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Russian Conservatism and its Critics: A Study in Political Culture

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This book is an overview of Russian conservative ideology from roughly 1500 to the First World War. Richard Pipes, the now Emeritus Baird Professor of History at Harvard, has written or edited more than twenty books on Russian history, and his latest work is in many ways a summary of his conclusions about why Russia developed differently from the countries of Western Europe. He calls it an 'essay in intellectual history, but intellectual history related to reality' (p. xv). Pipes has little time for the Marxist view that ideas and values belong to the 'superstructure' of society and reflect the socio-economic conditions within it; instead he defends the autonomy of ideas, although he notes that ideas do not emerge in a vacuum. Much of the book addresses arguments in defence of autocracy. The 'critics' to which Pipes refers are essentially liberals or conservative liberals; Pipes, never one to pay Russian socialism too much respect, excludes from consideration the radical strand of Russian thought on the grounds that it did not concern itself with autocracy except as something that needed to be destroyed.

Pipes emphasises that Russia never developed a tradition of partnership between state and society. Reiterating ideas developed in works such as *Russia under the Old Regime* (1974) and *Property and Freedom* (1999), Pipes notes that Russia never developed the traditions of private property necessary for the formation of a civil society. Although in medieval Muscovy, there existed privately owned estates known as *votchiny* (patrimonia), these soon became fiefs held on condition of service to the crown. Mongol rule, which lasted for roughly two and a half centuries from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, accentuated the problem. Mongol rulers governed Russia through vassals, who considered the peoples and lands under

their rule as part of their individual 'patrimony', and when Mongol rule came to an end, the patrimonial system continued. More generally, such things as Roman law, Catholic theology, feudalism and the commercial culture of cities, which helped to shape Western political theory, were absent in Russia. The sense that Russia was a private possession of its rulers continued right up until 1917: the Russian state failed to evolve from a private to a public institution (p. 181).

The autocratic tendency was strengthened in the early sixteenth century by events in the Church. A dispute between defenders of church lands, known as 'possessors', and a more ascetic group, known as 'non-possessors', was resolved in favour of the former. According to Pipes's account, the possessors won their victory by trading the state's protection for theological support for autocracy. In 1503, the leading 'possessor', Joseph of Volokolamsk, wrote that to obey the sovereign was equivalent to obeying God. Later, following Basil III's decision to divorce his wife and marry a Lithuanian princess in 1524, Joseph's successor, Daniel, backed the tsar against the widespread opposition of clergy at home and abroad. In Byzantine political theory, church and state were supposed to operate in a harmonious partnership where each was responsible for a particular area of society; however, the victory of the possessors gave the state a greater level of dominance.

The early evolution of the Russian state thus led to the emergence of a particularly strong form of absolutism. Over the next four centuries, autocracy was defended on numerous grounds. Initially, it was suggested that since the tsar was only accountable to God, discussion of his role was not necessary. However, with time, and especially from the era of Peter the Great onwards, a body of doctrine emerged arguing not so much that autocracy was the best form of government in general, but that it was the one most suitable for Russia. It was held by such figures as V. N. Tatishchev (1686?1750), Russia's first historian, Catherine II and Sergei Witte (1849?1915) that Russia was geographically too large, and its population too backward, for the country to survive with any other form of government. There were many other arguments made in autocracy's favour: Nikolai Novikov (1744?1818) and to some extent Nikolai Karamzin (1766?1826) emphasised that what mattered were not political institutions but enlightenment and virtue in the citizenry; Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821?1881) and Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1827?1907) likewise stressed that personal morality was more important than political reform; Karamzin defended autocracy on the grounds that it was Russia's traditional form of government; Iury Krizhanich (1618?1683), Tatishchev and Alexander Pushkin (1799?1837) argued that only autocracy could lead Russia towards enlightenment, and Pushkin suggested that only the tsar could liberate the serfs; the Slavophiles stated that the Russian people were by nature apolitical and happy to let the monarch govern; Konstantin Kavelin (1818?1885) and Iury Samarin (1819?1876) warned that representative government in Russia would result in aristocracy rather than democracy; Konstantin Leontiev (1831?1891) stated that only the autocracy could save Russia from bourgeois philistinism, and Pobedonostsev saw it as the only means of saving the country from nihilism; Dmitry Shipov (1851?1920) defended autocracy on the grounds that, unlike democracy, it rose above class interests (pp. 183?84).

