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Russia: People and Empire 1552-1917

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Author:
Geoffrey Hosking
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Admiral Eduard Baltin, wrestling in mid-1997 with the consequences of the division of the ex-Soviet navy between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, took a moment to reflect on the creator of the imperial Russian Black Sea fleet: "a loose woman and non-Russian, Empress Catherine the Great was a greater Russian patriot than today's rulers of Russia. Yeltsin is not a collector of Russian lands as several Russian tsars were. He simply sells them off" (quoted in The Guardian, 6 June 1997). The admiral's angry remarks neatly encapsulate several key themes in Geoffrey Hosking's new book: the roots of national sentiment, the consequences of Russian imperial expansion, the meaning of patriotism in the Russian context, and what might be termed the trade in territory.

On one level this is a fairly straightforward history of Russia from the conquest of Kazan' in 1552 under Ivan IV to the eventual collapse of the tsarist state in 1917. Drawing upon a sound knowledge of the historiography (including many of the most recent works by Russian historians) and of many printed primary sources, Hosking provides a panoramic, lucid and reliable narrative from which general readers, students and specialists in Russian history will all learn a great deal. Anyone familiar with Hosking's well-regarded history of the Soviet Union will recognize many of the same virtues in his latest book: clarity of

exposition, the fair-minded summary of important debates, the careful handling of domestic politics, and the close attention given to religious developments and to non-Russian minorities (one might, however, also note the author's steadfast refusal to make more than passing reference to the history of women in Russia; five modest references in a work of 550 pages devoted to "people" is scandalous!). Hosking does not provide a bibliography, but there are fairly full notes at the end of the book. There are four clear maps, but no illustrations. This is a pity, given that parts of Hosking's argument merited some well-chosen reproductions of the ways in which Rus' and Rossiia were represented (see below).

As one would expect, several passages deal with key episodes in Russian history. To my mind, Hosking offers a riveting account of the Pugachev rebellion (pp.107-15), of the origins and ideas of the Decembrists (pp.171-82), and of the Pushkin celebrations in 1880 (pp.308-10). Many other sections, such as that dealing with the Time of Troubles (pp.56-64), offer rewarding insights. Some specific points deserved to be elaborated more fully: for example, there is no proper discussion of estate categories (sosloviia) and their significance. But these are matters where different scholars will naturally exercise different judgement. Russia: People and Empire is, in short, the work of a mature scholar who is scrupulous in the care he gives to the source material and who demonstrates the capacity to construct a vivid and coherent narrative.

However, it would be misleading to heap praise upon the author for his skills as a storyteller; misleading, because Hosking proposes at the same time to pursue a grand theme. His history is the story of the creation and consolidation of the Russian empire and the implications these processes had, above all, for the "Russian people". In Hosking's view, the Russian empire (rossiiskaia imperiia) "impeded the formation of a nation" (p.xix) and suppressed a sense of national identity, that is Russians' conscious affiliation to Rus'. In the process of creating an empire, the existing institutions of community that might otherwise have provided the basis for a "civic sense of nationhood" were weakened and crushed. This argument owes much to Mikhail Bakunin, whose views on "statehood and anarchy" are cited in the text (pp.279-80). They are worth quoting:

> "Any honest thinking Russian is bound to realize that our empire cannot change its attitude to the people. By its very existence it is doomed to be its blood-sucker and tormentor. The people instinctively hate it, and it cannot help but oppress the people, since its whole being and strength are founded on the people's misery...The only worthwhile constitution from the people's point of view is the destruction of the empire".

Bakunin christened this "Knutogermaniia", a compound of "Mongol cruelty [the knout] and Prussian pedantry".

A similar vision of the devastating consequences of imperial crystallization was embraced by Alexander Herzen (see pp.281-4), who wanted to revive the pristine principles of the community (mir) and the work collective (artel'), in order to promote the ideals of freedom of association, based upon equality of access to key resources. Hosking is very impressed by the notion of communal association and kinship ties, devoting much attention to their survival in various forms through to 1917. In his view, two mutually exclusive versions of community vied for supremacy in post-Petrine Russia - "two poles round which Russian national feeling could crystallize". One was a noble ideal of hierarchical authority, cosmopolitanism, a readiness to serve the state, and a firm commitment to property. The other was embodied in the peasantry, with its emphasis on communal ownership, egalitarianism, and mutual responsibility (krugovaia poruka). There was no reconciliation between these extremes; instead, "the two Russias weakened each other". The Russian intelligentsia - a potential source of an articulate and coherent national identity - was "crushed between them" (p.xxvi).

