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## The Truth about Muscovy

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## The Truth about Muscovy

Marshall Poe

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In the 1930s many Westerners visited the Soviet Union and returned home with strange and horrifying stories. They said that Bolshevik Russia was a ruthless communist dictatorship. One man—Stalin—held all political power; he ruled through terror and the fear it inspired; and he was prosecuting an experiment in social engineering that was destroying the lives of millions of his subjects. Generally speaking, these visitors were not believed, no matter how well they documented their case. Critics claimed that the Western commentators were ignorant of the Soviet Union or biased against communism. In fact, they proposed, Stalinist Russia was a progressive socialist state. Now that the archives have been opened, however, we know that much of what they said was true. The Soviet Union was a Communist dictatorship.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, another set of Western travelers visited Russia, and they too came home with strange and horrifying stories. They said that Muscovy was a despotism. The Russian tsar held nearly all political power; his subjects, who viewed him as God’s instrument, willingly did whatever he commanded; and he used Russia’s people and property as his personal possessions, doing with them what he would. Many modern historians of Muscovy—and particularly those in the United States—do not credit these accounts. These critics claim that the visitors were ignorant of Russian ways or biased against Russia. In fact, these historians propose, the Muscovite monarchy was in many ways similar to other early modern European monarchies. In this essay I will argue—with all due respect for my esteemed colleagues and friends—that the these critics are wrong, the foreigners were right, and that Muscovy was despotism.

### *Muscovite Political Folkways*

In the Golden Age of Russian historiography—the era of Solov’ev, Kliuchevskii and Platonov—the proposition that the Muscovite state was distinct from European-style kingdoms was relatively uncontroversial. Only one scholar, Pavlov-Sil’vanskii, attempted to argue that the Appanage and Muscovite systems of government were cut from the same cloth as European “feudal” monarchies.<sup>1</sup> As brilliant as Pavlov-Sil’vanskii’s exposition was, it was widely rejected by historians of the day in favor of what might be called the “service state” model, the most famous proponent of which was none other than Kliuchevskii. Kliuchevskii argued that the fundamental principle of Muscovite governance was service to the tsar. This service was universal—everyone owed it—and unconditional—it rested on no “exchange” between the tsar and his men. In fact, Kliuchevskii went so far as to propose that the idea of royal service was the structuring element of Muscovite society: different social classes were not defined by their rights (as in Europe), but rather by their obligations to the crown. The *dvoriane* fought for the tsar; the clergy prayed for the tsar; the merchants traded

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<sup>1</sup>Nikolai Pavlovich Pavlov-Sil’vanskii, *Feodalizm v drevnei Rusi* (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1907).

for the tsar; and the serfs labored for the tsar. Ironically, only slaves were free of royal service, because they were things own by others and not subjects owned by the tsar.

The first real challenge to the “service state” model was mounted by Soviet Marxist historians in the 1920s and 1930s. Historical materialism dictated that all nations followed the same historical trajectory. Russia, the Marxists said, could be no different. Therefore it was decreed that Muscovy was a “feudal” country ruled by an “estate-representative monarchy.” It was a relatively easy thing to adduce evidence to this effect: weren’t *pomeshiki* “knights”; weren’t *pomest’ia* “fiefs”?; weren’t the *krlestiane* “serfs”?; didn’t the *zemskii sobor* constitute a representative assembly? It mattered little in the intensely charged and even dangerous political climate of the time that all of these propositions had been destroyed in the debate following the publication of Pavlov-Silvanskii’s work. What mattered was the Party Line, and it dictated that Russia was a *typical* European country that had undergone the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism to Socialism. Certainly there was some room for maneuver here, and some of the great Soviet historians—Veselovskii, Zimin—maneuvered brilliantly and bravely. But in the end the Party Line prevailed.

