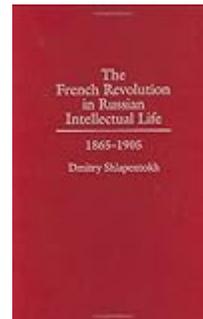




**Dmitry Shlapentokh.** *The French Revolution in Russian Intellectual Life, 1865-1905.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996. viii + 202 pp. \$57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95573-1.



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## **Renditions of the French Revolution in Russian Thought**

Dmitry Shlapentokh, assistant professor of history at Indiana University in South Bend, discusses the variety of interpretations of the French Revolution in Russian intellectual life during the period 1865-1905. His well-researched study, part of the author's dissertation at the University of Chicago, explores why the French Revolution captured the attention of some of Russia's leading thinkers and philosophers and how they perceived this seminal event in global history. By examining the writings of select figures, the work studies not only Russian versions of the Revolution but the impact of these renditions on Russian intellectual and political discourse. The book sheds light on the nineteenth-century origins of nationalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-western thought in Russia today and reminds readers of the intelligentsia's love-hate relationship with the West. Most of the author's intellectuals condemned the Revolution and rejected any notion that France's revolutionary epoch offered a desirable alternative path for Russia's historical development. Even liberals and radicals who accepted specific aspects of the Revolution seriously questioned the applicability of French models to Russia.

A number of reasons explain Russia's fascination with the French Revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century. The author points to significant parallels between old regime France and tsarist Russia: a dynastic monarchy trying to maintain absolute power, the question of social and institutional reform, opposition from liberal and radical critics, and pressure for political change. The centennial of 1789 and the Franco-Russian diplomatic alliance sparked further interest in France's revolutionary past and its relevance to Russia. Not surprisingly, Russian reactions and responses to the Revolution tell us more about Russian intellectual history and political culture than about the Revolution itself. For the most part, Russia's intellectuals adopted a subjective and impressionistic approach rather than an objective and analytical perspective. Images, symbols, and anecdotes outweighed evidence, detail, and analysis, thus spawning multiple versions of 1789 that were skewed and distorted. The Russian present shaped and determined the French past, as thinkers viewed France's revolutionary heritage through the lens of their own social and political beliefs. They saw what they wanted to see in the French Revolution.

An array of conservative writers, philosophers, journalists, and state officials rejected virtually every aspect of the French Revolution and dismissed any hint of the event's applicability to or positive meaning for Russia. To "conservative Slavophiles" such as Nikolai Fedorov, Nikolai Danilevsky, and Leo Tolstoy, the Revolution exemplified western civilization's immorality, vanity, greed, violence, and aggressive imperialism. Russia's autocracy withstood the tests of France's ideological and Napoleon's military invasions, and tsarism continued to cement Russian state and society. For "conservative Westernizers" like Ivan Aksakov and Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the philosophy of the Enlightenment produced the intellectual and political hubris of 1789, when misguided utopianists failed in their attempt to design a perfect society based on rationalism, secularism, and individualism. Echoing the interpretation of nineteenth-century European conservatives, Russia's conservative thinkers regarded the terror, anarchy, and dictatorship of the Revolution as natural byproducts of a flawed revolutionary ideology, a belief system which sought to enthrone reason and man in place of God and king. Monarchy, said the conservative credo, remained the best and most suitable form of government. Shlapentokh includes within Russia's conservative pantheon three "tragic thinkers"—Fedor Dostoevsky, Vladimir Soloviev, and Konstantin Leontiev—for whom the French Revolution signified not only western hubris but satanic delusion. The devilish temptation to create harmony, equality, and brotherhood inevitably resulted in bloodshed and chaos, thereby demonstrating the futility and destructiveness inherent in all revolutions against the established order. Even the partial fulfillment of 1789's social and political ideals in nineteenth-century Europe, according to Leontiev, left the West "boring, flat, colorless, bourgeois, and mediocre" (pp. 64-66). For Russia to avoid the miasma of bourgeois mediocrity, social hierarchy and dynastic absolutism had to guard against equality and democracy.

