between an apparently trans-historical mentality and a shifting set of historical conjunctures, Hosking relies above all on two related concepts. First, 'joint responsibility' (*krugovaia poruka*), an ethos of collective life that can be traced back to medieval times. Given the remoteness of much of Russia from the centres of political authority, communities had to find their own way of ensuring harmony. The aim was to reach decisions by consensus; individual or minority interests could not be defended independently, though they could be expressed during the course of the community's discussions. The result was a strongly egalitarian society: individuals were, on the whole, permitted neither to enrich or empower themselves unduly nor to go under entirely. The custom of *krugovaia poruka* later proved to be a boon to Russia's state builders, who were able to rely on peasants' sense of their collective responsibility to discharge labour dues or fiscal obligations. The second key factor Hosking identifies in Russian social history is *kormlenie* (literally 'feeding'), the practice of levying tribute in Kievan and Muscovite Rus'. (It is symptomatic of this term's prominence in *Russia and the Russians* that *kormlenie* loses its italics after the introduction, though it is hardly a household concept in English.) The right of *kormlenie* was enjoyed by the princes who ruled various parts of the territory of Rus', and it could also be granted by them to the leading warriors (or boyars) in their retinues, on condition that the boyars gave up a portion of the income they derived from their territory. The practice persisted even when Muscovy started its drive towards centralization. *Kormlenie* had enormous practical advantages for pre-modern state-builders in a political space such as Eurasia. Direct central authority over the full territory of a rapidly expanding dominion was simply impossible; the best way to maintain some semblance of control was to create a class of tribute-gatherers. The practice of *kormlenie* also meant that the state would not have to meet the potentially enormous costs of tax collection; nor would it need to provide direct material support for most of its servitors. Hosking – quite rightly, in my view – sees an essential continuity between *kormlenie* in Muscovite Russia, master-serf relations on the post-Petrine

landed estate, and the *nomenklatura* system of the Soviet period. He might also have added that in practice *krugovaia poruka* is what *kormlenie* feels like if one does not have the good fortune to belong to a socio-political elite: 'joint responsibility' and 'feeding' were mutually reinforcing features of Russian society.

In Muscovite times, *kormlenie* was a rational and relatively effective means of governing the territory. As the grand princes (in due course 'tsars') became more secure in their political power and symbolic authority, they increasingly sought to bolster that authority by handing out patrimonial estates (*votchiny*) to their loyal servitors. This was a wider dissemination of *kormlenie* that was designed to strengthen the state. The relationship thereby established between patrimonial masters (or tribute-gatherers) and subjects was not, moreover, a purely exploitative one. The former had opportunities to generate income for themselves, but they also had responsibilities to the people who lived on their estates; they were, moreover, bound by a set of customary expectations regarding land use. As Hosking argues, "the concept of ownership was much more diffuse in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Muscovy than it became in later centuries, and was compatible with multiple intersecting rights" (p. 91). Equally, the relationship between the grand prince and his leading servitors (themselves lords of their own manors) was far from being one of outright domination. For the most part, Muscovite rulers understood that they could accomplish little without the unswerving support of the main boyar clans, and did their best to ensure that these clans would remain major stakeholders in the state-building enterprise (by doling out generous land grants). Hosking suggests that we need to distinguish between the absolutist rhetoric of Muscovite rulers and the often more accommodating logic of their actions. For this reason, he takes issue with Pipes's notion of medieval Russia as a 'patrimonial monarchy'. This was not the mere enslavement of servitors to the state (*gosudarstvo*, literally 'lordship') but the establishment of a more fluid mode of politics that Hosking calls the 'statization of personal power'. Muscovite rulers did not behave like the lords of a patrimonial state, they did not believe, and could not afford to believe, that they owned people in the same way that they owned land. Nor, of course, were they bound by legal or constitutional constraints. Rather, they acted as patrons at the command centre of a network of clientelistic relations.

Hosking identifies the patron-client mode of politics as one of the defining constants of Russian history. As mentioned above, he sees a continuity from *kormlenie* to *nomenklatura*. But this continuity masks profound changes. In Muscovy, the 'statization of personal power' was in general an extremely effective way of mobilizing resources to pursue the interests of the state. Muscovy was able to cement its position as the new centre of Rus' because it was a more successful gatherer of tribute than its rival principalities. It then proved remarkably adept at acquiring and incorporating new territory. But the personalistic style of politics left Russia ill-equipped for many of the social, political and economic challenges of the following centuries: it impeded the development of a legal system and the emergence of a legal consciousness; it ensured that the weakness of intermediate social institutions would endure; and it left both the Russian state and the Russian people vulnerable to the caprice of wrong-headed patrons. In time, patrimonial masters' sense of their obligations weakened, and the pressure applied by the state on the agricultural population increased; the result was often indistinguishable from slavery. Servitors of the state with the right to *kormlenie* saw 'joint responsibility' not as an ethos that should inform their own actions as well as everyone else's, but rather as a means of squeezing more tribute out of an economically and politically disabled population.

