

Russia in the Age of Peter the Great

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Russian historiography has been richly endowed with numerous topics of enduring interest such as the founding of the Kievan Russian State in the ninth century and its later demise, the Mongol conquest in 1236-40 and its consequences, the rise of the Muscovite state between 1300 and 1514, serfdom, Ivan the Terrible and his Oprichnina, Peter the Great and Westernization, the revolutions of 1917, Stalin and his Great Purge, and most recently, the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each of these topics has produced a vast literature, much of it thoughtful and probably of world class quality. Lindsey Hughes's production joins that literature and, along with the classic works of S. M. Solov'ev, V. O. Kliuchevskii, and P. N. Miliukov, will be one of the books that everyone interested in Russia in the 1682/89-1725 period will need to read.

Hughes's volume masterfully presents most of the major historiographic disputes (what was developed in the period 1689-1725 from the past and what was new? what was the rôle of Peter's personality? what was imported from the West and what was native? which Petrine reforms proved to be ephemeral and which endured? was the Petrine experience on the whole positive or negative?) as it discusses the major relevant topics of the era: war and military change, the constantly reformed government, economic development, social change, the building of St. Petersburg, the arts, education and religion, secularization, Peter's court, his personality, his family and major assistants. The reader may be assured that much of the recent scholarship on these topics is accurately presented as well as that Hughes herself has read and creatively used most of the published primary sources as well as some unpublished archival materials in Russia. (In this respect, it is regrettable that the notes are at the back of the book, rather than at the bottom of the page, for many readers will want to read the notes as well as the prose.) Especially creative, in my opinion, is Hughes's use of the large number of contemporary non-Russian commentaries on the period, ranging from ambassadorial reports to the memoirs of some of the many Westerners hired to assist in Russia's military modernization and

economic development.

The major element that was "surprising" to me in this book is the presentation of the Petrine employment of Greek and Roman motifs. Typically one learns that the "neo-classical" age began in Russia around 1730, and that the "Baroque" was the reigning style in Peter's era. Here we learn, however, that the first quarter of the eighteenth century was full of Greek and Roman images, and thus the post-1730 "neo-classicism" was adumbrated decades before it became the dominant mode. The appeal of "neo-classicism" was to make the isolated Russian a man of the world, but Peter obviously had prepared the ground for such sentiments.

The end of the society chapter has a lengthy section presenting what little is known about women in the era under review, an especially important topic in light of Peter's attempts to force elite women out of the secluded *terem* (a recent phenomenon anyway, as other authors have discovered) into society.

Hughes considers Peter's notorious play regiments, mock rulers and church heads under the rubric of pretence and disguise. Her coverage of this topic is the most thorough I am aware of, especially the fact that Peter's Drunken Assembly persisted from his boyhood until the end of his life. She makes the excellent point that "Peter's masquerades were not true carnival at all, in the sense that 'people are liberated from authority, behavior is unfettered, and hierarchy is suspended'." Rather, Peter's carnivals celebrated authority as sacred, and attendance was compulsory (266).

I can think of nowhere else that a reader can gain a more thorough appreciation of Peter himself than in this book. Regrettably, however, no psychoanalytic approach is employed, as might be warranted by the death of Peter's father when he was 4, his childhood, or his recorded dreams, but nevertheless we learn nearly all the facts we need to know about our hero's violence and alcoholism, his probable homosexual relations with Menshikov, his trysts with many of the women who crossed his path. (Peter is sometimes termed "a narcissistic-character type.") Whether there were any "equals" of Peter in Russia may be debated, but it is certain that he was only willing to tolerate sycophantish yes-men in his immediate entourage. Hughes proves beyond a doubt that "objective merit" was not the major criterion for inclusion in Peter's circle. On a larger scale, the reader of the Hughes volume is almost certain to conclude that Peter was one of the "great men of history," that he was personally involved in most of the significant events of his era, and, more controversially, that he was personally responsible for many or even most of the differences observable in Russia between, say, 1690 and 1725.

One of the enduring historiographic issues of the Petrine era is its legacy. For example, uncountable lives and treasure were sacrificed for the fleet, yet already by the 1730s Russia lacked a viable fleet. On land, southern territorial acquisitions at the expense of the Turks (Azov) and the Persians (Derbent) proved ephemeral and hardly worth the cost. Endless governmental reforms failed to impose order and legality or to make Russia better governed. Peter's local administration disappeared after his death and he failed to establish his desired "well-regulated police state." Secular printing nearly collapsed when Peter died and by 1728, Peter's publishing operation was all but dismantled .