In the least developed of the three main sections of this study, the author portrays an eclectic group of liberal writers, thinkers, journalists, and academics who perceived the French Revolution as a sign of historical progress. Focusing on the constructive early phase of the Revolution, when constitutional government and social reform dismantled the old regime, Russia's moderates championed cooperation between autocracy and the liberal opposition. Gradual reform toward constitutional monarchy and political pluralism would curtail the worst abuses of autocracy and defuse the dangers posed by the

radical movement. Equally crucial, the development of constitutionalism would mark the continuation of the westernizing process given impetus by the Emancipation Edict and the legal and *zemstvo* reforms of Tsar Alexander II's reign. Of all the groups described by the author, only the liberals approached the French Revolution with a pragmatic and historically accurate perspective, sensitive to the interplay of social and political forces which drove the Revolution through its various phases. The liberals' version posited a dynamic, open-ended process with viable alternatives presenting themselves at critical junctures of a complicated and variegated revolutionary epoch.

Three echoes of the French Revolution come across in the writings and attitudes of Russian radicals examined by Shlapentokh. The emigre journalist and prolific writer Alexander Herzen experienced an intellectual odyssey which traversed contradictory interpretations of France, 1789, and western civilization. When Herzen focused ultimately on the *mir* and peasant collectivism as a seedbed for the triumph of socialism and democracy in Russia, the dissident's journey culminated with his ardent belief in Russia's providential role as leader of Europe's socialist transformation. As Europe's first successful socialist society, Russia would achieve the legacy of 1789, the principles of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. For Peter Zaichnevsky, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Peter Tkachev, and the men and women of People's Will, the French Revolution provided an object lesson in the moral virtue and political necessity of revolutionary terror. Russia's apostles of revolution called for Jacobin-inspired terror and dictatorship to overturn the old order's foundations, eliminate counter-revolutionaries, and restrain the anarchic violence of the populace. Jacobinism also shaped the radicals' self-image as revolutionary Christs engaged in a morality play against reactionary villains and as victims whose self-sacrifice was essential for humanity's historical progress. For Lenin, Trotsky, and other Russian Marxist leaders, power struggles within the Jacobin hierarchy paralleled their own competition for influence in the Social Democratic party. The Jacobin dictatorship anticipated the Bolsheviks' centralized organization, and Robespierre's manipulation of ideology for personal ambition and power was not lost on Lenin.

The author convincingly demonstrates that Russia's intellectuals politicized their understanding of the French Revolution in order to buttress their views on Russia's present and future. The simplistic images and symbols culled from the Revolution provided conflicting re-

sponses to the age-old question “what does Russia need?” and ignored the multiple dimensions and legacies of this landmark event. By focusing on whether intellectuals refuted or desired the Revolution’s applicability to Russia, Shlapentokh contributes to our understanding of conservative, liberal, and radical thought in late imperial Russia and illumines the vexing Westernizer-Slavophile debate on Russia’s historical destiny.

A few suggestions would enhance this work, especially for a non-specialized audience. A brief summary of the various stages of the revolutionary epoch from 1789 to 1815 would underscore not only the complexity of the French Revolution but the highly politicized and ahistorical perceptions of the author’s thinkers. A short section on nineteenth-century European versions of the Revolution might suggest that Russia’s conservatives, liberals, and radicals were not unlike their European counterparts who distorted selected aspects of the revolutionary heritage as a way to proclaim their own agendas. The French Revolution served as a mirror for European thinkers and activists of virtually all political stripes to glimpse traces of their ideologies, and these suggestive images offer insight into nineteenth-century intellectual and political history. Since Russia’s renditions of 1789 form part of the broader picture of Franco-Russian relations, a brief survey of the two countries’ cultural and political interactions might provide a useful framework for Russian attitudes toward the Revolution.

