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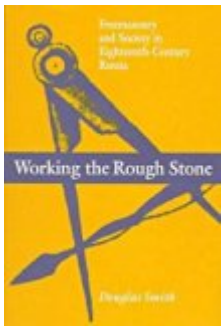
Douglas Smith. *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia.* De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999. x + 257 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-246-6.



Reviewed by Ernest A. Zitser

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Like the other five books in Northern Illinois University Press' "Russian Studies Series," this short monograph on the cultural significance of Freemasonry during the reign of Catherine II (1762-1796) is revisionist in both senses of the word. First, it reviews the literature on a familiar, but heretofore neglected topic in Russian history; and then, applying the latest theoretical approaches and using previously-unpublished archival evidence, it attempts to put this topic in a new light. The metaphors of vision and re-vision, light and darkness, are especially appropriate for this book, which seeks to explain how the Russian representatives of a social movement (in)famous for its secrecy and occultism could claim to embody the public-minded ideals of the Enlightenment.

The strengths of Smith's book -- and the things that are going to make it one of the starting points for all future studies of "civil society" in the Russian Enlightenment -- are its solid command of the literature on the topic; its laudable comparative focus; and, finally, its refreshing attempt to take the esoteric symbolism in which the Masons expressed their vision of a better, more enlightened world, as seriously as they did. If the book can be said to have a flaw, it is the author's decision to confine his revisionist argument to the commonly accepted chronological timeframe of the Russian Enlightenment.

The subtitle of the book, as well as the methodological and comparative thrust of the first chapter, suggests that Smith uses Freemasonry as a case study of the origins of Russian "civil society." In addition to Jurgen Habermas and Reinhart Koselleck, Smith acknowledges the fact that his own approach to this question is deeply indebted to the work of Margaret C. Jacob.[1] Indeed, the book aspires to do for the history of Russian Freemasonry what Jacob has done for the history of that Order in France. Using many previously unpublished documents (autobiographies, personal correspondence, Masonic statutes, and even minutes of particular lodge meetings, from the provinces as well as the two Russian capitals, all of which were produced by Russian Freemasons over the course of the eighteenth century) Smith seeks to show how its socially and confes-

sionally diverse membership attempted to live out the ideals of the Enlightenment. Unlike Jacob, however, this history of Freemasonry attempts to sidestep the heated debate over the brothers' political role in the Enlightenment -- a polemic which Smith dismisses as both teleological and anachronistic (pp. 14-17).

According to Smith, the debate has centered on the question of whether or not the Masons' ideals and secret organization shaped or reflected the political radicalism of those men and women who declared "revolution" to be synonymous with Enlightenment. Depending on how each participant in this debate defines the Enlightenment, the polemics about eighteenth-century French Masonry acquire a contemporary political coloration. In one view, the Masons appear as the prophets of "totalitarian democracy"; in another, as the founding fathers of "constitutionalism." Although Russia did not experience a similar social, ideological, and political upheaval at the end of the eighteenth century -- with the significant exception of Pugachev's *jacquerie*, a point to which I shall return later --the contours of the French polemic are also apparent in the study of the Russian Enlightenment.

In Russian historiography, however, the question of Freemasonry's relationship to "enlightened" politics has come to be equated with the fate of N. I. Novikov (1744-1818), publisher, educator, and Moscow Mason, whose arrest coincided with Catherine II's official ban of the Order. According to nineteenth-century liberal historians, and their twentieth-century proteges, the imprisonment of this "veritable saint" (p. 4) demonstrated that Russian autocracy would brook no challenges to its monopolistic control of the "public sphere." Indeed, the historiographical "canonization" of Novikov suggests that without "enlightened" men like Novikov, Russia would have to wait until February 1917 (if not until 1991), for its own, "bourgeois- democratic" revolution. It is this highly-politicized and teleological approach which Smith attempts to revise through his analysis of Russian Freemasonry.