At least in Russia. Elsewhere Muscovite historiography was taking a very different, and in its way, equally tendentious turn. In the West, scholars had begun to wonder about the ultimate historical origins of Bolshevism in Russia. How, they asked, could it be that Communism had taken root in Russia and not elsewhere? What was it about Russia that made it particularly susceptible to Communist rule? The answer given by many was found in the “autocratic political tradition,” which stressed the ingrained “need” for a strong leader (a *vozhd*) and an age-old habit of collective sacrifice (*sobornost*). This warmed over Slavophile interpretation of Russian Communism was most pronounced in the work of Berdiaev. Far from Russia and even farther from historical reality, he waxed philosophical about the remarkable coincidence of the “Third Rome” and the “Third International” in Russia:

The ancient Russian messianic idea goes on living in the deep spiritual layers of the Russian people. But in the conscious mind its formula changes, the thing “in the name” of which it acts; the messianic idea rises out the collective unconsciousness of the people's life and takes on another name. Instead of the monk Philotheus's [*sic*] Third Rome we get Lenin's Third International.<sup>2</sup>

Not a few Western historians followed Berdiaev down this path, though they ended their journey in a very different place. Where Berdiaev, even in his confusion, wanted to make audiences understand and even sympathize with the Russians’ peculiar Communist predilections, Western Cold Warriors wanted to demonstrate that Russia was evil, had always been evil, and would always be evil. Thus we find Muscovy described as “totalitarian” and a direct line was drawn between Ivan IV and Stalin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Nikolai A. Berdiaev, *The Russian Revolution* [1931] (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 41.

<sup>3</sup>For the “Ivan IV to Stalin” view, see John Lawrence, *A History of Russia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 90: “The princes of Moscow were landholders whose estates had grown into an empire, but when they had suppressed their rivals, neither law nor custom could limit their authority. The tradition of personal autocracy founded by Ivan the Great set the pattern for many generations of tsars. In the persons of Lenin and Stalin, it survived the October Revolution.”; Adam Ulam, “Tradition and Modernity in Soviet Political Culture,” in *Patterns of Government. The Major Political Systems of Europe*, 3<sup>rd</sup>

It was in this context of ideologically inspired historical myth that Edward Keenan wrote his famous piece “Muscovite Political Folkways,” the founding charter of much modern Western writing on Pre-Petrine Russia.<sup>4</sup> “Folkways,” Keenan explained, was written as part of a U.S. Department of State Contract in the mid-1970s and published in limited circulation by the Russian Research Center in July, 1976. The article attempted to do for the understanding of Russian history what George Kennan’s seminal “Sources of Soviet Conduct” had done for the understanding of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the two articles bear remarkable similarities, particularly the thesis that age-old Russian political habits—not some messianic ideological program—are behind ancient and modern Russian political activities. Keenan said that Muscovy was not a species of European “feudalism” and it certainly was not anything like modern “totalitarianism.” Rather, he avers, Muscovite “political culture” (his preferred term for ingrained and useful habits) was *sui generis*. It was built on the basis of Russian experience and Russian experience alone. And this experience, Keenan emphasizes, was a very harsh one. An erratic climate, poor soil and open borders made the Muscovite enterprise a marginal one, always in danger of extinction. In response to these conditions, the Muscovites developed a “risk-averse” pattern of political organization. Kinship and patronage—the most enduring of human associations—were at the core of the Muscovite system. Open conflict—expensive, wasteful and dangerous—was forbidden. Scarce resources were carefully husbanded and mobilized only for specific, attainable goals. And above all else, risky activities were avoided at all cost. In a word, the Muscovites only bet on sure things.

The image of Muscovite kinship that emerges from “Folkways” is somewhat murky. Keenan stresses that the Muscovite state bore little resemblance to the politically-conflicted, estate-based, legally-constrained kingdoms of Europe. The “Boyar Duma,” “zemskii sobor,” and other putatively European-style institutions were either misrepresented by historians who wanted to find Europe in Muscovy or were complete fabrications of later eras. Neither was the Muscovite system terribly similar to polities closer to home. Though the Muscovites may have borrowed certain political superficialities from the Byzantine Empire and the Golden Horde (clearly indicated in the historical record), their construct was actually quite distinct from both. Muscovy, Keenan insisted, charted its own course.

