

Russia's Age of Serfdom, 1649-1861 (Blackwell History of Russia)

Review Number:

736

Publish date:

Saturday, 28 February, 2009

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ISBN:

9781405134583

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

312pp.

Publisher:

Blackwell

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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To study Russia before the late 19th century is to labour under a twofold handicap. One sometimes feels like a poor relation: in the Russian field, it is the rise and fall of Soviet communism that occupies centre stage (increasingly so as budgets for Russian studies shrink), and while one often turns instead to the historiography of western Europe for inspiration, non-Russianists rarely return the compliment. The other handicap is the dead hand of ideas from the past. After Gogol and Dostoevskii, what is there to add about the society of imperial Russia? After '1917 and all that', how could the story of tsarist Russia be anything other than 'decline and fall'?

Elise Kimerling Wirschafter's new book is all the more welcome, then, because her excellent synthesis of the recent literature – to which she herself has made important contributions [\(1\)](#) – challenges the hoary clichés. For example, she explains, the Orthodox Church in Muscovy actually contributed significantly to cultural Westernisation. The proto-socialist communalism of the Russian peasants was a product of the early modern fiscal regime, not immemorial 'Slavic' tradition. Tsarist Russia was an undergoverned society whose social hierarchy was fluid and porous. While not all of this is news to experts in the field, Wirschafter provides a much-needed synthesis to orient readers in a dynamic scholarly field. As I will try to show, Europeanists as well as Russianists will find much that is useful in this book.

What is this book trying to do? The preface by Simon Dixon, the series editor, indicates that the Blackwell History of Russia series is ultimately to comprise three volumes: the present book; a second volume, by Theodore R. Weeks, on the period 1861–1945; and a third, by Stephen Lovell, from 1941 to the present. Dixon writes that each volume is conceived within 'an unconventional chronological framework' – i.e., each bridges a watershed historical moment (the Petrine Reforms, 1917, 1991) – so that 'familiar (and still

crucial) information can be presented in fresh and stimulating ways, interesting to both the student and the scholar' (p. x).

Is Wirtschafter's periodisation in fact 'unconventional'? Yes and no. No, because the specialist literature for some time now has recognised the 17th-century roots of the Petrine reforms and seen the Great Reforms of the 1860s–70s – particularly the abolition of serfdom in 1861 – as a major turning point; few would still treat the 'imperial' period from Peter the Great until 1917 as a coherent, discrete era. That said, scholarly practice remains shaped by the older periodisation: historians of the 17th century rarely work on the 18th and vice-versa, and those who study the early 19th century are a separate cohort again. Crossing chronological boundaries is more often talked about than actually done, so Wirtschafter's enterprise is indeed somewhat unconventional.

Wirtschafter draws together a broad range of issues in a coherent, sophisticated synthesis. The nature of her argument is reflected in the book's organisational structure: three chronological sections – Muscovite/Petrine, 18th century, and early-to-mid-19th century – each of which is in turn divided into chapters on society, politics, and culture. All of this is woven together in a single argument that may be summarised as follows.

The structures of 17th-century Muscovite society form the starting point for the book's first section. Seen from below, this was a society of patriarchal households that were clustered in geographically dispersed, collectivistic communities that had few formal ties to other communities. Villages and towns were 'self-governing and largely self-sufficient' and 'had little need for a larger "society" or government'. They had a tenuous political connection to the outside through a vertical hierarchy of landlords and officials all the way up to the monarchy, but unlike other Europeans they were not connected horizontally through 'locally constituted bodies designed to mediate civic relations' (p. 28) – no provincial estates, leagues of towns, interregional guilds, and the like. Seen from above, meanwhile, Muscovy in the 17th century was developing increasingly effective power structures – a nascent bureaucracy, nobles who ruled the newly enserfed peasantry, and an increasingly centralised clergy – that operated by exploiting the wealth and labour of the lower classes, but the relationship among these power structures was full of tension and ambiguity.

