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University of Iowa

2001

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The Medieval Origins of the Modern  
Russian Crisis

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“The Medieval Origins of the Modern Russian Crisis.” *Palomar. Revista di cultura e politica* 5 (2001), 72-81 (in Italian); in *Internationella Studier* (Summer, 2001), no. 2, 23-38 (in Swedish); in *Geschichte, Politik, und ihre Didaktik* (in German); *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (in Russian).

## **The Medieval Origins of the Modern Russian Crisis**

Marshall Poe

**Draft: Not for Citation**

On November 18, 2000, the Russian Space Agency announced that the Mir space station would be allowed to fall back to earth. The station has proven remarkably successful and resilient. The Russians, however, can no longer afford it. Much the same may be said of the state that built Mir. Over the past five centuries, Russia has succeeded in building a vast empire in a part of the world without defensible borders or friendly neighbors. But today Russia seems unable to thrive. Democracy and rule-of-law rest on uncertain foundations. Many Russians remain suspicious of free expression. The Russian economy is a shambles. The Russian empire is fractured.

Why has post-Communist Russia been unable to transform itself into a prosperous democratic state? And why has the West been unable to help Russia? The reason is that the roots of the modern Russian crisis run much deeper than most Russians or Western experts imagine. Indeed, they can be traced to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was then that Russia’s rulers formulated habits of governance that would make it difficult for their successors to follow a progressive, European path of development. The weight of their fateful decisions burdens Russia to this day.

### **From Rus’ to Muscovy**

Sometime in the ninth century a group of Vikings, aided by local strong men, organized a protection racket stretching along the riparian trade route from the Baltic to the Black Sea. These Norsemen—called Rus’—and their allies were better organized than the native agriculturalists and had little difficulty taxing the modest river trade. As a creation of the Vikings, “Kievan Rus’” (as historians call this medieval jurisdiction) shared a common heritage with other early European states, notably Normandy and England. Indeed, the histories of the western and eastern Norse enterprises were quite similar. Once the Vikings became sufficiently established, their political pretensions moved them to create kingdoms; their desire for patronage by Rome and Constantinople inspired them to accept Christianity; and their need for native allies led them to marry locals, starting a process that would end in their complete assimilation.

Though they were similar, careful examination reveals a number of differences between the Rus’ and the other Norse states. Culturally, the western Vikings were rather successors than founders. The Norman kingdom inherited the cultural legacy of older empires, the Roman and Carolingian. In stark contrast, the eastern Vikings were true pioneers. When the Rus’ arrived in the northeast, they found no hint of Classical civilization. The Rus’ did receive Classical culture *via* contact with Byzantium, but comparatively little of it. Economically, the western Vikings built their operations on the decayed remnants of older imperial infrastructures, while the eastern Vikings had to start from scratch. In the northeast, agricultural practices were primitive, the soil was poor, and the growing seasons were short. The lack of a rural surplus had an important consequence: low levels of urbanization and trade. Militarily, the eastern Vikings were at war much more often

than their western counterparts. Indeed hardly a year went by without the Rus' joining some sort of battle with their neighbors. At a time when the western Viking kingdoms were thriving in the "Renaissance" of the High Middle Ages, the Rus' were fighting Steppe warriors for their very lives.

In the early thirteenth century one of these nomadic groups—the Mongols—subdued Rus'. The Mongols taught the Rus' the ways of imperial administration, but little else. The only thing the Mongols and the Rus' shared was the imperial system. Their cultures, religions, and ways of life were radically different, so there was relatively little exchange. The primary impact of the Mongols on Russian history is found in the role they played in the rise of Moscow. Moscow began as a tiny principality, neither wealthier nor better situated than other post-Kievan jurisdictions, for example, the principality of Tver. Rather, Moscow's "comparative advantage" was to be found in its patrons and leaders. The Muscovite princes were the Mongols' best students. They did as the Mongols asked and were richly rewarded. Prior to Mongol patronage, Moscow was a provincial town; after Mongol patronage, Moscow was the political center of Rus'. Happily for the Muscovite princes, it was precisely in this era—the fifteenth century—that the Golden Horde fragmented into several khanates, creating a power vacuum. The Muscovites filled it in the reigns of Ivan III, Vasiliū III, and Ivan IV ("the Terrible"). These remarkable men expanded the kingdom's borders east beyond the Volga, south to the Caspian Sea, west to the Dniepr and north to the White Sea. Thus a new early modern state was born—"Muscovy."

