

## Recent Works on the Reign of Peter the Great

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**Author:**

Lindsey Hughes

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**Reviewer:**

Simon Dixon

Not so long ago, Peter the Great was commonly portrayed by historians on both sides of the Iron Curtain as a proto-*Homo Sovieticus*: an icon of muscular masculinity, giant in both frame and achievement. According to this tradition, it was Peter's distinctive genius to drag a backward and xenophobic Muscovy, kicking and screaming, into the rational modern world. Led by the tsar himself, his troops thrust Russia onto the European stage, guided by borrowed tactical manuals and armed with muskets made in the factories Peter had built expressly for the purpose as part of a new command economy, itself designed to drive the development of an increasingly bureaucratic state. Though the tsar's curiosity about Protestantism and other features of Western culture could hardly pass unnoticed, the emphasis of most twentieth-century accounts

was overwhelmingly materialist: 'pig iron figured strongly', as Professor Hughes reminded the audience at her inaugural lecture at the University of London in 1998.

Over the last fifteen years, three scholars have done most to reinvigorate study of the subject and shift the balance of interpretation. Two beautifully illustrated books by James Cracraft - *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Architecture* (Palo Alto; University of Stanford Press, 1988) and *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Palo Alto; University of Stanford Press, 1997) - were the first to place the accent firmly on culture. But since a comprehensive assessment of Cracraft's achievement must await the appearance of the final volume in his projected trilogy, attention here is focussed on the remaining two historians: Lindsey Hughes herself and Paul Bushkovitch. Hughes's new book pares down the detail from her earlier monograph, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven and London; Yale University Press, 1998), rearranges it in roughly chronological order, and adds new chapters on Peter's legacy and posthumous iconography.<sup>(1)</sup> Adamant that the earlier work was not a biography, she has now, as her subtitle makes clear, placed the tsar himself centre-stage. Bushkovitch, writing in a different register for a different readership, contributes a detailed monograph, focused on the balance of power at court, which is intended to transform the way we think about Russian politics in this period. It is a crucial part of his argument that the tsar is only part of the story.

Unlike Cracraft, both Hughes and Bushkovitch convincingly place Peter in the context of Muscovite political culture. Bushkovitch is almost halfway through his narrative by the time he reaches the death of the tsar's mother in 1694, an event that left him 'alone, his own man for the first time in his life'.(p. 180) 'Many things which Peter's own publicists and later historians included among the achievements of the Petrine 'revolution', Hughes reminds us, 'had their roots in his father's and even his grandfather's reign, including a professional army based on infantry, subjugation of the church, use of foreign specialists and imported technology and culture'.(p. 11) The two scholars nevertheless differ somewhat in their verdicts on the persistence of the Muscovite legacy. Bushkovitch, here concerned exclusively with the elite, notes that Peter, at his death in 1725, 'left a country that had in many respects changed beyond recognition'.(p. 442) Even the 'Old Russian' group at court derived their conception of Muscovy from 'European tracts on aristocracy or from Polish experience, not from Russian reality' (p. 443), and the 'cultural' opposition to Peter was complicated by the fact that his aristocratic critics owed more to Ukrainian mediation of both Catholic and Protestant ideas than they did to 'traditional' Muscovite Orthodoxy. Hughes's chapter on Peter's legacy similarly emphasises that there was no way back to Muscovy in eighteenth-century Russia. No less persuaded than Bushkovitch of the tsar's power to transform, or of his contempt for the past, Hughes nevertheless allows room for the resilience of old ways of doing things among the Russian people. And she is also interested in some decidedly anti-modern elements of Petrine rule.