Echoing the work of W. Gareth Jones, Smith seeks to shift the focus away from the clash between Novikov and Catherine, in an effort to contextualize what has too often been presented as a mere battle of wills between the autocratic Empress and the "Russian enlightener."[2] Smith's spin on the conflict between power and enlightenment translates the nineteenth-century scholars' liberal critique of autocracy into the (to us) more familiar terms of the rise of "civil society." In a chapter on "The Russian Public; or, Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century," the author demonstrates exactly how Novikov's Freemasonry fit into the new "public sphere" created by the boom in publishing and social activity, which came to characterize the latter half of the reign of Catherine II. Indeed, despite the fact that Smith puts this chapter ***after*** his introductory exploration of the origins, organization, and social composition of Russian Freemasonry (Chapter One), his argument about the historical significance of the Masonic movement depends on the success with which he illustrates that in Russia, as well as in the rest of "enlightened" Europe, the eighteenth century was a "sociable century."[3]

In Chapter Two, Smith revises the unflattering picture of Russian public life painted by Marquis de Custine at the beginning of the nineteenth-century -- an evocative image of unenlightened despotism which, as the author correctly points out, has influenced twentieth-century western perceptions about Russia's supposedly "backward" and "atomized" society.[4] Adopting the language of an eighteenth-century landscape painter, Smith proceeds to "draw" a rich "topography of Russian society," composed of a variety of clubs, societies, and publishing concerns, and headed by Russia's self-styled enlightened elite (p. 54). Assembling the information found in the scattered compilations of nineteenth-century antiquarians as well as in eighteenth-century Russian literary

journals, Smith presents one of the best pictures of Russian "social life" ever to appear in English. Indeed, on the basis of this chapter alone Smith's book deserves to be ranked as an important contribution to the history of the Russian Enlightenment. Eschewing the focus on St. Petersburg and Moscow, he marshals his (admittedly fragmentary) evidence to demonstrate that by the end of the eighteenth century, the fetes, journals, and ideals of Russia's ***haute monde*** had penetrated into the "provinces."

But just like an eighteenth-century court painter commissioned to produce the portrait of a wealthy and enlightened patron, Smith's account of "polite society" relegates some of the most troubling aspects of the Russian landscape into the background. Primary among these is serfdom. In a work devoted to a comparative study of Russian high society -- a social group which struggled with the "problematic relationship between the private and the public, the individual and the social, public ethics and individual interests, individual passions and public concerns,"[5] -- and, even more broadly, with the conflict between external obedience and internal nobility, one would expect to see more than a passing mention of the fact that most of the Russian population was made up of serfs. However, despite one or two references to the Masonic initiation of a former serf by his master (pp. 94, 98), Smith (unlike some of his nineteenth-century predecessors) does not draw our attention to the other side of the "social landscape," viz., the fact that the glittering salons of the Russian Enlightenment were built and financed through the unfree labor of the largest servile population in all of Europe.

In Smith's account of the origins of the Russian "civil society," serfdom appears merely as just another manifestation of the vulgar "dark masses" (*chern'*), which the enlightened theater-goer or his (even more) enlightened "brother" Mason attempts to transcend in an effort to demonstrate his true "nobility." Nowhere in his account of the structural similarities between the imperial "Table of Ranks" and the Masonic "degrees" does he point out that the "nobility of soul" attainted by the "brothers" was built on a legal system which guaranteed that members of the new, cosmopolitan Russian elite could own the "souls" of others - whether in the legal sense of serf-ownership, or in the metaphorical sense of exacting unconditional obedience from their subordinates.[6] Nor, despite Smith's interest in private theatricals, does he ever include a discussion of the exploitative social, political, and sexual dynamics behind the serf theaters found on some of those provincial outposts of "civil society."[7]

In all fairness to the author, his argument does take into account the problem posed for Russian "educated society" by the existence of serfdom. Indeed, he repeatedly identifies Russia's uniquely "porous" social structure as one of the main distinguishing factors between the reasons for the success of Masonry in Russia and the rest of Europe (pp. 87-88, 179).[8] What I am suggesting is that his conclusion --that "Freemasonry's popularity in Russia can be traced in large part to ['polite' society's] desire for distinction through the exaggeration of one's own self-worth and importance (in a word, vanity)" (p. 178)-- could only be strengthened by a much more explicit discussion of Russian serfdom - perhaps the most important sociological "variable" in any comparative study of European "civil society" in the eighteenth century.

