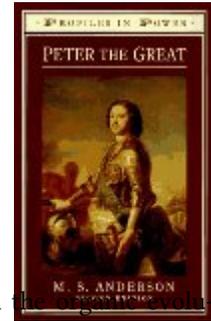


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

M. S. Anderson. *Peter the Great (Profiles in Power)*. London: Longman, 1995. \$57.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-08412-4; \$31.20 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-08411-7.

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Published on H-Russia (August, 1995)



This short popular biography of Peter I by one of the leading British scholars of eighteenth-century international diplomacy and author of the classic work on *Britain's Discovery of Russia, 1553-1815* (London, 1958) was originally published in 1978 as part of the Thames and Hudson series "Men in Office." Now, nearly twenty years later, a slightly revised, and unfortunately much more dated version has been published in paperback as part of the Longman series "Profiles in Power." The editors of the series have supplied a genealogical table of the Romanov and Holstein-Gottorp dynasties, two maps of European Russia, and a brief chronology of the reign, while the author has added a pared-down version of a list of supplementary readings geared primarily for a general English-speaking audience. Substantively, Anderson's challenge is to rework the immense historical literature on the period into a brief account of the "complexities of Peter the Great's character and achievements" which is at the same time lucid enough for the "relatively wide and non-expert" audience of "students and members of the general reading public" [Preface, vii, viii] – a challenge which he meets with remarkable skill and erudition. His unstated task is to debunk some common misconceptions surrounding a period that has laid the foundation myth of Russian modernity. Separating actual "history" from its uncritical reconstruction by contemporaries and by later, particularly eighteenth-century interpreters of the Petrine heritage, Anderson offers a narrative of origins which seeks to answer the question once posed by the late Alec Nove about Stalinist "modernization": Was Peter really necessary, and if so, necessary for what?

From the very first chapter, entitled "Russia Before Peter: Modernization and Resistance," Anderson places the subject of his biography in the long-term perspective of historical development while, simultaneously, setting

up a dialectical opposition between a traditional society and the mechanistic imposition of forced change – a dialectic which provides the leitmotiv for his view of Russia's road to modernity. Using the language of biological determinism, Anderson argues that long before the birth of Peter the Great, "forces of change and possibilities of new growth," which he strengthened but did not create, had been evident in "old Russia." Contrary to the views of "many of his contemporaries and nearly all writers of the eighteenth-century," Peter did not "burst upon a Russia still languishing in medieval obscurantism and hopeless stagnation." (19) The reforms of Peter the Great, and especially what the author takes to be the most remarkable of them, Russia's so-called "emergence into Europe," was not the single-handed work of Peter; they were, Anderson suggests, "perhaps implicit in the 'logic of history', which though a difficult concept is not a meaningless one." (86) Following the critical approach of nineteenth-century Russian historiography, and Solov'ev's emphasis on continuity with the pre-Petrine period and Russia's long-term historical "needs," he argues that few of the objectives for which Peter "strove so furiously" were new. Almost without exception they were "inherent" in the history and geographical position of Russia and the "necessities" which these created. Avoiding the simple-minded arguments about the radically transformative role played by Western ideas, Anderson stresses that none of Peter's objectives were inspired by "an irruption of novel ideas or foreign influences." And while he does believe that "changes in the structure and workings of Russian society were made," this was done by "accelerating developments already under way as much as by introducing anything really new." In sum, "Russia under Peter the Great can...be regarded as undergoing...a process of forced and greatly

accelerated evolution rather than of true revolution” (pp. 202-203).

But when it comes down to analyzing the actual reforms, Anderson argues that Russia did not undergo so much a process of evolution as of militarization and mechanization. Following Miliukov and Kliuchevskii, Anderson sees “war and its effects [as] central not merely to Peter’s foreign policies but also to his domestic achievements and failures. Without a grasp of this fact no real understanding of his reign is possible” (p. 93). The demands of the new armed forces had both “constructive” and “destructive” effects and “[d]ifferent historians have struck, and no doubt will continue to strike differing balances between these credit and debit factors.” Anderson offers his own balance sheet in the long chapter on “A New State and Society?” The question mark in the title echoes the author’s ambivalent appraisal of the reforms, especially Peter’s imposition of the new, more coercive, governmental power-structure. “The harshness, the rigidity, the mechanical insensibility which came to characterize much of the Petrine governmental machine was largely due to the strains generated by a long period of difficult and intensely exacting military struggle.”(93) By increasing the number of officials in Russia and “making them cogs in an increasingly elaborate machine Peter undermined, indeed destroyed, the essentially personal character of authority which had been characteristic of Muscovite Russia.” While this was, the author concedes, “in a sense, one of his greatest achievements, ”nevertheless, “by making the relationship between government and subjects increasingly impersonal and dependent on the workings of an unfeeling machine [Peter] was... making [society] less of an organism” (p. 203). Thus, according to Anderson, Peter was rudely tampering with the tempo of Russia’s historical evolution, thereby altering its nature to some extent (p. 206).