In particular, she draws attention to the significance of the tsar's 'mock court' - the All-Drunken, All-Jesting Assembly, presided over by a 'Prince-Pope', a role filled by the tsar's former tutor, Nikolai Zotov, until his death in 1717, and subsequently by Peter Buturlin. Devoted to elaborate (and notoriously bawdy) parodies of religious ceremonies, possibly inspired by the election of the real patriarch, Adrian, in August 1690, the assembly symbolised Peter's lasting fascination with charades, already demonstrated by the formation of his two 'play' regiments at Preobrazhenskoe in the 1680s. This fascination found further expression during the Grand Embassy to the West (1697-8) when Peter sought in vain to conceal his identity as the humble bombardier Peter Mikhailov, a ruse that merely served to intensify public interest in his outsize person. As Hughes plausibly claims, the tsar's 'love of play-acting and "pretendership"' was so pronounced that it 'verged on a desire actually to be someone else'.(p. 41) Yet, for all his efforts to divert attention towards others, there is no doubt that the central playmaker in this bizarre coterie was the tsar himself, abnormally tall at six feet seven inches, but by no means the Charles Atlas figure of popular mythology. As the life-size Rastrelli waxwork now in the Hermitage Museum shows, Peter's elongated body was oddly proportioned. The same distorted image, echoed in Valentin Serov's 1907 portrait, was reinforced in 1991 by the Russian émigré sculptor, Mikhail Shemiakin. His statue, symbolically placed at the heart of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St Petersburg, portrays the tsar as 'an ill-formed freak, unnaturally small-headed, bald, bug-eyed and spindly-limbed'.(p. 245) And these were not Peter's only physical peculiarities. 'Sometimes,' a Swiss

traveller reported in 1698, 'his eyes roll right back until only the whites are visible . He even has a twitch of the legs and can't stand in the same place for long.'

Peter, then, was not only fascinated by the human monsters that he had pickled for preservation in his new *Kunstkammer*, but was himself a freak of no mean proportions. However one might characterise his extraordinary reign, surely no-one has ever thought of it as a 'stagnant pool of routine autocracy', an interpretation Bushkovitch (p. 11) implicitly ascribes to the nineteenth-century 'state school' of historiography, of which the emphasis on institutional development is said (p. 2) to have guided the approach of a remarkably heterogeneous group of historians, from Bogoslovskii to Riasanovsky and from Marc Raeff to Hughes herself. Nor is this the only curious judgement in the brief 'Introduction'. Hughes's work alone gives grounds for wondering whether the history of elite women has been quite so grievously neglected as Bushkovitch claims.(p. 6) Though his decision to sidestep detailed historiographical debate (p. 11) is fully understandable, it occasionally seems involuntarily to have generated summaries of existing scholarship that are less persuasive than the fine analysis of the primary sources that make his book such a resounding success.

Bushkovitch is concerned above all to uncover the extent to which Russian rulership was a joint venture between the tsar and his boyars, and to determine the changing balance of forces over time, problems that lead him, in turn, to probe the nature and strength of aristocratic opposition to Peter. At the heart of this investigation lies an attempt to trace the development of a vigorous high politics, and to show how, allowing for phases of relative stability, power was subject to more or less continuous renegotiation in the light of fluctuating domestic and international circumstances. To complement (and occasionally challenge) the structural accounts produced by recent historians of Muscovite political culture, Bushkovitch takes a resolutely chronological approach. He aims to provide 'a new narrative of Peter's reign' that 'makes clear the informal rules of the political game, the need of the monarch to balance factions at court and to compromise even when carrying out radical changes'.(p. 11) As the author acknowledges, not everything he says is novel. But reading even the more familiar parts of his story is like hearing for the first time a favourite symphony played on original instruments. It is an exhilarating and revelatory experience, dependent not only on the author's avowed determination to strip away the accretions of anecdote and falsification perpetrated by later mythmakers (Bushkovitch is surely not the first to give battle against anachronism), but even more on his use of a range of previously untapped archival sources to reshape our understanding of key decisions and episodes.

The main challenge facing any attempt to 'put the people in' to an account of Russian politics in this period lies in the dearth of sources capable of transforming even the best-known actors from two-dimensional figures into believable characters. Unlike many of their Western contemporaries, the Muscovite elite left little personal correspondence. How has Bushkovitch filled the gap? Even his Sisyphean labours in the intractable service records of the *Razriad* - the Muscovite military chancellery - seem to have yielded only moderate dividends. Though there are, as he promises, genuine nuggets in his copious footnotes (some of which are themselves miniature works of scholarship), the uncertain linkages between lineage, rank and political influence necessarily force some conclusions to remain speculative. (See, for example, the discussion of the implications of changes in the composition of the Duma for the fall of Matveev in 1676: pp. 84-6.) More directly persuasive - and more immediately appealing to the reader - is the testimony drawn from the dispatches of the Dutch, Swedish, Danish and Saxon envoys, overlooked by the compilers of the 148-volume miscellany published by the Imperial Russian Historical Society between 1867 and 1916, in an era when it seemed more natural to focus on Russia's relations with Britain, France, Austria and Prussia (though there is more to say about them, too). How much confidence can we place in these reports? Later in the eighteenth century, when the tsarist court had expanded, foreign ambassadors found its secrets so hard to penetrate that their accounts are rarely to be trusted at face value. Despite his friendship with Potemkin, Britain's Sir James Harris laboured under the misapprehension that Catherine the Great was no more than a puppet whose strings were pulled from Potsdam. Under Peter and his predecessors, however, the circle of intimates was smaller and in some ways easier to access. Foreign envoys were able to gather accurate intelligence - sometimes in advance of events - because they were close either to the tsar's entourage (as was

