

Russian Conservatism and Its Critics

A Study in Political Culture

RICHARD PIPES

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Russian Autocracy Defined

The dominant strain in Russian political thought throughout history has been a conservatism that insisted on strong, centralized authority, unrestrained either by law or parliament. The rationale for such a regime varied from generation to generation, but its central argument was succinctly stated in 1810–11 by Nikolai Karamzin: "Autocracy has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in her political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to her perdition."¹

The question arises what accounts for the persistence of this conservative ideology. For once Russia, under Peter the Great and his successors, had ended her isolation from the West and began to westernize, she adopted a great deal of European culture. Russia's post-1700 art, literature, and science were all patterned on Western models. Her industries emulated Western prototypes, and so did her military. Why not her politics? The answer to this problem must be sought partly in the manner in which the Russian state came into being and partly in Russia's culture, inherited from Byzantium, the source of her religion, as well as the Mongol-Tatar khanate which ruled Russia for two and a half centuries.

European monarchies were shaped by a fusion of three elements: the heritage of the Roman Empire, the culture of the barbarian tribes which had conquered it, and the Catholic Church.

To begin with tribal culture. The critical feature of tribal society is that relations among its members are based on kinship ties rather than

on territorial contiguity—that is, that they are social rather than political in nature. Tribesmen regard themselves as descended from a common ancestor: in their veins, they believe, flows identical blood—they are the same “bone and flesh” (Judges 9:2). Being related, they are all equal. In the classic nomadic society there is no hierarchy, and proximity to the group’s founder does not confer status.² Nomads elect their chiefs and occasionally—as during seasonal migrations to grazing grounds and particularly in time of war—endow them with considerable powers. But these powers are temporary and granted for specific ends: they do not inhere in the office. The tribal chieftain is a mortal, the first among equals, who exercises such authority as his group vests in him not by inherent right of office but by personal example.³ Nomadic societies are unfamiliar with the notion of public authority and hence do not produce political organizations; when they do, it is usually the result of a power seizure or of conquest and transition to settled life.⁴

One aspect of the kinship bonds that unite tribal families is the custom of taking decisions collectively: in Latin, the principle held *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*—“What concerns all must be discussed and approved by all.”⁵ The gathering of all free adult males is a characteristic institution of the tribal community that later on, when the tribe settles down and acquires political attributes, assumes representative forms. The Roman historian Tacitus in his *Germania* confirmed that Germanic tribes regularly held such assemblies: “About minor matters the chiefs deliberate, about the more important [ones] the whole tribe. Yet even when the final decision rests with the people, the affair is always thoroughly discussed by the chiefs,” and the people must approve their decisions. Their kings, he added, “have not unlimited or arbitrary power.”⁶

A second feature of tribalism of major importance for the development of the West is that livestock, its principal economic asset, is held not collectively but privately: “From the legal point of view amongst nomads private ownership of livestock is an indisputable right.”⁷ Once nomads settle down and turn to agriculture, they transfer the right of private property to land. An illustration of this process of transition from nomadic ownership of livestock to settled ownership of land is provided by the early history of the Israelites, who, having migrated into Canaan, partitioned the territory among the twelve tribes by casting lots.⁸ The result was the emergence of landed property in the hands of tribal and subtribal groups. The Greeks followed the same pattern after migrating to Hellas from Ionia, as well as in their overseas colonies.⁹ These tribal

practices contrasted with those of nontribal, settled communities such as prevailed in ancient Mesopotamia and pharaonic Egypt, where agriculture was pursued by small families and the land belonged to kings and temples.¹⁰

Throughout European history, the existence of private property constituted the single most effective barrier to unlimited royal authority inasmuch as it compelled the kings to turn to their subjects for financial support and, in the process, to concede to them a share of political power.

The sanctity of private property was an axiom of European political thought and practice. An example of such thinking is the statement by John of Paris (c. 1255–1306), an influential theologian and philosopher, who declared that neither king nor pope could take a subject’s goods without his consent.¹¹ In Spain, a similar sentiment was expressed by the fifteenth-century jurist Palacios Rubios, a sentiment said to have been shared by Ferdinand and Isabella, that “to the King is confided solely the administration of the kingdom, and not dominion over things, for the property and rights of the State are public, and cannot be the private patrimony of anyone.”¹²

The commitment to private property was so deeply ingrained in Europe that even Jean Bodin, the theorist of royal absolutism, denied kings the right to infringe on it either by arbitrary taxation or by seizure.¹³ He distinguished genuine monarchy from despotism mainly by the respect of monarchy for property: under despotism, property was at the despot’s disposal.¹⁴

These were not isolated pronouncements. Charles McIlwain concludes his great study of medieval political theory with the following statement:

If I were asked which of the famous maxims into which the political thought of the world has at times been compressed is the one which on the whole best comprises the living political conceptions of the later middle ages, my choice, I imagine, would be rather unexpected, and not in all cases accepted, but it is one which my study of this period makes me willing to defend. It is the aphorism from Seneca’s *De Beneficiis*: “Ad Reges enim potestas omnium pertinet: ad singulos, proprietatis”—to kings belongs authority over all; to private persons, property.¹⁵

Once a tribe settles down, processes are set in motion that lead to the emergence of public authority embodied in the state, as well as to a distinction between private and public law. Sir Henry Maine has thus described the transformation:

The history of political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions; nor is there any of those subversions of feeling, which we term emphatically revolutions, so startling and so complete as the change which is accomplished when some other principle—such as that, for instance, of *local contiguity*—establishes itself for the first time as the basis of common political action. . . . The idea that a number of persons should exercise political rights in common simply because they happened to live within the same topographical limits was utterly strange and monstrous to primitive antiquity.¹⁶

Informal custom, appropriate for groups united on the basis of kinship, is henceforth replaced by law that applies to all the inhabitants of a given area and is administered by public authority.

Such a transformation took place gradually. Early European kings tended to treat their realm as they did their livestock and land, that is, as property: they drew no distinction between what the Romans called *dominium* (ownership) and *potestas* (authority),¹⁷ giving rise to what has come to be known as a “patrimonial” type of regime. Thus the rulers of the Merovingian dynasty of France (476–750 CE) apportioned their kingdom among their sons as if it were a private estate.¹⁸ Charlemagne (768–814), even though he, too, followed this practice, was already aware that he did not own his realm but only governed it. Gradually, the idea emerged that, unlike an estate (*domain*), the kingdom was not the property of the king but the joint possession of the king and the people.¹⁹ As early as 802 it was asserted that kings had not only rights but also duties: they must not oppress their subjects but treat them fairly, protect the church, widows, and orphans, and combat crime as well as heretics.²⁰ Charlemagne’s son, Louis I the Pious (814–840), spoke of kings having the obligation to promote peace and justice.²¹

Charlemagne held regular assemblies at which matters of state were discussed. They were of two kinds: gatherings of aristocrats who met behind closed doors, and consultative assemblies, held every spring, in which participated leading nobles along with the clergy, warriors, and officials.²² The notion grew that the kingdom was distinct from the person of the monarch and, as such, indivisible and inalienable.

