

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**G. M. Hamburg.** *Russia's Path toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500-1801.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 912 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11313-6.

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As expected from a review written for H-Teach, I will start and end my review with notes related explicitly to teaching. This magnificent volume offers a challenging yet rewarding reading experience. Its breadth and depth make it a required reading for any serious student of Russian history, and its writing style makes it possible for the dedicated student to grasp. I shall return to its possible applications in teaching Russian history when concluding this review.

G. M. Hamburg, as an accomplished intellectual historian of modern Russia, seeks to outline the major trends of Russian political thought between 1500 and 1801. Choosing this periodization might raise questions among various readers, who are used to a major turning point with Peter the Great. This periodization, however, has been continuously utilized and convincingly defended by historians of the early modern period, such as Nancy Shields Kollmann.[1] Without neglecting to acknowledge Peter's role in this "path toward Enlightenment," Hamburg manages to see beyond Peter and to put his role in a wider historical context.

One of the most remarkable features of this book is its introduction. While every historian works according to certain assumptions and in a defined conceptual (and therefore terminological) framework, few authors have managed (or tried) to elucidate them to the nonspecialist reader in the same exacting clarity. Hamburg explains the fundamental views of Russia and its history while demonstrating the intellectual origins of these views. He defines the terms he uses, such as "faith," "politics," "reason," and "Enlightenment," to distinguish their accepted

uses (such as the Kant-inspired definition of the Enlightenment) from what they represented to the people in Muscovy. By doing so, the author makes it easier for his readers to understand the ideas he has meticulously collected, described, and analyzed.

Hamburg artfully demonstrates how Russia's "Enlightenment" drew its origins from both Orthodox teachings on virtue and Western notions translated into Russian idioms. He shows, for example, how Catherine's definition of "liberty," the key tenets of which were obedience to the law and freedom of conscience, was a product of both Orthodox teachings transmitted from the Muscovite political culture to imperial times and the Western ideas she sought to import to Russia. It is the combination of both that allowed such views to resonate within its audiences.

One must admit this work reads like a textbook at times and like a reference book at others. Such a volume is based on intimate knowledge and proficiency in the source materials. With 122 pages of notes and an index of another 30, one cannot but admire Hamburg for his comprehensive treatment of such a wide topic. The sources he engages with have been the cornerstone of every graduate student's reading list on early modern Russia and its thinkers, and therefore the sweeping overview gives its readers a preliminary understanding of the main characters in the intellectual arena of that time period.

Like any other good book, Hamburg's does raise questions and reveal open ends. For example, the idea that "the divinization of the autocrat reduced the prince's desire to elicit and heed counsel from his sub-

jects, and it also diminished his subjectsâ urge to tender that counsel,â is difficult to reconcile with studies that ascribe the elites with a participatory role, sometimes even stronger and more meaningful than the one of the autocrat, in Muscovite politics (p. 729).[2] Daniel Rowland demonstrated that âwise advisorsâ were a crucial part of the ideological depictions of the tsar, especially of an erring tsar, in an analysis that is otherwise in line with Hamburgâs analysis.[3] The boyars had an interest in maintaining the image of an unlimited autocrat, but always sought to counsel him and vociferously protected their right to partake in ruling the country.[4]

In addition, his assertion that âRussian thinkers before Peter ascribed importance to book learning, to practical wisdom, to spiritual discernment,â and that being learned is a quality of being enlightened while using Vladimir Monomakh as an example, is interesting (p. 731). Simon Franklin immediately comes to mind, reminding us that, while being a bookman was generally a compliment, there was an increasing suspicion of the bookman. What began as âan unmixed blessing, unambiguously glorious,â demonstrated âa germ of distrust.â[5] Such comments, however, are inevitable and can be attributed to the different ways scholars see history, both in major and minor issues.

Having determined that the book in question is undoubtedly an immediate classic, one only wonders how we can bring such a âmonstrousâ volume to the classroom. Clearly, this is not a monograph that can be brought to complement any of the standard textbooks in

a survey class. Indeed, it is best used in upper-division and graduate classes, where it can be used as a textbook on its own or, when taking selected chapters, as a complement to reading the original works or to quickly cover topics not covered by the syllabus. When looking at graduate programs, it is beyond doubt that this book, paired with Andrzej Walickiâs *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (1979) and William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offordâs edited collection *A History of Russian Thought* (2010), should be an authoritative reading on political thought.

#### Notes

[1]. Nancy Shields Kollmann, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 251-252.

[2]. A good example for such a study is Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

[3]. Daniel Rowland, "Did Muscovite Literary Ideology Place Limits on the Power of the Tsar (1540s-1660s)?" *Russian Review* 49, no. 2 (1990): 125-155.

[4]. See John P. Le Donne, "The Eighteenth-Century Russian Nobility," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 34, no. 1 (1993): 139-147.

[5]. Simon Franklin, "Booklearning and Bookmen in Kievan Rusâ: A Survey of an Idea," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12-13 (1988-1989): 830-848.

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