

SLAVIC REVIEW

Notes on the Princely Role in Karamzin's *Istorija gosudarstva rossijskago*

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Source: *American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Feb., 1959), pp. 12-24

Published by: The American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3001042>

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NOTES ON THE PRINCELY ROLE IN KARAMZIN'S *ISTORIJA GOSUDARSTVA ROSSIJSKAGO*

R. E. MCGREW*

WHILE THE INTRINSIC WORTH OF NIKOLAJ MIKAILOVICH KARAMZIN'S work still may be debated, his importance in Russian history has become clear. Karamzin popularized Russian history for his own day and through history gave form and content to Russian conservatism. Even his sharpest critics recognized these contributions, and Alexandre Koyré referred in a cutting note to Karamzin's arguments which appeared with monotonous regularity throughout the nineteenth century. A. N. Pypin pointed out that Karamzin's ideas had an immediate practical effect, for he was able to influence the new Tsar, Nicholas I, in the moment of crisis which began his reign, and Karamzin's views formed the substructure for Nicholaevan conservatism.¹

The *History of the Russian State* was Karamzin's best known historical work and achieved an immense popularity. The first edition of 3,000 copies was sold out in twenty-five days, it became the fashion to read Russian history, à la Karamzin, and no boudoir was complete without a copy. This popularization had more far-reaching effects, for Karamzin was responsible for creating a demand for ancient Russian history in the school curricula.² All this points to wide currency for Karamzin's ideas within the educated class and goes far toward explaining the "monotonous regularity" with which his ideas appeared in the nineteenth century.

The "Zapiska o drevnej i novoj rossii" is rightly regarded as Karamzin's political testament, but this work, presented to Alexander I in March, 1811, never had the currency that the *History* enjoyed. It was treated as a state document and went unpublished until 1837 when fragments appeared in *Sovremennik*. The first complete edition was published in *Russky arkhiv* in 1870. The "Zapiska" has a strong appeal

* The author wishes to thank the Joint Committee on Slavic Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the University of Missouri Graduate Research Council for research funds which helped in the preparation of this article.

¹ A. Koyré, *La philosophie et le problème national en Russie au début du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1929), p. 26; A. N. Pypin, *Die Geistigen Bewegungen in Russland in der ersten Hälfte des XIX Jahrhunderts, uebertragen von Dr. Boris Menzies* (Berlin, 1894), pp. 374-76. See also M. Pogodin, *N. M. Karamzin*, (Moscow, 1866), II, 460; "Imperator Nikolaj Pavlovich i Karamzin v poslednie ego dni," *Russky arkhiv* (Moscow, 1906), pp. 122-27.

² A. A. Kizevetter, "N. M. Karamzin," *Russkij istoricheskij zhurnal* (Moscow, 1917), Book I, p. 14. The first eight volumes of the *History* were published at St. Petersburg in 1816, and successive volumes appeared through 1826. A French translation, *L'histoire de l'empire de la Russie* was published at the same time at Paris, at first under Karamzin's supervision. The edition cited in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, is *Istoriya gosudarstva rossijskago*, 12 volumes (St. Petersburg, 1892). Cited hereafter as *Ist. gos. ross.*

for the historian, for in it Karamzin speaks specifically not only of the ancient past, but of Peter, Catherine, Paul, and most especially, Alexander. This work, however, remained in the archives, and while it was known to some, it was by no means widely known. The *History* was well known and popular and it contained the basic elements of Karamzin's ideology. It is, therefore, of major importance in defining Karamzin's immediate influence on a broad reading public.³

The *History of the Russian State* divided Russian development into three distinct stages: the pre-political, the monarchic, and the autocratic. Each stage defined or re-defined the Prince's role in society, and taken together, they indicated progressive growth. Within these stages a rhythmic pattern emerged, beginning in the pre-political, building to a climax with Vladimir the Holy and Yaroslav the Wise, then receding as the Kievan monarchy broke apart to reach the nadir in the Tartar invasions. The ascending line began again in the Mongol period and reached a new climax with Ivan III and Vasily Ivanovich, only to begin a precipitous descent through Ivan IV and Boris Godunov to another low point in the Time of Troubles. Karamzin died before he could complete the pattern, and the re-ascending line, pre-figured in the later chapters of Volume XII, broke off abruptly. Its continuation, however, may be noted in the "Zapiska."⁴