These arguments are developed in Part One ("The Russian empire: how and why?"). Hosking paints a picture of pre-1700 expansion that was designed to enhance Russian security and to obtain tribute; in the

steppes there was no intention of destroying indigenous culture. Gradually, however, the tsarist state began to pursue the administrative, economic, cultural and religious integration of subject peoples. The relatively straightforward conquest of Siberia is contrasted with the much more protracted and violent conquest of the Caucasus, a region where indigenous groups could exploit international rivalry for their own purposes. Economic motives contributed to the decision to conquer central Asia. Elsewhere, imperial expansion meant the absorption of highly developed polities, such as Poland, from which emanated the two greatest challenges to imperial rule during the nineteenth century. But the vision of imperial conquest and administration did not distinguish between Russian and non-Russian elements; all were subject to imperial authority: "all peoples, Russians included, were the raw material of empire, to be manipulated or dominated as seemed expedient to its unity and strength" (p.39). One consequence of this indiscriminate subordination of people to state was a relatively relaxed attitude towards indigenous elites and a toleration of ethnic, religious and cultural difference, at least until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the concept of Russian national identity remains elusive. Did such an identity exist prior to the encounters with non-Russians in the imperial project? Elsewhere, it appears in the guise of human sympathy, playfulness, informality and communal solidarity, in contrast to German rationality, orderliness and impersonality (p.161). These are slippery kinds of self-definition (see David Blackbourn's recent history of Germany) and it would have been nice if they had been deconstructed by Hosking.

Part Two offers one hundred pages on the construction of the "imperial" state, with most attention devoted to the emergence of a polity in which elements of the service nobility, townspeople, clergy and "black" (that is, free and self-governing) peasants hesitantly began to cooperate in a kind of proto-nation that curbed the patrimonial principle. (By contrast, Richard Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, 1974, saw only the "partial dismantling" of patrimonialism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.) Hosking also traces the crucial emergence of a militant patriarchate, seized by the idea of Russia as the "Third Rome", and capable of alienating a sizeable community of the faithful that constituted itself as the Old Believers. Here again Hosking demonstrates the power of association: the Old Believers became a rallying-point for political as well as religious dissidents, whilst state-sponsored persecution only reinforced their belief in the need for Russia's people to be governed in accordance with piety, faith and virtue. Not for the last time, a profound rift opened up between the ordinary people and the ruling elite.

This theme is also developed in Hosking's account of Peter the Great's programme of westernization. Petrine administrative reform created a kind of rational bureaucratic state which was at odds with the alternative systems of authority that derived from kinship ties, mutual responsibility (krugovaia poruka) and face-to-face networks. Only in respect of taxation - the introduction of the poll tax - did Peter acknowledge the possibilities inherent in mutual responsibility amongst the peasant taxpayers. In a fairly conventional account, Hosking concludes that Petrine changes imposed an "artificial" regime on Russia, typified by the westernized elite that became yet more divorced from the people.

Part Three of this book considers social classes (nobility and peasantry), the intelligentsia, the Orthodox church and the army. (Again there are striking structural similarities with Pipes' survey of Rusian history.) The chapter on the nobility restates the point that Peter the Great amalgamated heterogeneous groups of privileged servitors into a single category of service; in due course, the noble corporate estate (soslovie) acquired a non-Russian, European culture which alienated them from the peasant masses. Catherine the Great promoted the idea of private property in land and serfs, but property rights failed to lay the basis for civil society and instead reinforced the gap between the noble elite and the peasantry (pp.156-58). Serfdom ruined the prospects for civic development (p.164). Critics of the existing order, such as Radishchev (whose Journey from St.Petersburg to Moscow appeared in 1790), espoused notions of honour, duty, and responsibility in a manner that aroused the ire of the autocracy. The Decembrists envisioned patriotism in terms of comradeship, freedom and constitutional government in the interests of "the welfare of Russia". Alexander Murav'ev complained that, in the aftermath of the war against Napoleon, Alexander I offered Poland a constitution, whereas Russia's reward was the notorious military settlements (p.173). The proto-Decembrist Union of Welfare offered membership of a reformed polity to those who were Russian ("born in Russia and speak Russian"); Pestel' envisaged that non-Russians, with the exception of Jews and Poles,

