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**Richard Pipes**. *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xv + 216 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11288-7.

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**Russian Autocracy and Its Critic**

There is no disputing the contemporary relevance of the topic that Richard Pipes has chosen for his latest book, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russian academics, journalists, and politicians have shown great interest in the theory and practice of conservatism in general and Russian conservatism in particular. In 2004, the philosophy faculty of St. Petersburg State University founded the Center for the Study of Conservatism, which holds an annual conference and has assisted in the publication of books and articles on the theory and history of Russian conservatism and its significance for post-Soviet Russia. Academics and journal writers in Moscow and Voronezh have been producing monographs and publishing new editions of classic works of Russian conservatism for several years now. Most significantly, members of President Vladimir Putin's administration now appear to be seeking inspiration, or at the very least ideological justification, for their policies in classic works of Russian conservatism, especially those of Ivan A. Ilyin.[1]

Russian conservative ideology has several basic tenets, including, but not limited to, the notion that the national interest is above the interest of the individual; faith in Russia's "traditional" form of government, strong centralized authority concentrated in a single person (autocracy); affirmation of the values of Orthodox Christianity and Russian national culture; and belief that the state is held together by the "organic" ties of tradition, custom, faith, and feeling rather than by a social contract.[2] Pipes's book, in fact, analyzes only one aspect of Russian conservatism. Apart from a couple of short asides on the religious conservatism of Dostoevsky and the aesthetic, cultural conservatism of Konstantin Leontiev, Pipes focuses exclusively on the theory and practice of Russian autocracy, examining the views and actions of its apologists (such as Nikolai Karamzin, Mikhail Katkov, and Konstantin Pobedonostsev) and liberal critics (such as Pavel Pestel and Mikhail Speransky) in prerevolutionary Russia. Thus, a more accurate title for the book would have been *Russian Autocracy and Its Critics*.

In his introduction, Pipes expresses the view, which recent events confirm for him, that Russia, "for reasons rooted in either her social structure or her culture, or both, is committed to authoritarian government" (p. xii). The rest of the book, then, can be viewed as an attempt to explain the historical causes of and philosophical justifications for Russia's attachment to an authoritarian form of government.

Russian autocracy, according to Pipes, is "strong centralized authority, unrestrained either by law or parliament" (p. 1). Pipes claims that the Russian monarchy "in its powers exceeded anything known in the West even in the age of absolutism" (p. 13). He imputes the development of this "unalloyed autocracy" to geographical and cultural factors. Because of the vastness of the country's territorial possessions, land was never scarce and hence ownership of property was not much of a concern in medieval Russia. The crown was able to take advantage of this state of affairs, claiming all land as the monarch's own patrimony. By the late fifteenth century, even Russia's nobles held their land only "provisionally, on condition of satisfactory service to the crown" (p. 11). Thus, medieval Russia lacked two institutions that in the West served to limit the power of the monarchy: namely, "an independent nobility and middle class, and private property in land" (p. 11).

On the cultural side, Pipes argues that whereas in the West kings had to contend with demands of the Catholic Church that they rule for society's benefit, in Russia the Orthodox Church was "the sovereign's obedient tool" (p. 35) and thus demanded "that Russians humbly suffer whatever injustices were visited on them" (p. 42). Unrestrained by the nobility, a commercial class, or the church, Russian tsars, concludes Pipes, "live[d] off the population without a concept of duty toward a general good and the recognition of a higher allegiance to which

all must subscribe" (p. 26). Once the institution of autocracy was formed, argues Pipes, Russian tsars in the ensuing centuries were determined and successful in resisting all attempts to constrain their power, owing in no small part to the influence of conservative ideology. Prominent thinkers of a conservative bent argued variously that autocracy was the only form of government that had ever ruled the country effectively, that Russia was not suited to democracy, and that no other form of government could bring the country enlightenment and prosperity and protect it from revolutionary extremism. The tsars' refusal to accept limitations on their authority and to view "society as a partner" meant that when parliamentary institutions were formally introduced in 1906, the country was already so polarized between supporters of the status quo and anarchistic militants that liberal attitudes and institutions were not given time to take root (p. 176). This, says Pipes, is the tragedy of Russian history, whose lesson Russians have yet to learn.