If Muscovite “political culture” was not European, Byzantine, or Mongol, what was it? The Muscovites themselves offered no obvious answer: Kotoshikhin was the only Russian to provide a description of the Muscovite state, and he was more concerned with details than general characterizations.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the only answer readily available in the sources was to be found in the writings of the visiting Europeans. Yet Keenan rejected their opinion that Muscovy was a despotism. In what would become the standard critique, he argued that the Westerners were ignorant, biased, and (especially) fooled by Russian political theatre. The Muscovites wanted to present the image that the tsar was all-powerful and that they stood united behind him as one force. The travelers—who, Keenan says, were ignorant of Russian ways and predisposed to such a view—accepted

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edition, ed. Samuel Hutchinson Beer (New York: Random House, 1973), 605: [Ivan IV’s] reign is not atypical of certain other great periods in Russian history. Though he was a great social and political reformer...his reign abounds in instances of violent and systematic terror. It is a pattern to be found again in Peter the Great and Stalin...”

<sup>4</sup>Edward L. Keenan, “Muscovite Political Folkways,” *Russian Review* 45 (1986), 115-81.

<sup>5</sup>X [George F. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25: 4 (July, 1947), 566-82.

<sup>6</sup>Grigorii Kotoshikhin, *O Rossii v tsarstvomani Aleksieia Mikhailovicha*, ed. Ann E. Pennington (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980).

this ruse without question. In reality, Keenan claims, the tsar was often (particularly in his minority and when feeble) a puppet of the boyars who ruled Muscovy from the security of carefully maintained clans.

In the end, Keenan steadfastly refused to put a convenient label on his depiction of the Muscovite polity, or even to offer a brief, telegraphic characterization. This, as we will see, left the door open for others to develop his ideas in directions that the author of “Muscovite Political Folkways” never imagined.

*The Harvard School and Its Discontents*

“Muscovite Political Folkways” proved to be the most influential article on early Russian history in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It became standard reading in undergraduate surveys. It was discussed in countless graduate seminars. It was cited, almost always approvingly, in every book on Muscovite history published in the Anglophone world. Why? First and foremost, the power of Keenan’s conception must be recognized. In a field divided by politicized and empirically unconvincing positions (Soviet and American), “Folkways” provided an entirely new and at least intriguing way to understand Russia history from beginning to end. It was relatively simple to demonstrate that Muscovy was neither an “estate-representative monarchy” nor an early premonition of Communist “totalitarianism.” But it was quite another matter to construct a convincing model—albeit vague—of what Muscovy *was*. And Keenan had done this: the Russian political system was a clan-based oligarchy with a figure-head tsar (party chairman).

Yet the popularity of Keenan’s article cannot be divorced from the political context in which it was written and received. “Muscovite Political Folkways” was a true product of the Detente era. Just as the proponents of Detente, Keenan was trying to project a new and less threatening image of the Russians, one that would allow political reconciliation between the Superpowers. He accomplished this by carefully distinguishing who the Russians are from what the Russians say. As to the former, he proposed essentially that the Russians were and are “just like us,” only a bit more traditional and paranoid. They stick to what works (clan based organization, patronage networks) and avoid risks (like international military adventures). As to the latter, he avers that the Russians are masters of political theatre. Thus the Muscovites staged the “despotic tsar” in order to overawe their subjects and foreign travelers, and the Soviets staged “real existing socialism” for the same purpose. For liberal American historians, weary of the harsh rhetoric and willful distortion of Soviet and Cold War historiography, the idea of “two Russias”—one benign and real, the other threatening and false—was comforting. It allowed them to believe that the disquieting message of the sources themselves—that Muscovy was a despotism and that Soviet Russia was a totalitarianism—was somehow false, and that behind this harsh, misleading veneer was a kinder and gentler Russia, one the West could deal with peacefully.