Peter the Great inherited this situation and took steps to resolve its contradictions: nobles and clergy were firmly subordinated to the autocracy, the enserfment and fiscal exploitation of the population intensified, and the earlier ambivalence over contacts with the West was decisively resolved in favour of cultural cosmopolitanism and aggressive imperialist expansion. The title of this first section of the book, 'Russian Absolute Monarchy 1649–1725', conveys the section's principal theme: the construction of top-down instruments of power, from the legal consolidation of serfdom in 1649 until Peter's death in 1725.

The second section – 'The Building of Society 1725–96' – focuses on the attempt by the regime and its allies to foster a 'society' that could assist the state in governing the country. Russia's peasant 'base' changed little during those decades; instead, it was at the upper end of the scale that important developments occurred. The Petrine reforms bequeathed to Russia's elites a contradictory set of political realities and aspirations that unfolded across the 18th century. Ideally, Russia's upper classes wanted government to become 'regular', i.e., subject to laws and routinised procedures. They also wanted to bring government more effectively to the local level by systematising the participation of nobles and townspeople, to which end bodies of local and provincial self-government were established. Achieving these various goals required potent institutions of state that could knit the country together. In practice however, bureaucracy and local civic institutions remained weak, and Russians further undercut the impetus toward 'regularity' by holding firm to the belief that power was best exercised through individual relationships, not impersonal institutional mechanisms; hence they continued to prize individual morality above respect for laws and rules, an attitude reflected in the quasi-unanimous support for preserving the absolute personal authority of the emperor. Accordingly, when they encountered the Western Enlightenment, its ideas about ways to reorganise state and society interested them less than did its moral teachings; in Russia, as Wirtschafter puts it, 'the Enlightenment represented a moral philosophy, not a political or social movement' (p. 144). Ultimately, and this is one of her central arguments, 18th-century Russia 'remained undergoverned and

underinstitutionalized', and its 'governing elite looked to moral progress for solutions to legal-administrative problems' (p. 142).

Peter's successors applied these approaches to governance with growing success, and the later 18th century was a time of consensus among Russia's elites. The government by then treated the educated classes with far greater consideration than in Peter's time, and for their part, the educated classes considered it their patriotic moral duty to promote an (often rather imitative) Westernised culture and serve the monarchy. Patriotism and cosmopolitanism, service to the nation and to the crown, noble and 'public' interests – all were harmoniously aligned. Alas, this harmony broke down in the early 19th century. Three factors, explored in the book's third section, conspired to undo the accomplishments of Peter and his successors.

First, the 'public' or 'society' – new constructs that designated a nascent civil society – gradually achieved a self-consciousness that, for lack of institutionalised political venues, expressed itself through literature and the arts. Educated Russians started using European cultural forms to express a consciously 'Russian' identity and to speak to and for a nation that they began to differentiate conceptually from the regime. Russia and the West, crown and nation, the nobility's class interests and those of the 'public'—these were increasingly seen to be in tension with each other.

Perhaps the state could have accommodated these forces by giving public opinion an institutionalised political role. Instead, and this is the second factor underlying the decline of the 18th-century order, the regime grew authoritarian and repressive. Russian government in the 18th century, especially with the reforms of Catherine II in the 1770s–80s, had encouraged free public discussion and local civic participation in ways that could have pointed the way toward constitutionalism. This impulse revived under Alexander I (1801–25) but did not prevail. The desire to achieve 'regular' governance undermined liberal reform initiatives and instead strengthened the power of the bureaucracy. Ironically, however, the growing and increasingly repressive bureaucracy was never able to govern with optimum effectiveness because both Alexander I and Nicholas I (1825–55) clung to their personal autocratic prerogative of intervening at will in government affairs. The desire to achieve bureaucratic 'regularity' without sacrificing personalised authority therefore produced government that was increasingly both oppressive and ineffective.

'State' and 'society' were becoming increasingly alienated from each other when – the third factor in the old order's demise – the Crimean War revealed how backward Russia's serf-based socioeconomic order had become in the era of west European industrialisation. What had been a successful sociopolitical system in the 18th century thus carried the seeds of its own demise in the 19th century.