Pipes devotes a lot of space to liberal and liberal conservative criticism of autocracy. Indeed, he suggests that liberal elements in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were stronger than is generally supposed (pp. 112?113). Dmitry Golitsyn, for example, tried to introduce some form of constitutionalism at the beginning of the reign of Queen Anne in 1730, but Anne avoided it by forming a compact with members of the lower nobility who feared that constitutionalism might in practice mean aristocratic rule. Count Nikita Panin (1718?1783), who played a role in the overthrow of Peter III, was an aristocrat and patrician who sought to restore the influence of the nobility and defended the role of private property; according to Pipes he was 'Russia's earliest liberal in the Western sense of the word' (p. 73). Mikhail Speransky (1772?1839), Alexander I's chief minister between 1807 and 1812 and, according to Pipes, a 'profound and original thinker', sought to create an autocracy that was accountable to law; he was the first Russian political thinker to emphasise the importance of public opinion, once stating that 'no government at odds with the spirit of the times can stand up to its all-powerful action' (p. 84).

Speransky's interest in public opinion was unusual, and it took a long time for Russian thinkers to take society itself seriously. A pioneer in this field was Samarin, a Slavophile whose views, according to Pipes,

had a 'solidity rarely found among Russian intellectuals' (p. 127). In an essay of 1853, 'About Serfdom and the Transition from it to Civil Freedom', Samarin emphasised that great power status could only be derived from the strength and vitality of society. Although Samarin remained committed to absolute monarchy in the 1860s, he believed that the institutions of self-government set up in 1864 could help to prepare the peasantry for political participation; implicitly his ideas pointed towards a constitutional regime. Another Slavophile, Ivan Aksakov (1823?1886), who eventually became a rabid nationalist, developed the concept of *obshchestvo*, meaning by it a population that, although not having political rights, was separate from the state and had developed its own culture. Although Pipes lauds Dostoevsky's psychological understanding of the revolutionary movement, he also states that he was a man who 'loved to hate', and that he was himself 'no less of a utopian than the most extreme nihilist' (pp. 137, 139). Shipov, he calls 'naïve' (p. 171).

The chief theorists of the Russian conservative-liberal school in the nineteenth century were Konstantin Kavelin, Boris Chicherin (1828?1903) and Alexander Gradovsky (1841?1889). Kavelin, the founder of the Russian Statist School of historiography, argued that unlike in Western Europe, where change was consistently driven 'from below', Russian development was always shaped by the state. For this reason, in the 1860s he did not endorse the idea of a constitution on historical grounds, believing that the country was not ready for one. Chicherin, the leader of the conservative-liberal school, distinguished his own 'conservative liberalism' from what he called 'oppositional liberalism' ? the tendency to identify all government with oppression. His commitment to a mixture of autocracy, laissez-faire economics, civil rights and law alienated both left and right, and he remained an isolated figure. Gradovsky also believed that autocracy and civil rights were compatible. In practice, it was difficult to combine a commitment to autocracy with a belief in liberal ideas in nineteenth-century Russia. Indeed, Pipes criticises this nineteenth-century brand of conservative liberalism as 'abstract and unrealistic'. As regards a later conservative liberal, Peter Struve (1870?1944), on whom Pipes wrote an acclaimed two-volume biography, Pipes notes that Struve came to believe that the individual took precedence over the state, and that liberalism was a precondition of national greatness. It was Struve who stated in 1895 that if the autocracy identified with the bureaucracy and not with society, then it would eventually 'fall under the pressure of live social forces' (p. 167).

Pipes has some interesting things to say about Russia's two great pre-revolutionary statesmen, Witte and Peter Stolypin (1862?1911). Pipes states that although it was Witte who persuaded Nicholas II to issue the apparently liberal October Manifesto in 1905, Witte was not a liberal-minded statesman, but one whose vision resembled that of the German Reichstaat; he emphasised autocracy buttressed by bureaucracy, and in this he was quite similar to Tatishchev and Catherine II (pp. 151?152). Pipes calls Stolypin a 'sophisticated conservative liberal'; he understood that the patrimonial ideal was outmoded, and also saw the vital need of bringing society into some kind of equilibrium with the government. Unfortunately, like so many of his predecessors, he was unable to bring government and society together; opposed by both conservatives and liberals, and lacking wholehearted backing from the court, his successes were limited to implementing his agrarian reform plan. His failure, Pipes declares, 'demonstrates that Russia could not take the middle road: its alternatives lay between the extremes of black and red' (p. 178).

Pipes does not regard autocracy as exclusively to blame for the fact that state and society never developed an adequate partnership in Russian history. In his conclusion, he points out that liberal rulers like Catherine II and Alexander I feared surrendering their authority because they believed that if they did so, their empires might implode. However, they also received no support from society at large. If the state was too powerful, society was itself too weak. Pipes writes that the 'weakness of Russian society inevitably led to the growth and assertiveness of autocratic principles' (p. 185); conservatism triumphed because there was no society to act as a counterweight. Speransky expressed it well in 1802 when he noted that paupers and philosophers were the only free people in the country; all the rest were slaves, 'slaves of the tsar and slaves of the landlords' (p. 113).