The evolution of leadership from that of a tribal chieftain to that of a king with public responsibilities occurred under the influence of two factors: Roman law and the teachings of the church.

In Rome the notion of a public order, *res publica*, had been well established in theory as well as practice. The distinction between the private

and public spheres emerged there as early as the third century BCE: here was the state and there was society, and the two interacted but did not mesh.²³ The jurists in both Republican and Imperial Rome proceeded on the principle that all public authority emanated from the people and its end was justice.²⁴ Such ideas seeped into post-Roman Europe and distinguished its political institutions from all others in the world. A partnership was forged between rulers and ruled, a sense of common destiny, that never disappeared from Europe. As we shall note later, in Russia it never even appeared.

The contribution of the Catholic Church lay in insisting that kings must rule justly, in accord with the precepts of the Holy Scriptures. As early as the sixth century, St. Isidore of Seville quoted the ancient proverb “Thou shalt be king, if thou doest rightly; if not, thou shalt not be king.”²⁵ Similarly, the early-ninth-century French divine Jonas of Orléans preached that princes must govern justly, fulfilling their obligations to God, the church, and the people.²⁶ Even the earliest European kings, including the Merovingians, who treated their realms as property and, in theory, held absolute powers, were considered by their subjects to be bound by law.²⁷ Such notions, too, even if not always followed in practice, became a permanent feature of European political thought.

One manifestation of this notion of a partnership between state and society was the convocation of assemblies throughout Europe for the purpose of consultation on grave matters of state, especially taxation. They constituted a heritage of the popular assemblies convened in tribal times, which now, because the size of the population precluded universal participation, transformed into representative bodies. European kings did not rule an amorphous population, atomized and powerless, but a society composed of “estates” with defined duties and rights. These usually consisted of the clergy, the nobility, and the burghers. The estates were considered by custom to be intrinsic constituents of the body politic: a custom unique to European civilization. Ordinarily, their approval was required to enact new legislation and impose new levies.

Parliaments arose in the Middle Ages because of the desire of kings to secure public approval for major legislation and taxes. Kings summoned representatives: these were at first appointed (at any rate, in France), later elected. In England by the thirteenth century the principle was established that each shire sent two knights, and each town and borough its own representative. There is no evidence that the people themselves clamored for such attendance because it was costly and bothersome: they helped the king rather than the subjects.

Representative institutions first emerged toward the end of the twelfth and in the thirteenth century in Spain, Portugal, Sicily, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and Ireland. In the fourteenth century they made an appearance in France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and many of the states in Germany and Italy, as well as Hungary. In the fifteenth century they came into being in Denmark, Sweden, and Poland.*

The Middle Ages did not know "parliament" as a permanent institution: there were only "parliaments" convened at the king's pleasure and then, when they had fulfilled the task for which they had been convened, dissolved. These tasks were of a twofold nature: to ratify major political decisions and to authorize extraordinary assessments. "Almost everywhere in Latin Christendom the principle was, at one time or another, accepted by the rulers that, apart from the normal revenues of the prince, no taxes could be imposed without the consent of parliament."²⁸ The latter function was essential because it was through control of the purse strings that the most successful of parliaments, the English, ultimately achieved representative democracy.

In England parliament very early established the principle that the king had the right to certain revenues in addition to those brought in by his own domains in the form of rents—escheat, forfeitures, and customs—but that any additional levies required approval by the House of Commons. In France, by contrast, the power of the kings to levy taxes was very broad and unchecked: the *taille* (a tax on commoners) and the *gabelle* (salt tax) levied on top of the royal estate revenues and feudal dues, made the crown quite independent of the Estates General. The French Estates were divided and quarrelsome, and hence unable to check the power of the crown.

Elsewhere, parliaments exerted genuine power. Sweden, for example, in 1350 under King Magnus II Eriksson adopted the Land Law, a constitutional charter, according to which kingship was "limited and contractual." The king's authority was subject to law and custom. Any change in existing laws required public approval, as did new taxes.²⁹ European political practices received reinforcement from two additional institutions: feudalism and urban communes.

Feudalism prevailed in much of western Europe between c. 1000 and c. 1300 CE. During this period of constant wars, governments were

* A. R. Myers, *Parliaments and Estates in Europe to 1789* (London, 1975), 24. This is one of the few books dealing with the important subject of representative institutions in Europe. Just as Western historians take property for granted, so they view parliaments, with the result that the literature on both these institutions that in many ways define the West is lamentably poor.

too weak to provide society with adequate protection. Public authority was therefore supplemented with personal contracts by virtue of which strong individuals (lords) provided the weak with security, and the weak (vassals) repaid the lords with loyalty. This arrangement, symbolized by the ritual of "commendation," in which the vassal placed his hands in the hands of his lord, was reciprocal: that is, if either lord or vassal reneged on his pledge, the contract was annulled. Customarily, the vassal received from his lord land in the form of a fief, which he kept as long as he fulfilled his feudal obligations, but which in practice tended to become hereditary.³⁰ At its height, feudalism involved also subinfeudation, by virtue of which some vassals turned into lords with their own vassals. Thus a network of solid if personal bonds created a structure that replaced, for the time being, the feeble public authority.

Historians have found regimes similar to the feudal in other parts of the world, notably Japan, where there is evidence of vassalage and fiefs. However, Japanese pseudofeudalism lacked the element of reciprocal obligation that was unique to medieval Europe:

If the lord failed to fulfill his engagements he lost his rights. . . . The originality of [Western feudalism] consisted in the emphasis it placed on the idea of an agreement capable of binding the rulers: and in this way, oppressive as it may have been to the poor, it has in truth bequeathed to our Western civilization something with which we still desire to live.³¹

That "something" was the idea of a contract binding ruler and ruled which, in time, gave birth to constitutionalism.

Concurrent with the emergence of feudalism, Europe witnessed the rise of cities. The relative peace which the continent came to enjoy from the eleventh century onward led to the revival of trade. This trade was concentrated in the cities which now evolved from fortresses that had provided their inhabitants with little more than bare physical security into thriving centers of commerce. They arose first in Italy and then in the Low Countries and northern Germany. Medieval cities secured from the feudal lords in control of the countryside the right to self-government, which authorized them to elect their own magistrates and to administer justice and tax their citizens. They granted the latter extensive rights and freedoms unknown in the feudal countryside, such as titles to urban real estate.³² These powers provided the infrastructure of Western civil rights. Like feudalism, they too were unknown in any other part of the world.

The authority of European kings was thus from the earliest limited by a variety of ideas and institutions: the conviction that a king had the

responsibility to attend to the well-being of his subjects, that he had to respect custom and not legislate arbitrarily, that before making decisions affecting the country he was obligated to consult the people, and, above all, that he had to respect his subjects' property.