Keenan himself never followed up in print on the ideas set forth in “Folkways.” His students, however, did. In the mid 1980s, they began to publish work heavily influenced by the image of Russian monarchy found in “Muscovite Political Folkways.” Nancy Shields Kollmann’s *Kinship and Politics* (1987) represents the first major contribution to what might be called the “Harvard School” of early Russian history.<sup>7</sup> By analyzing appointments to the Boyar Duma in the fourteenth through mid sixteenth century, Kollmann empirically

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<sup>7</sup>Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics. The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

fleshed out Keenan's theory of collective rule. Following Keenan, she argues that the despotism we find in the foreign sources was a "façade" thrown up by the elite clans who truly ruled the state. In reality, the clans controlled Muscovy and strictly limited the prerogative of the crown. And they ruled through consensus, carefully avoiding political infighting when ever possible. In 1990 Daniel Rowland seconded this motion in an influential article. He found that certain Muscovite literary texts stressed the requirement of the tsar to take council with his boyars. According to Rowland, the Muscovites believed that a tsar who ignored this requirement—that is, ruled without council or consensus—was not a legitimate tsar at all.<sup>8</sup> George Weickhardt published a series of articles in the early and mid 1990s aimed at demonstrating, again, that Muscovy was not the despotism the foreigners imagined. In these pieces, he proposes that the Muscovites believed the tsar was elected by the people, and as such could be limited in his actions and removed if found wanting<sup>9</sup>; that the Muscovites were considered equal before the law and enjoyed the right to due process<sup>10</sup>; and that the Muscovites held a form of private property that would have been recognized as such by the English of the era.<sup>11</sup> In a 1996 book, *Autocracy in the Provinces*, Valerie Kivelson extended Keenan's theory to the study of center-periphery relation in Muscovy.<sup>12</sup> Again, Kivelson explicitly rejects the testimony of the foreigners that the Russian gentry was under the heel of Moscow. Instead, she finds that the gentry exercised a considerable amount for freedom vis-a-vis the crown and even goes so far as to propose that they represented the stirrings of a nascent "civil society" in Russia. Two year later, Donald Ostrowski (who, it should be said, disagrees with several of Keenan's theses) published *Muscovy and the Mongols*, a thorough exploration of Mongol influence on early Russia. There he proposes that the Boyar Duma held considerable power and that, in fact, Muscovy was a "constitutional" monarchy. In 1999, Kollman issued a second monograph—*By Honor Bound*—which drew heavily on propositions found in "Muscovite Political Folkways."<sup>13</sup> Specifically, she again reiterates that Muscovy was not a despotism. Far from it. Rather, she proposes that Muscovy was a "minimalist state" in which individuals could and did protect their honor from harm by the crown.<sup>14</sup>

To varying degrees, each of these authors shared a number of opinions, some of which can be found in "Folkways" and some of which cannot. First, they are deeply skeptical of foreign testimony about the nature of the Muscovite political system. Second, they all oppose themselves to what Kollmann and Kivelson call the "State" or "Statist School" of Russian historiography—Chicherin, Kliuchevskii, and, more than anyone else,

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<sup>8</sup>Daniel Rowland, "Did Muscovite Literary Ideology Place Any Limits on the Power of the Tsar?" *Russian Review* 49 (1990), 125-56. Also see his "The Problem of Advice in Muscovite Tales about the Time of Troubles," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 6 (1979), 259-83.

<sup>9</sup>George Weickhardt, "Kotoshikhin: An Evaluation and Interpretation." *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 17: 2 (1990), 127-54; idem, "Political Thought in Seventeenth-Century Russia." *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 21 (1994), 316-38.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., "Due Process and Equal Justice in Muscovite Law." *Russian Review* 51 (1992), 463-80.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., "The Pre-Petrine Law of Property." *Slavic Review* 52 (1993), 663-79.

<sup>12</sup>Valerie A. Kivelson, *Autocracy in the Provinces: Russian Political Culture and the Gentry in the Seventeenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup>Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup>Nancy Shields Kollmann, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