The distinguishing feature of this pattern was fluctuation between anarchy and authority. Anarchy existed in inverse proportion to the extent of the Prince's power and his regard for the general welfare in exerting that power. Absolute anarchy existed when there was no Prince who could control the Russian lands. Moral anarchy appeared within a framework of political perversion when the Prince retained the artifacts of power but used them against the public interest, or when an illegitimate sovereign, either collective or individual, usurped the princely role. The high points in the rhythm of Russian development were the reigns of those sovereigns strong and wise enough to maintain Russia's internal unity and external security, while the low points marked the most intense periods of moral and political dislocation.

These generalized patterns were focused on the Prince, and it was

³ Pypin gives a summary and critical analysis of the "Zapiska," *op. cit.*, 306ff. N. Tourgueneff [Turgenev] published a French translation of selections from the "Zapiska" in *La Russie et les russes*, 3 volumes, (Paris, 1848), I, 496ff. For the memorandum itself, see: "Zapiska o drevnej i novej rossii," *Russkij arkhiv*, 1870, 2229-2350.

⁴ The high points of the recent period were Alexej Mikhailovich, Peter the Great (qualified), and Catherine the Great. The burden of Karamzin's argument to Alexander was that he should follow the wise principles of Catherine while avoiding her excesses, and recognize that the autocracy in its historic form was essential to Russia's welfare. See: "Zapiska," *op. cit.*, 2245 ff. On Alexander, see 2271 ff.

this that led Kizevetter to conclude that Karamzin wrote a history of rulers rather than a history of the state.⁵ This conclusion is only partially true. The Prince played a dual role in the *History of the Russian State*. On one side the Prince was part of a developing institutional structure, and the existence of a Prince marked the line between anarchy and the state. Karamzin noted, for example, that before the Varangians came, the lands of the East Slavs lacked any political coherence, and only local centers of authority existed. These lived in a state of nature characterized by constant and bitter strife until finally they escaped by appealing to the Varangians who then laid the foundations of the Russian monarchy.⁶ The prince's other role was as an actor. Here Karamzin seemed to follow a mechanistic theory of historical causation which explained complicated results in terms of simple causes and laid Russia's glory or degradation squarely on the shoulders of her rulers. This appearance is misleading, however, and the interaction of the institutional and personal roles of the Prince saved Karamzin's *History* from being just a history of rulers and made it a history of the state, or better, a history of sovereignty.

Karamzin believed that Russia's greatness stemmed from wise autocracy, and the *History* showed how autocracy developed and how it was best maintained.⁷ The Kievan monarchy was the first Russian state, and under Kiev's great rulers, Oleg, Vladimir, and Yaroslav, Russia rose to heights of culture and power which made her more than Europe's peer. The great Kievan Princes controlled their lands, repressed dissident and divisive forces and maintained the unity and the security of their state. Even the wise may err, however, and though Svjatoslav began the practice of dividing his estate, he was followed in that practice by both Vladimir and Yaroslav. This policy undermined the monarchy, opened Russia to civil war and anarchy and left her drained and helpless to face the Mongol conquerors.⁸

Karamzin's discussion of Kievan Rus' emphasized the Prince as

⁵ Kizevetter, *op. cit.*, 19.

⁶ *Ist. gos. ross.*, I, 13-20; 37 ff; 75. Karamzin pointed out that both great men and great nations go through infancy and ought not to be ashamed of it. The pre-political, or pre-Varangian, period was Russia's infancy, and the path to political maturity opened only with the coming of a Prince. The state of nature resumed when monarchy was destroyed by the practice of dividing the Great Prince's estates. See: *Ist. gos. ross.*, I, 119-20; 131; II, 19. III, *passim* describes the struggle for power during Kiev's decline.

⁷ In the introduction, Karamzin expressed both his belief in autocracy and his faith that history guides the statesman, and inspires and comforts the citizen. The *History* can be read as an extended "statesman's handbook." See: *Ist. gos. ross.*, (St. Petersburg, 1816), I, ix, xxviii.