Nor did the decline of feudalism and the triumph of royal absolutism subvert these values. There is agreement among historians that the arrogation by European monarchs of unprecedented powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was necessitated by the rise of modern, professional armies in place of feudal levies. Such armies required massive financial outlays. These were difficult to obtain by the traditional means of raising revenues with the approval of the estates: "Faced with the need to mobilize more and more men and money, kings became impatient of the obstruction and parochialism of estates and taxpayers."³³ Hence in many continental countries they ceased to convene the estates, and the latter quietly disappeared. This did not happen in England, which had no standing army.

Essentially, absolutism meant that kings could legislate on their own: as Louis XV said of himself: "à mois seul appartient le pouvoir législatif, sans dépendance et sans partage."³⁴ This practice certainly violated custom accepted in Europe during the preceding millennium that kings did not legislate but enforced existing laws and that if legislation was required, it was enacted with the consent of the people.*

However, even as absolutism deprived the people of their political prerogatives, it did not violate their fundamental civil rights of person and property. "Absolute monarchy is a term that contrasts with feudal dispersal. But it does not signify despotism or tyranny."³⁵ Hence it cannot be said to anticipate twentieth-century totalitarianism. The principal theoreticians of the age of absolutism were at one that kings always had to observe "the laws of God and nature"; some of them went so far as to argue that subjects of monarchs who failed to do so, were, like vassals of feudal lords who reneged on their obligations, released from the duty of obedience.³⁶ In France, one of the most absolutist monarchies, even advocates of royal absolutism conceded that the country had a "customary" constitution that superseded the will of the king and which the king had to respect: the liberties and properties of Frenchmen were inviolate. †

* "There is scarcely any important statute in which the mediaeval monarch omitted to claim that his decree had received advice and assent, i.e., that it was in harmony with the legal convictions of the community." Fritz Kern, *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1956), 73.

† The well-known saying attributed to Louis XIV—"I am the state"—is fictitious. It was invented by Voltaire: François Olivier-Martin, *L'Absolutisme français* (Paris, 1988), 38. Louis

And in Spain, whose ruler, Philip II, has been called the "most absolute monarch in the world," opinion concurred that royal absolutism entailed *reciprocity* in that the king preserved justice and property, in return for which his subjects owed him obedience. Kings were created by the people and hence were duty-bound to work for the common good.³⁷ (The term *bonum commune* was used in France as early as 1273.)³⁸

When absolutism came under assault, first in England, then in the United States and France, there existed a widely shared consensus dating back to the earliest days of European civilization as to what constituted legitimate government: such government acted in accord with custom and law, respecting the rights and wishes of the citizenry. Essentially, therefore, the democratic revolutions did not so much advance new principles of government as restore and broaden one of the principles traditional to Europe, namely that what concerned all had to be discussed and approved by all. The rest of Western political theory and practice had been in place for a long time.

For a variety of reasons—geographic, in the first place, but also cultural—the political evolution of Russia proceeded in a direction opposite to that of the West: from the relative freedom of the Middle Ages to a regime that in the vocabulary of western political theory would be variously defined as tyrannical, seigniorial, or patrimonial.

As a rule, the stability and liberty of a country stand in inverse relation to its size and external security: that is to say, the larger a country and the more insecure its borders, the less can it afford the luxury of popular sovereignty and civil rights. A country that administers vast territories and is exposed to foreign invasions tends toward centralized forms of government. This fact was remarked on by such eighteenth-century political theorists as Montesquieu and in Russia served as the principal justification for her autocratic form of government.

And indeed, viewed from this perspective, autocracy could well be justified as the only form of government suitable for Russia. Her territory was immense: thanks to the conquest of Siberia, Russia was already in the seventeenth century the most spacious kingdom on earth. Moreover, her vast realm lacked natural boundaries in the form of mountains or seas, which meant that Russia was exposed to incessant raids by

XIV did say, memorably, that as absolute sovereign he had "at his full and free disposal all the assets, both secular and ecclesiastical." But by this he meant not that he had the right to deprive his subjects of their belongings but that he had the power to tax them as the state's finances, in his opinion, required: *ibid.*, 170.

nomadic and semiseddled Mongol and Turkic tribes. Such incursions were part and parcel of Russian reality from the twelfth until the eighteenth century, when the fluid frontier was finally stabilized. This experience contrasted with that of western Europe, which enjoyed immunity from external invasions from the eleventh century onward.

Insecurity led in Russia to the development of a military establishment far in excess of what the country's inhabitants and economic resources could prudently bear. Her government became militarized, with every group of the population, the clergy alone excepted, conscripted for state service and required to labor for the state: in the words of Rostislav Fadeev, a Russian conservative of the late nineteenth century, Muscovite Russia was first and foremost a "military dictatorship."³⁹ Under these conditions, so different from those prevailing in the West, there could be no society independent of the state and no corporate spirit uniting its members. The entire Russian nation was enlisted; there was room here neither for a privileged aristocracy, nor for a class of self-governing burghers, nor yet for a rural yeomanry.

The concentration of power in the hands of Russia's rulers was bolstered by the virtual absence of private property in the means of production and marketable commodities. Property emerges under conditions of scarcity: where objects are available in unlimited quantity, no one has an interest in claiming ownership, which involves needless hardship to protect something that is overabundant and hence of no value. It so happened that in medieval Russia land, the principal form of productive wealth, was inexhaustible. Before the late sixteenth century, when they were forcibly bound to the soil, Russian peasants roamed the country's forest zone, the *taiga*, practicing the "slash and burn" technique of cultivation. They would occupy a tract of forest, set the trees on fire, and, once the flames died down, clear it. Then they would sow the grain seed on the soil enriched by ashes. They would do so for a few years until the soil showed signs of exhaustion, whereupon they would move on to another part of the boundless forest. The notion that land could be owned in exclusive property was entirely alien to them: they were convinced into modern times that land, like air and water, all equally essential to life, was created by God for everyone's use. As we shall see, the crown took advantage of this attitude to claim title to all of Russia's soil: action which the peasantry found quite acceptable and logical since the church taught it to regard the tsar as God's vicar on earth.

Nor did private property develop in Russia's cities. The immense distances separating Russia's population centers and the vagaries of a se-

vere climate inhibited the emergence of commerce on a national scale. So did the crown's unspecified but very effective claims on commodities. Until the nineteenth century, when improvements in transportation made possible the emergence of a national economy, Russia knew only local markets that traded in local products. All these factors prevented the evolution of a middle class and of an urban culture. Muscovite cities were essentially administrative and garrison centers, containing sizable rural populations engaged in agriculture and lacking powers of self-government. Townsmen served the crown, as did other groups of the population, and they were forbidden to move. They did not own their houses or the land on which they stood: "There was no form of urban property that private citizens might hold in right of full ownership."⁴⁰ Credit was unknown. The Mongols had destroyed such urban self-government as had existed before their conquest of Russia.

There existed in medieval Muscovy private estates known as *votchiny*—that is, patrimonia—but these did not survive the emergence of Moscow as the national government, being transformed into fiefs held provisionally, on condition of satisfactory service to the crown. There was private property in the city-state of Novgorod, but it too disappeared in the late fifteenth century, when Novgorod was conquered and absorbed by Muscovy.