Though there is truth in Pipes's thesis, there is also much oversimplification and distortion. Since it would be impossible in the space of a short review to catalogue all the instances where Pipes simplifies or distorts, I will make only a few points. My first objection is in regard to Pipes's portrayal of Muscovite Russia. It is telling that Pipes introduces his work on Russian conservatism by recalling an idea that has appeared in many of his previous writings, namely, the supposed "resemblance between Communist Russia and Muscovite tsardom" (p. xi). Pipes is one of several Sovietologists who for some reason has preferred to look for the origins of totalitarian Communism in medieval Russia rather than where they should look for them, in Jacobin and Marxist ideology. It is perhaps this need to see such a resemblance that accounts for the distorted view of Muscovy in this study.

Just as totalitarian Communist Russia was for Pipes the antithesis of the "free world" (the West), so is autocratic Muscovy the opposite of "proto-democratic" medieval Western Europe. If we are to believe Pipes, in medieval Western Europe, both king and clergy were bound by duty to serve for the good of the subjects of the kingdom and the followers of the faith. But in Russia, the tsar treated his subjects as slaves, and the Russian church, which was not truly Christian, taught its faithful to suffer patiently all injustices. This is simply not a fair contrast. In fact, medieval European monarchs and clerics, Russian ones included, showed varying degrees of concern for the welfare of their subjects and faithful. It is absurd to claim, as Pipes does, that the notions of Christian charity and serving the public good did not exist in Russia until they were brought from the West. Pipes implies that Muscovite tsars felt no obligation to seek the welfare of their subjects, and that the Russian church, apart from the "nonpossessor" ascetics, was an un-Christian den of riot and corruption and merely a prop to the tsarist regime. Granted, the Orthodox notion of welfare was different from the Protestant one: the salvation of the soul was more important than material well-being, as is argued by historian Galina Valer'evna Talina.[3] But even by the standard of material welfare, the Russians cannot be declared guilty on all counts. Pipes may dismiss the influential monastic leader Joseph Volotsky as a closed-minded "religious fanatic" (p. 32), but would he deny that Joseph depleted the reserves of his monastery feeding the peasants during the famine of 1512? [4] Likewise, would he deny Tsar Boris Godunov's efforts at famine relief during the Time of Troubles?

I would also contend that Pipes's notion of "unalloyed autocracy" does not apply to Muscovy. Pipes is unwilling to recognize as valid any constraints on the power of the monarch other than those demanded by liberal ideology, that is, positive law and parliament. It is true that such restraints on royal power did not exist in Russia, but other institutional and customary ones did. Political historians should not ignore such things. As the Russian conservative Ilyin has written regarding the English system of government, "That which is not stipulated by any law is observed by all as obligatory to such an extent that it turns out in practice to be more solid than much that is stipulated by law."[5]

Though one probably could not go that far in characterizing Muscovite Russia, the real significance of custom and various institutional restraints on the power of the Muscovite tsar is still a matter for debate among historians of the period. Nicolai Petro, after presenting both sides of the debate, opts for the view of Muscovite tsardom as a "constrained autocracy," ascribing great import to the Boyar Duma and the land assemblies (*zemskie sobory*).[6] In any event, Pipes's characterization of Muscovite autocracy is misleading. He takes one statement by Muscovy's most tyrannical tsar, Ivan IV (The Dread), as the final word on autocracy. This is like giving a description of the English monarchy based exclusively on observations about the reign of Henry VIII. Be that as it may, even Ivan IV recognized constraints on his power. It is true that he spoke of the gentry as his "slaves" but, as historian Mikhail Zyzykin notes, that was not his attitude toward the clergy. Ivan IV is recorded as having made the following address to the clergy in 1551: "'If I go against you, in violation of divine laws, be not silent about this; if I go wrong, then forbid me without any

fear, upon my soul and the purity of Orthodox Christian law."'[7] That Metropolitan Philip was martyred for taking the tsar at his word and "forbidding" him does not invalidate the point. Much like England's Henry II, Ivan IV later repented ordering the murder of the Metropolitan. Moreover, history records Tsar Aleksii Mikhailovich Romanov's address that begs the martyred Metropolitan's forgiveness for the "sin of our ancestor" (Ivan IV). [8] The ability of the church to censure the crown when it strayed from its Christian duty was an established custom in Muscovy, which tsars were bound to respect. If truly "unalloyed autocracy" ever existed in Russia, then it began with Peter I who, following the model of Western absolutism, did his best to dismantle all customary restraints on his power and subjugated the church to the crown.