⁸ On Russia's glory and her equality with Europe, *Ibid.*, V, 226ff. On dividing the estates and undermining the monarchy, I, 119-120; 131. Karamzin saw this breakup of authority as feudalism, a word which he used as the antonym of monarchy. II, 19. See also: II, 45-46; III, 128.

actor. Oleg consolidated the Russian lands, Vladimir introduced Christianity and maintained the state, Yaroslav ratified the laws, while Svjatoslav undermined the monarchy, Svjatopolk overextended it, Ysjaslav deserted it and Mstislav tyrannized it. Each ruler committed particular acts which affected the state directly, and each played a role in determining the state's final destiny. Karamzin centered on the Prince as actor, and stressed the personal responsibility he carried.⁹

The Prince was also part of a governmental system, and as such, could go only as far as conditions allowed him. The Kievan monarchy was by no means absolute, and the Kievan Prince was hedged about and challenged. This was true from the very beginning. Karamzin noted the Slavic libertarian tradition and pointed to the Slav's public assemblies and their fierce individualism. The Varangians came by sufferance, and the independence of the Russian people was, for the most part, untouched. That spirit of independence, untouched and uncrushed, was a source of trouble which had constantly to be guarded against by the Prince.¹⁰

There were other elements as well which checked princely action and presented positive dangers to state unity. The Varangians held to the tradition that the Great Prince was a companion in arms, and that the Prince's guard, together with the supreme council, shared his power. The soldiers limited the Prince by taking the lion's share of plunder, and when the Prince collected tribute, the soldiers received a portion. The appanage princes were a latent threat, and the system of succession made anarchic feudalism a constant danger.¹¹

Karamzin characterized the Kievan system as one which joined the advantages and abuses of despotism and of liberty. When Kiev's great

⁹ The organization of the work furthers the sense of emphasis on the Prince. After the opening chapters, the *History* settles down to a reign by reign pattern. Social and economic conditions are handled in separate chapters, and only occasionally form part of the integrated account. Within each chapter, Karamzin keeps the focus of his interest on the Prince, and he digresses only to return. Even during the civil wars in later Kievan history, he attempts to use this organization and carefully follows the fortunes of the contending princes. *Ibid.*, III, *passim*. Some of the more interesting judgments in the *History* are in the "cultural" chapters. See: I, chapter 10; V, chapter 4.

¹⁰ On the spirit of independence and individualism, see *Ibid.*, I, 37ff. Karamzin criticized Nestor's chronology, but he accepted the story of voluntary submission to the Varangians. I, 34-36. As further proof that the Slavs were not conquered, Karamzin cited Yaroslav's code which made no distinction between Slavs and Varangians. II, 44. The populace was fickle and untrustworthy, and the assemblies in which the people exposed their trust were unstable. See: II, 88; III, 18 (for popular reactions on the death of Andrej of Suzdal); III, 95-96 (On popular rising in Novgorod, 1215); IV, 174.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, 158-60. In this passage Karamzin pointed out that the appanage grants were theoretically in the power of the Great Prince, but that their holders came to regard them as patrimonies.

rulers were in control, the people were tranquil and obeyed without murmuring. When the great rulers passed, however, and Russia came to have several rulers, then the people asserted themselves and dreamed of ruling. A Prince of genius and strength could hold the Kievan state together. But a Prince lacking those characteristics soon found himself a prisoner of the system. The Kievan state was only a monarchy, and there were elements in it which were disruptive of absolute authority and therefore dangerous to progress.¹²

Svjatoslav's tragic error bred civil war, and by the time the Tartars appeared, Kiev's glory was already dimmed. The Tartars extinguished it. A somber pall cloaked Russia's life. Beneath that pall, however, a progressive principle was stirring. The foundations of autocracy were being laid. Karamzin's description of the Tartar conquest is immensely important. In it he completed his criticism of the Kievan system and the Kievan Princes. Furthermore, he was able to indicate the necessary pre-conditions for autocracy and weave their formation into the fabric of his work.