would be assimilated into a unitary state. Several relevant points occurred to me here, and I am not sure that Hosking attaches sufficient importance to them. First, the Decembrists' vision of national regeneration was expressed in terms that preserved a cultural and social distance between nobles and peasantry; nor did the Decembrist project deal adequately with the issue of peasant access to farm land. Second, the Northern Society had a very specific plan for the territorial sub-division of Russia, which is passed over hurriedly even though this is relevant to the theme of conceptualizing the "Russian land". A final problem is the relationship between the Decembrists and the dvorianstvo. The majority of Russian nobles were politically inert, not thoughtful critics of the tsarist state, only becoming politically active when the government (during the 1890s), then the peasantry (in 1905-07) threatened their immediate material interests.

The chapter on the army begins with the suggestion that the state uprooted peasants, drafted them into an "alien" institution, failed to offer adequate resources, and left the people to make the best of a bad job. This is summarized as follows: "the ethnos constantly threatens in its rambling way to reabsorb the empire" (p.183). Drawing upon the work of John Bushnell, Hosking shows that the army mirrored peasant life, but that at the same time it inculcated a sense of "imperial Russian consciousness" in the use of uniforms and decorations (something that could also have been developed more fully.) Reform followed the Crimean war; minister of the interior Valuev argued that "military service is a form of national elementary education". But reform did not tackle the fundamental problem of resource constraints, which limited the amount of time devoted to military training. This shortcoming was exposed in the wars of 1877-78 and 1904-05.

Appropriately, the following chapter turns to the peasantry. Serfdom, like the army, seems at first to have been a purely repressive instrument; and there were indeed numerous instances of brutality in both institutions. But, in practice, landlords allowed their serfs considerable latitude. The risks of farming poor land were shared through communal land redistribution, whilst peasant liability for taxes and other dues was managed by means of collective responsibility. The village community and the artel (pp.203-6) constituted a kind of "ghetto", confirming the cultural as well as social distance between the elite and the peasantry. The peasantry understood Russia to be informed "by the guiding principles of military power, religious rectitude and social equality" (p.211). But they had no sense of territoriality beyond the village and no idea of a national community. They grasped something of Russia as a community bound together by the Orthodox faith. Here, too, however, peasants worked their own beliefs into official religious precepts and practice. What survived was an uncompromising peasant suspicion of the state.

This leads to a chapter on the Orthodox church. In Germany and England the church provided a means whereby people encountered the national language and culture. In Russia the church was firmly subordinated to the state. Peter the Great abolished the Patriarchate, and by the nineteenth century the Procurator of the Holy Synod was effectively a government minister. Parishioners enjoyed little autonomy ("there are parishioners, but there is no parish in the proper sense of the word", wrote Aksakov in 1868). Priests were appointed from above and enjoyed a difficult relationship with their flock. The scriptures were not available to the masses in modern Russian version until after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The theme of weak institutional counterparts to the imperial state is developed in a chapter on "towns and the missing bourgeoisie". Towns were "grafted on to a peasant society". Weak guilds and competition from other social groups hampered the development of bourgeois institutions and identity. Only Moscow merchants from mid-nineteenth century onwards constituted a coherent countervailing social force and a nationalist ideology that was reproduced through cultural patronage.

The next chapter locates the "birth of the intelligentsia" in the late eighteenth century, returns to the abortive claim of the Decembrists to create a framework for national renewal, and documents the emergence of slavophil notions of sobornost' (community) as a means of reuniting the nation's elite with the masses. The most potent ideology directed towards this end, however, was Russian socialism. But socialism too bifurcated Russian national identity by offering competing visions, one based upon the fundamental wisdom and virtues of peasant "ethnic" Russia, the other a more cosmopolitan outlook in which peasants became "integrated" into the international order.