Some things did last, of course, such as the poll tax (1724-1887), the gradually increasing Westernization of the ruling elite, the regular sending of youth to the West for study, the developing of a native intelligentsia, the Urals metallurgical industry, and St. Petersburg. Hughes lovingly presents the details of the creation of Peter's new capital, but she does not tally how many thousands of corpses comprised its foundation. I might also add that the laws promulgated to create the new capital are not listed in the very useful chronology on pp. xxii-xxviii.

I hope it does not seem churlish to express a few reservations about such a magnificent achievement as this, but that is one of the tasks of reviews. In the first place, it should be noted that Hughes herself devotes considerable space to stressing minor disagreements with authors whose significant contributions are not acknowledged. On a higher level, I should like to suggest that Hughes fails to stress the major point of the Petrine era which, as I see it, was the revitalization of the service state. In my terminology, in response to the 1700 defeat by Sweden at Narva Peter launched the second service class revolution. (The first service class

revolution began around 1480 with the result that a "garrison state" was created, which soon led to the enserfment of the peasantry and the legal stratification of society. The first service class revolution deteriorated in the seventeenth century as privilege replaced service. After Narva Peter put the land- and serfholders back in harness, but ultimately his service class decayed in the striving for privilege. Stalin launched the third service class revolution in 1927-28 in response to the "war scare." He again put most of society in state service. For a third time, privilege again overtook the "new class," and the system predictably collapsed in 1991. Hughes's readers will get a glimpse of the parallels between the second and third service class revolutions, between Peter and Stalin, when they read the Acmeist poet Maksimilian Voloshin's lines about Peter as "the first Bolshevik.")

There are dozens of statements throughout the book supporting this thesis, but the point as a whole is never made. Some of these statements make up the rest of this paragraph, for I regard this as the real significance of the first quarter of the eighteenth century: Petrine "recruitment and industry were based on servitude." Hughes mentions "the middle and lower service classes" (137), which logically should generate the upper service classes, but instead she inexplicably prefers the inappropriate term "nobility" for both the upper and middle service classes (see below). "Lifelong compulsory service was the defining characteristic of being a nobleman" (172). Peter "concentrated more power in the hands of the ruling monarch than ever before, to the detriment of the nobility" (185). Female "emancipation" was a female version of service to the state" (201). "Cultural affairs were in the hands of the State, which disposed of all Russia's resources, both animate and inanimate. The engraver was a servant of the State, no less than a soldier or an administrator" (232). "With few exceptions, all of the art of the Petrine era seems to have been created for public purposes" (239). "The whole population was harnessed for hard toil" (269). "For Peter state service was the highest calling" (299). The 1714 act on single inheritance sought "to bind the nobles to state service by interfering in traditional inheritance patterns" (303-4). "Petrine education was imposed by the State in the interests of the State" (308). "Poetry was harnessed to the service of the State" (326). "Nearly all the secular works published, and some of the religious ones, were linked to the needs of the State" (327). "Monasteries must use the revenue from their lands for deeds pleasing to God and for the good of the state" (341). "Upon ordination a priest had to take an oath of allegiance modelled on that for civil servants, in which he swore to be an obedient servant of the emperor" (346). "One of the original impulses of Peter's reforms of the Church" was "to maximize revenues and the fulfillment of service obligations to the State" (346). "The whole of life from cradle to grave was military service" (383). "The State was not the State of this or that class. It was the State's State" (386). The same kind of state-society still existed in 1864 as was created in Peter's reign (468). "Pluralism, the glimmerings of civil society, were killed at birth, because Peter could not break with authoritarian rule, and found no strong desire among his subjects to do so: they went from being worthless slaves to being numbers in the Table of Ranks" (469).

Historiography buffs wanting to know where Hughes comes down on the major issues of continuity, innovation, impact, and Peter's personality may be disappointed by a lack of decisiveness on these issues, which typically is the result of a sophisticated approach recognizing that black and white presentations are too simplistic. Yet on some issues a more specific authorial verdict might be welcome, for it may seem contradictory that Peter both forced Russia out of Asiatic barbarism and backwardness to Western modernity, but also held Russia back two centuries by reinforcing the recently created caste system and crushing all manifestations of a civil society. In my opinion, Hughes's readers would benefit from the reflections of D. S. Likhachëv, the dean of pre-Petrine Russia specialists, on the issue of continuity between Old Russia and Petrine Russia, just as they benefit from her retailing the negative post-Soviet scholarly views on the Petrine impact of A. P. Spunde (d. 1962, published only in 1988), Ia. E. Vodarskii, Anatolii Lanshchikov, and Evgenii Anisimov.