If Peter was not historically necessary for the “modernization” of Russia, he made it difficult for historians to leave him out of it. Although Peter may not have anticipated all of the consequences of war as well as its costs, it is still important to know what set off this “mainspring of much of Peter’s creative and innovative activity” (p. 92). Besides listing the historical examples of Russian military failures in the Baltic, the structure of international relations, and the strange reference to the “logic of history,” Anderson does not really explain why Peter felt compelled to engage in war in the first place. Instead, the personality of the “Great Man” serves as the key. The image of Peter that emerges from Anderson’s biography, irrational in his hatred of traditional way of life, im-

pulsive in implementing his inchoate desires for change, and yet supremely rational, cautious and tough-minded in delicate diplomatic decision-making, is the product of using two very different historiographic approaches: the psycho-historical “realism” of Kliuchevskii and the geopolitical “realism” of international relations theory. The psychological approach made paradigmatic by Kliuchevskii, Freudian in everything but its fascination with sex, stresses the effect of Peter’s upbringing on his personality. A strong, healthy and unrestrained child, who is abandoned to his passions, to life on the street, and to the influence of foreigners and evil machinations of political rivals becomes an impulsive, earthy “artisan tsar.” However, citing recent work by Lindsey Hughes on the regency of Sophia, the author correctly points out that Peter was not forced out of Moscow, but chose to devote his energies to military training on the nearby royal estates. If so, it becomes important to explain why Peter seemed to be “turning his back on the obligation of his position and selfishly indulging purely personal tastes” for “horseplay and heavy drinking” (p. 32). Were mock-games and mock-processions of the young tsar merely whimsical personal diversions or did they define, and help formulate, a serious political outlook? What role, if any, did new notions of the monarch’s duty and early Enlightenment ideals play in Peter’s “horseplay”? Kliuchevskii, for one, stressed that Peter’s insistence on proper promotion through the ranks of his “play regiments” was motivated by his sense of duty to serve the common good. Moving beyond the psychoanalytic explanation offered by Kliuchevskii, Anderson suggests that the parodies of religious rites associated with Peter’s “Most Drunken Synod” may have embodied “a half-conscious attempt, by satirizing the formal and traditional aspects of religion, to devalue them and to assert that it was by daily conduct, not ritual observances, that the sincerity and the value of belief must be measured” (p. 122). That would certainly put Peter in line with seventeenth-century religious reformers like Patriarch Nikon, whom Anderson extols as “a learned man and a passionate reformer, [who] stood for a more critical and intellectually questioning [read modern] attitude” to religion (p. 8).

Yet despite his focus on continuity with the pre-Petrine period, Anderson fails to make this connection, relegating Peter’s antinomian behavior to his “brutal grossness” and the “pathological distortions of feeling whose nature he himself did not really understand.” Even if we grant that Peter “was never in any formal sense a well-educated man” (28), being “first and last a man of action” (205), it is much too easy to reduce Peter’s

early behavior to his youth, natural robustness, and visceral contempt for tradition; in fact, Peter's "games," like the courtly masques of his 17th-century royal contemporaries in France and England, may provide an important clue to the ideology and to the methods of rule which characterize the political life of the Petrine court.

