



**Nancy Shields Kollmann.** *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999. xiii + 296 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3435-8.



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### **Muscovite Autocracy: Practice vs. Theory**

In this superb, thought-provoking, exceptionally well-written and stimulating monograph, Nancy Shields Kollmann presents an ambitious and revisionist analysis of the relationship of state and society in Muscovy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which significantly advances our understanding of early modern Russian history.

Kollmann shares a growing consensus that while Muscovite autocratic theory claimed a monopoly of power, in practice geography, scant resources, and poor communications inhibited the state, as elsewhere in Europe, from exercising that power universally. Moreover, the central government understood its own limits. To husband its resources for national defense and the maintenance of order, the state fostered societal participation in political functions such as local self-government, tax collection, and combating brigandage, and even more so tolerated areas of social autonomy. Therefore, Muscovy in reality was neither a patrimonial nor hypertrophic state nor an oriental despotism, nor totalitarian, nor even a "plain tyranny."

Muscovite society viewed the state from local or par-

ticularist perspectives. There was no term for Muscovite society as a whole. Instead, as petitions indicate, most Muscovites shared multiple self and collective identities rooted in kin, household, patronage, indenture, village, town and social rank. Although Muscovites lacked the abstract theories of social organization found in Western Europe, their lived experiences were comparable, and the elite was just as much a corporate aristocracy.

By the middle of the sixteenth century social change and government mobilization stimulated the crystallization of a latent consciousness of personal dignity in Muscovy, derived in part from Kievan East Slavic sources, into the two institutions which are Kollmann's primary focus in this study: dishonor (*bezchestie*) and precedence (*mestnichestvo*).

Concepts of honor were ubiquitous in early modern Europe. Honor, according to social scientists, was a "social construct," "a symbolic language to communicate status and identity," a "social praxis" to defend or advance those identities, "a rhetoric and cultural practice." These "theories of honor" (pp. 24-29) apply to Muscovy, where "dishonor" became an offense in the *Sudebnik* (law code)

of 1550. Unlike western Europe, the *Sudebnik* did not define the term, just assigning fines and establishing procedures for prosecuting allegations.

There were differences in Muscovite conceptions of honor from western Europe: in Muscovy everyone except criminals had honor, whereas in western Europe certain “dishonorable” professions such as butchers were excluded; in Muscovy the state defined and defended honor in law, whereas in western Europe guilds and estates sometimes established their own codes; Muscovy lacked the vendettas, charivaris, vocabulary of physical gestures and duels of western Europe; the especially Mediterranean practice of keeping mistresses and fathering illegitimate children was absent in Muscovy; and the notion that sexual exploits with females of other families enhanced honor was not found. Nevertheless, in Muscovy as in western Europe honor was a two-edged sword, by which individuals defended their social status and government fostered social stability and cohesion. Both aspects of honor, bottom-up and top-down, merit attention, and both constituted responses to social change. Like western Europe, the system of honor was applied with particular rigor to women, who were defended and controlled by its strictures.

Kollmann presents rich social data on dishonor in practice from her data base of 632 cases, over half of archival origin. There are fewer than ten cases per decade from 1500-1619, but all chronological periods are represented; the geographic and thematic distributions are broad. Dishonor suits could be restorative or disruptive, but on the whole they provided a ritual space for the resolution of community tensions and closure; public participation in the process, social pressure to settle, and community endorsement of the result were all conducive to the restoration of peace and maintenance of hierarchy, far more important goals than “justice.” The levels of violence and corruption in Muscovy should not be exaggerated; the legal system functioned adequately enough so that aggrieved parties sought redress via its procedures, and the tsar’s ability to grant mercy even in the event of an unfavorable verdict reinforced his image as a benevolent ruler.

The Muscovite system of precedence, in which clan genealogy and service history served as evidence in legal procedures over appointments and ceremonial rankings, has no analogy in western Europe, but was a natural outgrowth of status consciousness. There are disagreements among scholars as to whether precedence “proper” existed before the 1530s, and in particular over

the 1460s Saburov-Zabolotskii case; Kollmann obviously favors a fifteenth-century origin for precedence. There is no doubt that the system reached maturity in the 1550s. Kollmann’s data base contains 1076 cases, 1/3 fewer than the comprehensive Iu. M. Eskin, *Mestnichestvo v Rossii. XVI-XVII vv. Khronologicheskii reestr* (Moscow, 1994), and is comprised primarily of published data, with some archival documents.