Finally, Hosking looks at literature as "nation-builder". The suggestion here is that the literary elite espoused a cosmopolitan, European outlook, which contributed further to the rift between elite culture, the church, and "the ordinary people". The person chiefly responsible for seeking to overcome this rift was Belinskii, who sought to synthesize folk idioms and elite culture (pp.291-4). But it was left to Dostoevskii to re-crystallize the myth of "holy Russia" for a late nineteenth-century audience, by seeking to synthesize the idea of a suffering, compassionate narod and Russia's religious mission (pp.304-8). Surprisingly, perhaps, the author devotes no attention to other cultural forms, notably music, painting, and architecture, which would have leant themselves to his thesis. It would have been interesting to read what Hosking makes of Musorgskii! (See pp.406-14 of James H.Billington, The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture, Vintage Books, 1970, a towering work of cultural and intellectual history that would repay the attention of readers who wish to pursue some of Hosking's themes.) I also felt that more needed to be done to establish the extent of the new reading public that took shape during the later years of the nineteenth century, particularly given the importance this plays in Hosking's identification of it with an emergent "Russian nation" (p.311).

There seem to me to be other missed opportunities. Where is the discussion of national identity in terms of symbols such as currency, flag, anthem, postage stamps, sport? What about holidays and festivals - why did these not become a means of national integration? More theoretically, what about the crystallization of national identity in terms of an encounter with "the other"? For example, to what extent did war or migration help to introduce the peasantry to new kinds of identity, by exposing them to "foreigners"? Did their encounter with Jews reinforce a sense of peasant-ness or instill a sense of Russian-ness? What role did Siberia play in changing notions of what it meant to be a "Russian"?

Part Four offers a fairly conventional account of the ways in which imperial Russia succumbed to the pressures of economic and social modernization. Westernizers and slavophiles alike interpreted Russia's humiliation in the Crimean war in terms of a rift between state and society. Two strategies contended for primacy: one was to create the institutions of civic society and political participation; the other to homogenize the tsar's subjects through a programme of Russification. Broadly speaking, Alexander II pursued the former course, whilst his successors pursued the latter (p.319). Peasant emancipation and the creation of zemstvos merely confirmed the institutions of peasant self-government; they did not overcome the political and cultural distance between the peasantry and their political masters. Hosking traces the emergence of a conscious professional stratum which identified Russia's mission to civilize the peasantry and the peripheral peoples of the Russian empire. I would have liked more deconstruction of the term obshchestvennost' (educated society) and the way in which professional activists constructed an image of the peasant narod. (See Cathy Frierson, Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia, 1993; also James Lehning, Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century, 1991.) Hosking's chapter on Russian socialism conveys something of the frustration with which radicals encountered the peasantry (p.352). But this doesn't take us very far. Nor is it altogether clear from Hosking's account why peasants became revolutionary in 1902-07; perhaps the author attaches too much importance to their awareness of state vulnerability; in any case, he does not make it sufficiently clear how this awareness was transmitted. It is also strange that, in a book which relies quite heavily on the idea of cellular communities, the author did not investigate more fully the idea of a revolutionary party cell. And, although he suggests (p.412) that the soviet was analogous to the village assembly, he does not explore the analogy or unpick the differences in organization, membership, and tone.

The failure of reform prompted the state to pursue the alternative strategy, of Russification. Hosking describes this as the attempt to implant an overarching sense of Russian-ness amongst all subjects of the tsar: "by inculcating in each of them the language, religion, culture, history and political traditions of Russia, leaving their own languages and native traditions to occupy a subsidiary niche, as ethnographic remnants rather than active social forces" (p.376). This policy not only placed a heavy strain on the state budget, but also provoked a "national" backlash (as seen in the popularity of the Armenian Dashnak movement after the heavy-handed Russian attack on the autonomy of the Armenian church). But I wanted to learn more about the tactics that allowed the patriotic intelligentsia in Poland, Ukraine, Latvia and elsewhere to communicate

with the masses; was this because some of these societies were much less "peasant"? Meanwhile, Russification alienated Russian progressive opinion and failed to arouse any response on the part of "the masses".