The work might have been more effective had the author defined and clarified the term “intelligentsia,” particularly this group’s variegated social composition and ideological outlook in the late imperial era. The author uses labels and categories for thinkers, especially in the chapter on conservatives, which are neither clearly delineated nor sufficiently explained. For instance, Tolstoy falls under the rubric of “conservative Slavophiles,” yet the great writer’s opposition to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, his Christian anarchism, and his moral opposition to autocracy suggest the inappropriateness of this category. Dostoevsky is placed with the “tragic thinkers,” yet his views on Constantinople, the Eastern Question, and Russia’s mission echo the writings of Danilevsky and other conservative Slavophiles. The chapters on liberals and radicals contain labels that are equally amorphous and vague; both sections also strike this reader as incomplete because they neither reflect the nuance of liberal and radical opinion nor cover sufficiently representative examples. Discussion of how Alexander Radishchev, Ivan Turgenev, Constitutional Democrats (Kadets), and other voices of moderate protest responded to the French Rev-

olution would enlighten the chapter on liberals. The section on radicalism passes over the majority of populists who objected on moral and political grounds to terror, dictatorship, and similar tactics inspired by Jacobinism and Nechaevism.

Of the various thinkers presented in this study, I question the author’s assessment and interpretation of Dostoevsky. Shlapentokh neglects to relate the impact of Russian Orthodoxy on Dostoevsky’s religious nationalism and ignores why or how the novelist’s understanding of Christ’s presence in the Russian masses influenced his messianic proclamations about Russia’s spiritual destiny. I do not think Dostoevsky would fully concur with Shlapentokh’s remarks on his religious philosophy: “Dostoevsky did not feel that Russia would be immune from the fruitless devastation that had visited Western revolutions. Russia would not be able to offer the world a peaceful alternative to promote social change” (p. 58). The author later suggests that Dostoevsky’s “protagonists who did embody spiritual harmony were completely removed from the realm of decisive social intercourse” (p. 59). This particular interpretation is open to dispute in light of the spiritual message conveyed by characters such as Sonia, Porfiry, Zosima, Tikhon, and Alyosha Karamazov. I agree with the author’s assessment that the radical groups in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* “resemble gatherings of lunatics more than an underground consisting of cunning revolutionaries with elaborate strategies and tactics” (p. 102). Yet to call this novel “a realistic portrait of the late nineteenth-century Russian radical” misses the point and neglects the idealism, moral fervor, and self-sacrifice which drove many of Russia’s revolutionaries. It would be more accurate if Shlapentokh used “caricature” instead of “realistic portrait” to describe Dostoevsky’s politicized depiction of demonic radicals.

The work reads like an extended essay instead of a monograph, primarily because of the editors’ decision to use consecutive numbering for notes which total an excessive 666. The notes and bibliography indicate the author’s thoroughness and present a useful guide to further research. While the author has consulted most of the significant literature on the subject, key omissions include studies of Russian conservatism by Robert Byrnes and Edward Thaden, Peter Christoff’s writings on Slavophilism, Joseph Frank’s multi-volume biography of Dostoevsky, and Nicolas Zernov’s *Three Russian Prophets*.<sup>[1]</sup> These criticisms aside, Professor Shlapentokh’s important study merits attention from scholars and graduate students of Russian intellectual history and

evokes the nationalistic, anti-western strains of Russian thought past and present.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev: His Life and Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968). Edward Thaden, *Conservative Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964). Peter Christoff, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Russian Slavophilism: A. S. Xomjakov* (The

Hague: Mouton, 1961); and *I. V. Kirevskij* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972). Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 4 vols. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1983-95), covers the writer's life from 1821 to 1871. Nicolas Zernov, *Three Russian Prophets: Khomiakov, Dostoevsky, Soloviev*, 3rd ed. (Gulf Breeze, Fla.: Academic International Press, 1973).

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