The theory that precedence disputes hobbled autocracy fails in the face of the evidence that plaintiffs almost always lost, disputes were settled expeditiously by the tsar, and the tsar’s mercy, again, softened the blow to the vanquished party. Since the state lacked the material capacity to foster mass social cohesion, it concentrated on the elite, whose services were essential for governmental operations. Thus precedence reinforced the status quo. Lawsuits ran at about forty to fifty cases per decade in the 1540s-1560s, ballooning in the 1570s-1590s: Eskin shows 305 for the 1570s. Most litigants relied not on clan or service history but dismissed their opponents as “without honor,” as belonging to inferior social ranks.

Precedence was abolished in 1682. More was involved than its incompatibility with the reformed military structure. During the seventeenth century new notions of personal piety, lifestyle and achievement, again without the articulation of western Europe, rendered clan-based precedence obsolete. Most of the elite were “new men” who could hardly have relied upon ancient clan honor for their identities. Precedence, like honor, became a function of individuality, as new concepts of self, society, and state were disseminated. Honor continued to exist through the nineteenth century; Catherine II first defined it in the 1787 statute on Duels. As reliance on the state to settle dishonor disputes declined, duels took up the slack [to Pushkin’s dismay - CJH].

Kollmann disputes the dichotomy between coercion and consensus as strategies of autocratic political and social integration. As in most western European states, both modes were employed. Especially effective in a society dominated by orality, not literacy, were new ceremonies and rituals which propagated the ideology of the tsar as the apex and most “honorable” member of society, whose Kremlin constituted a sacred space. The Assembly of the Land (*zemskii sobor*) was not a parliament but a mechanism for negotiation and contestation. Repeal of the right of direct petition to the tsar in 1649 and Golitsyn’s aristocratic reform proposals laid the groundwork for the Petrine institutionalization of the notion of an abstract State serving the “common good.”

In conclusion, honor unified society from top to bottom, from tsar to peasant, and was shared by all orders of society at least enough for them to manipulate the concept for their own purposes, whether they “liked” the state or not. Kollmann notes that this study supports a new periodization, 1600-1800, which continues much recent debunking of Peter the Great. Kollmann identifies a convergence in historiography as western Europeanists turn from abstract theory and juridical institutions to the messy nitty-gritty of lived experience, where Muscovy fits right in. Muscovite society, much traditional historiography and myth to the contrary, was not inert, and has been seriously underestimated.

Kollmann handles the vast problematica of this study with depth and verve. This is a thoughtful and subtle analysis which makes a major contribution to Russian history. Kollmann succinctly distills historiographic debates to put her conclusions in context. The book is literally saturated with analogies to western European history, and infused with an informed appreciation of social science theory. The technical production is superb: almost no typographical errors until the bibliography, and useful illustrations (although the reproduction of Olearius’s illustration of the *Boiar Duma* is spread across two pages (144-145) in such a way that tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich is clipped out!).

The following comments are intended only to further discussion of the issues which Kollmann raises. It might be helpful to look at the term “land” (*zemlia*) as a conception of society as a whole, since *obshchestvo* obviously did not occur until much later (p. 61); “land” always had social as well as geographic connotations, and the phrase “Council of the Entire Land” could be a reference to the totality of corporate groups participating in the assembly.

Although the notion of honor bridged all social divides in Muscovy, Kollmann’s primary emphasis is on the elite. Peasants enjoyed honor and peasants in the North some self-government, but on the whole the peas-

antry was sacrificed to the interests of the state and the landowning elite through the process of enserfment. Thus the term “society” is not always equally inclusive in this study. Kollmann mentions socially dysfunctional periods, such as the *oprichnina* or the Time of Troubles, only as heuristic examples to the elite of the threats to the established order. Such social unrest characterized all of early modern Europe. Nevertheless, it was outside the scope of this study to analyze popular animosity toward the state or its social hierarchy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Two observations are not developed. First, Kollmann teases the reader with the intriguing suggestions that Ivan IV’s *oprichnina* might have been a weapon of boiar vendetta (p. 153). Secondly, Kollmann contends that the explosion of dishonor suits in the 1680s and 1690s were as much a product of social change as compensation for the abolition of precedence.

Finally, there is a chronological anomaly. Dishonor and precedence originated or began to flourish in the middle of the sixteenth century, yet there is much more documentation from later decades, especially the seventeenth century. Kollmann contrasts the jarring bureaucratization and state intervention in society in the seventeenth century versus the sixteenth, and does recognize that these two institutions evolved. Therefore, the disparity of data between the two periods need not distort our perceptions of them, but does complicate historical analysis of their causation.

*By Honor Bound* is on all accounts an outstanding monograph, which will provide much food for thought not only to specialists in Muscovy, but to all students of Russian history. It deserves the highest possible recommendation.

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