
A New Perspective in Russian Intellectual History: Russian Political Thought in Early Modern Times

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G. M. Hamburg, Russia's Path Toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500–1801. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016, 912 p. ISBN: 9780300113136

Gary Hamburg's erudite and thoughtful survey of early modern Russian thought began its life as part of a more general study of Russian thought up until the revolutions of 1917. As originally conceived, this study would have built upon the author's already substantial corpus of work on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian history and thought, most notably his monograph of 1992 on Boris Chicherin and his volume of 2010, co-edited with Randall A. Poole, on freedom and dignity in Russian philosophy from 1830 to 1930. As work progressed, however, it became clear that thinkers active from the early sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth demanded more attention than Hamburg had anticipated; in fact, they came to merit a book all to themselves. The resulting 900-page product of his reflection on the prehistory of modern Russian thought enables him to straddle what are generally perceived as two great divides: First, the supposed divide between Muscovite and Imperial Russia and, second, that between the traditional religious and the secular enlightened forms of Russian culture.

The enormous volume of material that Hamburg presents in this monograph is organized in three parts within a broadly chronological framework. In Part 1, entitled "Wisdom and Wickedness, 1500–1689," he begins with consideration of some Byzantine and Old Russian precedents and then goes on to explore faith, politics, and reason in this early period. He is particularly interested, in this part of the book, in Russian debate about the relationship between Church and state, attempts by subjects to find acceptable ways of resisting ungodly rulers, and conceptions of the place of the emergent Russian nation in human and Christian history. Virtually all Russian thinkers in this era, Hamburg argues, "considered salvation the overarching goal of human life, and therefore they understood politics in moral terms" (p. 230). In Part 2, "Ways of Virtue, 1689–1762," he concentrates on the age of Peter I (i.e. Peter the Great, who reigned as sole ruler from 1696 to 1725) and the following three and a half decades, when new ideas about relations between Church and state, conceptions of economic life, and notions of Russia's interdependency with other nations came to the fore. The new "set of religious, political, and philosophical ideas" elaborated in this period drew simultaneously on contemporary foreign intellectual sources (for instance, Grotius, Hobbes, Leibniz, and Pufendorf) as well as the traditional Russian sources discussed in the first part of the volume. In Part 3, "Straining toward Light, 1762–1801," he focuses on the Russian contribution to the European Enlightenment, treating numerous figures of this era as important in their own right rather than as minor actors in a process that culminated in the nineteenth-century golden age of Russian culture. By this time, Russian thought is infused with foreign ideas drawn from d'Alembert, Beccaria, Diderot,

Hume, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Voltaire, and a host of others. Yet, questions that had long since preoccupied Russian thinkers, such as relations between Church and state and how a virtuous life was to be lived, continued to be of importance, while the question of Russia's relationship with the outside world came to the very center of the Russian mental landscape.

The scope of Hamburg's volume is panoramic, indeed epic. For one thing, his cast of characters is of Tolstoyan scale. His *dramatis personae* includes numerous churchmen (the eleventh-century Kievan Metropolitan Hilarion, the late fifteenth-century monk Iosif Volotskii (Iosif of Volokolamsk), the sixteenth-century monk Filofei, the seventeenth-century Patriarch Nikon, Feofan Prokopovich, the first Procurator of the Holy Synod set up in 1721 by Peter the Great, and Metropolitan Platon in the age of Catherine II (i.e. Catherine the Great, reigned 1762–1796). There are heretics too, such as the late fifteenth-century "Judaizers" and the seventeenth-century Old Believer, Archpriest Avvakum. Many statesmen, government officials, bureaucrats, advisers, and petitioners have important parts: Ivan Peresvetov, Aleksei Adashev, and Archpriest Silvestr in the time of Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible, who reigned as Tsar from 1547 to 1584), Grigorii Kotoshikhin in the mid-seventeenth century, and Nikita Panin in the age of Catherine. Sovereigns themselves (especially the twelfth-century Prince Vladimir Monomakh, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great) occupy a prominent place, by virtue of their own political writings (for example, Monomakh's *Instruction (Pouchenie)* to his sons (1117) and Catherine's *Instruction (Nakaz)* to the Legislative Commission she convened in 1767) or because their political ideas found expression in letters, charters, and other papers they wrote or in laws they introduced. Opponents of rulers also have their say, including Prince Andrei Kurbskii, a fierce critic of Ivan the Terrible, and the brigands Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev, who led elemental Cossack and peasant revolts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively. Poets (Simeon Polotskii, Gavriil Derzhavin), dramatists (Aleksandr Sumarokov, Denis Fonvizin, Catherine herself), writers of prose fiction (Nikolai Karamzin), and men of letters who made a broad contribution to Russia's burgeoning intellectual life from the mid-eighteenth century (Mikhail Lomonosov, Nikolai Novikov) abound as well, especially in the last of the centuries covered, when Russians were becoming more familiar and increasingly engaged with Western European thought and literature. In the eighteenth century, we encounter economists (the mercantilist Ivan Pososhkov), writers on jurisprudence (Ivan Desnitskii), and a political thinker who is keen to introduce Russia to the notion of a social contract (Aleksandr Radishchev). Naturally, historians are richly represented throughout the volume, from the monastic chroniclers of Kievan Rus' and the author of the mid-sixteenth-century *Book of Royal Degrees* (probably composed by Archpriest Andrei under the direction of Makarii, the Metropolitan of Moscow), to Vasilii Tatishchev and Mikhail Shcherbatov in the eighteenth century and Karamzin in the early nineteenth. These men wove and reweave the narrative of the history of the Russian lands from the time when literacy arrived there together with the Christian faith.