Generally speaking, Pipes's portrayal of Petrine Russia is perhaps more balanced, but he remains unwilling to give the autocracy any credit for those of its accomplishments, which he would presumably regard as "progressive," such as the liberation of the serfs. Long before 1861, Catherine II had tried and failed to free the serfs in the teeth of gentry opposition. Pipes passes over this fact, likely because it calls into question his idea of "unalloyed autocracy" and puts the gentry, who must according to liberal theory succeed in constraining the monarch's power, in an unfavorable light from his own liberal point of view.

Pipes's bias is visible in full force, however, when he discusses the reign of Nicholas I. He attributes to the oppression of this era the fact that Russia was later "torn by the bloodiest revolution ever experienced by mankind, whereas post-1848 Europe evolved into an oasis of stability" (p. 101). What oasis of stability? Was not post-1848 Europe later torn by the two bloodiest wars ever experienced by mankind? Pipes, of all people, should be acutely aware that Russia is not the only country that was hijacked by maniacs in the twentieth century. And even if Russian autocracy is to blame for the creation of the Bolsheviks, this is still not a vindication of liberalism. In both Germany and Russia, liberal-democratic regimes, and not autocracies, allowed radicals to seize power. In his last will and testament addressed to his son, Tsar Alexander III wrote, "the collapse of the truly Russian form of government will open an endless era of disorders and bloody internecine strife.... Preserve autocracy, remembering that you bear responsibility for the fate of your subjects before the throne of the Almighty." [9] Pipes's book on the whole reads like a history of missed chances from the liberal point of view. But he misses another more interesting counterfactual. Alexander III died young. Suppose he had lived another twenty years, or that Nicholas II had been able to fulfill his father's wish. I suspect that a man like Alexander III would have been more successful in keeping the radicals down than were Weimar-era German President Paul von Hindenburg or the leader of Russia's short-lived provisional government, Alexander Kerensky.

Pipes offers a book on a topic usually ignored by English-speaking academics. His summaries of the political thought of a selection of Russian conservatives are mostly accurate, and for that he may be thanked. These summaries provide an introduction to ideas that are being earnestly discussed both at Russian universities and at the highest levels of the current Russian government. But readers should be skeptical of Pipes as an interpreter of Russian history, should make themselves aware of other interpretations, and should hope that more books will be published on this particular topic in the future.

Notes

[1]. See Ivan A. Ilyin, *Sobranie sochinenii v 10 tomakh* [Collected Works in 10 Volumes], ed. IUri Lisitsa (Moscow, 1993-1999).

[2]. Igor Dmitrievich Osipov, "Aksiologiia rossiiskogo konservatizma," in *Filosofiia i sotsial'no-politicheskie tsennosti konservatizma v obshchestvennom soznanii Rossii*, ed. IUrii Nikiforovich Solonin (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo Sankt-Peterburgskogo gos. Universiteta, 2004): 106-118, see 115-117.

[3]. See Galina Valer'evna Talina, "Russkaia samoderzhavnaia monarkhia pervykh Romanovykh glazami sovremennikov i potomkov" in *Samoderzhavnoe tsarstvo pervykh Romanovykh* ed. S. V. Perevezentsev (Moscow: Izd-vo "Sotsial'no-politicheskaia mysl'," 2004): 7-74. esp. 31-36.

[4]. David Goldfrank, "Old and New Perspectives on Iosif Volotsky's Monastic Rules," *Slavic Review* 34, no. 2 (June 1975): 279-301, esp. 295.

[5]. Ivan A. Ilyin, *Sobranie sochinenii v 10 tomakh*, ed. IUri Lisitsa (Moscow: Russkaia Kniga, 1993-1999): Vol. 4, 420.

[6]. Nicolai Petro, *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): 28-59.

[7]. Mikhail Zyzykin, *Tsarskaia vlast' v Rossii* (Moscow: Izd-vo zhurnala "Moskva," 2004): 74.

[8]. "Poslanie Sviatitelyu mucheniku Filippu," included in the volume *Samoderzhavnoe tsarstvo pervykh Romanovykh* ed. S. V. Perevezentsev (Moscow: Izd-vo "Sotsial'no-politicheskaia mysl'," 2004): 160.

[9]. Quoted in Natalia A. Narochnitskaia, *Rossiia i russkie v mirovoi istorii* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2004): 136.

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