Under Tartar rule, Russia became a jungle, and the law of survival was the only moral imperative. The Tartars governed Russia from afar, but their representatives treated the Russians as slaves, and the Russians, their national pride debased, kissed the fist that struck them. The people became untrustworthy as the need to fool the Tartars accustomed them to deceit. Security could be purchased, and the Russians became avid hoarders willing to endure any shame to gather money. But real security could not be bought, and moral barbarism produced total anarchy. Force replaced law. Russians and Tartars pillaged with impunity. Neither life nor property was safe upon the roads, and the only real protection within doors was a stout lock and a strong arm. Banditry was epidemic, and the very rudiments of civilized society were known only from the past. When law was finally restored, it appeared in a form hitherto unknown among the Russians. The death penalty was widely used, and corporal punishment became an essential element. Russia had been brutalized, and stringent measures were necessary to restrain primitive instincts.¹³

Society's degradation marked a change in social and political forms. The libertarian tradition was repressed and disappeared. Ambitious rulers went to Sarai, effaced themselves before the Khans and returned to exercise the tyrannic powers granted by their conquerors. Only at Novgorod and Pskov did the *vech* bell ring assembling the people, and in the new cities which rose to power, the tradition of

¹² *Ibid.*, III, 128.

¹³ *Ibid.*, V, 227-29.

popular assemblies failed to appear at all.¹⁴ The cities lost their privilege of electing their military chiefs, and even the boyars, who had been independent aristocrats, saw their rights abrogated as they became dependents of the Prince. In sum, the checks on monarchical authority were destroyed, and no voice remained that could legitimately be raised against the sovereign.¹⁵

Anarchy and brutalization were Karamzin's final arguments against checks on monarchy. The praise he lavished on the great Kievan Princes was based on their effective control of dissident and destructive tendencies, but the weakness of the Kievan system appeared even in the work of Kiev's greatest rulers. Only a Prince of genius, a St. Vladimir or a Yaroslav the Wise, could contain the inner forces of destruction and maintain the state. Too many challenges existed, and too few rulers possessed both genius and strength. It was necessary to complete princely power before political and social progress could be constant.¹⁶ Vladimir and Yaroslav themselves had debased monarchical authority by sanctioning the roto system. The only recourse possible was to purge Russia's system of liberty's poisons and create a Prince who not only would be the Great Prince, but who would be the Autocrat. Karamzin viewed the Slav's tradition of independence as a positive evil, and though he spoke nostalgically of the great *vech* bell which was silenced, he thought the silencing a marked improvement. The Tartar yoke was onerous, but under its authority made great strides, and while the change in status of the people and the boyars was undoubtedly obnoxious, Karamzin called it Providence's richest gift to Russia.¹⁷

In an ingenuous passage, Karamzin justified this stand and completed his rationalization of autocracy. He pointed out that Rome required a dictator in her hour of greatest danger, and that Russia, helpless and dismembered, could hardly accept less. Only a single hand could restore authority, and neither the populace nor the aristocracy was sufficient to the challenge. He then remarked that optimism has no place in history, and that the historian should never scrutinize events for proof that everything is for the best. Batu's invasion was one of the greatest calamities in history. It crushed the nation, strewed Russia with cinders and corpses, and imposed a state of slavery as long

¹⁴ Karamzin noted that only a single council was held at Moscow and that was treated by the annalists as an extraordinary event. *Ibid.*, V, 230.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 230-31.

¹⁶ During the Kievan civil war, some of the men who gained control were men of virtue, as Mikhail II or Yaroslav of Galich, but few were able to attain more than momentary success, and no one of them was able to establish a solid line of succession. See: III, 27; 45-46; and for summation, 128.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, V, 231.

in duration as it was cruel in effect. Yet the optimism which Karamzin denied came bubbling out when he wrote that even so this calamity was advantageous. It would have been far better had one of Yaroslav's descendants avoided the disaster, re-established monarchical unity and assured the state's integrity and internal tranquility. But no such leader appeared, and the logic of Karamzin's exposition militated against such an appearance. The internal structure of the Kievan monarchy had basic flaws, and a cataclysm was necessary to destroy them. The Tartars provided that upheaval and accomplished what no Prince could have done in his own right. Further, as the Tartars weakened or destroyed the checks on monarchy, so they raised up the Moscow dynasty which, from the time of Ivan Kalita, built an autocratic state on new foundations.¹⁸