### **From Muscovy to Russia**

The Muscovite elite then began to be drawn into European affairs. For centuries, the Rus' princes had paid almost no attention to the West. Russians generally did not travel to Europe and Europeans did not travel to Rus'. Yet in the late fifteenth century, as Muscovy grew in power, Russia slowly drifted into the European orbit. Western diplomats began to visit Moscow and Muscovite diplomats began to journey to the West. Soon the Muscovites found themselves bound in alliances with some European powers and at war with others, notably Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and Livonia. The Muscovites had entered the European state system and, it seemed, were on their way to becoming a European state.

The first step was the transformation of the image of the Russian monarchy. Having long been a part of the Mongol empire, the Muscovites had developed a Steppe style. Ivan III, for example, liked to call himself "khan." This played well in the East, but would not do in Europe. The new empire needed a new, European-oriented public face. Since the Muscovites knew almost nothing of the West, they required help. And they got it, in the person of Sophia Palaeologa—niece of the last Byzantine emperor, Renaissance princess (raised and educated in Italy), and the wife of Ivan III. She and her entourage of Italo-Greeks would serve as imperial style-consultants to the "rude and barbarous" Muscovites. They had the full support of the Russian Church. While the Mongols were strong, the Church had remained silent as the Muscovite court copied Steppe manners. Once the Mongols had weakened, however, the churchmen grew bold and decided that their one-time overlords were godless heathens. The new official line on the Mongols was re-enforced by the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. With the demise of Byzantium, the heads of at least a few Russian clerics were filled with fantasies about "Third Romes" in Moscow. The new Christian "Rome" required a new

Christian “caesar,” not a heathen khan. And so the Church set about aiding Sophia and her party in their efforts to Byzantinize the Russian monarchy.

All in all, they did a respectable job of making Ivan III into a “new Constantine” and Moscow a “new Constantinople.” A great number of cosmetic, European changes were made: Ivan’s Russian title (grand prince) was supplemented by “tsar” (Latin *caesar*) and “autocrat” (Greek *autokratōr*); his decidedly Russian lineage was traced to Caesar Augustus; his prosaic palace was rebuilt in an Italian style; and his empire was given a symbol—the double-headed eagle, courtesy of the Habsburgs. European envoys noted the difference, puzzling over the meaning of manifestly Roman imperial regalia in the “Scythian” east. Muscovy was even given a European name, “Russia”—the Greek designation.

### **Into the Breach, Unprepared**

Paradoxically, it was precisely in this triumphal age—at the birth of the Muscovite state—that the origins of the modern Russian crisis are to be found. Ivan III’s turn to the west thrust the Muscovites into a context for which they were not prepared—not culturally, not economically, not militarily.

Muscovite high culture in the era of Ivan III was an elaboration of the culture of Kievan Rus’ with a slight admixture of Italo-Greek elements. It was overwhelmingly religious: Muscovite literature, art, and architecture were all patterned on Byzantine Orthodox models. It was also insular. After the fall of Constantinople, the Russians were almost completely cut off from Classical civilization. In other circumstances, such a cultural complex might not have been inadequate for a thoroughly typical pre-modern state such as Muscovy. But circumstances were not otherwise. The Renaissance was blazing in Europe. In nearly every sphere of human endeavor—science, politics, religion, philosophy, art, letters—the reconsideration of Ancient learning was transforming the intellect of European man. The Russians missed this revolution of the mind. Muscovite sources from the era contain almost nothing that could reasonably be called Renaissance thought: no philosophy, no science, no political theory, and little literature or poetry. Why? Most basically, the Russians possessed very few Classical texts, often couldn’t read those they had, and they had no schools to teach the languages required (Greek and Latin). Moreover, the tsar’s court, the Church, and the common people demonstrated a marked hostility to foreigners and foreign learning. The former were viewed as heretics and the latter was seen as the work of the devil. Without the textual material of the Renaissance and without the tolerance required to receive it from Europe, the new Muscovite empire remained frozen in a fundamentally medieval cultural context.