In the case of the reform of the church (the abolition of the Patriarchate and its replacement by the Holy Synod, a government department), the reader is likely to believe that the reform was more radical than it really was because the effective secularization of church administration by the creation of the Monastery Chancellery in the Ulozhenie of 1649 is not mentioned (see "The Church and the Law in Late Muscovy: Chapters 12 and 13 of the Ulozhenie of 1649," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 25 [1991]: 179-99). This

is the moment to observe that Hughes tries to debunk the extent of secularization in the Petrine era, in spite of the contemporary observation that the authority of the clergy was shaken: "formerly they occupied without dispute the first places of honor in all public assemblies, but now their dignity has grown so vile [sic] that they are seldom . . . admitted to the table" (336). Moreover, I would stress that the entire issue is complicated by the facts that the Russian church was always the handmaiden of the state since the introduction of Christianity in 988, that confiscation of church lands had been a major feature of the first service class revolution, and that significant numbers of Russians were still pagans in Peter's lifetime. Hughes's presentation of the church as a state tool is unexceptional, and it is not accidental that Peter's major cheerleaders were men of the cloth. Typical of the new secular mood was the Holy Synod's ruling in 1724 that Aleksandr Nevskii was no longer to be depicted iconographically as a monk (his image in his quixotic dealings with the Mongols), but only as a warrior-prince (his image in his victories over the Livonian Knights and Swedes). The rôle of church personnel in the Second Service Class Revolution is adequately detailed, from the requirement that clergy had to report anything of interest spoken in the confessional to the secret police, denounce tax-evaders and religious dissidents to the authorities, and keep records useful for tax collection purposes. Hughes states that "it is hard to disagree with James Cracraft's conclusion that `of all the achievements of Peter's reign his church reform constituted the most decisive break with the past'" (334). In my opinion, a knowledgeable person can agree with Cracraft's conclusion only if he understands that Peter's other reforms were also minimally decisive breaks with the past.

On the "continuity theme," the plague quarantine measures and the passing of documents through fire, to which Hughes devotes considerable attention (314), long antedated 1709.

I have a problem with Hughes's presentation of society, which I find confusing. She uses the word "nobility/nobles" very loosely to refer to everyone from the handful of boyars down through the tens of thousands of provincial landholders/owners, and even some people who had no land or serfs at all, even, apparently, all servicemen (*sluzhilye liudi*, p. 162). (At least she is to be congratulated for eschewing the word "gentry," which is equally inapplicable.) She erroneously calls a service landholding (*pomest'e*) a "fief" (106) and the servicemen who held them "landowners" (453). Apparently my 1972 *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy*, where these issues are discussed at great length, is not available in the UK. At the other end of society, the presentation of slaves (sometimes misleadingly called "servants," or even worse, "serfs" [5, 110, 313, *inter alia*]) is also confused and the index lists less than half the mentions of slaves in the text.

It is surely an error to calculate that there were 3.5 males per household in 1678, when the household tax was just about to be introduced (332). Most calculations put the mean household size (MHS) in 1678 at about 4 persons, or 2 males. The rise in the MHS to levels of 7 and higher was caused by the change to the household system of taxation, which drove out solitaries and created the Russian extended family as Russians crowded into one household to beat the tax system. It is also totally incorrect that "the average levy per taxpayer (1720-3) was 0.57 kopeks, of which 0.34 [kopeks] was in fixed taxes" (137). The median wage in this period was 4 kopeks per day, so, according to Hughes's presentation, a household could meet its entire annual tax obligations if (assuming the MHS was 8) one member worked one day per year something totally unlikely! At the other extreme of implausibility, Hughes writes about the "70 grivna poll tax" (452), which would be 7 rubles, or over half a year's pay!

Peter's statement that "English freedom is not appropriate here" is quoted (93), but I wonder whether readers of Hughes's tome will understand why that was so. Why was/is social cohesion wanting in Russia? Why does the rule of law not work? Why do contracts mean nothing? These were major questions about Russia of Peter's time, as they are of our time.