The argument that Elise Wirtschafter develops in this book holds interest not only for Russia but in wider European perspective as well, and exemplifies why European historiography would benefit from closer attention to imperial Russia. Three examples will illustrate this.

Historians of France know that the oppression and backwardness of the *ancien régime* is a retrospective post-revolutionary construct that we should be wary of taking at face value. The same, Wirtschafter shows, is true of Russia. Russia's educated society came into its own just as its *ancien régime* began looking dysfunctional, so novelists, playwrights, journalists, social scientists, and graphic artists filled entire libraries and art galleries with denunciations of its iniquities. For readers interested in the evils of the tsarist bureaucracy there were Gogol's satires. Serfdom? Read Turgenev. The Siberian exile system? Dostoevskii. The benighted merchantry? Ostrovskii. These polemical representations shape perceptions down to this day, but they don't help us understand why the system was so resilient in the first place. Arguably it is actually the system's successes, not its failures, that are in need of closer scrutiny. Scholars have argued that the *ancien régime* character of the Russian army helps explain its victories over Napoleon (2); that early 19th century Russian peasant serfs ate better than west European peasants (3); that liberal economic ideas tended to make the agrarian system more oppressive and exploitative (4); and that 'proto-industrialisation' generated significant economic development well before the onset of large-scale, state-sponsored industrialisation.(5) The Russian *ancien régime* was long able to sustain a powerful state and a reasonably (by premodern standards) prosperous population, and few Russians of any political stripe in the 1820s–40s felt envious of

the barricades of Paris or the slums of Manchester. The Russian experience thus reminds us not to take for granted the superiority of 'modern' over 'premodern' forms of social or political organisation.

The constructedness of identities is another theme from European history that Wirtschafter applies with great effect to Russia. In fact, the sheer amorphousness and fluidity of its social structures, and the resulting difficulty of constructing stable identities, makes it an ideal arena for studying the phenomenon. The tsars were torn between multiple identities – Russian patriot versus Europeaniser, Orthodox Christian versus 'enlightened' seculariser, bureaucrat-in-chief versus father figure. The nobles were torn between being obedient imperial servitors, despotic serf-owners, and civic-minded members of 'society'. Officials divided the population into social estates whose definitions often had little relation to social reality. These issues are central to Wirtschafter's analysis. Thus, she notes that in her patronage of Russia's fledgling art and literature, Catherine II 'acted as a kind of grand *salonnière* eager to engage in polite conversation' (p. 148), and that educated Russians constructed identities – as members of 'society', 'the public', or the 'intelligentsia' – that deeply affected the behaviour of those who internalised them. Wirtschafter barely touches on the multiethnic character of the Russian Empire, but the difficulty of constructing a satisfactory sense of Russian nationality would only bolster her argument.

A third issue that connects Wirtschafter's story with the wider history of Europe is what one might call the *Sonderweg* problem. Like their Germanist counterparts, Russian historians have to account for the disaster that befell 'their' country in the 20th century. The debate over the German *Sonderweg* was rooted in the notion that there existed a Western norm – Enlightenment plus middle-class culture equals liberal modernity – from which Germany deviated. Russia is different in many ways from Germany, but its history raises a similar question: why did the reasonably progressive consensus undergirding the 18th-century regime fail to carry over into the 19th century and beyond? Wirtschafter offers a range of answers. For one thing, Russia's Enlightenment focused on moral questions and failed to articulate a sophisticated sociopolitical agenda. Also, Russia's nascent civil society constituted itself in the realm of high culture, so it did not develop strong ties to politics (controlled by bureaucrats and the court), business (dominated by culturally traditionalistic merchants), and the common people. Some of these issues are different than in Germany, but examine the two countries side by side and you find that liberal modernisation looks considerably less 'normal'.