The remaining chapters describe the 1905-07 revolution, its aftermath, and the 1917 revolution. Professor Hosking is very much on his home ground here. There are three main arguments in this part of the book. First, that none of the revolutionary elements succeeded in articulating "a vision of nation or empire which could appeal over boundaries of soslovie and ethnos" (p.422). Second, that the new parliament or Duma failed to overcome the rift between ruler and ruled. Third, that the post-revolutionary reassessment by the Russian intelligentsia failed to come to terms with the multi-national character of the empire or the "localized consciousness" of the Russian peasantry (Russification was revived by the counter-revolutionary Whites in 1917-21). I have some reservations about the first point. Radicals and "the masses" shared a vision of the bankruptcy of state officials, of the need for a government that enjoyed the confidence of the people, and of the pressing need for land redistribution. This surely was a vision of a reconstructed nation, albeit not couched in "nationalist" terms. Some other judgements are also open to question. We are told (p.417) that peasants continued to revere the Tsar. Can we be certain of this; why did peasants not translate reverence into defence? Hosking also offers a decent account of the policies pursued by Stolypin, but plays down the repressive elements in post-1905 policies. I was also surprised that Hosking did not take the opportunity to explore the cultural meanings of different Russian cities (there is a brief discussion of the construction of St.Petersburg, but no sustained reflection on the comparative meanings that Moscow and St.Petersburg assumed), the attempts to russify other cities (e.g. Warsaw) and the construction (in both a physical and cultural sense) of newer Siberian towns. Surprisingly little attention is given to foreign policy and the idea of Russia's abortive "mission" in the Far East, which would have strengthened the argument about the meaning of "Russia".

Hosking maintains that the imperial regime never overcame the profound rift between rulers and ruled. Russia failed the test of war in 1914-17: nation-states, not empires, win modern wars (pp.xxi, 449-52). It is worth pointing out, however, that nation-states did not "go it alone" in 1914; Britain relied upon the mobilization of its empire, as Avner Offer has shown (The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation, 1988), and what counted in wartime was economic and military cooperation between nation-states. In the end, peasant conscripts did begin to articulate a kind of national consciousness in wartime (Hosking, pp.457-8). There is much more that needs to be said on this score. Hosking shows that workers and peasants were impatient to settle old scores with the propertied elite, as well as aiming to secure material benefits; this generated institutional collapse and bitter social conflict. Like Moshe Lewin, Hosking argues that the peasantry was the class that survived best the upheaval of revolution and civil war. I wondered how fair it was to describe the participants in the soviets (such as Kronstadt) as loyal to "the age-old vision of an egalitarian democracy" (p.476); doesn't this minimize the importance of class conflict and exclusion? And the suggestion that suppression of the Kronstadt revolt ushered in something called totalitarianism should not go unchallenged.

Some concluding observations are prompted by Hosking's enterprise. Following Anthony Smith, National Identity, 1991, we know that even "western" nations were to some extent designed, the outcome of deliberate attempts to pattern a new nation state. But what economic and social basis allowed these projects to succeed? England and France boasted relatively advanced economies, with a reasonably high degree of urbanization and literacy. It took a lengthy communications revolution (schooling plus railways) to effect a transformation in national identity. A more dynamic Russian economy - with corresponding changes in population migration, urbanization and division of labour - might have had a much more positive outcome in terms of national consciousness. It is not clear from Hosking's account that imperial expansion and administration hampered Russian economic growth; in any case, he does not pursue this line of enquiry.

Put another way, the Russian state did not crush the peasantry, and this failure confirmed the peasantry as the bearers of a communal tradition. Hosking himself sees this as one version of "Russia", so in that sense a kind of national identity survived decades of economic, social and political change. Peasants defied the imperial state; they "peasantized" the army and the town, and they preserved customary law. What matters

for Hosking is that they did not constitute themselves a nation state. But this was a protracted process throughout much of Europe. For many states the process was barely complete by 1900 - one thinks of Italy and the powerful countervailing forces at work to dent the national project; or of France, where peasants "became Frenchmen" later in the century. Is not the real problem to explain why peasant society proved so resilient; and why, in order to promote "successful" nation state-building, the peasantry would have to be crushed, as Stalin sought to do in the 1930s? I get the feeling that Hosking cannot make up his mind whether or not he likes peasants (he is not alone!); sometimes he describes peasants as "superstitious" (p.193), a term that implies - to me at least - a degree of disdain, or at least impatience. But Hosking is a humane scholar; not for him the certainties espoused by E.H.Carr! So what would be his prescription for successful nation-state formation? Was the task insoluble, as at times he appears to concede? Did the economy fail Russia, by generating insufficient scope for sustained growth and non-rural employment - in a word, too little urbanization?

Professor Hosking has done much to encourage further debate in this important area. I hope that his bold work will encourage students to rediscover the classic works by Billington, Pipes and others where they will find plenty more food for thought. I also hope that those who consider these issues in future will make greater use of theoretical approaches to social and national identity, integrating these more closely into the complex web of historical narrative. When all is said and done, however, Hosking remains a consummate storyteller and it is this skill that will ensure that his book enjoys a wide and enthusiastic readership.

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