Richard Pipes. Indeed Pipes' *Russian under the Old Regime* is the *bete noir* of the Harvard School.<sup>15</sup> Third, they all propose that Muscovite politics was not despotic but something else. Here is where we find the greatest variation among members of the Harvard School and the greatest conceptual distance from the ideas originally propounded in "Folkways." Some of the Harvard school works—early Kollmann and Rowland—hew closely to Keenan's original tradition-bound, clan-based, oligarchic model. They confine themselves to empirical exploration and verification of Keenan's political cultural thesis. Others venture much further down the road toward a kinder, gentler, less despotic Muscovy. This road is generally paved with analogies between Muscovite institutions and European institutions. Thus we find Weichardt claiming that Muscovite ideology and law are quite like early modern English ideology and law; Kivelson proposing that informal groups of Muscovite gentry were the functional equivalent of European legal estates; Ostrowski speculating that the Boyar Duma was quite like the constitutional royal councils found in European courts; and later Kollmann arguing that Muscovite honor legislation suggests a deep kinship between Russian and European state-society relations.

*What Muscovy Wasn't: A European Ständestaat*

The Harvard School, then, has evolved since the publication of "Folkways" some 25 years ago. Its proponents (and they are certainly more numerous than this brief sketch suggests) remain united with Keenan in believing that Muscovy was not the sort of place found in, say, Herberstein's *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii* or Pipes' *Russian under the Old Regime*. But they have to one degree or another parted company with Keenan as regards the positive characterization of Muscovite state and society. Where he proposed that Muscovite political culture was profoundly *unlike* European political culture, they have grown accustomed to claiming—to various degrees and in various ways—that the two were quite similar in important ways. In a word, they now argue that Muscovy was something like a "typical" early modern European *Ständestaat*, that is, a kind of traditional monarchy in which the king's power was strictly limited by law and tradition; he was surrounded by powerful courtiers who wielded significant political power; his kingdom was divided into legally-constituted estate-like organizations; and his subjects were entitled to the protection of law and due process.

There is a host of compelling evidence that contradicts this view of Muscovite government and society. In my view the most compelling is the testimony of the European travelers themselves, for they flatly, repeatedly and forcefully denied that the Muscovite tsardom was similar in nature to the European states that were their homes. If, as the Harvard School claims, Muscovy was so like Europe, how could all the visiting Europeans—hundreds and hundreds of them—fail to notice? No author of the Harvard School has attempted to answer this question in an extended critique of the foreign testimony. They often seem to assume, without analysis, that since the things the foreigners said were (in a European framework) improbable, they must not be true. There are, of course, good reasons to be skeptical of foreign ethnographic testimony in any age: foreign observers are sometimes ignorant of local way; they can be biased against their subjects; and they can be actively misled by the locals. The proponents of the Harvard School have leveled each of these charges against the visiting Europeans. The visitors, they claim, didn't have the experience necessary to truly understand Russian customs. Therefore their accounts are full of misleading superficialities. Moreover, the Europeans, they

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<sup>15</sup>Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner, 1974).

say, usually didn't like the Russians or their habits. Thus we find them painting a very dark picture of the "rude and barbarous" Muscovites. Finally, the travelers were fooled by the false image of an all powerful tsar thrown up by the manipulative boyar clans. This, they say, is the root of the erroneous notion that Muscovy was a despotism.

To be sure, there is some truth to these charges. One can easily find and site instances in which visiting Europeans were ignorant, biased and under the spell of Russian stagecraft. But a careful analysis of all the foreigners' testimony suggests that these mislead souls are the exceptions rather than the rule. Though some travelers went to Russia on brief diplomatic junkets (if 6 months to a year can be called brief), many visitors lived and worked in Russia for years. Such people certainly developed a deep and accurate understanding of Russian life. Though some travelers didn't seem to like the Russians very much, many others stated with apparent conviction that they reported things exactly as they saw them. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to call these men ethnographers, for that is the way they imagined themselves. Finally, though some Europeans may have been tricked by Russian spectacle, most were not. Most of the visitors were seasoned men of affairs, and as such were quite skeptical (and even cynical) about elaborate courtly presentations. Thus we have every reason to believe that those men who lived for some time in Russia, those who strove to be objective observers, and those who viewed Russian stagecraft skeptically accurately reported what they saw. And almost to a man they reported the same thing—that Muscovite rule was tyrannical.

