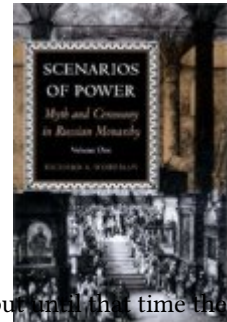


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard S. Wortman. *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xiii + 432 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03484-3.

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In this first of two planned volumes, Richard S. Wortman describes the themes, style, and meaning of court ceremony from the founding of the Romanov dynasty in the early seventeenth century through the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855). Depending on the accessibility of sources, he focuses more or less evenly on the details of specific reigns to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving myths and motifs of imperial rule—symbols that at once projected and legitimized the sovereign’s authority. As backdrop to his narrative, Wortman touches briefly on developments in European court ceremony and devotes considerable attention to the ways in which Russian monarchs embraced, adapted, transformed, and sometimes denied their predecessors’ scenarios of rulership. He is especially interested in how the autocracy attempted to elicit and sustain feelings of loyalty among those through whom it governed: the nobility, military elite, officialdom, and church hierarchy. He also wisely and unavoidably eschews the issue of how society in its constituent elements received the official images of power, emphasizing instead how individual rulers and staged events “were supposed to be perceived by the participants and the audience” (p. 7).

There are few surprises in the characterizations that emerge from Wortman’s absorbing study of coronation ceremonies, church holidays, and various secular celebrations, such as those marking military victories or the opening of Catherine the Great’s Legislative Commission. It is clear from Wortman’s account that historiographical depictions of particular rulers derive from the continuing “theater of power” and that the themes and policies identified by historians to distinguish reigns frequently are consistent with the official representations. In the reign of Nicholas I public rituals began to depict the private sphere of family life and thus became less in-

dicative of actual policy concerns, but in that time the motifs of rule corresponded fairly closely to subsequent scholarly understandings of individual sovereigns. Although it is impossible to determine where the personality and innermost feelings of a given ruler ended and the myths of his or her court began (Wortman’s sources generally were produced by artists and writers), it is tempting to conclude that with the possible exception of the formidable and ruthless Peter the Great (1689-1725), Russia’s supreme autocrats were themselves intellectually and psychologically bound by their own images of rulership. Alexander I, according to Wortman, died a broken and dispirited man because of his failure to live up to his elusive ideal. Whether the internalization of a scenario occurred among its creators or audiences makes no difference; the immediate power, controlling efficacy, and enduring influence of Russian court mythologies remain evident.

The purpose of the monarchy’s “theater of power” was “to present the ruler as supreme and to vest him or her with sacral qualities” (p. 4). Already in the fifteenth century and continuing until the late nineteenth, the sources of sacrality were Christian and foreign (i.e. West European). Each ruler performed the imperial myth differently, but the divinely sanctioned image of the Byzantine emperor survived. The ruler’s role as defender of Orthodoxy justified ongoing imperial expansion, and the identification with Western values and political ideals elevated the sovereign (and governing elite) above the general population. It is impossible to summarize fully the multiple themes and motifs presented during the long period covered by this book. There are, however, several pan-European issues of development that Wortman traces in terms of court ceremonies and the imagining of rulership. These include sources of sacrality, symbolic

roles of women, Western ideals of government, the relationship of the sovereign to his or her subjects, and after the French revolution, notions of nationality and nation.

Although Peter the Great's father, Aleksei Mikhailovich, presented himself as a model of piety, the Baroque culture brought to Russia in the Nikonian church reforms set the stage for Peter's emphasis on the personal characteristics of a tsar who brought secular well-being to his subjects through human agency. The image of victorious military conqueror, also important to the Petrine and all succeeding scenarios, included the concept of the ruler as a civilizing force among Russians and ethnic and religious minorities. The basic motifs of Christian emperor, bringer of civilization, guarantor of the common good, and military leader persisted throughout the period examined. What changed were the personal characteristics needed to perform these functions and the political principles and values they represented. Thus, Peter the Great's scenario depended on the god-like heroic achievements of the individual ruler to justify power, Elizabeth's on displays of happiness and rejoicing, and Catherine the Great's on her role as enlightened legislatrix, philosophe, and pedagogue. Eighteenth-century depictions of sovereignty consistently associated monarchs with classical gods and thus secularized authority by sacralizing human accomplishments. At the end of the century, the penetration of enlightenment values, so vigorously promoted by Catherine, produced a scenario of the ruler as human and humane being. Both Paul I and Alexander I fashioned themselves as great men whose higher human qualities resulted not from otherworldliness but from enlightenment.

The desacralization of the emperor—though not the belief in his unlimited power—reached an endpoint in the imagery of Nicholas I, who brought the nineteenth-century intimate sphere into full public view with a dynastic ideal that portrayed the tsar as loving husband and caring father. Before the succession law of 1797, few of Russia's rulers could safely evoke the principle of heredity to justify their power without also undermining their

own legitimacy, and it was not until the reign of Nicholas I that patrilineal succession, freed of murder and rebellion, became firmly established. Ironically, by that time new models of government based on popular sovereignty and the nation had taken root in the West; consequently, in his short-lived dynastic scenario, Nicholas also had to remove the autocratic ideal from its European origins and develop a conception of rulership that posited a distinct Russian love for the monarch expressed in the acclamation of the people. This motif survived in some circles until the demise of the old regime, but already in the next reign (the subject of part one of Wortman's second volume), Alexander II would attempt "to reconcile autocracy with the liberal model of mid-nineteenth-century Europe" (p. 417)—an effort described by Wortman as "the tragic finale of the myth of foreignness" (p. 417) that since the reign of Peter the Great had ensured "symbolic distance" between rulers and ruling elite and the subject population.

Wortman's narrative is aesthetically pleasing and intellectually enriching; his sources include engravings, paintings, architecture, sculpture, memoirs, literature, the periodical press, and most importantly, official descriptions of ceremonies and processions. Although his work suggests an initial excursion into these rich and varied sources, the documentation is well chosen and sufficient to support his main points. He also has effectively mined Soviet and Russian accounts that cover some of the physical evidence presented here. The sixty-seven illustrations are equally helpful, even though it is not always possible to see the details described in the text. Aside from giving a fascinating and intrinsically interesting description of "myth and ceremony in Russian monarchy," Wortman highlights the individuality of each ruler's "scenario of power" (and the connections between them) and thus reminds us of the importance and historical impact of his or her personal qualities—those very qualities that Peter the Great made so central to the justification of power and that in the reign of Nicholas II would make it impossible for conservative monarchists to support the autocracy.

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