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Thierry Sarmant, with the collaboration of Jean-Pierre Sarmant, Pierre le Grand: La Russie et le monde. Paris: Perrin, 2020. 500 p. ISBN: 978-2-262-04814.

Thierry Sarmant's *Pierre le Grand* is the second scholarly biography of Peter the Great to appear in France in the last decade, the first being Francine-Dominique Liechtenhan's volume of 2015. Though clearly written for a broad audience, Sarmant's book is the work of a historian, not a journalist (Robert Massie, 1980) or novelist (Henri Troyat, 1979). Unfortunately, these highly readable popular accounts showed little acquaintance with the scholarly literature that was available at that time. In contrast Sarmant makes excellent use of the publications by the main historians of Peter and his time that have appeared in the last thirty years, in Russia as well as in Western Europe and America.

The story he tells will be familiar to many readers, but he tells it very well. Neither encumbered by scholarly disputes, long-discarded anecdotes, or excessive detail, the prose moves quickly and clearly, a model of accessible narrative. There is none of the academic jargon that makes the reader search French dictionaries in vain for the latest fashionable words. He concentrates on the greater events, Peter's wars and foreign policy, his travels, and his relations with his family and his court. Wars and foreign policy are easy to make dull and repetitive, but Sarmant manages to tell the story accurately but without tedium. He also largely avoids the trap of assigning motives to Peter without evidence, something easy to do since there is so little source material for Peter's views of foreign policy until very late in his life. The reorganization of the state and the innovations in culture are not neglected, but do not take up the space that earlier scholarly writers, Reinhard Wittram or Lindsey Hughes, gave to them. Sarmant's theme, as the title suggests, is Peter and the world. At the same time Sarmant is acutely aware of the significance of Peter's efforts to rebuild Russia: the reign, he tells us, is part of the "*occidentalisation*" of the world that began in the early modern era. "Westernization" is perhaps not as fashionable today as in the past, but is certainly better than "globalization", as it points to the dominance that the West had in the world from before Peter's time to the recent past.

The story of Peter continued after his death, here revealed in a few brief chapters on his successors and the posthumous reputation of the tsar-emperor in Russia and abroad. In these chapters the author is not quite as thorough in grounding his work in the recent literature. On the "Bronze Horseman" we miss the fundamental study of Alexander Schenker, and on Anna Ivanovna the publications of I. V. Kurukin and N. N. Petrukhintsev. For the reign of Peter, however, his use of the current scholarly work is exemplary and gives the book a feel of authenticity that was so lacking in earlier popular biographies.

Inevitably every reader acquainted with the topic will find some minor errors and bits to quarrel with. The biographer's need to make his subject live leads to various anecdotes

about Peter, though Sarmant keeps them to an absolute minimum. He also tries to understand Peter's physical ailments, most of which elude modern diagnosis, and to make sense of the oddities of personality. These are murky areas, where the conventions of behavior, Russian and West European, as well as Peter's undoubted eccentricities, make it exceedingly difficult to present a convincing portrait. Peter's correspondence does not always help either, as much of it is official and the more personal letters hard to put in context.

The result is a useful, solid, and engaging account of one of the major eras of Russian history, and one of considerable relevance to European history as well. Indeed, Sarmant goes to a considerable effort to present Peter in European context. Not all of his personal quirks were unique, and can be found in many of his contemporaries on the thrones of Europe. The "occidentalization" of the world is surely a major theme, yet the conclusions are a bit flat. He notes that Peter's conquests have not remained part of the Russian state, and that some of the institutions remained until 1917, others did not. He does note the permanence of the cultural transformation: there could be no Lomonosov or Pushkin without Peter. One could go farther: there could be no Bolshevik or Kadet party without Peter, whose reign westernized Russian political thought. There could have been no Soviet Union without him, since Marxism was, after all, a product of Western Europe, not Russia. Perhaps most important, Peter gave Russia the means to survive the brutal competition for survival in the world that was beginning in his time, where great civilizations like India and China fell before the hired armies of European merchants and their state allies. Those countries that did not participate in "occidentalization" soon became the vassals of the West. Russia did not. These strictures aside, Sarmant's work provides an excellent introduction to Peter and his time, founded solidly on the considerable work of the last generation of scholars around the world.