Having (I hope) conveyed my unalloyed enthusiasm for the book as scholarship, let me suggest some thoughts about genre and audience. *Russia's Age of Serfdom* is an important and thought-provoking book. Who should read it? According to the editor's preface, the intended audience includes both "the student and the scholar" (p. x), but balancing the needs of those two is always tricky, the more so when the topic is vast and the text is a mere 236 pages long.

Russia's Age of Serfdom, like most historical studies, combines description, analysis, and narrative, but it resembles Wirtschafter's other books in giving primacy to the descriptive and analytical: what were the mechanisms of Russian history (serfdom, Enlightenment, bureaucracy...) and how did they work? The descriptive component is excellent, which is of course essential if beginners are to understand the argument. The analysis likewise is always stimulating, but novices may not find it uniformly accessible. Certain concepts are easily explained, e.g., that peasant village elders were not mere despots but took their paternalistic obligations seriously. In other cases, however, the book's analysis rests on theoretical concepts that scholars convey with specialised terms of art. Some of these terms – for example, 'industrious revolution' (p. 99) – are explained for the benefit of the uninitiated, but elsewhere a shorthand is used that may be opaque to novices: 'carnavalesque' (p. 46), 'cameralism' (p. 54), 'printing revolution' (p. 61), and 'polite sociability' (p. 76) are mentioned without explanation, and readers unfamiliar with 'prepolitical literary public sphere' (p. 144) will find a definition only if they flip to an endnote 108 pages later, which not every undergraduate is likely to do.

Narrative plays a subordinate role in the book, and for good reason, since the focus is on deep structures and long-term dynamic forces, not *histoire événementielle*. However, the book does contain two types of narrative elements. One are thumbnail portrayals of individual personalities that illustrate broader themes. These are excellent. The brief sketches of Pososhkov, Lomonosov, Herzen, and others hold no surprises for

the expert, but the beginner will find them helpful, I think, for humanising the abstract processes described by the book. The other type of narrative has to do with battles and treaties from various wars and the court politics of the 18th century. Since military campaigns, empire, and dynastic infighting seem peripheral to the book's central focus, I am not persuaded of the usefulness of this material (the more so as there are no maps of campaigns and battle zones to help the geographically challenged).

The real strength of this book lies in its quality as an extended interpretive essay, not as a textbook that 'covers' dates and events. The true novice who most needs a conventional textbook will, I suspect, have trouble anyway with the sheer density and complexity of the argument presented here; for him or her, *Russia's Age of Serfdom* may have more value as a challenging supplementary reading than as a straightforward textbook. Instead, the ideal audience, in my view, is likely to be readers who have a grasp of historical concepts but limited knowledge of the specifics of Russian history—graduate students, advanced undergraduates, and non-Russianist historians. It is they who have the most cause to welcome the publication of this excellent book, and to look forward to the remaining volumes in the Blackwell History of Russia series.

Elise Wirtschafter wishes to acknowledge with appreciation Alexander Martin's thoughtful and intelligent discussion of her book. She cannot imagine a more meaningful review.

Notes

1. For example: *From Serf to Russian Soldier* (Princeton, NJ, 1990); *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia's 'People of Various Ranks'* (DeKalb, IL, 1994); *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL, 1997); *The Play of Ideas in Russian Enlightenment Theater* (DeKalb, IL, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Dominic Lieven, 'Review article: Russia and the defeat of Napoleon', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, 2 (Spring 2006), 283–308, esp. 294–5.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Stephen L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, a Village in Tambov* (Chicago, IL, 1989), p. 50.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Alessandro Stanziani, 'Free labor – forced labor: an uncertain boundary? The circulation of economic ideas between Russia and Europe from the 18th to the mid-19th Century', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, 1 (Winter 2008), 27–52; Esther Kingston-Mann, *In Search of the True West: Culture, Economics, and Problems of Russian Development* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Claus Gestwa, *Proto-industrialisierung in Russland: Wirtschaft, Herrschaft und Kultur in Ivanovo und Pavlovo, 1741–1932* (Göttingen, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3713>