The Muscovite economy *circa* 1500 was larger than its Kievan predecessor, and probably better organized: markets were expanded and protected; a system of weights and measures was introduced; some money was circulated; commercial laws were promulgated. Though it remained comparatively unproductive, the peasant-dominated economy was usually sufficient for the needs of the state and its people. Had things remained unchanged, this typical pre-modern complex would not have presented a significant problem. But economic conditions immediately to the west were changing dramatically. As the Renaissance was transforming European culture, a great commercial revolution was sweeping the continent. Agricultural yields improved as new techniques and crops were introduced; manufacturing centers developed in large cities; trade expanded; silver

money flooded in from the New World; and banking centers evolved in various European capitals. Alas, the Muscovites missed this boat as well. In gross structural terms, the Muscovite economy remained fundamentally unchanged from 1400 to 1650. Its huge peasantry was poor, its merchant class anemic, and it hosted no mining or industry to speak of. Why? In the first instance, Muscovite peasants—farming poor soil with primitive techniques—had too little to spare to support an entrepreneurial merchant class, the motor of early modern economic development. The peasants' excess income was, apparently, plowed into increasing numbers of children—a rational strategy for an environment in which labor was in short supply and land was abundant. Moreover, the Muscovite elite, Church, and commoners were suspicious of foreign traders. This prejudice impeded the transfer of capital and technology that might have stimulated economic growth. Without sufficient demand to support an entrepreneurial class and unwilling to permit large numbers of foreign traders into Russia, the Muscovite economy remained medieval in nature.

Muscovy's greatest achievements in the age of Ivan III were military. The Muscovite cavalry army grew strong and its traditional opponents—the Tatar khanates—were either subdued or bound in alliances. With a little luck, the Muscovites could have hoped for a century or more of relative peace. Unfortunately, no such luck was forthcoming, for a new and much more threatening set of opponents appeared on Muscovy's western horizon. During the Renaissance, gunpowder transformed the European way of war: ill-disciplined hordes of mounted knights were replaced by a mix of forces including infantry with firearms, pikemen, cavalry, and field guns. European armies were bigger, more expensive, and more lethal than ever before. The Muscovites were slow to react to this new challenge. As a result, they were repeatedly mauled by European forces. Why? Most basically, the Muscovites did not know how to make gunpowder weapons or train troops to use them. This knowledge could only be gained from Europeans, and it was both very expensive and spiritually dangerous. In the end, the Muscovites were compelled to hire foreign mercenaries, but they could neither afford nor tolerate sufficient numbers of them to defeat the Livonians, Lithuanians, and Swedes. In order to supplement their small gunpowder forces, therefore, the Muscovites continued to deploy their medieval cavalry in the West, usually with poor results.

### **Of Autocracy**

The Muscovites, then, had built a medieval kingdom at precisely the time when medieval kingdoms were becoming obsolete, at least in Western Eurasia. They did, however, possess one tool that could save them from conquest by more advanced European states—autocracy, a type of political regime typical in the pre-modern world but unusual in the early modern European context. What was Russian autocracy? Most simply, it was the tsar and his self-styled “slaves,” that is, the warriors who comprised the court, the army, and the provincial elite. This group held a nearly complete monopoly on legitimate coercion in Muscovy. If ever there was a “ruling class,” this was it: relatively closed, primarily hereditary, and nearly unlimited in its ability to force compliance on the unorganized peasant and urban populations. Comparison helps explain the relative strength of Muscovite autocracy. In large early modern European states such as England, France, and Prussia, power was divided among several groups. These groups could be religious (the church), economic (incorporated towns), or political (estates). Often their interests were represented on the national level in “ancient”

representative institutions. In Muscovy, all political power was concentrated in the ruling class, for it had no serious competitors: the church was basically a department of state; there were no powerful commercial interests to speak of; and Russia had no legal estates. There was a representative institution of sorts, the so-called “Assembly of the Land.” It did not, however, represent the interests of “society” before the ruling class, but rather provided a mechanism by which the elite could consult with its foot soldiers.