Another set of issues with both historical and contemporary resonance involve the Russian economy and why Russia was and is poor. Hughes mentions war, capital flight, corruption, the weakness of private property rights and lack of capital and "enterprise culture" [she might have mentioned that anti-Semitism kept the Jews out]. There were no systems of insurance or quality control, while there were "checks downward on the amassment of power and wealth." The families forced to move to St. Petersburg lost two-thirds of their capital in the move, which in almost every respect was a veritable potlatch. There were no full-

time retail stores because of insufficient trade to support them [and no Jews to start them up note that Foreign Minister Peter Shafirov was the son of a POW-slave who went into trade after manumission, and that Tsar Peter discovered young Shafirov working in, presumably, his father's store]. Profits were not reinvested, there was little competition, and less incentive to improve techniques. I would add that borrowing turnkey technology meant that no Russians participated in the process of developing it, which made advancing it difficult if not impossible. The government was constantly broke and could not pay wages (which evoked much of the "corruption"), and I would stress that there was no banking system or system of government debt/credit to take up the slack when the government needed funds, something typical of "Asiatic systems." Perhaps nothing was as deleterious, I would aver, to the honest accumulation of wealth as the collective taxation system (in this sense the change from the household system of taxation inaugurated in 1679 to the poll tax calculated on the basis of all males and first collected in 1724 made little difference: the local collective had to come up with the amount due, not either any specific household or male), and nothing did more to discourage long-term planning and investment than the constant changing of laws and the capriciousness and arbitrariness which that embodied. Granted that warfare created exigencies which could not be ignored, but on balance the verdict must be that Peter's constant meddling in the economy probably did more to retard it than to advance it.

Most economic historians doubt that there were few if any "prosperous" economies in the world prior to 1750, and most countries' per capital incomes rose little above the equivalent of the \$600 to \$750 found today in the poorest Third World Countries. Some of Hughes's foreign observers support such a conclusion for Russia between 1689 and 1725 when they note that most Russians had almost no possessions, what we would term "wealth." The real tragedy of the second service class revolution (reinvigorated by the third service class revolution) was that it created a political economy in Russia that continues to inhibit the creation of per capita wealth. Peter's social, cultural, and sartorial engineering was able to create a few tens of thousands of Russians (in a land of 10 to 15 millions) who looked like Westerners, but his "correctional cudgel" was unable to create any people who behaved like enterprising Dutchmen. It may not be accidental that Peter's legacy in 1999 is a country which accounts for less than 1 percent of global domestic product and has a total gross national product which is less than that of Belgium.

I fail to see that "semiotic analysis" adds much (other than mumbo-jumbo) to this book. This is true for "the semiotics" of the fleet (p. 88) and also, in the last analysis, the use of a "semiotic approach" to make much of a point that some of Peter's problems stemmed from his inability to communicate with his subjects (384, 452). I would prefer to argue on the last point that most Russians were pre-literates with the inevitably resulting right-brain mentality (and thus the famous "intellectual silence" of Old Russia [299]) and that, in brief, Peter's nauseatingly continuous use of violence was precisely the way to communicate with a Russian society of that make-up. Pre-literates (non-readers) cannot be appealed to by left-brained rationality, something that Peter himself intuitively understood very well. Peter himself personified the beginning of the transition from the illiterate non-reader whose left-brain capacities were definitely limited. As Hughes summarizes the evidence: "There is no evidence that Peter ever read, annotated, or commented in any detail on 'difficult' works of philosophy, theology, or history. . . . His scientific interests suggest a love of practice rather than theory, a search for sensation rather than rational reflection" (368). Literacy is a sine quanon for rationalism, in its absence belief in the efficacy of reason is a non-starter, and Peter's educational record was definitely mixed and bore little fruit before 1725, when the Academy of Sciences (staffed exclusively by foreigners) was established in a country with almost no primary schools and not a single university.

Regrettably, neither Peter nor his admirers and imitators had the slightest understanding that human rights and dignity and personal autonomy were and are absolutely essential to sustain a cohesive, responsible, self-generating, productive society. For half a millennium autocrats, absolute rulers, and dictators in Russia (and elsewhere) have been picking and choosing from the Western technological and cultural package in hopes of surviving, maintaining independence, or overtaking and surpassing the West. The lesson would seem to be that anything less than the entire package will yield disappointing results in anything other than the short term.

Yale University Press is to be commended for producing an attractive book at a reasonable price. I hope that

those who have read and considered this review will be induced to buy the book.

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