The failure of the Russian state and society to work together has been a recurring theme in Pipes's oeuvre. For example, writing about the relationship between the monarchy and the intelligentsia in *The Russian Revolution*, Pipes stated that a constitutional regime can only function properly if government and

opposition accept the same political ground-rules; however, in Russia after 1905 both tsar and intelligentsia believed that the new regime was an obstacle to their ambitions. (1) Pipes has always considered the revolutionary intelligentsia to be as much to blame for the absence of a dialogue between state and society as the Romanovs. In this new book, by refusing to give the revolutionary tradition serious attention, Pipes is implicitly saying that the Russian socialist tradition lacked real intellectual substance. Probably he endorsed, and indeed enjoyed the comment made by Chicherin that the Russian radicals Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Dmitry Pisarev participated in the 'Great Reforms' of the 1860s only in the way that flies defecating on a painting could be thought of as having contributed to art (p. 162).

Writing about Witte, Pipes quotes Struve as saying that he lacked a 'central idea toward which he would gravitate morally'; 'the absence in him of a moral-ideological center was especially striking in view of his political genius' (p. 150). Although Pipes questions the final accuracy of Struve's appraisal, the theme is an interesting one to consider in relation to Pipes himself. There is a sense that *Russian Conservatism and its Critics*, along with Pipes's other writings, and indeed his activities on Reagan's National Security Council in the early 1980s, reflect some kind of unifying moral and political ideal. In *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919-1924*, Pipes stated that 'to "make sense" of the past, the historian must follow some principle'. (2) What, then, is Pipes's principle, or the moral-ideological framework shaping his view of Russian history?

Summed up, Pipes's moral and political ideal appears to be a form of conservative liberalism: in healthy countries, there will be a working alliance between state and society based on private property and the rule of law. In the medieval era, Russia failed to develop the political and social institutions needed to sustain that kind of alliance. Following this unpromising beginning, Russian history after 1500 was the story of the consolidation and expansion of autocracy. However, there were also a number of key moments, taking place at times of social upheaval or with the appearance of certain brilliant personalities, when breakthroughs of social evolution might have occurred. For a variety of reasons, the Russian state or people failed to take advantage of these occasions; Russian history was effectively a series of missed opportunities. In Pipes's framework, a lot depends on particular individuals. Pipes suggests that Mikhail Katkov (1818-1887), whose strong conservatism greatly influenced both Alexander II and Alexander III, 'bore heavy responsibility for tsarism's persistent refusal to grant its subjects a voice in running the country' (p. 126). And he describes Nicholas II's rejection of calls for consultations with the zemstva in 1895 as 'the most fatal mistake committed by tsarism in the late nineteenth century' (p. 167). He clearly believes that individuals can make mistakes, and that these mistakes can be costly. Implicitly he also believes that historians have a right to hold figures from the past morally accountable for their actions. Pipes's sense that history contains a real moral drama, and that moral judgments about the past are valid, suggests that his worldview contains some underlying metaphysical elements.

Critics of Pipes, of whom there have been many, might easily suggest that this framework for interpreting Russian history is too rigid; it contains too much liberal ideology to be good history. However, the fact that Pipes operates within a liberal interpretative framework is in fact one of his strengths. It means that he clearly has something to say, and it gives him a way of integrating a large body of material. The French philosopher, Henri Bergson, once said that every philosopher has one basic insight, and that everything he says is a variation on it. It is a point that might be equally applied to Pipes: he is constantly re-expressing the same point about the failure of Russia to establish a partnership between state and society.

It should be said, however, that Pipes's account of Russian history also contains an element of sadness. If the past was a series of missed opportunities, as Pipes implies, then it could also have been different; the fact that it was not different means that Russian history is a somewhat depressing story. At the end of the book, Pipes bleakly concludes: 'Such ... was Russia's fate.' (p. 185) There is a sense of loss for what might have been. It should also be said that Pipes is not an admirer of the Russian intellectual tradition. He states, rightly, that Russians generally think in terms of 'either-or': hence their inability to endorse concepts of limited government or moderate forms of patriotism (p. 183). Few of the statesmen or thinkers described in this book achieve a larger greatness in terms of consistency and depth of thought. On the other hand, the book underlines the fact that there are plenty of liberal currents in Russian history on which to build.

Notes

1. Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (1990), p. 153. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919-1924* (1994), p. 10. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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