The Mongols changed basic Russian institutions, and thereby changed the Prince's role. As the autocrat emerged, the nobility appeared in an altered guise as mere advisers dependent on the Prince, while the populace, having lost its traditional rights, was expected simply to obey. The autocrat became both the sum of Russia's institutions and the primary focus of her history. As sovereignty incarnate, the Prince's actions took on new meaning, affecting all phases of Russian life directly. The Prince's dual role became one, and the causal patterns of Karamzin's *History* now centered on a single point.¹⁹

The essence of Karamzin's conservatism appeared in his depiction of the princely role in the period from 1462-1612. Tendencies which he noted in the opening volumes became realities, and the basic issues of princely morality and the proper goals for princely authority were given their fullest definition. Karamzin had established that for Russia there was only the choice between absolute authority and anarchy. The remainder of the work explained the autocracy and completed the autocratic theme.

The Russian autocracy under Ivan III astonished foreign observers. The monarch exercised complete power and maintained that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, V, 231-35. Karamzin assigned autocracy a "progressive role," and it is hard to escape the conclusion that, in spite of its horrors, he regarded the Tartar conquest positively since it advanced autocracy. Karamzin singled out for special mention the very elements which had challenged the Kievan rulers as the elements which were seriously weakened or destroyed by the Tartars, thus clearing the way for autocracy and progress.

¹⁹ Karamzin noted these changes when he introduced Ivan III's reign. He pointed out that Russia's history entered a new phase and that Ivan III realized the promise of autocracy. The *History* itself, he went on, reflects that promise, for it no longer catalogues the senseless quarrels of princes, but rather describes a nation dedicated to conquering its glory and independence. *Ibid.*, VI, 3-4. The intimate relationship between princely acts and societal responses may be seen in the discussion of Ivan Kalita's crime, which Karamzin severely criticized, and in the miraculous change in Russian life following Sylvester's warning to Ivan IV. See below for discussion. See: IV, 152-153; VIII, 66-67.

power simply and directly. Ivan III and his successor, Vasily, fixed forever the nature of Russian government, and autocracy became the sole constitution and the unique base for Russian progress and prosperity. This, Karamzin insisted, was not tyranny, for the autocrat fostered the rule of law. The autocrat's primary duty was to serve his subjects' welfare, and the public welfare was the essence of the rule of law.²⁰

Ivan III above all served Russia's welfare. He recognized Russia's backwardness and through his contacts with Venice and the Papacy brought Western artisans and architects to aid in re-developing the arts and commerce.²¹ He reduced the power of the appanage princes, brought Novgorod within the circle of Muscovite control, threw off for good and all the Tartar yoke, and raised Russia to the status of a great power, respected by other European states.²² In achieving these ends, he exercised moderation and followed the rules of prudence faithfully. He avoided infringing solemn treaties, avoided arbitrary acts, and eschewed acts of violence which were always dangerous to the throne.²³ And when his policies were successful, and Russia was firmly set on the road to greatness, he again showed prudence by refusing to become immersed in foreign affairs at the expense of his estates. The alliances he accepted were useful to Russia, and Ivan never served as the instrument for another nation's polity. His sole concern was the welfare of his people, and the result of so much care was that Russia, an independent power, enjoyed a calm exterior and had nothing to fear from foreign enemies.²⁴

Karamzin compared Ivan III to Peter the Great, and in the comparison, the qualities of the good Prince emerged even more clearly. Both, he pointed out, were great, but Ivan showed the greater perspicacity. Although he recognized European superiority and introduced European artisans, he never dreamed of either introducing new customs or of changing the national character of his subjects. Ivan imported expert craftsmen or military men only to embellish the capital or improve the army. He did not forbid the empire to foreigners, but he received only those whose talents he could use, and if he chose to honor them, he did so as a great monarch without hu-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, 123-24. Karamzin asserted earlier that the principal end of organized society was the security of the individual and the maintenance of property. II, 31. This idea remained basic, but he expanded it as he discussed the reign of Ivan III. See below.

²¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 46-50; 110.

²² *Ibid.*, VI, 62ff; 218.