Autocracy was the key to Muscovy’s survival in Europe. It enabled the ruling class to compensate for Russia’s deficiencies by enacting radical reforms in the spheres of culture, economics, and military policy. These measures saved the ruling class, but, ultimately, produced the modern Russian crisis.

The Muscovite elite needed European culture—Russian learning, technology, and arms were all acknowledged to be of an inferior grade. The ruling class, however, demonstrated a marked distaste for everything European of a non-technical nature. The Europeans, after all, had fallen from God’s grace. Thus the Muscovites needed to be extremely selective about the things they imported and to make sure that the contagion of European influence did not escape into the Russian body politic. The ruling class accomplished this selective assimilation, first of all, by closing the borders: foreigners were not allowed to enter Muscovy and Russians were not permitted to leave the country without the express permission of the tsar. Naturally, the elite was not entirely successful in quarantining the Orthodox population, but its intent is significant. Second, the elite recruited a few foreign scholars—Greek monks, German doctors, Ukrainian humanists—but only for very limited purposes. All the foreign experts were under the direct jurisdiction of the court and generally lived under state supervision in Moscow.

The ruling class took even more drastic economic measures to protect itself. Military pressure compelled the Muscovites to increase the number and alter the type of forces they fielded. The elite, alas, could not raise sufficient cash for this purpose from the poor peasantry. The only asset the ruling class possessed which might be traded for military service was land. So, in the sixteenth century, the court nationalized a major portion of all productive land and distributed it in parcels to cavalry men as conditional tenures. This reform produced the required army, but it also froze the land market. Land nationalization did not, however, produce a permanent solution. The free peasants who worked the estates of warriors were quite mobile. They would often seek better working conditions with new masters or strike out to some new region. Peasant flight left the conditional estates without sufficient labor, the estate holders without sufficient income, and the state without a sufficient army. So, in the early seventeenth century, the ruling class nationalized a major portion of all peasant labor and bound it to the land. This measure ensured that the cavalry army would live on, but it also froze the labor market. It remains to add that the ruling class exercised a virtual monopoly on foreign trade and certain domestic items (especially liquor). These monopolies increased state incomes, but they interfered with the operation of markets.

The ruling class reformed the Muscovite army as well. The elite knew by hard experience that European gunpowder armies were superior to their cavalry hordes. Obviously, some means had to be found to import European military techniques. But, as we’ve said, the Muscovites were resistant to European culture and they did not possess the economic resources to buy and retain a modern army. Their solution was ingenious. First, the ruling class would continue to employ the cavalry army—supported by conditional tenures and serf labor—

wherever possible. This measure reduced defense expenditures and provided security in the Steppe, where old-style Russian forces were still competitive. Second, they would limit contact with foreigners by hiring as few European officers as possible and by importing (instead of manufacturing) most firearms. This measure would provide them with the expertise and weapons they needed to begin organizing a Russian gunpowder army. Finally, the elite concentrated its military energies on the capture of peripheral trading towns such as Kazan', Astrakhan', Kiev, Smolensk, Polotsk and, the biggest prize of all, the German port cities along the Baltic. The captured borderlands would serve double duty: they would produce the cash necessary to continue military reform and they would function as an imperial buffer zone between Moscow and hostile powers.

How successful was the Muscovite response to the West? The most common fate of an early modern European state was extinction. Of the several hundred sovereignties and semi-sovereignties that made up Europe around 1450, only a handful remained in 1700. It is remarkable that Russia was one of these few survivors, because it was among the most primitive states in Europe in 1500—ill-educated, poor, and without a modern army. Russia lived on because of the power, ingenuity, and ruthlessness of its autocratic ruling class. Autocracy was the ruling class's blessing. In the long run, however, it proved to be Russia's curse.

### **Of Historical Cycles**

Though the Muscovite ruling class could not have known it, its program to preserve the country made it very difficult for Russia to modernize in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During this period, the most successful and humane modern states came to be characterized by four features: democracy, openness, capitalism, and nationalism. Russia, though it survived and even became a world power, continued to be characterized by Muscovite traits—autocracy, insularity, command economics, and imperial identity. The reason has to do with four historical cycles initiated by the Russian ruling class in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though the ruling class attempted at various moments to institute modernizing reforms, it was ultimately unable to break out of older, Muscovite patterns of rule.