Such a large cast of actors makes for polyphonic treatment of Russian thought before the nineteenth century. It also requires the author to draw upon an enormous and diverse range of documentary sources, embracing – in Hamburg's own words – "theological treatises, sermons, saints' lives, political tracts, broadsides, legal statutes, philosophical treatises, poems, plays, and historical narratives" (p. 1). Both the linguistic

competence and the range of disciplinary competence that are required to analyze this corpus of sources deserve comment. The Russian language underwent considerable morphological, syntactic, and lexical change over the 750 years from the time when the earliest extant documents were composed to the late eighteenth century, when the polyfunctional standard language polished by Russia's great classical writers began to develop. To offer a close reading of documents of many registers across this entire timespan is no simple task. Equally important, it is unusual to be able to write with sensitivity to the meanings and nuances of sources of so many different kinds, from the royal, the bureaucratic, the legal, the diplomatic, and the theological to the polemical, the literary, and even the demotic. Yet, it is such sensitivity that Hamburg's method demands, for he explicitly follows the example of Quentin Skinner, who urges scholars, when they read the language that political writers have used, to pay attention to words whose specific meanings and connotations can only be understood in the light of knowledge of the intellectual and historical contexts of a writer's time. In reading texts attentively and letting authors speak for themselves, Hamburg hopes his method will prove "*empathetic* (hearing each voice, understanding each person from the inside)", as well as "*democratic* (attending to thinkers from various walks of life), and *analytical* (evaluating each literary monument with tools appropriate to it, judging each thinker *sine ira et studio* ["without indignation or partisanship"; the phrase originates with Tacitus], comparing thinkers across chronological ruptures)" (p. 6).

In line with Skinner's advice, and since *Russia's Path toward Enlightenment* follows a broadly historicist approach, Hamburg places the writings he examines in firm historical contexts. In this regard, his volume offers valuable commentary on many matters of interest to the early modern historian who is not necessarily a student of intellectual history. Such matters include the centralization of the Russian state and the emergence of Moscow during and after the centuries of Tatar domination; the consequences for this state of the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, notably the theory of Moscow as the Third Rome, according to which Russia had become the true center of the Christian world after the fall of the Byzantine Empire to Islam; the schism in the mid-seventeenth-century Russian Church, which resulted from the attempts of Patriarch Nikon to modernize religious texts and ritual in accordance with Greek practice; the effects of the influx of European objects, habits, customs, and ideas, which began in the seventeenth century, if not before, and accelerated rapidly as a result of Peter's reforms and the founding of St. Petersburg in the early eighteenth century; and, of course, Russia's encounter with the Enlightenment in the age of Catherine II.

As the sub-title of Hamburg's volume – "faith, politics, and reason" – suggests, a central preoccupation of his capacious examination of pre-nineteenth-century Russian thought is reflection on political matters. The questions to which the writers whom Hamburg studies are continually drawn include the following, as he himself defines them on his opening page. How did Russian thinkers imagine a good life in a just polity? How did they picture an ideal ruler? What duties did they wish to attach to rulers and subjects? When did they consider it justifiable for subjects to disobey their ruler? Was it ever appropriate to overthrow a tyrannical ruler, and, if not, why not? How did Russian thinkers conceive of their polity's place in the international order, and of their own place in the current of time?