The net effect of these conditions was that medieval Russia lacked the two institutions that in the West served to limit the power of kings: an independent nobility and middle class, and private property in land.

There was another factor that affected Russia's politics, a factor missing in Europe, and that was subjection to Mongol rule. While Russian historians disagree on the nature and extent of Mongol influence on Russia, it is difficult to see how two and a half centuries of Golden Horde domination could not have profoundly affected the way their Russian vassals perceived authority.* After all, Russian princes had to travel to the Horde's capital in Sarai on the Volga to be invested with authority by means of letters patent. There they were subjected to

* Some historians stress the role of Byzantium in the evolution of Russian autocracy. Thus one prominent scholar of the subject asserts that there can be "no doubt" that the idea of autocracy derived from Byzantium: M. Diakonov, *Vlast' moskovskikh gosudarei* (St. Petersburg, 1889), v. However, the fact remains that Byzantium was remote and, during the two and a half centuries of Mongol rule, largely out of reach. The historian Vladimir Savva in his *Moskovskie Tsari i Vizantiiskie Vasilevny* (Khar'kov, 1901), 400, observes that in claiming the tsarist title in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Russia's rulers did not claim to be successors of the Byzantine emperors. Instead, they referred to the crowning of St. Vladimir and V. Monomakh, as well as to the conquest of the tsardoms of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Siberia.

various humiliations; sometimes, they lost their lives. Their Mongol masters insisted that they dissolve the traditional urban assemblies known as *veche* because they served as foci of popular resistance to their exactions. In the past, the *veche*, in which participated all freemen of the town, had deliberated on political decisions; it had also elected urban officials, as well as their prince, setting conditions for his rule. Such self-government was now abolished. All forms of mass discontent were ruthlessly repressed by the princes acting on Sarai's orders: Russia's princes could always secure obedience from their people by threatening to call in the Mongols.⁴¹ Surely, these experiences had to have an impact by providing a model of effective government.

The weakness of Russia's society *vis-à-vis* the state was further aggravated by the absence of a genuine feudal system. In 1907 the historian N. Pavlov-Silvansky published a monograph in which he argued that, contrary to prevailing opinion, medieval Russia did know feudalism.⁴² But his thesis did not gain acceptance among Russian historians. V. O. Kliuchevsky and Sergei Platonov, the leaders of the Moscow and St. Petersburg schools of history, respectively, while conceding that there were elements of feudalism present in medieval Russia, denied that the country had had a full-blown feudal system—in the words of another prominent historian, P. N. Miliukov, the feudal “species” were absent.⁴³

Indeed, the embryonic feudalism in Russia never had a chance to mature, first because of the Mongol conquest, and then because the Russian monarchy, having emancipated itself from Mongol rule, wiped out all personal quasi-public relations. In the early Middle Ages, vassals had been free to come and go: they could hold their estates in principalities ruled by other lords than those whom they had pledged to serve. This right was guaranteed in contracts, a number of which have survived. Nor were there any stipulations of reciprocity in Russian lord-vassal relationships or any provisions that freed a vassal from his obligations to his lord if and when the latter failed to keep up his part of the bargain.

Thus the social fabric that Western feudalism wove was missing, and “society” was little more than an aggregation of individuals and families, loosely connected and sharing few if any common interests.

Yet another contributing factor to the rise of an extreme form of autocracy was the Orthodox religion. The Russian church saw as its mission the salvation of souls, not of bodies. It kept out of politics on the grounds that in the “symphony” that, according to Byzantine dogma, defined church-state relations, politics was the responsibility of secular authori-

ties. Hence it provided no norms that would define the “good” king as did Western church fathers: the king who ruled justly and devoted himself to the well-being of his subjects.⁴⁴ The concept of “common good” was missing from the Byzantine vocabulary. A bad, unjust ruler was, in its view, not a tyrant but God's instrument in punishing human iniquity and, as such, someone who had to be unreservedly obeyed. Kings were God's surrogates appointed to keep mankind virtuous:

Fallen man, the Muscovites believed, was born in sin and, given the slightest opportunity, would stray from the true path into lust, greed, avarice and so on. In the Muscovite conception, then, freedom was not a vehicle for self-perfection (a belief that smacked of the greatest sin, pride) but a capricious condition that allowed man to descend deeper into depravity and further away from salvation. God had, of course, foreseen that humankind would be incapable of self-governance, and loving his creation, He had provided men with kings. Their purpose was to restrain the wayward tendencies of human nature. . . . God made it the duty of men to serve their temporal rulers as “slaves,” with the same measure of submission as they accorded God and Christ.

To the extent that kings bore responsibility for their actions, they were accountable to God, not to man.⁴⁵

Such geographic and cultural factors accounted for the emergence in Russia of a form of monarchy that in its powers exceeded anything known in the West even in the age of absolutism. The six hundred accounts left by European travelers of their experiences in Muscovy agree that they had never known a monarchy that enjoyed such extreme powers.⁴⁶

The Russian monarchy emerged as a sovereign power in the second half of the fifteenth century. Until then, Russian rulers had been vassals of both Byzantium (in theory) and of the Mongol-Tatar Golden Horde (in reality). The capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 ended Russia's dependence on the Byzantine Empire. Shortly afterward, the Golden Horde fell apart. As a result, by 1480, in the reign of Ivan III, the rulers of Muscovy could claim, at first cautiously and then boldly, the title of *samoderzhets*, a translation of the Greek *autokrates*, which meant sovereign, that is, a ruler independent of any external power: it was the antithesis of “vassal.” (Later, beginning with the second half of the sixteenth century, the word acquired the additional meaning of unlimited ruler.)⁴⁷ The term *tsar*, an adaptation of Caesar, now also began to gain

currency: it was formally adopted in 1547. Until then, the term had been applied exclusively to the khan of the Golden Horde and the Holy Roman Emperor.⁴⁸ Its adoption implied the Russian ruler's worldwide mission.⁴⁹ During the century that followed, the rulers of Muscovy came to claim imperial prerogatives on the grounds that they were the world's only Orthodox sovereigns and, as such, the world's only true Christian rulers. The clergy vigorously supported this claim because according to Orthodox theory, the church could not exist without an emperor.⁵⁰

But from the 1470s onward, Russia's rulers were also addressed by another term, one which survived until 1917, and that term was *gosudar'*. Commonly translated as "sovereign," it derived from the vocabulary of the manorial economy, where the landlord was called *gosudar'* and his tenants were *khology* or slaves.*

In old Russian terminology, this word [*gosudar'*] designated, above all, a commanding [*vlastnyi*] person, but only in private, not public, relations. He was *gospodin*, master [*dominus*], whose rights extended over objects and people. The terms *gospodin*, *gospodar'* and *gosudar'* are employed in the oldest written documents without distinction, to designate, in particular, the owner of slaves and the owner of land. . . . From the middle of the fourteenth century, the term *gosudar'* begins to penetrate the language of politics to designate bearers of sovereign authority. This application emerged quite unnoticed and naturally, given that the Great Princes were large-scale proprietors, landlords and owners of slaves, and in this capacity, *gosudari*. Their private economic and public functions were not distinguished because the distinction did not exist.⁵¹

According to Kliuchevsky, the term *gosudar'* meant "the personal power of a free man over an unfree one, over a slave."⁵² This terminology provides a clue to the patrimonial nature of emergent Russian absolutism.

