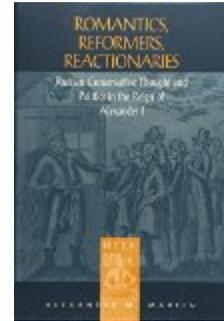


Alexander M. Martin. *Romantics, Reformers, Reactionaries: Russian Conservative Thought and Politics in the Reign of Alexander I*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997. x + 294 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-226-8.

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The Origins of Russian Conservatism

This book provides a detailed analysis of the development of Russian conservative thought in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Alexander M. Martin discusses the varieties of conservatism which emerged under Alexander I and traces the influence which they had on the conduct of Russian government. Martin's approach is to identify a selection of key individuals and to examine their views and activities in depth within a chronological framework which allows him to chart the evolution of Russian conservatism. He utilizes a very wide range of sources, including substantial Russian archival materials and many printed primary works.

Martin argues that modern conservatism right across Europe found its origins in reaction to the French Revolution and to the ideas and attitudes of the Enlightenment. After 1789, conservatives made an explicit defence of the old regime, but they expressed many different views about the most appropriate path that European society should take in the aftermath of the cataclysm which had befallen the French monarchy. For some, a simple return to ancestral tradition would suffice, but this was inadequate for those who believed that Enlightenment ideas lay at the heart of the problems which beset the old regime and argued that the entire Enlightenment canon had to be rejected before the old regime could be rejuvenated. Russian conservatism was as diverse as elsewhere in Europe, and Martin identifies three basic trends which dominated thinking on the right in early nineteenth century Russia.

The first type of conservatism which Martin discusses is the romantic nationalism associated with Alexander Shishkov. Shishkov made his career in the navy and was very much part of the official St. Petersburg elite, eventually serving as Minister of Education between 1824 and 1828. For Shishkov and his followers, each ethnic nation derived its identity from a shared cultural heritage which developed according to inner laws that were immune to conscious manipulation. To understand the nature of a nation's identity, therefore, it was necessary to study the past and to focus on a nation's traditions. In the case of Russia, this meant concentrating on the ordinary people who were the true repositories of the nation's traditions. Shishkov firmly believed that the Russian peasantry best preserved the nation's conservative virtues and wanted to nurture their development. The Russian language was a particularly important part of the nation's identity, and Shishkov wanted attempts made to remove the foreign elements that had crept into it and to restore the Old Church Slavonic basis of the language. After the French Revolution and the death of Catherine II—who, for all her interest in things Western, was seen as providing stability and ensuring Russia's greatness—Shishkov's romantic nationalism looked back to a utopian and invented past.

The St. Petersburg environment in which Shishkov operated was, however, untypical of Russian conservatism. The physical appearance of the capital continually reminded its inhabitants of the city's Western heritage, while its intellectual atmosphere was heavily influenced by European ideas and trends. Martin makes

the point that Moscow, as the ancient capital of Russia and the traditional gathering place for the provincial nobility, had a better claim to be seen as the focus of conservatism. Sergei Glinka, brother of the composer Fedor, is depicted as a Moscow representative of the romantic nationalist school, and Martin analyses in detail the gentry conservatism exemplified by Rostopshchin, governor of Moscow during 1812, and by N. M. Karamzin. Their views focused on the more practical tasks of preserving the autocracy and of maintaining the rights of the nobility. Rostopshchin argued that a powerful state was needed if gentry interests were to be protected and emphasized that it was vital that the peasantry should continue to be subordinated to their landlords if the social order were to be maintained. It was this type of conservatism that was to prove the most persistent over the next century as the Russian state attempted the process of economic modernization while retaining intact traditional political and social structures.

Martin finally turns his attention to the religious conservatism which he identifies as coming to the fore in the last decade of Alexander I's reign after the defeat of Napoleon. Religion was at the heart of Russian identity and appeared to some conservatives as the most appropriate method of cementing social cohesion. It provided a means of combining the traditional values of the Orthodox Church with the expanding influence that Nonconformity was able to exert in Russia. The author suggests that the last part of Alexander's reign can be seen as a coherent entity, with religious conservatism permeating both domestic affairs and the foreign policy of the Tsarist state, embodied in the Holy Alliance. While neither the romantic nationalists nor the gentry conservatives had succeeded in gaining access to the levers of power, the Tsar himself was persuaded of the virtues of the religious approach. Under Alexander's tutelage, the Russian state attempted to shape the consciousness both of its own people and of Europe as a whole: inside Russia, the Ministry of Education became the Ministry of Spiritual Affairs and Education while the influence of the Russian Bible Society expanded. Alexander I himself encouraged the society in its work of providing a vernacular Russian Bible, and the Tsar's patronage enabled the body to prosper for a decade.