Russia has attempted liberal governmental reform several times. One thinks, for example, of Catherine the Great's "Instruction" (*nakaz*), Aleksandr I's legal codification, Aleksandr II's Great Reforms, Nicholas II's *duma* and the Provisional Government's democratic reforms. None of these initiatives, however, was successful. The explanation is to be found, in part, in the historical legacy of Muscovite autocracy. In contrast to the most successful European states, the Muscovite ruling class could not rely on a well-developed socio-economic infrastructure to provide the resources necessary for state-building. Muscovite society was, comparatively speaking, simple: it had no legal estates, no incorporated towns, no commercial bourgeoisie, no universities, and few merchants. Early modern Russia was overwhelmingly a society of subsistence agriculturists. Thus the Muscovite ruling class was compelled to use the power of autocracy to create an infrastructure capable of supporting the state. Though a rational measure given available options, the Muscovite recourse to heavy-handed state intervention initiated an anti-democratic cycle: infrastructural weakness led to statism, which led to more infrastructural weakness, which led to more statism, and so on. The state became the primary active agent of reform, while society was overtaken by a kind of learned helplessness. Unfamiliar with any other kind of government, the people soon grew to believe that autocracy was natural to

Russia. A pro-autocratic ideology equating strong central government with the “Russia tradition” evolved. The anti-democratic cycle and its statist ideology were operative throughout the Imperial period as the ruling class strove to “keep up” with the West. The pattern was again rehearsed in Soviet times as the Bolsheviks turned to the autocratic state and statism as tools for radical modernization.

Russian efforts to allow free expression have almost always coincided with the liberalizing reforms mentioned above. And like them, they have all failed to take hold permanently in Russia. Why? Again, we must turn to the Muscovite experience for a complete explanation. In the sixteenth century, Russia was “discovered” by Europe. European diplomats, merchants, and craftsmen began to appear in the once isolated country. And they bore new and strange ideas. The ruling class faced a choice: they could open the borders and allow the population to learn from the Europeans, or they could close the borders and effect a kind of cultural retrenchment. As we have seen, they chose the latter option. This act, though understandable in its context, initiated an anti-openness cycle: cultural fear led to closure, which caused more cultural fear, which caused further closure, and so on. The state decided that the people were “not ready” for European ideas and closed the borders; yet closing the borders made the people yet more unready. Without a free exchange of information with the West, many people came to regard European notions as somehow unfit for Russia. An ideology stressing the cultural purity of the “Russian tradition” evolved and gained currency. The anti-openness cycle and the “Russian tradition” ideology that legitimized it were passed on to the Imperial period, though in attenuated form. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia usually remained closed so as to protect the “Russian tradition,” though the privileged classes were allowed to discuss European ideas as long as they remained passive. This was basically the pattern assumed by the Soviet regime as well: the borders were closed in order to protect Communism (a kind of re-figured “Russian tradition”), though the passive Party elite was permitted some accurate information on the West.

Modern Russia has also flirted with capitalism from time to time. The outstanding example is found in the period 1890-1914, when Russia experienced rapid capitalist growth. By and large, however, Russia’s economy has proven relatively stagnant. The explanation for Russia’s economic immobility has much to do with the Muscovite state’s response to military pressure. Given the primitive state of the Russian economy, the ruling elite had no option but to nationalize a significant portion of the land and labor markets in order to field a competitive army. This measure, however sensible at the time, initiated an anti-capitalist cycle: economic backwardness led to shock mobilization, which led to more economic backwardness, which led to further shock mobilization, and so on. The very process by which the state mobilized resources stifled the development of a market economy. Unfamiliar with commercial capitalism, Russians became suspicious of capitalism in the abstract. An anti-market ideology developed in which corrupt “Western capitalism” was opposed to the virtuous collectivism of the “Russian tradition.” The anti-capitalist cycle and its ideology operated throughout the Imperial period as successive regimes used the state as an instrument of economic mobilization, by-passing and even destroying markets. After land and labor were partially freed in 1861, an entrepreneurial class appeared in Russia. Capitalist growth began. This promising development was halted by the arrival of the Bolsheviks, who again nationalized land and labor. A familiar pattern emerged: state-driven, coercive economic development legitimized by the “Russian tradition,” now in Communist guise.