Until the latter part of the fifteenth century, as vassals of Byzantium and the Golden Horde, the rulers of Muscovy had enjoyed only private, not public, powers over their domains. The public powers belonged to their foreign overlords: they themselves were merely seigneurs by virtue of grants from their Mongol overlords: "Within the confines of his appanage, the prince was, strictly speaking, not a political ruler, but a private owner. His principality was for him not a society but an economy;

* I. E. Zabelin in VE (1871), 2: 502. It had the same meaning as the Greek word *despotes*, namely a term which combined head of the household and owner of slaves. R. Koebner in *Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes* 14, no. 1–2 (1951), 276. The use of *gosudar'* to designate the master of serfs survived into the mid-nineteenth century, as seen, for example, in Turgenev's story, "Burmistr" ("The Bailiff"). *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1963), 4: 145.

he did not administer it, he exploited it. He considered himself the owner of the appanage's entire territory."⁵³ And indeed, Ivan I Kalita (1304?–40), a loyal vassal of the Mongol khan, in his testament referred to the principality of Moscow as his patrimonial property, along with cities, villages, golden chains, and goblets.⁵⁴

Once they had shaken off Mongol domination, the rulers of Moscow suddenly became sovereigns. Quite naturally, they continued to regard their realm as they had done before, as patrimonial property, property inherited from their fathers, for which Russians used the term *votchina*, the equivalent of the Latin *patrimonium*. A landed estate was *votchina*, and so was the kingdom.

The prince's legal title to administration and to state authority was patrimonial, the same as his title to landed property. . . . It was his property, a direct right, not derivative but original, based entirely on inheritance and not dependent in its source on anyone. In this sense, the principality was the prince's *votchina*, and he divided it like any other asset.⁵⁵

No distinction was drawn between public powers and private ownership, between *potestas* and *dominium*: principalities were bought and sold like ordinary real estate. Thus, for example, in 1463 Ivan III purchased Iaroslav, the patrimony of its princes.⁵⁶ And like ordinary real estate, principalities could be inherited by women.⁵⁷ For this reason, the new sovereigns would be addressed as *gosudari*. This conception was entirely devoid of any notion of "society" as a distinct entity, something with its own interests and rights: the only interests and rights were those of the sovereign, the *gosudar'*.

Thus it comes as no surprise that both Ivan III (1440–1505) and his son Basil III (1479–1533), like Ivan I before them, continued to refer to Muscovy as their "patrimony" (*votchina*): "All the Russian land," said Ivan III, "is, by God's will, our patrimony from our ancestors of old."⁵⁸ Such designations occur also in Russian medieval chronicles.⁵⁹

The following are examples of Ivan III's patrimonial mindset. In 1477 Ivan applied pressure on the city-state of Novgorod, a prosperous trading partner of the Hanseatic League, intending to incorporate it into his "patrimony." The citizens of Novgorod, in their negotiations with Moscow in 1478, requested that they be allowed to retain certain rights, such as safeguarding their properties and carrying out justice in their traditional manner. Ivan brushed these requests aside, saying that he was not prepared to accept any instructions on how to run his domain.⁶⁰ During the negotiations with Ivan III, Novgorodians asked him to kiss

the cross—that is, swear an oath—which he also refused to do on the grounds that the sovereign does not assume obligations to his subjects with an oath.⁶¹ A similar incident occurred in Ivan's relations with the city-state of Pskov after he had forced it to submit to his rule. Ivan had assigned one of his sons to rule over Pskov, but its citizens said that they would prefer to have him take personal charge. Ivan again rejected the request with the words: "Am I not free to dispose of my grandson and children? I will give the principality to whomsoever I want."⁶²

We have concrete evidence of this attitude in the testaments of the Great Princes or tsars of Muscovy.⁶³ In 1858 Boris Chicherin, the future leader of Russia's conservative-liberal movement, drawing on these testaments, published an influential essay in which he demonstrated that Russia's rulers had bequeathed their state along with physical objects on the basis of private, not public law:

The first conclusion we can draw from an analysis of the testaments is that the order of succession among Moscow princes followed private law, and, as in the succession of private persons of that time, the dominant principle was the personal will of the bequeather.

The second conclusion . . . consists in this that no distinction was drawn between state property and the private property of the prince. All that belonged to the prince belonged to him as property . . . in accord with private not state law. In no testament did we see any hint of a distinction [between the two]. All categories of assets—cities, districts [volosti], villages, incomes, benefits [*puti*], movable belongings, slaves, cattle, range side by side and are willed to the heirs on exactly the same basis. The appanage that the prince rules is called his patrimony [votchina], exactly as are the belongings of private persons.

[When one analyzes these testaments], one notices that the land, as a social entity, [or] the people, are not hinted at anywhere. The princes receive the districts as property, and not as rulers with a social responsibility. From which it clearly follows that the concept of the land as something counter to the state . . . does not correspond to the facts.⁶⁴

Although subsequent Russian historians have qualified somewhat Chicherin's conclusions by pointing out the presence of some rudimentary elements of public law in the princely testaments, his basic contention stands.⁶⁵

The Muscovite state administration evolved from the administration of the appanage, the principal task of which had been exploitation. The *prikazy*, Moscow's principal executive offices, similarly evolved from the administration of the prince's household.

As indicated above, such a mentality had also existed in early medieval Europe—for instance, among the Merovingian kings of France, who also treated their kingdom as property. But there an evolution occurred which superimposed the public on the private and produced a notion of the state as a partnership between rulers and ruled. In Russia such an evolution did not occur because of the absence of the factors that had molded European political theory and practice, such as the influence of Roman law and Catholic theology, feudalism and the commercial culture of the cities.

Ivan III, as well as his immediate successors, Basil III and Ivan IV, tolerated neither privileged status nor private property: all subjects, from highest to lowest, had to serve the crown, and all productive assets, land above all, were treated as belonging to the crown.

This kind of mentality was not confined to Muscovy. Researches by Russian prerevolutionary scholars have revealed a similar patrimonial mentality in the principality of Tver that antedate even Muscovite practices. An anonymous document from the middle of the fifteenth century, apparently written by a monk, praises the prince of Tver, Boris Aleksandrovich, as the foremost ruler in all Russia: he is 'gosudar', as well as tsar and autocrat, appointed by God himself.⁶⁶

Muscovite Russia had a titled nobility known as boyars, most of them descendants of the princes who had ruled the appanages until their absorption into Muscovy. They resided in Moscow and attended the tsar's court, serving in his Boyar Council (of which more below), or were dispatched to the provinces on administrative assignments. They constituted an upper class when compared with the rest of the population, a fact institutionalized in the curious practice of *meshchestvo*, a system of "ranking" in state service which permitted a noble to refuse to serve under a fellow noble whose ancestor had served under his own forbear. Russia, however, had nothing comparable to the Western estates: in the eyes of the crown, its subjects had only duties and no rights, and in this sense, they were all equal.