In May 1824, however, the Dual Ministry was abolished and religious conservatism fell out of favour. This turnabout in the fortunes of conservative thinkers was symptomatic of one of the fundamental difficulties which faced the nascent Russian right. The Tsar himself had limited sympathy with many of the opinions voiced by

the conservatives and, for much of his reign, showed himself to be antagonistic to the romantic nationalism typified by Shishkov and far from enthusiastic about the gentry's calls to preserve their own position. While conservative thinkers had access to the salons and social elites of Moscow and St. Petersburg, this did not equate to influence over the decision-makers of the Tsarist state. While the Russian regime was perceived across Europe as representing the firmest bastion of autocracy, Alexander I himself had an ambiguous attitude to conservatism. This was partly a result of the Tsar's personal beliefs: the conflicting natures of his grandmother, Catherine II, and his father, Paul I, clearly left Alexander confused about the role that a Russian ruler should play.

The "enigmatic Tsar," as he was described by Maurice Paleologue,^[1] represented a deeper confusion about the nature of the Russian state. For conservatives during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, support for the Russian state was awkward. The views which were propounded by each of the types of conservatives depicted by Martin concentrated on the promotion of deep-seated Russian values. Since the time of Peter I, however, the Tsarist state had looked overwhelmingly for inspiration not to the traditions of Russia itself, but to Europe. The "Westernization" of Russia, which had been put in place by successive rulers during the eighteenth century, thus presented conservative thinkers with a profound difficulty. While they venerated the concept of the Tsarist autocracy and believed that this was the only suitable form of government for Russia, the direction which the state had taken, especially under Peter I and Catherine II, made support for the autocracy problematic.

These problems were accentuated by Russian involvement in European affairs during Alexander I's reign. The rapprochement with Napoleon that was cemented at Tilsit in 1807 made Russian conservatives extremely uneasy: Napoleon was, after all, the heir to the revolution of 1789 which represented everything that they rejected. Even after Napoleon's eventual defeat, Alexander's deep involvement in the process of peace-making and in European politics provoked deep suspicion among those on the right. The relationship that emerged between the post-1800 autocracy and the Russian right retained a deep ambiguity. The Slavophile elements in Russian thought regarded the idea of autocracy as commendable, but believed that the ways in which Russian Tsars exerted their powers in practice frequently failed to live up to their ideals. The author suggests that the basis of Alexandrine conservatism lost its relevance after Alexander's death. This was, however, a

much slower process than Martin suggests: gentry conservatism continued to retain its vigour and influence long after emancipation and was able to make a powerful resurgence in the last decade of Tsarism's existence. Romantic nationalism continued to find echoes in the writings of Slavophile thinkers while, although the specific politics associated with the Holy Alliance perished with Alexander I, the importance of religion in Russian conservative thought continued into the twentieth century.

Martin suggests that Uvarov's formula of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality," even though similar in vocabulary to the ideas of the Alexandrine conservatives, represented very different values. He argues that Uvarov and the conservatism of Nicholas I were more concerned with practical politics and with facing the challenges of modernization than with the spiritual dimensions that the earlier conservatives represented. This perhaps underplays the wider significance of Uvarov's formulation: the basic tenets of "Official Nationality" found a resonance among many nineteenth-century Russians. The ideas and policies propounded by Pobedonostsev, for example, have their roots in the nationalism, elitism and emphasis on religion that first emerged under Alexander I and were formed into a coherent whole by Uvarov. Martin's dissection of later Russian conservatism into discrete traditions of enlightened absolutism, reactionary statism and Slavophilism needs to be complemented by a recognition of the common views which underpinned the beliefs of all Russian conservatives.

Martin's book makes an important contribution to the history of the Russian right. The richness of the sources ensures that we gain a detailed knowledge of the

views of the individuals on whom the author concentrates. The author rightly notes the limited size of the Russian "public" in the early nineteenth century, but he also stresses the varied means by which ideas could be communicated and discusses forums such as the salon of Grand Duchess Ekaterina Pavlovna. This approach could be extended to give a more comprehensive picture of the extent of conservative ideas. Martin makes mention of the background of the subscribers to Glinka's journal *Russian Messenger*, and it would be interesting to know more about the identity of these people and to analyse the influence which they exerted in their own communities. As the author notes, many of the provincial gentry regularly journeyed to Moscow, where they met their peers from other parts of the empire and exchanged views. The Moscow and St. Petersburg focus of this study could be broadened to encompass the wider environment of provincial society which would enable us to deepen our understanding of the extent of contacts between centre and periphery in imperial Russia. It was in the provinces that conservatism proved to be most long-lasting, and the ways in which metropolitan Russia was able to influence provincial opinion are crucial in examining the practical political impact of the conservative ideas which Martin analyses so well.

Note

[1]. M. Paleologue, *The Enigmatic Czar* (London, 1938).

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