the Dane, Magnus Gjøe, who relied in the 1670s on Matveev's confidant, Paul Menzies) or to an influential aristocratic family (as was the Prussian, Johann Georg von Keyserling, to the Sheremetevs in the early eighteenth century), or simply (as in the case of Peter's denunciation of Aleksei Petrovich) because the tsar deliberately left the Senate windows open in order to be overheard. Bushkovitch makes no attempt to conceal the potential limits of such sources. To take only one example, his discussion of opposition to V. V. Golitsyn's ill-fated Crimean campaign in 1687 (pp. 152-3) incorporates in close succession the phrases 'supposed to have been', 'supposed to be', 'seems to have been', 'it is said that', and 'it seems that'. Time and again, however, an unanswerable case is made for the plausibility of these newly discovered materials, not least because the munificence of Cambridge University Press has permitted the author to include generous translated extracts in his text and to provide in his footnotes still more extensive passages in the original languages. Such gobbets simultaneously allow readers to sample for themselves a wide range of new primary material, and to see how closely Bushkovitch has relied on it in framing his own narrative (for examples, see p. 201, n.78; p. 202, n.79).

Though it is part of the author's point to show that this complex narrative defies simple summary, it demonstrates clearly enough that periods of domination by favourites - Matveev between 1671 and 1676, Golitsyn in the mid-1680s, Golovin and Menshikov between 1699 and 1708 - were punctuated by periods in which decision-making had to allow for wider consultation among the great families of the Muscovite elite. By no means monolithic, these boyar clans were just as capable of dividing on policy lines, as they did over foreign affairs during Sofiia's regency, as they were over the personal quarrels that dominated the early 1690s. It is not always clear why one set of divisions succeeded the other. But it is plain enough that the underlying cause of Russian political instability was lack of trust. Boyars resented the gradual accumulation of power by favourites; tsars thought it prudent to develop a nose for disloyalty. Peter was notoriously mistrustful. In the wake of the Streltsy revolt of 1698 (which took place while the tsar was abroad on his 'Grand Embassy') and mounting rivalries amongst the boyars (which were all too evident on his return), it seemed that all his fears had been justified. As the imperial ambassador, Ignaz von Guarient, reported in January 1699, 'the tsar finds daily, more and more, that in the whole empire not one of his blood relatives and boyars can be found to whom he can entrust an important office; he is therefore forced to take over the heavy burden of the empire himself, and pushing back the boyars (whom he calls disloyal dogs) to put his hand to a new and different government'.(p. 210) Peter then embarked on what was probably 'his most anti-aristocratic' period (p. 442), when, ignoring the great families, he embarked on the war against Sweden and introduced a series of radical domestic reforms by means of personal decree. Because war was expensive, even victory was insufficient to quell rising resentment at various levels of society. Bushkovitch's greatest achievement is to demonstrate, in unprecedented detail and with unprecedented conviction, how aristocratic opposition (and with it, domestic politics as a whole) began to revolve round the person of the tsarevich. A brilliant reconstruction of the Aleksei Petrovich affair marks the culmination of the book. Though the brutal investigation that resulted in the death of Peter's son produced no real evidence of widespread *conspiracy*, the evidence of widespread *opposition* was overwhelming. Since it was impossible to conceive of ignoring hostile aristocrats, as he had tried to do between 1699 and 1708, the tsar 'once again reset the balance among factions at court' (p. 426), surrounding his critics with favourites and bureaucrats, and driving forward the pace of change. 'The case of Aleksei was the greatest spur to Peter's reform in the history of the reign, greater even than the Northern War'.(p. 425)