²³ *Ibid.*, VI, 62-63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 222. This was one of the more striking lessons that Karamzin thought history taught. He praised the foreign policy of Catherine II for it secured the external security of the state. Furthermore, he asserted, Catherine never involved herself in useless foreign wars. Karamzin sharply criticized Alexander I for failing to follow Catherine's lead and for become needlessly embroiled in Europe after 1804. He suggested that the European powers were using Russia, and that Alexander acted against the best interests of the state. See: "Zapiska," *op. cit.*, 2274-82.

miliating his nation. Although Karamzin deferred his detailed discussion of Peter to its proper place in the chronological framework, the implication was clear that Peter failed in those areas where Ivan succeeded, and that thanks to his prudence and care, Ivan ruled in greater conformity with the true interests of the state.²⁵

The monarch contrasting most sharply with Ivan III was Ivan IV. His excesses and illegal actions pointed up the virtues of Ivan III, and the melancholy consequences of his reign of terror underscored the necessity for wise and virtuous governance. Vasily Ivanovich, the father of Ivan IV, had maintained the tradition established by Ivan III, and his reign was an extension of his predecessor's. He was moderate in his acts, made his decisions in council, and enlightened his opinions by listening to the experienced servants who surrounded him. Even so, he knew how to be a master and pressed his prerogatives with firmness and dispatch. He loved peace without fearing war, and never neglected an opportunity to increase his power. He was in all respects worthy to take up the scepter.²⁶ That scepter was tarnished, however, when it finally reached the hands of Ivan IV. The interregnum from Vasily's death in 1533 to Ivan's coronation in 1547 saw Russia subjected to oligarchic rule.²⁷ The people suffered, and the young Prince was prevented by his advisers from knowing of their suffering. Russia's only hope was that years and reason would mature his judgment and prepare him to rule for the welfare of his subjects.²⁸

This hope was faint, and Karamzin asserted that Ivan lacked the qualities of a good Prince even in the early days. Capricious and mercurial, he abandoned himself to violent rages and unworthy amusements. When he exercised his sovereignty, he did so to please his whim. He was falsely persuaded that arbitrary actions proved his independence, never seeing that by neglecting the state he submitted to the nobles. Karamzin accused Ivan of never learning the first axiom of monarchy: the sovereign is only independent to the extent that he is virtuous. Never, Karamzin asserted, was Russia worse governed, as the nobility aggrandized themselves in the name of the Tsar.²⁹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 222-223. See: "Zapiska," *op. cit.* 2249ff. for detailed statement concerning Peter's reforms and the errors involved in them.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, VII, 4.

²⁷ Karamzin criticized the regency of Helen Glinsky for she was unable to control her council, and he thought a council without a sovereign was like a body without a head. The oligarchy which resulted was worse than tyranny. Karamzin compared an irascible monarch to an angry deity. The people could accommodate themselves to his whims and recognize his rights to those whims. An oligarchy lacked legitimacy, and men only saw other men tyrannizing over them. This raised a spirit of detestation and ultimately rebellion. *Ibid.*, VIII, 3-6. This point of view did not however, soften Karamzin's criticism of Ivan IV's tyranny. See: IX, 273-275.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII, 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 59-60.

The inevitable result of so much evil was civil strife, and when Moscow burned in 1547, the people rose against the Glinskys, massacred their servitors, and murdered the Tsar's uncle. Ivan could only tremble, and Anastasia prayed. The fault lay with Ivan, and Sylvester of Novgorod appeared like a prophet of Israel to warn the Tsar of God's wrath and the destruction which must follow it. Sylvester blamed the young ruler for Russia's misfortunes, and then instructed Ivan in the way of God's mercy and in the divine precepts which the Prince must follow. Karamzin quoted Kurbsky to the effect that Sylvester awakened the desire for good in Ivan's heart, and the historian himself noted that from this encounter dated Ivan IV's glory.³⁰

Sylvester worked a miracle, for the very atmosphere of the Russian court changed, and the sovereign power was established on principles of wisdom, moderation, sweetness, and peace. Karamzin pointed the moral with great satisfaction. Only in an autocratic state could such a rapid change take place, for in an autocracy everything depends on the will of the sovereign who can lead his millions either to ruin or to happiness.³¹ So long as virtue ruled Ivan, Russia would be happy, but when the old passions reasserted themselves, her future would be dark. Those passions rose again when Anastasia's death destroyed Ivan's balance, and from 1560 until his death in 1584, Ivan tyrannized over Russia.³²