That status excluded proprietary rights to the land. In the Middle Ages, Russia had known allodial landholding in the form of *votchiny*. Unconditional land tenure, however, was eliminated by Ivan III after his conquest of Novgorod. Here he abolished landed property by confiscating all private estates and transferring title to them to himself, following which he distributed the estates to his servitors as fiefs or *pomest'ia*. The holder of a *pomestie* was required to render the tsar lifelong service: failure to do so or to perform it satisfactorily led to the confiscation of

the estate. In time, all land in Russia in private possession—and this included the *votchiny*—was required to render state service. Thus the economic basis of society's identity, private property in land, was extinguished. As Antonio Possevino, the papal envoy to Ivan IV, observed of the people of Muscovy:

No one can really say what actually belongs to him, and every man, whether he wishes or not, exists in a state of dependency upon the Prince. The more a person has, the more he recognizes this dependency; the richer he is, the more he is afraid, for the Prince often takes back everything he has given.⁶⁷

To emphasize the humble status of his nobles, Ivan and his immediate successors enjoyed humiliating them. This practice, too, astonished Western visitors. The following excerpt is one of many that can be found in Western travelers' accounts on this subject:

The entire population of Muscovy is subjected more to slavery than freedom. All Muscovites, no matter what their rank . . . without the slightest attention to their person, find themselves under the yoke of the most cruel slavery. . . . If one of the [Grandees] in a petition or letter to the tsar were to sign his name in a positive degree [*polozhitel'noi stepeni*] he would be at once punished for violating the law concerning insults to His Majesty. It is required to adopt diminutive names. For instance, Iakov [Jacob] must sign his name Iakushka [Jake], not Iakov. . . . One must refer to oneself as a *kholop* [slave] or the meanest, most contemptible slave of the Great Prince, and refer to all of one's possessions, movable and immovable, as belonging not to oneself but to the sovereign. The tsar of Muscovy wonderfully reflects this notion. He uses his fatherland and its citizens in such a manner that his autocracy, bound neither by limits nor by laws, is clearly revealed, for example, in his full disposal of the properties of private persons, as if nature had created all of it only for him.⁶⁸

Sigmund von Herberstein, another early traveler to Muscovy, whose account, first published in Vienna in 1549, was to exert strong influence on the image formed of Russia in Europe, noted with surprise that "all the people in the country call themselves the Prince's *chlopn* [kholopy]."⁶⁹

In an important chapter of his classic *Boyar Duma*, Kliuchevsky raised the question why Russia failed to develop the kind of aristocracy familiar from the history of western Europe and even the neighboring

* *Moscovia* (Weimar, 1975), 78. Jean Bodin, the sixteenth-century French political writer, alluding to the fact that Muscovites referred to themselves as "slaves," noted that this had held true also of the subjects of the rulers of ancient Egypt and Assyria. *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale* (1606) (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), book II, chapter 2, 200.

Lithuanian commonwealth. One reason he adduces is that whereas in the West the aristocracy emerged from the ranks of conquerors, in Russia it was made up of one-time rulers of principalities conquered by Moscow and, as such, subordinate to the tsars of Muscovy. Another factor was the institution of *mestnichestvo*, which, annoying as it was to the crown, caused constant conflicts within aristocratic ranks and inhibited the emergence of a corporate spirit. But the most important factor was economic. Beginning in the 1540s, the Russian peasantry began to scatter out of the central regions of Muscovy, colonizing adjacent regions and depriving the landowning nobility of labor, without which their estates were worthless. To bind the peasantry to the land, a process which within the next one hundred years would result in full-blown serfdom, the aristocracy forfeited its political ambitions.⁶⁹ Serfdom, indeed, was the element that bound the Russian upper classes to the monarchy from the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, and caused it to surrender its political interests.*

The notion of an aristocracy in Russia was finally destroyed by Peter the Great's Table of Ranks of 1722. In order to secure the maximum of service from his nobles, as well as to give talented commoners an opportunity to acquire noble status, Peter introduced the principle of meritocracy, by virtue of which all members of the service class, or *dvoriants*, regardless of their ancestry, had to begin service—whether in the army, navy, and bureaucracy or at the court—at the lowest, fourteenth rank, and then rise, step by step, up the career ladder. Commoners attaining the lowest, or fourteenth, rank (*chin*) in the military services were automatically ennobled; those employed in the civil service attained such status upon reaching the eighth rank. The uppermost four ranks in the service hierarchy were known as *generalitet*. The Table of Ranks undermined what was left in Russia of the true nobility, inasmuch as nobility, by definition, bestows privilege on the basis of birth, not accomplishment.

In a country which knew no estates there was no place for Estates General through which the various ranks of society could participate in legislation. And indeed, the two institutions which superficially resembled the western Estates General—the Boyar Duma and the Land Assemblies—had no legislative powers: they were adjuncts of the tsarist bureaucracy rather than representatives of the population at large. The Boyar Duma (1547–1711), commonly referred to in contemporary sources as *boiars* (boyars), was a royal council. Originally composed of

* For this reason it seems to me wrong to refer to the Russian service nobility as a "ruling class," as does John P. LeDonne in his *Absolutism and Ruling Class* (New York, 1991).

the descendants of appanage princes, in time its membership came to consist primarily of such officials as the tsar chose to invite, including so-called *dumnye dvoriane*, a rank especially created in 1572 to enable nonboyars to attend; these men lacked the pedigree of boyars but fulfilled important administrative functions. Conversely, the possession of the boyar title did not empower a person to sit in the Duma: toward the end of the sixteenth century, approximately one-half of the boyar families were not invited to participate in it.⁷⁰ Participation in the Duma was a duty—a form of service—not a privilege.⁷¹ The council's membership underwent extreme fluctuations: it counted 19 members in the early sixteenth century and 167 at the end of the seventeenth. Much of the time, as many as half of its members were absent from Moscow on administrative assignments. All this militated against the Boyar Duma developing a corporate spirit.⁷² The Duma met whenever the monarch decided to convene it and dealt only with such matters as he chose to submit to it: it never took the initiative. Some of the most important state affairs, including taxation, were never presented for its consideration. The Duma met behind closed doors and kept no records. Its advice was not binding. It had no vested, de jure, powers, but only de facto powers, whose scope was defined by the ruler.⁷³ "From all of which one can conclude," wrote the Russian historian Nicholas Khlebnikov,

that the Boyar Duma played quite an insignificant role in the administration of the country. The entire actual administration of the realm was concentrated in the prikazy and followed exclusively the will of the sovereign. The prikazy were nothing else than divers chanceries of the tsar, involved with all the branches of the administration in accord with his orders, under his personal supervision and control.* This situation evolved naturally from the patrimonial principle according to which the patrimonial owner was the natural master of everything and no one could interfere with his management of his patrimony.⁷⁴

In sum, the Duma did not limit in any way the authority of the tsars, as did similar bodies in the medieval West. It was an instrument of the tsar's will: it did not serve the interests of his subjects or even convey their wishes. Indeed, Augustin Mayerberg, who traveled to Muscovy in 1661, wrote that "many of the Grand Princes customarily asked the Duma's advice only for appearances' sake, in order to shift unto the Duma the hatred [aroused] by the injustice which they have committed."⁷⁵

* *Prikaz*, the name for the tsarist administrative office in Muscovite Russia, was formed from the verb *prikazat'*, 'to order or command. The prikazy were executive offices in charges of various functions and regions.