Problems of periodization further undermine the methodological rigor and tremendous explanatory potential of Smith's argument. Although the author is aware of the fact that, from at least the middle of the seventeenth century, Muscovite courtiers (like A. S. Matveev and V. V. Golitsyn) would throw lavish parties on their suburban estates (pp. 64, 199-200 n. 45) he insists that the form of sociability which is truly worthy of the name of "civil society" begins with the "Westernizing" reforms of Peter the Great. Indeed, in every

chapter Smith pays homage to the historiographical truism which locates the origins of Russian modernity in the reign of this "modernizing" and "secularizing" monarch (1682-1725). Coupled with the fact that the author's analysis of the relationship between Freemasonry and "civil society" concentrates on the reign of Catherine II --the only other "great" monarch of eighteenth-century Russian imperial history (1682-1917)-- a reader who is not initiated into the arcana of the historical craft practiced by Russianists can come away with the notion that the quest for "enlightenment" was a brief, and purely regal affair.

However, as Smith's own analysis suggests, the chronological boundaries of the Russian Enlightenment are as "porous" as Russia's "civil society." Although Freemasonry, as an idea and an organization appears to have been adopted at court only in the 1740s - some twenty years after the founding of the movement in England - the intellectual origins of "enlightenment" can be pushed as far back as the mid-seventeenth century. Indeed, judging by the fact that some of the esoteric texts later used by eighteenth-century Masons were first translated into Russian during the reigns of tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich and his children (Fedor, Sof'ia, and yes, Petr Alekseevich),[9] it would appear that the ideas, if not the practices of the spiritual quest for moral self-perfection, enlightenment, and social discipline were first articulated by seventeenth-century Orthodox clerics, in the context of their attempt to use the coercive authority of the state to "re-Christianize" Russia. [10] Whether or not these "enlightened" churchmen (and their high-placed Russian patrons) constituted a "public sphere," as we understand that term, the very possibility of an earlier, religious, and pre-Petrine origin for the Russian Enlightenment is certainly an effective way of breaking out of the conceptual straitjacket imposed by the outworn categories of "modernization theory."[11]

As the later history of Russian Freemasonry demonstrates, Smith's attempt to confine his topic to the reign of Catherine II shows that the other end of the Enlightenment is as "porous" as the first (pp. 179-183). The fact that the Order underwent a revival at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, after the death of both Novikov and Catherine, lends credence to the argument that the "public" transcended the personal conflict between the "enlightener of Russia" and the "great empress." However, it also puts into doubt the idea that the Order was fatally compromised by the "public's" association between Masonry, Martinism, and Jacobinism. Post-revolutionary and conservative ideology notwithstanding, the complex symbolic world of Freemasonry, if not its conspiratorial and authoritarian form of organization, continued to hold a certain appeal to a large number of elite Russian men.

Indeed, as Smith's insightful semiotic analysis of "Masonic discourse" clearly demonstrates (Chapters One and Three), the members of this Order learned to appropriate the common stock of Masonic symbols and the latest technological advancements in communication technology in order to fashion themselves into a moral and political elite, over and above the "dark masses," the "public sphere," and even the Russian monarchy. [12] This training would stand them in good stead even after the temporary decline occasioned by the backlash against the quackery of foreign "charlatans" (like Cagliostro) and the "excesses" of the French Revolution. In 1825, at the height of a succession struggle between Catherine's grandsons, some of these men would go on to organize the so-called "Decembrist uprising" - the last attempted court coup of the long eighteenth-century and the first modern, revolutionary act directed specifically against the Romanov dynasty by a self-consciously Russian ***intelligentsia***. [13]

Yet Smith prefers to deal with the suggestion that Decembrism and Freemasonry were connected (in complicated and often unusual ways) by situating that tantalizing hint in a footnote on one of the last pages of the book. (p. 227 n. 16) Surely, if

there is some truth to the claim that Freemasonry is not a marginal historical phenomenon (p. 178), and that the "public's" vanity is as much a factor in the creation of the modern world as the "popular" association between esoteric ideas and revolutionary praxis, then the author should not have broken off his analysis with the end of Catherine's reign.[14]