Although he had tried to emulate Ivan the Great and become known as a monarch who ruled according to the law, Ivan IV became best known for his utter denial of legality and morality. Karamzin's description of the terrors and accomplishments of Ivan IV takes up all of Volume IX of the *History* and need not concern us here. Karamzin did point out that each act of brutality created fear among the boyars, and that Ivan read fear as hatred and struck again and again. But Karamzin refused to accept any excuse for Ivan, and pointed out that the only plots which existed were in the Tsar's troubled mind.³³ Indeed, Karamzin wondered which was the more astonishing, the Tsar who destroyed without thought of reason, or the people who allowed themselves to be destroyed and then mourned the tyrant's death.³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII, 62-64. The Church played a culture-bearing role in Karamzin's analysis, and at crucial moments, as in the case of Sylvester, would intervene to show the Tsar the way, or as in the case of the Suzdal rioters, to calm the population. The Churchmen were to aid the Prince and were a prop for the state. See: *Ibid.*, I, 155; III, 18; V, 229-30. Karamzin criticized the Metropolitan Cyprion for fleeing Moscow as the Tartars approached. He betrayed his duty to the Church and the people by seeking personal safety. V, 50.

³¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 66-67.

³³ *Ibid.*, IX, 12; 273-75.

³² *Ibid.*, IX, 3-4

³⁴ *Ibid.*, IX, 106; 273-75.

Although Karamzin granted that Ivan IV sometimes acted as a great monarch should,³⁵ he emphasized his disregard of law and his ignoring the common weal. Ivan's reign, however, was instructive. The life of a tyrant, Karamzin declaimed, is a calamity for humanity, but his history offers useful lessons to sovereigns and to nations. To the extent that that history inspires a horror of evil, it fosters virtue, and as history illuminates the evil ways of tyrants, it shows sovereigns what pitfalls to avoid. The people may have pardoned Ivan, for whatever reason, but history cannot pardon as easily as the people. Ivan the Terrible was a tyrant who abrogated moral law and neglected the welfare of his nation. That tyranny and that neglect not only tortured Ivan's Russia, but opened the way to weakness and decay under Ivan's successors.³⁶

The effects of tyranny live on after the tyrant has passed away, and Karamzin opened his tenth volume by quoting Tacitus that the first days following the death of a tyrant are the happiest for the people. But a cruel reign often prepares the way for a weak one, for the new sovereign fears that he will resemble his odious predecessor, and will, therefore, allow a relaxation of authority which can be disastrous. Russia had not only seen a tyrant pass, but now saw a man better fitted for the monastery than the throne prepare to succeed him. Feodor Ivanovich was weak, and his weakness worsened the after-effects of tyranny.³⁷

When the sovereign is weak, others seek power, and the great nobles vied among themselves. The man who achieved the pinnacle was Boris Godunov. Karamzin described Godunov as a man of superlative abilities but marked by a tragic flaw. Glory and power were his obsessions, and he saw virtue as only a means to an end. Godunov, who was born only to be a subject, coveted the Tsar's position, and in reaching for it, brought down himself and Russia.³⁸ Godunov became indispensable to Feodor, and the Tsar, who feared responsibility, allowed his adviser to rule in his name. Russia appeared to enjoy prosperity in those days, but underneath the surface burned the fires of unrest. It was known that Godunov was the first power in the state, and it was known that Feodor bore only the Tsar's title. These facts bred hatred. Godunov tried to win the nobles to him, to gain the support of the townspeople, but each new move only intensified the feelings against him. Boris Godunov had no legitimate claim on the autocracy, and absolute power in the hands of even the most worthy subjects displeases the nation.³⁹

³⁵ *Ibid.*, IX, 275ff.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, X, 3-6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, IX, 294; X, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, X, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, X, 43ff.