It is sometimes suggested that this unity of opinion was the product of a pervasive stereotype of "Russian tyranny." It is true that such a stereotype developed in the last quarter of the sixteenth century: by that time enough accounts of Muscovy had been published for most educated Europeans to know that there was something peculiar about the power of the Muscovite tsar. It is also true that this stereotype was blindly perpetuated by the wide-spread practice of plagiarism (or "borrowing") among authors of European *Moscovitica*. For example, it is rather simple to demonstrate that many authors "borrowed" descriptions found in Herberstein's seminal work without attribution. But, even granting that the stereotype existed and borrowing occurred, what are we to do with Herberstein himself. As the first man to write an extended, eye-witness description of Muscovy, he could not have been influenced by any stereotype, for none existed. Ironically, he helped to create it! Herberstein plainly says that Muscovy was a tyranny. And what are we to do with the many authors who, while they may have been influenced by some atmospheric stereotype, wrote in complete literary isolation and nonetheless described Muscovy in terms virtually identical to those found in Herberstein. These men could not have "borrowed" their descriptions of Russian tyranny, for they had never read any. And finally there is the Syrian cleric Paul of Aleppo. He could not really have been influenced by the European stereotype of Muscovy (he was not European), nor could he have been influenced by European descriptions of Muscovy (he had read none, nor could he). Yet he describes Muscovy in terms that agree very nearly with Herberstein. In other words, he independently corroborated the testimony of the European travelers.

But even if one throws out the testimony of the foreigners, there is still very little in the sources that would suggest Muscovy was some sort of European-style *Ständestaat*. No Muscovite source suggests that the authority of the tsar was limited by human law. Quite the contrary. The *Uložhenie* of 1649, among others, makes very clear that the tsar was the author of worldly law, not the subject of it. Few would deny that several tsars—Ivan

III, Ivan IV, Aleksei and Peter I—acted as if they were not subject to any human law. No Muscovite source suggests that the tsar’s authority was limited by any “constitutional” body, such as a curia regis, a system of courts, regional corporation, estates. Quite the contrary. The preponderance of evidence suggests that the various sub-units of the Muscovite state—occasional royal councils, the so-called *zemskie sobory*, central chancelleries, regional governorships, and the various classes of service people (*sluzhbiye liudi*), merchants (*gosti*), etc.—were created by the crown and existed solely at its pleasure. The record is full of instances in which the state simply decreed previously existing bodies or institutions out of existence (*mestnichestvo*, for example). No Muscovite source suggests that Russians believed they had a firm “right” to defend their persons or possessions before the crown. Quite the contrary. There is voluminous and unambiguous evidence—petitions, *slovo i delo* cases, statements to foreigners—that they believed they themselves and everything they possessed were ultimately owned by the tsar. He was master, and they were slaves.

Given that Europeans said Muscovy was not a European-style monarchy, and that the overwhelming preponderance of Muscovite evidence suggests that it was not a European-style monarchy, it seems reasonable to conclude that Muscovy was something other than a *Ständestaat*. But what?

#### *What Muscovy Was: A Despotism*

To answer this question, we can do little better than to turn to the European visitors. They observed Muscovy at firsthand and they described what they saw using Aristotelian political categories that are still current today. In other words, they were knowledgeable and spoke in a language that we can understand clearly. So what did they say? Politics, they believed, were of basically three types: democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. Each of these three types was subject to tendencies that would eventually corrupt it: democracy became mob rule; aristocracy became rude oligarchy; and monarchy became plain tyranny. Most frequently, the Europeans described Muscovy as a tyranny, that is, a polity in which a rogue prince, flouting law and custom, appropriates the *res publica* for his own private use. Aristotle said that the tyrant unjustly makes the entire commonwealth his own property.