Smith's decision to append a brief discussion (pp. 179-183) of the repeated attempts to revive Freemasonry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that he is aware of this problem, but chooses not to engage it. This awareness, however, brings us to the ideological implications of the author's decision to confine his description of the Russian elite's attempt to "live the Enlightenment" to the second half of the eighteenth century. Precisely because of the fact that in contemporary, post-Soviet Russia, the discourse (if not the organization) of Freemasonry has seen yet another revival --primarily in its paranoid, right-wing, and anti-Semitic form (pp. 227-228 n. 18) -- Smith's position as a knowledgeable Western scholar and his revisionist argument will certainly invite all kinds of political commentary. In fact, judging by the author's own comments about the "unease" with which historians approach "a topic tainted by its association with right-wing Russian groups intent on cultivating a myth about the Judeo-Masonic origins of the Russian Revolution" (p. 183).

Smith's rigorously comparative, text-based, historical methodology is intended to forestall the misuse of his book by participants in the current debates about Russia's role in the world. However, while Smith is acutely aware of the problem of "teleology" (or the "fallacy of origins") in French historiography on the Enlightenment, he does not make the same point about Russian historiography (p. 17). Or, rather, this reviewer would have liked to see a much more explicit discussion of the problems with any approach which attempts to seek the roots of Bolshevism and Russian totalitarianism, or, for that matter, of constitutional democracy and "civil society," in the Masonic lodges of the eighteenth-century. As Smith points out with reference to the French Revolution, what ultimately divides the critics and the supporters of "enlightened" Freemasonry is their understanding of Enlightenment itself. To write a history of Freemasonry is, therefore, to take sides in a contentious and on-going debate about the meaning of a concept which is "synonymous [both] with vague notions of modernity and Western civilization" (p. 16).

Echoing contemporary debates, both in Russia and here in the United States, Smith argues that "[t]o defend the Enlightenment is to defend the modern era and the West; to criticize the Enlightenment (for its false universalism, its naive faith in reason, its racism and sexism) is to criticize -- indeed, to expose -- the modern era and the West" (p. 16). By this same logic, Smith's attempt to re-frame the questions asked by nineteenth-century "liberal" historians of the Order in the terms of Habermasian "civil society" also has contemporary political implications. Indeed, the argument that the mystical and authoritarian excesses of the Masons' "drive for distinction" merely reflected the "vanity" of eighteenth-century "polite society" serves to "expose" more than just the pretensions of eighteenth-century Russian "enlighteners.[15] In this way, Smith's analysis of the historical origins of Russian "civil society" hints at the complicated relationship between the discourse on Freemasonry and current attempts to "re-live" the Russian Enlightenment. The author deserves to be commended for his insightful, sober and scholarly contribution to this ongoing debate.

NOTES

[1]. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* Trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, 1989); and Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society.* (Cambridge,

1988); and Margaret C. Jacob, ***Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*** (New York, 1991).

[2]. W. Gareth Jones, ***Nikolay Novikov, Enlightener of Russia*** (Cambridge, 1984); and ***ibid.,*** "The Polemics of the 1769 Journals: A Reappraisal," ***Canadian-American Slavic Studies*** 16: 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1982): 432-443.

[3]. Urlich Im Hof, ***Das gesellige Jahrhundert: Gesellschaft und Gesellshcaften im Zeitalter der Aufklarung*** (Munich, 1982).

[4]. Smith cites the work of Irena Grudzinska Gross, ***The Scar of Revolution: Custine, Tocqueville, and the Romantic Imagination*** (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), which shows the popularity which Custine's image of Russia enjoyed among twentieth-century theorists of "totalitarianism."

[5]. Adam Seligman, ***The Idea of Civil Society*** (New York, 1992), 5, quoted in Smith's "Conclusion," 179.

[6]. For a contemporary insight into the metaphorical "enserfment" of the "brothers," see A. T. Bolotov's illuminating response to Novikov's attempt to lure him into the Order: "No sir! You haven't descended upon such a fool and little simpleton who would be blinded by your idle chatter and tales and would stretch out his neck so that you could put upon it a bridle in order to ride him like a horse and forcibly make him do everything that you please." Quoted in Smith, 155.