Godunov went even farther. The murder of Dmitri Ivanovich left Russia without an heir, and when Feodor died, Godunov was selected to wear the crown. Karamzin pointed out that this appeared the logical choice, for Godunov, in spite of opposition, had ruled strongly and well during Feodor's lifetime. But this was only the appearance, for the new sovereign, a man endowed with great human wisdom, had gained his crown by crime, and Heaven's rage menaced the criminal sovereign and the unhappy nation.⁴⁰

Sylvester might threaten Ivan IV with Heaven's wrath and mean it, but to Karamzin the phrase was only figurative. Following Boris' coronation, the contentious boyars and the dissatisfied populace grew more restive, and when the first False Dmitri appeared at the head of a Polish force, no one rallied the resistance. The reason was Boris. He commanded respect neither as man nor ruler, and this lack of attachment to the sovereign bred indifference for the honor of the country.⁴¹

The death of Boris Godunov and the victory of the False Dmitri opened another period of anarchy in Russian history. This time the autocrats had failed, and the nation again sprawled supine before its enemies. Karamzin noted history's judgment on Godunov, and remarked that although he was among the wisest rulers in history, his name, even centuries after, was pronounced with horror. The historian applauded that judgment, for Boris bathed Russia with the blood of his victims, and practiced persiflage where only truth and honesty could succeed. This unhappy Tsar wore the mask of virtue, but the benefits he brought Russia through wise judgments and considered acts were more than obscured by his willingness to betray basic principles of governance whenever ambition demanded it. Boris committed the sin of ambivalence, for he was sullied with a tyrant's crimes yet lacked the tyrant's character. He seemed incapable of distinguishing right and wrong, and viewed his worst actions as strokes of state. He lacked Ivan's blind fury, yet he was capable of acts as cruel. He opened the abyss before Russia, profaned the throne and prepared the way for cutthroats, imposters, and avengers who practised their awful acts on a helpless state.⁴²

Boris Godunov provided Karamzin with an example of the Prince who allowed ambition to rule him and thus defied both absolute moral law and the rule that Princes exist only for the state's welfare. Godunov was a wise ruler and capable of statesmanship, but his wisdom and his statecraft could not overcome his tragic flaw. Like Macbeth he could cry, "I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, X, 141.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, XI, 95.

⁴² *Ibid.*, XI, 109.

but only Vaulting ambition. . . .,” and like Macbeth his ambition brought ruin in its train.⁴³ Godunov aspired to a position which should never have been his, and opened the way to that position by murder. This led to Karamzin’s second point. Legitimacy and a defined line of succession are essential to the welfare of the state. Godunov lacked that legitimacy, and thus debased and ultimately destroyed the ruling house.

Russia’s collapse in the Time of Troubles contrasted with the breakdown of the Kievan state. Kiev suffered structural weaknesses which, combined with errors by her rulers, destroyed her power. Muscovite Russia fell as a consequence of Ivan IV’s tyranny and Feodor’s weakness combined with the illegal and immoral ambitions of Boris Godunov. The structure was sound, but the men who controlled it were not. Consequently, Karamzin could view the failures of Kiev as proof of institutional inadequacies, while the failure of Muscovite Russia was a human failure. Autocracy itself was not questioned, but the uses to which autocracy was put were.

Karamzin was not overtly teleological in his approach, but as he attempted to explain tradition’s sanction for the autocrat, a teleological element crept in. Since history was the holy book of nations whose lessons guided the statesman and inspired the citizen, the present was always before the historian’s eyes as he looked at the past. The lessons which Karamzin presented were to be read by the men of his own time, and the reflection of his time was mirrored in the past. The patterns of Russian history proved conclusively that autocracy was necessary, for Russia was most splendid when she was most strongly ruled. But Russia’s rulers had also to be virtuous and guide themselves by the general welfare, for otherwise tyranny and moral anarchy followed. The *History of the Russian State* portrayed the Prince as an historical necessity and then demanded that he be both strong and good, for he was also the prime mover in Russia’s destiny.⁴⁴

⁴³ Shakespeare impressed Karamzin at an early age, and on occasion his handling of the princely role has Shakespearean overtones. Pogodin was enthusiastic about Karamzin’s capacities as a Shakespeare scholar, but Pypin qualified that enthusiasm. See: Pogodin, *op. cit.*, I, 29; 38-39. Pypin, *op. cit.*, 267-268.

⁴⁴ States, Karamzin pointed out, are not mineral-like aggregations but are the product of their rulers’ genius. *Ist. gos. ross.*, VI, 222.