Responses to these essentially political questions, as another element of the book's sub-title indicates, were for long colored by religious faith. Indeed, Russian thinking about politics before the eighteenth century, Hamburg maintains, rested on religious assumptions to a degree that is "almost unfathomable" for twenty-first-century secular readers (p. 727). In the Muscovite period, it was therefore "virtually inconceivable for a Russian to think of politics as a pursuit separate from religious considerations", so that, "as a rule, Russian thinking about politics through the end of the eighteenth century was a branch of applied Christian ethics or was heavily influenced by Christian ethics" (p. 24). In particular, political thought was shaped by attachment to Orthodox Christianity, which, Hamburg claims at the outset, became the "dominant strain in Russian religious and political life and thus in Russian culture" (p. 6). The Russians, he argues, "have approached the subject of politics from quite different vantage points" from those on which most Western thinkers have stood. Their "principal intellectual orientation grew out of Byzantine Christianity, which regarded the ruler as a member of the Orthodox Church with the responsibility of upholding justice, of practicing charity to the poor, [and] of defending the Church against its enemies, domestic and foreign" (p. 24). Moreover, far from accepting the widely held belief that Russian culture was secularized at the expense of the Orthodox Church following the Petrine reforms of the early eighteenth century, Hamburg contends – and this is a particularly original thread in his book – that politics and Eastern European Christianity remained inextricably inter-woven.

As for "enlightenment" (*prosveshchenie*) and the third element, "reason," in Hamburg's sub-title, they are not to be understood exclusively in modern terms but in their contemporary contexts, of which Hamburg, following Skinner, is mindful. In Russia before the eighteenth century, Hamburg points out in one of several useful sections in his introduction in which he defines the notions that will be central to his discussion, enlightenment was conceived as a form of spiritual illumination or moral knowledge or discernment. This conception was to be supplanted by "a nineteenth-century notion mixing science, reason, and ethical duty," while in the twentieth century it came to be associated with the process of education or simply "the condition of rationality". Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, the notion of spiritual illumination was still present in the word *prosveshchenie*, alongside the connotation of ethically grounded rationality (p. 19).

Regarding Russia's interactions with other polities and cultures in the three hundred years with which his book is concerned, Hamburg rejects the view that Russia was for the most part sealed off from the world beyond its borders until the Petrine age. Rather, he argues, Russia had both 'openness' (to Moslem khanates to the south and east and to Western Christian states before and during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation) and "fixity," inasmuch as Muscovites were wedded to the Byzantine model of an imperial symphony between Church and state. Inevitably, Russians' reflections on their relations with other cultures entailed consideration of themselves as members of a coherent entity (what would come to be called a nation) and of what it was that made that entity distinctive and special. The rise of national consciousness and the components of that consciousness also receive ample treatment in *Russia's Path toward Enlightenment*. Hamburg, like Dominic Lieven in *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals*, takes the view that national consciousness emerged in the Russian lands at a considerably earlier date than Geoffrey Hosking, in his book *Russia: People and Empire*,

1552–1917, is inclined to believe. Already in the *Book of Royal Degrees*, Hamburg argues, we find a view of Russians as a people knit together by religion, language, territory, and rulers, that is to say, a conception of Russian identity that “amounted to a prototype of integral nationhood” (p. 76). Intense diplomatic, military, and above all cultural contact with the West in the eighteenth century heightened interest in this subject, and this interest found expression in the corpus of literature, in the broad sense of that term, that was then coming into being – witness the writings in various genres by Fonvizin, Derzhavin, and Karamzin, who excelled in drama, poetry, and prose (both fictional and non-fictional) respectively.

Russia's Path toward Enlightenment, then, offers an account of early modern Russian political thought that is perhaps unprecedented in its scope and depth. Against a rich historical background, and engaging with old and new scholarship on his subjects, Hamburg expounds and discusses at length and in depth the views and writings of Ivan the Terrible and his opponent Kurbskii, Avvakum, Polotskii, Prokopovich and Tatishchev (two of “the fledglings from Peter’s nest,” as Alexander Pushkin described them), Pososhkov, Lomonosov, Catherine the Great, Fonvizin, Derzhavin, Metropolitan Platon, Desnitskii, Radishchev, Shcherbatov, and, finally, Karamzin (whose *Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia* and *History of the Russian State* take us beyond 1801 into the reign of Alexander I). Consistently tracing the link between faith, politics, and reason, Hamburg demonstrates that the history of the development of Russian culture over the three centuries he surveys is not to be understood as “a teleological process in which the Muscovite religious worldview was displaced by an ‘enlightened’ secular one” (p. 20). On the contrary, the “phenomenon we call the Russian Enlightenment” was “as much the consequence of *historical continuities* in the way that Russian thinkers perceived the world as it was of the *historical discontinuities* of the Petrine ‘revolution from above’” (p. 19; Hamburg’s italics). Russian thinkers in the age of Catherine, now well versed in Western European thought and attracted by foreign teachings or notions such as Stoicism, natural law, social contract, and freemasonry, still reflected on the duties of rulers and subjects, the paths to virtue, Russia’s place in the world, and the construction of utopias. From Hamburg’s lucid, magisterial narrative there thus emerges a fresh interpretation of the Russian Enlightenment which will have enduring value for students of Russian intellectual history and, more generally, for students of the various national forms taken by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.