The *Zemskie sobory*, or Land Assemblies, also served the government, not society. Their origin is in dispute: the date of their founding was long considered to have been either 1549 or 1550, but subsequent researches established that they had come into being in 1566.⁷⁶ Detailed scrutiny of their composition in the sixteenth century has revealed that the majority of the deputies were government officials who held positions in the capital or in the provinces: they were not elected by the populace but appointed and summoned by the crown. The very idea of elections contradicted the spirit of patrimonial absolutism:

Indeed, the application of the elective principle signifies recognition of society's political rights, even if only of a most minimal kind. In any event, it presumes a view of society as an indispensable independent ingredient of the concept "state." But neither the one nor the other can be expected there where the administration is based on patrimonial principles and where the population, to quote Prof. Kliuchevsky, is a political accident.⁷⁷

Land Assemblies were often summoned on very short notice, allowing no time for elections to be held even had they been desired. Their task was to strengthen the government's control over the provinces. Hence the Land Assembly has been described as "not a representative institution but rather a gathering of government agents. . . . From the juridical point of view, they were a supportive institution, constructed in accord with the service-based design of society and reflecting not society's rights but its duties."⁷⁸ They never constituted an institution that restrained the government.

Were there in our country parties hostile to tsarist authority? Such parties never existed in our Land Assemblies. Muscovite representatives were always distinguished by devotion to the monarchist principle and displayed not the slightest striving to exceed the limits set for them by the monarch's will. They always acted on the basis of the existing order. They tendered their complaints in a most respectful form. Their activity could in no wise appear dangerous to our sovereigns.⁷⁹

The Assemblies only once performed a vital role, and that was at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when, following the extinction of the Riurik dynasty and the anarchy that followed, Russia needed to choose a new tsar. This was accomplished by the 1613 Assembly, which, unlike its forerunners, was largely elected: it chose Michael Romanov to the throne. The Assembly sat in continuous session until 1622, helping restore order to a country ravaged by foreign invasions and civil wars. Another Assembly convened in 1648–49 to ratify Russia's new legal

code. But as the new dynasty consolidated its authority, the need for Land Assemblies diminished. The last one met in 1653, a century after it had been first convened. It then vanished without a trace.

The Assemblies never exerted the kind of political influence that in their heyday did Western Estates. The reason is that Muscovite Russia had no legally defined estates with their rights and privileges which would give them a sense of shared interest vis-à-vis the crown. The various social groups had no collective rights to safeguard and, feeling little in common, could not perform a political role.⁸⁰ Indeed, they tended to regard each as other as rivals and to look to the crown for protection of their interests.

European theorists became aware of this patrimonial type of government as early as the sixteenth century. The first modern writer to call attention to its existence was Niccolò Machiavelli, who in chapter 4 of *The Prince* (1513), contrasting the sultan of the Ottoman Empire with the king of France, referred to the former as a ruler who treated his subjects like slaves. In 1576 Jean Bodin, drawing on travelers' accounts, spoke of "lordly monarchy" in which the prince "is become lord of the goods and persons of his subjects . . . governing them as a master of his family does his slaves."⁸¹

The initial model in Western literature for this type of government was the Ottoman Empire, with which the Europeans had the greatest familiarity, but later Russia and the Mogul Empire of India also served as examples. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European travelers to Muscovy perceived its rulers as possessing unlimited authority and dis-regarding private property rights.⁸² An influential work about the Mogul state came from the pen of a seventeenth-century Frenchman, François Bernier, who, having returned from a thirteen-year residence in India, wrote a classic description of what before long came to be known as Oriental despotism: "As the land throughout the whole empire is considered the property of the sovereign, there can be no earldoms, marquisates, or duchies. The royal grants consist only of pensions, either in land or money, which the king gives, augments, retrenches or takes away at pleasure."⁸³ Such opinions were virtually unanimous, and while it is true that they often served polemical purposes (for example, as an oblique criticism of the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV), they unquestionably reflected reality as seen from the European perspective.⁸⁴

This information attracted the attention of Marx and Engels.⁸⁵ Having read Bernier and some other travelers to the Orient, Marx conceived

a stage of socioeconomic development which he called the Asiatic Mode of Production. In a letter to Engels he wrote: "Bernier is right in finding the basic form of all the occurrences in the Orient—he speaks of Turkey, Persia, Hindustan—in the absence of *private property in land*. This is truly the key even to the Oriental heaven."⁸⁶ It differed from the European model, which was a regime of private property.⁸⁷

Independently, the peculiar quality of this kind of statehood was remarked on by Russian historians of the so-called "statist school," which came into existence in the middle of the nineteenth century. An early adherent of this school, I. E. Zabelin, wrote:

The political basis of the Moscow state was exclusively patrimonial, it was fostered by and grew from the patrimonial evolution of the people. Moscow itself, as a state, was nothing but a typical higher species of the ancient Russian allodium. For this reason it came to be called *gosudarstvo*, which was the proper name of allodium.* And for this reason, too, the general state policy was, essentially, only the fullest expression of private allodial relations.⁸⁸

The legal historian Boris Chicherin also stressed the private, proprietary character of sovereignty in the medieval and early Muscovite periods of Russian history.

This theme was most fully developed by Russia's premier historian, Vassily Kliuchevsky, who in his *Boyar Duma* formulated the theoretical foundation of the patrimonial nature of the early Russian state. He regarded the medieval principality as the private property of its ruler. "On his estate, the prince was a seigneur with the powers of a sovereign, whereas outside it, he was a sovereign with the habits of a seigneur."⁸⁹

The patrimonial state defined Russian absolutism in terms very different from those familiar in the West and more akin to those observed in the Orient. Here, rulers not only were free to legislate and tax at will, as were Philip II of Spain or Louis XIV, but confronted neither private property nor established social estates, which, by their very existence, set limits to their authority. Nor did Russia's rulers have to contend with the notion of "society" as a partner or have the church require them to rule for society's benefit. This whole arrangement resembled, both in theory and practice, not European monarchies but those of the Orient, such as the Hellenistic state, of which it is said that it represented "personal dynastic rule that does not emerge from a specific land or people but is

*"Allodium" was land held in outright ownership, without feudal obligation.

imposed from above on a specific realm." Such a nation is the object of power, not its source.⁹⁰

The net effect of such a political arrangement was that the ruling elite—the tsar and his officials—neither then nor later conceived of society as independent of the state, as having its own rights, interests, and wishes, to which they were accountable. This elite assumed, quite unconsciously and without any theory to back it, that the "populace" (*narod*) existed only insofar as the state acknowledged its existence and that its sole function was to serve the state. It took no interest in the well-being of its subjects and, in return, demanded that the subjects take no interest in affairs of state. This mentality was deeply ingrained: it first emerged in Muscovy and survived into the imperial and Soviet eras.