The domination of personalistic power over the rule of law did not preclude the search for symbolic sources of political legitimation but rather exacerbated it. Muscovite Russia was split between three identities: it might imagine itself as the centre of the Eastern Christian ecumene; as the centre of a Eurasian empire; or as an emerging European great power. Usually rulers did not commit themselves to any single one of these legitimizing strategies but rather used an eclectic mix of all three. But however they viewed the mission of Muscovy, their vision was bound to place enormous strain on the available state-building resources. The strain showed in the violent internal strife of the reign of Ivan IV and of what Hosking calls "the turbulent seventeenth century". In the time of Peter the Great, the Russian state began to place emphasis on modernization: on overcoming Russia's economic and technological backwardness; on creating more and larger cities; on inculcating more 'civilized' forms of behaviour; and even on instituting the rule of law in some areas. But such attempts very often relied on coercion, and in any case had to work within existing

personalistic power structures; for this reason, more often than not, "modernization reinforced archaism" (p. 176). Attentive readers of *Russia and the Russians* will find many other examples of 'archaicizing modernization' in Russian history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well: in the 'great leaps forward' that have resulted in gigantic steps backwards, or in the creation of bureaucracies that have entrenched, not eliminated or obviated, personalized powerbroking. Where modernization has been effective, however, is in eliminating institutions and practices that might have helped Russian society and statehood to take more benign forms. A notable casualty, in Hosking's view, has been the Orthodox Church, whose thorough statization under Peter the Great left it incapacitated as a provider of national cohesion.

Up to and including the chapter on the Petrine period, chronological and thematic approaches work beautifully in tandem. The Kievan and Muscovite eras are not just periods in history but represent emerging models of statehood. The seventeenth century stretched to near-breaking point some of the tensions inherent in Muscovite statehood. The Petrine era brought an explicit, if only partially successful, attempt to modernize and revitalize the mechanisms of authority. When we reach the period from the death of Peter to that of Nicholas I, however, big ideas and historical paradigms are thinner on the ground. When Russian history is viewed on the grand scale that Hosking lays before us, the era 1725-1855 might appear to be something of an interlude between the awesome first phases of state- and empire-building and the onset of terminal decline in the later nineteenth century. Even so, Hosking identifies several new themes that advance his argument as well as his narrative. Although Russia continued to make territorial gains, it now did so within the framework of European great power politics. While this was gratifying for the imperial self-image, it also placed new strains on the Russian polity (as the Crimean War would eventually demonstrate in terms too stark for anyone to ignore). The fiscal burdens borne by the population increased to meet the demands of military expenditure and nascent industrialization. At the same time, Russia's rulers – especially Catherine II – were searching for new ways to boost the health and the efficiency of the Russian state: notably, by strengthening the role of corporations and the rule of law (with law understood in a primarily instrumental sense, as a means of achieving state ends). But the reality of state administration at all levels remained extremely personalistic – not least in Catherine's own court. Throughout the eighteenth century, the power of the tsar was seriously constrained by a set of elite families whose power was reiterated by the palace coup that brought the murder of Paul in 1801. A further obstacle to the exercise of rational monarchical authority was the emergence of a group of free-thinking intellectuals who had their own ideas on statehood and were increasingly inclined to give voice to those ideas (in the late eighteenth century many of them were freemasons, by the 1840s they had coalesced into an 'intelligentsia').

By the time he reaches the 1860s, Hosking is on the home straight. The last few pre-revolutionary decades are shown to bring the tensions of Russian society and statehood to a new level of intensity. And the Soviet rulers are seen to have grappled with many of the same problems as their tsarist counterparts. Conceptual continuity is maintained even into the post-Soviet period. Yeltsin's shelling of the White House in October 1993 was the kind of action to be expected from a Russian ruler confused about his sources of legitimacy and frustrated by constitutional constraints on his statization of personal power.

In sum, Hosking has given us an important and coherent vision of Russian history. This is a book that should be read by anyone seriously interested in the social, economic and political paths open to the contemporary Russian Federation. It also deserves to make an impact in more specialized, historiographical, areas. Hosking's insight on the centrality of patron-client relations needs to be followed up in more focused studies. It is time to investigate in greater depth how 'patrons' and 'clients' operated in specific institutional settings, and what implications their manoeuvres had for Russian statehood. A particularly fascinating period in this respect is the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the imperial court was subsumed under what might be called 'elite society'. For some readers, perhaps, Hosking's work will seem too tolerant of Russian social and political pathologies and not political enough in its determination to illuminate Russian society, culture and even the Russian 'national character'. On both these counts, *Russia and the Russians* is profoundly different from Pipes's incisive and brilliant *Russia under the Old Regime*, the book that is perhaps its closest analogue in intellectual ambition. But it seems to me that these two works complement rather than contradict each other. History is (or should be) the broad church that Russia tried,

and failed, to be.

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