The book is studded with all manner of individual insights. A detailed discussion of the Tsykler affair of 1697 - 'the first serious case of opposition to Peter on the part of the court elite' (p. 188) - demonstrates, contrary to some accounts, that the investigation 'turned up nothing about Old Belief and the subject was not even mentioned'.(p. 197) A particularly cogent section (pp. 280-92), linking the vicissitudes of internal politics, as reported by the foreign ambassadors, to the progress of the Great Northern War, shows how Charles XII's fateful decision to turn south towards the Ukraine in September 1708, though 'in retrospect a fatal error' culminating in the defeat at Poltava, was 'a perfectly logical move for man counting on revolt and treason within Russia to bring him victory'.(p. 286) Nor is all the most interesting material confined the later years. The implicit analytical thrust of the early chapters consists in a provocative attempt to puncture the pretensions of both the Miloslavskii faction and those scholars who have stressed its importance in

Muscovite politics from the 1670s to the 1690s. Because the much-vaunted rivalry between Naryshkin and Miloslavskii clans 'only dates from the winter of 1676-77', when Bushkovitch attributes it to 'concrete actions by Ivan Mikhailovich Miloslavskii', 'the struggle of the Naryshkins and Miloslavskiis before 1676 is a myth'.(p. 57) 'During the last five years of the life of Tsar Aleksei, after his marriage to Peter's mother, the most important sources for Russian court politics, the reports of the various resident ambassadors, make no mention of a Naryshkin faction'.(p. 63) During the regency between 1682 and 1689, 'the Sofia-Golitsyn faction was not really a 'Miloslavskii' faction in that Ivan Miloslavskii played no role. The only 'Miloslavskii' was Sofia herself'.(p. 136, n.20) There is much for historians to chew on here.

Though it seems churlish to ask for more, one wonders whether the argument might have been expanded (or perhaps reshaped) in three inter-related ways. The first concerns the 'mock court' of the All-Drunken Assembly. Perhaps because its freakish machinations were beyond the comprehension of, distasteful to, and partly hidden from the foreign envoys on whose reports he relies, Bushkovitch mentions the assembly only in passing as 'a sort of drinking society that parodied church and state'.(p. 179) For Hughes, however, the drunken antics in which Peter played the part of humble bombardier or deacon in attendance on the Prince-Pope 'demonstrated his ability to set the rules and choose his own roles'.(p. 32) Was this because he struggled to set the rules in the 'real' world? Was the mock court the only place where he could be sure of loyalty? 'All the mock post holders were absolutely loyal', Hughes notes, 'all close to the tsar. This was essential, because Peter made himself vulnerable by posing as their humble subject or pupil and had to be confident that none of them would take advantage of his assumed "weakness"'.(pp. 107-108) If it was not mere escapism, the mock court - by no means a passing phenomenon - may deserve greater prominence in the study of Petrine high politics than it has so far received. It certainly gives pause for thought about the nature of that politics, which was no more a conventional factional system than it was a stagnant pool of routine autocracy. 'The machine seemed to be working smoothly', Bushkovitch remarks in passing (p. 184), but he never quite tells us precisely what sort of machine he thinks it was, and the mechanical image sits somewhat uncomfortably with his overall emphasis on fluidity. A final point concerns change over time. While his magnificent opening chapter on the 'structures and values' of Muscovite political culture demonstrates that narrative is not the only historical form that Bushkovitch has mastered, it is not quite held in balance by the 'Epilogue and conclusion, 1718-1725'. How stable was the Petrine regime by 1718? The William Mons affair is but one indication that simmering under the surface of these later years lies a further narrative that might reveal them as an integral part of Bushkovitch's story, rather than as the appendage to it that they are made to seem.

Observations such as these are not so much criticisms as reflections on the continual stimulation to be derived from a close reading of an outstanding work of scholarship. The scale of the achievement is enviable: by scouring European archives and applying his forensic intelligence to a daunting range of published sources in several languages, Paul Bushkovitch has given us a wholly refreshing view of the politics of Peter's reign, rich in texture and all the more attractive for being expressed in plain English. Though the detail is demanding, there is not a dull page in the book. Provided that they are prepared to concentrate, readers at almost every level of sophistication have much to learn from it. And they will appreciate the importance of its insights all the more if they read Lindsey Hughes first. Her readable, wide-ranging, and exceptionally well-balanced biography, not only has much to teach the expert, but also offers an excellent introduction to the reign.

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## Notes

1. For a review of *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* on these pages, please click [here](#) [3].[Back to \(1\)](#)

Professor Hughes thanks Professor Dixon for his generous review, and does not wish to comment further.

**Other reviews:**

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