As expected from a review written for H-Teach, I will start and end my review with notes related explicitly to teaching. This magnificent volume offers a challenging yet rewarding reading experience. Its breadth and depth make it a required reading for any serious student of Russian history, and its writing style makes it possible for the dedicated student to grasp. I shall return to its possible applications in teaching Russian history when concluding this review.

G. M. Hamburg, as an accomplished intellectual historian of modern Russia, seeks to outline the major trends of Russian political thought between 1500 and 1801. Choosing this periodization might raise questions among various readers, who are used to a major turning point with Peter the Great. This periodization, however, has been continuously utilized and convincingly defended by historians of the early modern period, such as Nancy Shields Kollmann.[1] Without neglecting to acknowledge Peter’s role in this “path toward Enlightenment,” Hamburg manages to see beyond Peter and to put his role in a wider historical context.

One of the most remarkable features of this book is its introduction. While every historian works according to certain assumptions and in a defined conceptual (and therefore terminological) framework, few authors have managed (or tried) to elucidate them to the nonspecialist reader in the same exacting clarity. Hamburg explains the fundamental views of Russia and its history while demonstrating the intellectual origins of these views. He defines the terms he uses, such as “faith,” “politics,” “reason,” and “Enlightenment,” to distinguish their accepted uses (such as the Kant-inspired definition of the Enlightenment) from what they represented to the people in Muscovy. By doing so, the author makes it easier for his readers to understand the ideas he has meticulously collected, described, and analyzed.

Hamburg artfully demonstrates how Russia’s “Enlightenment” drew its origins from both Orthodox teachings on virtue and Western notions translated into Russian idioms. He shows, for example, how Catherine’s definition of “liberty,” the key tenets of which were obedience to the law and freedom of conscience, was a product of both Orthodox teachings transmitted from the Muscovite political culture to imperial times and the Western ideas she sought to import to Russia. It is the combination of both that allowed such views to resonate within its audiences.

One must admit this work reads like a textbook at times and like a reference book at others. Such a volume is based on intimate knowledge and proficiency in the source materials. With 122 pages of notes and an index of another 30, one
cannot but admire Hamburg for his comprehen-
sive treatment of such a wide topic. The sources he
engages with have been the cornerstone of every
graduate student's reading list on early modern
Russia and its thinkers, and therefore the sweep-
ing overview gives its readers a preliminary un-
derstanding of the main characters in the intellec-
tual arena of that time period.

Like any other good book, Hamburg's does
raise questions and reveal open ends. For ex-
ample, the idea that “the divinization of the auto-
crat reduced the prince's desire to elicit and heed
counsel from his subjects, and it also diminished
his subjects' urge to tender that counsel,” is diffi-
cult to reconcile with studies that ascribe the elites
with a participatory role, sometimes even stronger
and more meaningful than the one of the autocrat,
in Muscovite politics (p. 729).[2] Daniel Rowland
demonstrated that “wise advisors” were a crucial
part of the ideological depictions of the tsar, espe-
cially of an erring tsar, in an analysis that is other-
wise in line with Hamburg's analysis.[3] The boy-
ars had an interest in maintaining the image of an
unlimited autocrat, but always sought to counsel
him and vociferously protected their right to par-
take in ruling the country.[4]

In addition, his assertion that “Russian
thinkers before Peter ascribed importance to book
learning, to practical wisdom, to spiritual discern-
ment,” and that being learned is a quality of being
enlightened while using Vladimir Monomakh as
an example, is interesting (p. 731). Simon Franklin
immediately comes to mind, reminding us that,
while being a bookman was generally a compli-
ment, there was an increasing suspicion of the
bookman. What began as “an unmixed blessing,
unambiguously glorious,” demonstrated “a germ
of distrust.”[5] Such comments, however, are inev-
itable and can be attributed to the different ways
scholars see history, both in major and minor is-

Having determined that the book in question
is undoubtedly an immediate classic, one only
wonders how we can bring such a “monstrous”
volume to the classroom. Clearly, this is not a
monograph that can be brought to complement
any of the standard textbooks in a survey class. In-
deed, it is best used in upper-division and gradu-
ate classes, where it can be used as a textbook on
its own or, when taking selected chapters, as a
complement to reading the original works or to
quickly cover topics not covered by the syllabus.
When looking at graduate programs, it is beyond
doubt that this book, paired with Andrzej Walicki's
A History of Russian Thought from the Enlighten-
ment to Marxism (1979) and William Leatherbar-
row and Derek Offord's edited collection A History
of Russian Thought (2010), should be an authorit-
avative reading on political thought.

Notes

[1]. Nancy Shields Kollmann, By Honor Bound:
State and Society in Early Modern Russia (Ithaca,

[2]. A good example for such a study is Nancy
Shields Kollmann, Kinship and Politics: The Mak-
ing of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547

[3]. Daniel Rowland, "Did Muscovite Literary
Ideology Place Limits on the Power of the Tsar
(1540s-1660s)?" Russian Review 49, no. 2 (1990):
125-155.

[4]. See John P. Le Donne, "The Eighteenth-
Century Russian Nobility," Cahiers du Monde

[5]. Simon Franklin, “Booklearning and Book-
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-teach


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48257

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