Modern European states are, in theory at least, nation-states, and the Russians at several points seem to have been headed for nation-statehood. For example, during the Napoleonic Wars, in the late-Imperial period, in World War I, and in World War II, the elite promoted Russian chauvinism. In the wider view, however, these national moments seem to have been little but digressions in a story about imperial identity. Unlike other major powers, Russia has proven both unwilling and unable to give up its empire, or at least all of it, in the broader national interest. Explaining this adherence to an imperial form of organization takes us back to pre-modern times. In the sixteenth century, the Muscovite ruling class decided to create an army capable of conquering a sizable buffer zone. The army was built, the “near abroad” was seized, and, eventually, it was colonized by Russians. This series of acts, perhaps warranted at the time, initiated an anti-national cycle: geopolitical insecurity led to empire-building, which led to more insecurity as the state moved to protect its imperial subjects. What had originally been an effort to protect the Russian enterprise, paradoxically, ended in expanding the defensive commitments of Russia to include a host of non-Russian peoples and new Russian colonists. In such a geopolitical environment, the very notion of a “nation-state” was seen as subversive. An ideology developed which stressed the imperial, civilizing mission of the “Russian tradition.” The legacy of empire and imperial identity were fully embraced in both the Imperial and Soviet periods as generation after generation of leaders committed themselves to the buffer zone, colonization, and the imperial ideology of Russian rule.

### **Of the Future**

Historical analysis suggests that, at the very least, Russia’s transition to democracy, openness, capitalism, and the nation-state will be far longer and more difficult than most Western experts assume, if it happens at all. The primary factor that conditioned the entire course of Russian development—the perceived Western threat—persists to this day. In the opinion of many Russian politicians, NATO expansion is yet another instance of “age-old” Western aggression. Moreover, the institutional legacy of centuries of powerful statism is everywhere to be seen in post-Communist Russia. The Kremlin, though weakened, still has great control over the political process, public expression, the economy, and the empire. Finally, and perhaps most important, the interventionist state, the closed culture, the command economy, and the empire are still believed by many to be part of an imperiled “Russian tradition.” In short, the Russian elite believes it needs a strong state, it currently possesses the remnants of one, and it will probably find sufficiently strong public support if it opts to rebuild it.

Whether the political elite will revive the strong state or not is an open question. If, on the one hand, Putin intends to push forward a Western-style liberalizing program, Russia’s historical experience suggests that he will fail, as did Nicholas I in the 1910s and Gorbachev in the 1980s. They introduced reforms that partially dismantled the autocratic state. In both cases, the result was nothing short of catastrophic: the end of their respective regimes, massive civil unrest (and civil war in the earlier case), economic collapse, and the fracture of the empire. Putin and his circle must know this, and they will likely proceed cautiously with any reform plan. If, on the other hand, Putin intends to reconstruct autocracy, historical experience suggests he will succeed, as did Mikhail Romanov after the “Time of Troubles” (1605-13) and Lenin after the Russian Civil War (1917-21). During both of these tragic episodes, autocratic power collapsed completely, only to be resurrected by the

victors of a long, bloody struggle. The re-imposition of autocratic rule brought Russia political stability and some measure of security, but also continued oppression and poverty. Putin and his party know this as well, and they may be tempted to push Russia in an autocratic direction, most likely by the creation of some sort of pseudo-democracy.

The best that can be hoped for is that Putin and his successors opt for a middle course, one that neither raises dangerous expectations (and fears) about a sudden “Westernization” and one that does not foreclose the possibility of an evolutionary liberalization. If modern Russian rulers can accomplish this feat, they will have done what no Russian leader has ever done—slowly move Russia out of the historical cycles that have gripped it for the past half millennium. And so will end the modern Russian crisis.