Yet it seems that tyranny is not a very accurate depiction of Muscovite rule in the *longue duree*. According to Aristotle’s theory of regimes, tyrants were hated by their subjects and, thus, inevitably overthrown by the disgruntled population. Many of the European travelers, apparently influenced by this theory, predicted the violent downfall of this or that Russian tsar (particularly Ivan IV). In fact, only two were ever overthrown—False Dmitri I and Tsar Vasiliu Shuiskii, both in highly unusual circumstances. The Muscovites, for whatever reason, did not rise up against the tyrants who ruled over them. In the mid seventeenth century, European visitors such as Adam Olearius began to notice this exception to the accepted Aristotelian rule. How could there be such a thing as a stable tyranny? Olearius and others found the answer in Aristotle. In *The Politics*, the Stagerite describes a kind of monarchy in which the king rules his subjects like a master over servants. He, in effect, is a legal tyrant and they are, in effect, his willing slaves. This form of rule Aristotle called despotism, and Olearius thought the term best described the peculiarly stable tyranny he and other Europeans observed in Muscovy.

There is much to be said for Olearius’s conclusion, for it accords rather nicely with what we find in the sources themselves. In Muscovite documents, the tsar was always referred to as *gosudar’* (master); his elite servitors—those directly under his protection—styled themselves the tsar’s *kbolopy* (slaves); everyone else—those outside the direct protection of the crown—called themselves the tsar’s *siryty* (orphans) or *bogomoltsy* (pilgrims). It is difficult to determine exactly what tsars thought of their power, for none ever described it at length. We do, however, have some evidence that they took the master-slave metaphor to heart. The foreigners recount testimony, corroborated by Muscovite sources, in which tsars referred to themselves as “masters” and their subjects as “slaves.” Muscovite rulers seemed quite willing to play this role, for they treated their subjects as “slaves”—ordering them about, punishing them at will, and even executing them with impunity. Similarly, it is difficult to discover what common Muscovites thought about their relation to royal power. But again, we have good evidence that they too took the master-slave metaphor seriously. For example, Muscovites repeatedly told visiting foreigners that the tsar was a “master” of “slaves” and that he owned everything in the realm. By all appearances, they generally acted in accordance with their role as “slaves.” With certain extreme exceptions (especially during the Time of Troubles), they seem to have willingly done all they were asked to do as if their very salvation depended on it.

And they believed it did. To understand why, we must look at the sources of Muscovite political consciousness. They were three. First, there were political lessons learned from life in a harsh agricultural world of northern Rus’: life is hard, and death always near; people are evil, and they will hurt you if they can; you need someone powerful to protect you; disobeying your protector is dangerous. Second, there were lessons learned from the Holy Scriptures: life on earth is punishment for original sin; people are sinful, and they will hurt you if they can; God has appointed princes—like King David—to bring order to his faithful flock; to disobey the prince is to disobey God. Third, there were the lessons learned from the mish-mash of Greek political ideas available to the Muscovite elite: princes are appointed by God; they are beholden only to God; and they hold unrestricted authority. The Muscovites, in stark contrast to Renaissance-era Europeans, received no other political wisdom—no Plato, no Aristotle, no Polybius. Nothing. The only man in Muscovy to produce “political philosophy” that we might compare to Bodin, Hobbes or Locke was Iurii Krizhanich—a Croat trained in Rome and held prisoner in Tobol’sk by the Muscovites. And it seems certain that no Muscovite ever read Krizhanich or could have understood it if he had. So, given the limited range of sources available to the Muscovites, and the evident way in which all their sources agreed on the basic principles of political authority, it is hardly surprising that tsardom was understood as the natural order of things. To the Muscovites, the rule of the tsar was like the heavens and the earth, a part of God’s benevolent creation. As such, their duty in life was crystal clear—obey the tsar, for his was the command of God, and pray for salvation in the next and better life.

If we understand Muscovite political mentalities in this way, then the incredible things reported by the foreign visitors and observed in Muscovite sources begin to make sense. Why did Muscovites call themselves the tsar’s “slaves,” “orphans” and “pilgrims?” Because they believed they were. Experience told them that the “master” (*gosudar’*) was powerful and they were not; the Bible said that the subjects of God-appointed princes were to be submissive; the authorities themselves, parroting Greek political theory, insisted that the tsar was