To what extent it permeated Russia's ruling elite can be illustrated on examples taken from the reigns of three nineteenth-century monarchs: Nicholas I, Alexander II, and Alexander III.

Peter Chaadaev was a descendant of one of Russia's most distinguished aristocratic families; and although in 1836 he was to gain notoriety for publishing scathing criticism of Russia's place in history which caused the tsarist authorities officially to declare him insane, his views were not generally known three years earlier when he addressed a petition to Nicholas I through the chief of police, Count Benkendorf. In fact, his political views at the time were resolutely conservative. He happened to experience financial difficulties and applied for a government position. In his petition he voiced some mild criticism of Russia's educational system and offered to join the imperial officialdom in a capacity which would give him the opportunity to help improve it. In response he received a sharp rebuke from Benkendorf, who wrote: "Only state service and state service of long duration gives us the right and the opportunity to pass judgement on matters of state . . . [whereas] you, emulating the frivolous French, presume to judge matters of which you are ignorant."⁹¹ The unspoken assumption behind these words was that affairs of state, like medicine or law, required professional skills, and hence were not to be dealt with by amateurs. Nicholas I made this premise even more explicit in 1849 when, objecting to an article concerning universities published in a Russian journal, he wrote to the minister of education and the principal ideologist of his reign, Count S. Uvarov, that he had found the article "indecent" because "to praise or to reprove our governmental institutions in response to empty gossip is compatible neither with the dignity of the government nor with the

order, that, fortunately, prevails among us. One must obey and keep one's opinions to oneself."⁹²

Thirty years passed and on the throne sat the most liberal of nineteenth-century Russian monarchs, Alexander II, the tsar who had emancipated the serfs and set in motion other reforms intended to bring the crown in closer contact with its subjects. In January 1865 Alexander received a petition from the assembly of the Moscow gentry, approved by the overwhelming majority of its participants, which, while expressing gratitude for his reforms, humbly requested that he "complete . . . the state structure which [he] had created by convoking a general assembly of elected representatives of the Russian land to discuss the needs common to the entire country."⁹³ This request was perfectly legitimate, being in conformity with a law of 1831 which had authorized the gentry to petition the crown on matters of public concern.⁹⁴ Despite this, Alexander responded with what can only be described as a verbal slap in the face:

The successful changes accomplished during the decade of my reign, and which continue according to my instructions, testify sufficiently to my constant concern to improve and perfect, to the extent possible and in the order which I have predetermined, the various branches of the governmental structure. The right of initiative in regard to the main parts of this gradual improvement belongs exclusively to me and is indissolubly bound with the autocratic power with which God had entrusted me. In the eyes of all my loyal subjects, the past ought to serve as a pledge for the future. None of them has the right to anticipate my ceaseless solicitude for Russia's well-being and to predetermine questions concerning the essential principles of her general state institutions. No estate has the right to speak in the name of the other estates. No one is entitled to present me with petitions concerning the common benefits and needs of the government.⁹⁵

He ordered the assembly closed and, at the same time, revoked the 1831 law.

Alexander's son and successor, Alexander III, reacted even more bluntly to a memorandum submitted to him by two prominent nobles: "Why do these swine meddle in business that is not theirs?"⁹⁶

This attitude prevailed not only at the court: it permeated the entire administrative apparatus of Imperial Russia. The well-known Russian lawyer and judge A. F. Koni, who had personal experience with the resistance of the bureaucracy to the notion of an independent judiciary, described as follows the mindset of the country's highest administrators, the governors:

The governor, in the majority of cases, was accustomed to viewing himself not only as the supreme representative of local administrative authority but as in all respects the master [*khoziain*] of the province, to whom local society, with the exception—and this not invariably—of the province's marshal of the nobility and bishop, bowed in servility. He often felt angry perplexity when side by side with him emerged authority whose local bearers in no way depended on him and from whom he could demand not obedience but only courtesy and *external* respect, inasmuch as *inner* respect had to be earned.⁹⁷

The Russian monarchy continued to follow the practices of the medieval princely household, “for which the undisguised purpose of ruling had always been to live off the population without a concept of duty toward a general good and the recognition of a higher allegiance to which all must subscribe.”⁹⁸

Of course, as is the case with all general concepts in human affairs, in practice the autocratic ideal in some ways had to yield to reality. The rulers of Muscovy were not as absolute as they claimed to be. One Russian historian, for example, has pointed out that tsarist authority often did not extend to the estates of large landowners, who ran them like sovereign dominions of their own.⁹⁹ Monarchs also had to contend with *mestnichestvo*. The bureaucracy often executed tsarist orders in its own way. Landowners in the second half of the seventeenth century were known to evade obligatory service and to hide out on their estates. But such departures from the ideal hold true of any concept in the historical vocabulary and do not invalidate them. Thus “capitalism,” for all its insistence on the free, unregulated market, has always had to cope with some government regulation. “Democracy,” which means the rule of the people, was and is in some measure constrained by the influence of private interests in the form of lobbies. Yet for all these exceptions, capitalism and democracy exist as identifiable institutions and differ from all other forms of economic and political organization. The same holds true of patrimonial autocracy.

A regime which lacked support among the people it ruled—indeed, spurned such support—lived in a permanent state of insecurity and fear of collapse. This fear induced Russian thinkers as well as the population at large to support autocracy as the sole guarantor of external security and internal stability. It was a vicious circle: Russians supported autocracy because they felt powerless; and they felt powerless because autocracy gave them no opportunity to feel their power.

TWO

The Birth of Conservative Ideology

The sovereignty which Moscow acquired as the result of her emancipation from both Mongol and Byzantine domination forced it to confront an array of political questions that previously had been resolved by others. This gave rise in the sixteenth century to controversies that marked the birth of Russian intellectual life.

For all their historical importance, these early polemics are difficult to track. For one, a great many of the relevant documents have disappeared: this holds especially true of those of the losing party, the so-called nonpossessors, whose writings the monks of the opposing and winning side refused to copy and sometimes destroyed. The reputation of one rather unusual political theorist of the time, Fedor Karpov, for example, rests mainly on a single letter of his that happened to survive. As a consequence of the dearth of documents, the intellectual life of medieval Russia appears as more primitive than it was in reality.

To make matters worse still, the documents that have survived are, for the major part, undated, which often makes it impossible to relate them to contemporary events. In the case of one important source, the so-called *Dialogue of the Vaalam Miracle-Workers*, specialists cannot agree whether it was written at the beginning of the sixteenth century or at any time during the following one hundred years.¹ Questions have been raised whether the famous debate at the church council of 1503 between supporters and opponents of monastic landholding ever took place.² To make matters worse, the biographical data on some of the leading figures involved in the controversies are sparse and sometimes nonexistent. Thus, of the monk Filofei, who is credited with formulating