Anderson's depiction of Russia's "emergence into Europe" and Peter's "cautious and realistic" (p. 68) actions during the Northern War owes much to the "realism" of international theory, which posits calculating, opportunistic actions by the hard-headed statesman who is the embodiment of national interest. But, as Anderson's own account of Petrine diplomacy indicates, Peter was not a mere opportunist taking advantage of a geo-politically propitious environment for aggrandizing his realm. In fact, when the whole configuration of international relations was, for the time being, unfavorable to his ambitions, Peter worked to create opportunities for himself, not least by engaging in eighteenth-century "shuttle diplomacy." More importantly, was Peter really acting out of desire for national interest, a term of 19th century Realpolitik, or his own sense of dynastic glory as well as his image of the 18th-century monarch? Was his "dynamism" simply a unique personality trait or a part of the new definition of royal authority which he himself helped to legitimize with a string of military victories and diplomatic successes? Perhaps Russia's geopolitical success is to be viewed not as her "emergence into modernity" but as an aspect of her role in the construction of the Western world as we know it. As Paul Dukes has recently suggested, Russia had not entered "modernity" before the reign of Peter because there was no modernity for her to enter. The very term "Europe" as distinct from "Christendom" came into common usage at about the time of Peter's celebrated embassy to the West [*Russia and Europe*, ed. Paul Dukes (Avon, 1995), 8]. In fact, the evidence cited by Anderson suggests that even as late as 1717, during Peter's second visit to north-western Europe, the diplomats of "the princes of Europe" still defined themselves in opposition to Turkey, Morocco, China "and other nations shut out of the pale of Christianity and the common course of correspondence" (p. 84). It is precisely the insistence of Petrine diplomats on a common idiom – titular parity – with other Christian princes of Europe, including the Holy Roman Emperor himself, that served to differentiate the Romanovs from the Safavids and the Moguls and insure that St. Petersburg would be an important "address" in the common course of European correspondence. Thus, Muscovy's role in the process by which the various "Western" traditions of early modern

Christian principalities were consolidated into a "modern Europe" can only be called "westernization" if one agrees that Sweden, Austria, Poland, France, Spain, and England were themselves engaged in the process of "westernization" during the same period. After such an admission it becomes much less a "mystical undertaking to investigate the differences of national development among the European states" [L. Jay Oliva, *Russia in the Era of Peter the Great* (Englewood Hills, N.J.: 1969), p. 29].

In the last chapter on "Peter's Place in History," Anderson offers two reasons why the "one-sided and inadequate" view of "Peter's reign as marking a sharp transition from darkness to light, from barbarism to civilization," a view which he admits it is now a truism to dismiss as untenable, has exercised such appeal both for contemporaries and eighteenth-century writers. One reason for the appeal of the Petrine myth is "the taste for the dramatic which is inherent in every normal man." The other, and ideologically more significant reason is the encouragement that such a view gave to "the hopes of rapid progress in the states of western Europe under the guidance of intelligent, public-spirited and energetic rulers, 'enlightened despots'" (p. 201). It is not a coincidence that this characterization of the intellectual appeal of the myth for Peter's contemporaries parallels the fascination with the Soviet experiment among the western intellectuals of Anderson's own generation. Indeed, the need to locate various historical precedents for state-led revolutionary transformation can be understood in the context of the ideological climate generated by the Cold War and made even more urgent in the post-Soviet revision of Russian history. In fact, I would suggest that Anderson's attempt to prove that Peter the Great was no "imperial revolutionary" [cf. M.S. Anderson, "Peter the Great: Imperial Revolutionary?" In *The Courts of Europe*, ed. A. G. Dickens (London, 1977), Chapter 12] represents a response to the same historiographical problem which has currently given rise to the interest in the allegedly Petrine origins of Russian totalitarianism [E. V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia* (London, 1993)]. Anderson argues, quite correctly, that "Peter lacked almost completely the intellectual equipment of a modern revolutionary. He had no ideology, no articulated system of general ideas to guide his actions, no clear vision of a march of history irresistibly impelling Russia in a particular direction" (p. 205). Although this provides a necessary corrective to Anisimov's intentionalist argument, faulting Peter for having no notion of "ideology" in the 20th-century sense of the term is just as anachronistic as trying to

decide whether or not the Petrine period was "revolutionary." Indeed, before the mid-18th century, few people ascribed the kind of radical political meaning to the word "revolution" – a narrowly scientific term characterizing the cyclical motion of the Copernican universe – with which the historiographical debate over Peter's policies is invested. The more engaging task is to reconstruct the cultural milieu in which both Peter himself and his early modern contemporaries conceptualized and implemented the policies for which he alone was dubbed "Great."

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**Citation:** Ernest A. Zitser. Review of Anderson, M. S., *Peter the Great (Profiles in Power)*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. August, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=143>

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