[7]. Laurence Senelick, "The Erotic Bondage of Serf Theater," ***Russian Review*** 50:1 (1991): 24-34; Priscilla R. Roosevelt, "Emerald Thrones and Living Statues: Theater and Theatricality on the Russian Estate," ***ibid.,*** 1-23; and Richard S. Wortman, "Theatricality, Myth, and Authority," ***ibid.,*** 48-52.

[8]. Smith relies heavily on the work of Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, ***Social Identity and Imperial Russia*** (De Kalb, 1997), the first book to be published in the Northern Illinois "Russian Studies Series"; he is also indebted to the revisionism of Gregory L. Freeze, "The ***Soslovie*** (Estate) Paradigm in Russian Social History," ***American Historical Review*** 91:1 (1986): 11-36.

[9]. Although Smith refers to the work of Stephen L. Baehr, ***The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture*** (Stanford, 1991), he seems to be unaware of the secondary literature mentioned in Isabel de Madariaga, "Freemasonry in Eighteenth-Century Russian Society," in ***Politics and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia*** (London and New York, 1998), 150-167, esp. 150-151 (notes 2 and 3). W. F. Ryan's magisterial work on early Russian esoterica, ***The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*** (University Park, 1999), obviously came out after the publication of Smith's book.

[10]. On Russian religious reform as an exercise in "social disciplining," see Gregory Freeze, "The Rechristianization of Russia: The Church and Popular Religion, 1750-1850," ***Studia Slavica Finlandensia*** 7 (1990): 101-136; and ***ibid.,*** "Institutionalizing Piety: The Church and Popular Religion, 1750-1850," in ***Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire,*** ed. by Jane Burbank and David L. Ransel (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), 210-249. This collection also includes "Freemasonry and the Public in Eighteenth-Century Russia" (281-304), an article-length synopsis of Smith's dissertation.

[11]. For a theoretically-informed attempt to locate "civil society" among the provincial military servitors of seventeenth-century Muscovy, see Valerie Kivelson, ***Autocracy in the Provinces: The Muscovite Gentry and Political Culture in the Seventeenth Century*** (Stanford, 1996).

[12]. Despite Smith's attempt to de-politicize Freemasonry, it is possible to see a connection between the single "largest elite social movement in the entire century" (p. 172) and the political violence associated with the succession problems confronting the unstable Russian monarchy after the death of Peter the Great. Indeed, the evidence

which Smith himself incorporates into his study demonstrates that at least some of the "public's" suspicion about Masonic subversion stemmed precisely from the fact that the elite guards' officers who belonged to this Order took an active part in the palace coups which had become such a staple of Russian politics in the eighteenth century (pp. 138, 145, 148, 173, 182-183). Smith's analysis of the "Panin faction" even seems to suggest that one of the reasons why the leaders of each lodge stressed the Order's ideals of secrecy, loyalty, and obedience to its senior "brothers" (and patrons) was the need to mobilize loyal clients for decisive political action (pp. 24-26). In turn, this may explain why eighteenth-century Russian empresses (from Elizabeth to Catherine II), expressed such grave doubts about the Masons' political loyalty.

[13]. In this respect it is surprising that Smith does not cite the work of Lauren G. Leighton, ***The Esoteric Tradition in Russian Romantic Literature: Decembrism and Freemasonry*** (University Park, 1994).

[14]. Although he decided not to pursue this line of inquiry, Smith's analysis of the diverse social composition of the Masons (Chapter One) could have given him the opportunity to revise yet another classic work on Russian intellectual and social history, Marc Raeff's ***The Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility*** (New York, 1966).

[15]. In a sentence which has broad contemporary echoes, Smith points out that "Freemasonry functioned as a blank screen upon which Russians could project a variety of fears that changed with time and reflected some of the chief concerns of a given period"; questions about the role of Freemasonry in contemporary society thus "act[ed] as a lightning rod for a whole range of contentious issues and debates" (pp. 170-171).

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