God's instrument and they were obliged to be humble before him. Why did Muscovites proclaim that all they possessed was ultimately owned by the tsar? Again, because they believed it did. Experience showed that the tsar could grant anything and take away anything; the Bible, in describing the rule of King David, states plainly that he is a universal proprietor; and the authorities, inspired by the Greeks, loudly proclaimed that the tsar was God-like in his control of the life and property of his subjects. Finally, why were the Muscovites willing to do, even at great personal cost, almost whatever the tsar told them? Because they believed that the word of the tsar was *literally* the word of God, and to disobey Him was to jeopardize one's eternal soul. Experience itself demonstrated that disobeying the tsar entailed very nasty consequences; the Bible states that divinely appointed princes are God's vicars on Earth and not to be contradicted under pain of damnation; and the authorities, with reference to Greek political wisdom, emphasized the "God-granted" nature of the tsar and all that entailed. In short, there was nothing in the world of the Muscovites that suggested the true tsar was anything but a semi-divine being sent to discipline wicked subject-slaves.

Muscovy, then, was a despotism. Here despotism means a polity comprising: 1) a theoretically unrestricted, divinely-appointed ruler (or body of rulers); 2) a set of institutions and laws putatively of his creation and potentially subject to change by his will; 3) subjects-slaves to do his bidding. In the Muscovite case, despotism consisted of: 1) the tsar; 2) his court, the army, the chancelleries, the provincial administration; 3) all Muscovites, except slaves (they were someone else's property). Here despotism *does not mean* a regime in which the ruler acts arbitrarily to fulfill his own personal desires or fantasies. That is, this despotism is not "Oriental Despotism" as it was invented by opium-smoking nineteenth-century English poets. All human institutions of any duration rely on routine, and despotism is no different. The despot may have a greater opportunity to act capriciously than a monarch or president, but he would be wise not to, for the consequences are grave. Neither does despotism as it is used here mean a regime in which the tsar *actually* has universal power. That is, it is not "Totalitarianism" as figured by model-building, anti-Communist American political scientists of the late 1950s. Such a state of affairs does not exist and cannot exist. In all living polities, rulers' actions are impinged upon by a whole host of factors—available resources, technical means, custom, the willingness of subjects and so on and so forth. This despotism is, however, a regime in which the prerogative of the ruler is theoretically greater than that in a standard monarchy or democratic republic.

#### *Conclusion: The Truth about Muscovy*

Soviet historians and the Harvard School denied the truth about Muscovy—that is was a primitive, poor, beleaguered despotism—they found it offensive. Why? It seems clear that the reason has more than a little to do with latent, almost unconscious Europhilia and xenophobia. In their view, Russia was a modern European (or rather Europeanized) state, therefore it had to be provided with an acceptable European pedigree. Some form of *sui generis* despotism would not do. So in the eyes of the Soviets Muscovy became a feudal state and in the eyes of the Harvard School it became a *Ständestaat*. In so doing these historians not only mislead their respective publics, but they also failed to see that there is something truly heroic about Russia's actual past.

Early Muscovy faced three remarkable strategic disadvantages: it was poor (long winters, bad soil, off trade routes); it was primitive (poor agricultural techniques; no legacy of Classical civilization ); and it was almost

immediately under siege by more advanced powers (Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, etc.). It is important to remember that most early modern states in Western Eurasia—states with more advantageous strategic positions than Russia—simply collapsed. Muscovy did not. Instead, her elite build a kind of state that efficiently and effectively mobilized scarce resources for predominately military purposes. Granted, by our lights the Muscovite enterprise was cruel: it concentrated all power into the hands of a tiny elite; it obligated soldiers and administrators to a life of hard, unremitting service; and it consigned the overwhelming majority of the population to a kind of slavery. And it was not European, as all the visiting Europeans recognized: the Muscovite tsar was more powerful than any European king; his court was largely untouched by Latinate courtesy; his army and state was organized in a way considered antique in early modern Europe; his cities were rather fortresses than places of culture and commerce; and the bulk of his people were illiterate subsistence farmers. But it was magnificently successful in achieving its primary goal—the survival and expansion of Muscovy itself.

A primitive ethnos facing impossible odds manages to become one of the great powers in Europe and then the World. One need not embellish or disguise the story of Muscovy in order to make it heroic. The truth about Muscovy is quite remarkable as it is.