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God, Tsar, and People is a collection of the key essays by Daniel B. Rowland, one of the major scholars of early modern Russian history in the United States and now emeritus professor at the University of Kentucky. Effectively a companion piece to the earlier The New Muscovite Cultural History: A Collection in Honor of Daniel B. Rowland (2009), a festschrift that collected the works of colleagues inspired by his ideas, God, Tsar, and People brings together Rowland’s essays that influenced his colleagues most. As Russell E. Martin, another eminent expert in early modern Russia, notes in his foreword to God, Tsar, and People, this new volume serves an important purpose. Despite recent challenges from such work as the digital humanities, the monograph remains enshrined in most university bureaucracies as the gold standard of demonstrating a scholar’s abilities and contribution to the field. Yet, here, Martin lauds instead the essay as a major contribution. Essays are not merely fractional parts of larger studies but can stand alone as important marks in the field. God, Tsar, and People is then a celebration both of a distinguished colleague’s contributions to a field and of the essay genre itself.

Following Martin’s foreword, the volume consists of fifteen essays divided into three sections. Since the volume functions to represent and contextualize classic works, the majority of the essays are republished from elsewhere. The earliest essay is from 1969 and is a graduate school essay of Rowland’s—may we all have such confidence in our younger selves—while the other essays were published between the 1970s and the 2000s, with a concluding piece written specifically for this volume. The first section, “The Textual: Breaking the Code,” presents five essays, each of which is a close reading of a group of sources or even a single source relating to early modern Russian politics. The chapters deal with Andrei Kurbskii’s writings, Ivan Timofeev’s Vremennik, stories about the Time of Troubles, Muscovite literature dealing
with the limits of monarchical power, and texts on Saint Sergius.

The second section, “Adding the Visual: Investigating Art and Architecture,” is a little longer at seven essays. “Visual” in the title is a bit tricky, as Rowland’s work collected here is not restricted to the visual alone. Three essays in this section deal with art and architecture in the direct sense: chapter 6 deals with the Church Militant icon, chapter 7 with early modern Russian churches, and chapter 9 with the decoration of the Moscow throne rooms. Chapters 8 and 10 represent Rowland’s thoughts on the meaning of architecture as something that is built and something that is used, dealing with, respectively, Boris Godunov’s architectural monuments and the spaces, images, and rituals of the throne rooms. Rowland here is not interested in the visual as only something to be looked at but also in how early modern people moved through spaces and conducted their lives in the shadow of images. Chapter 11 draws together the interests of the two sections of the book by looking at the images and text from the Illustrated Chronicle Compilation. This essay, like the others, is a republication, but it is here for the first time accompanied by an unpublished conference paper applying similar analysis to the images accompanying early modern Russian biblical texts. The final essay of this section does not deal with visual images directly but is an analysis of political ideas contemporary to Ivan the Terrible in comparative European context.

The volume concludes with the section “Summing Up: What Our Work Means.” This section brings together work on Russia and other scholarly inquiry and contextualizes Rowland’s work with others in his field. As Martin notes in his introduction, there is a major thread in this volume, as there has been in Rowland’s work, of engaging with early modern Russia on its own terms. Although he does at times engage in comparative history, Rowland insists throughout that we should not bemoan Russia’s indifference to writing theological tomes or wonder if the country might have taken on a more western European character had events unfolded differently. We must, for better or worse, take Russia where it is.

This volume, then, serves a specific purpose. It will be a helpful compendium for those interested in key works in early modern Russian cultural history, especially in combination with the final essay situating Rowland’s work within broader trends in the field. It may also interest those contemplating why we still valorize the monograph. It is a work that calls us to look back and value what has already been achieved in the field rather than one that seeks to push us forward.
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