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The Muscovite State and its Personnel

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For the Muscovite state, the seventeenth century was one of evolution and growth, rather than radical change. The century experienced no political revolutions of the magnitude seen during the reigns of Ivan III and Ivan IV. Russia, having recovered from the confusion of the Time of Troubles, remained a strong autocracy firmly in the hands of a small, martial ruling class. This is not to say that there was general stasis. Things still fell apart, though only for brief moments. And one can detect a single important political trend—the remarkable inflation of honors begun under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich and radically amplified by his weak successors. Nonetheless, the general picture was one of continuity, punctuated by momentary fits of confusion and gradual change.

The case is much the same in the realm of institutions. Seventeenth-century Muscovy was administered by the same fundamental types of organization that it had been before the great upheaval of the beginning of the century. The most important institutions remained the royal family, its court and courtiers (gosudarev dvor), and the administrative chancelleries (prikazy). Similarly, the boyar council (sobor) and the assembly of all the land (another sobor)—both inventions of an earlier age—continued to operate in the seventeenth century much as they had before. All of these institutions grew, but not so much as to fundamentally alter their essential character.

Finally, we might note that the state existed for the same purpose as it had in the sixteenth century and earlier—to serve the interests of the Muscovite ruling class. Though one occasionally finds Biblical tropes in Muscovite ornamental texts about monarchs 'tending their flocks' and such, the truth is that the elite did not hide the fact that they were a self-interested ruling class and that the state was the instrument of their domination. They showed open contempt for peasants, merchants and often clergymen, and almost never missed an opportunity to fleece them—a point made and bemoaned by the well-traveled, well-educated, and well-informed political philosopher (and proto-Slavophile) Iuri Krizhanich in the 1660s. Any attempt at protest that was not couched in the most subservient terms was met with a rush of horrific violence (violence that only the state could muster, since it was the only organized interest in early modern Russia). As visiting foreigners often noted, there was no talk of the ‘commonwealth,’ the ‘common good,’ or common anything (that would come with Peter and from Europe). Muscovites high and low believed the tsar owned

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2For an overview of governmental institutions, see N. P. Eroshkin, Ocherki istorii gosudarstvennykh uchrezhdenii dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Uchebno-Pedagogicheskoie izdatel’stvo Ministerstva provvesheniia RSFSR, 1960).


everything—land and those occupying it—by heavenly proclamation. That he distributed his largess unequally (and predominantly to the elite) bothered not a soul. No one could conceive of any other order, no one objected to it (at least for very long…), and no one even thought it wrong. It was the way of things, and that was that.

The Tsar in His Court

Muscovites had an entire catalogue of sayings to the effect that the tsar was like God (and, one might add, the God of Moses rather than Jesus)\(^6\), so it is only appropriate that we begin our survey of seventeenth-century institutions with the ruler and his court.

Let us begin with the royal person, for he was an institution in his own right. In contrast to some monarchies, the Russians do not seem to have recognized or even known about the ‘king’s two bodies’ doctrine.\(^7\) The clergy said and commoners believed that the tsar was selected by the Lord, not to hold the office of tsar, but to be tsar. This is why one finds so much talk of the ‘true tsar’ and ‘pretenders,’ particularly during the Time of Troubles when it was tough to tell the difference, but also after the ascension of the Romanovs.\(^8\) Just how one could know the ‘true tsar’ was anybody’s guess, but that there was a ‘true’—that is, divinely appointed—tsar was never seriously questioned. There was, then, no office of ‘tsar’; there was just the ‘true tsar,’ a person and family ordained by the hand of the All Mighty.

We know, of course, that Mikhail Romanov was elected or, rather, his family won out in a rough and tumble competition dominated by occupying Cossacks in 1613. But it wasn’t considered polite (or even safe\(^9\)) to mention this after the fact. That’s because Mikhail was the ‘true tsar.’ His family and their propagandists spent a lot of effort to drive this point home. They went so far as to argue that they were not only the very descendents and rightful heirs to the Rurikids (\(via\) one of Ivan IV’s marriages), but that they were in some mystical sense Rurikids themselves. This effort to cloak themselves in other-worldly divinity appealed to the Muscovite mind, but it doubtless had little effect on the men who actually engineered the Romanov ‘succession.’ They knew, as politicians always know, what had actually happened. Nonetheless, it made no sense for them to do anything but play along. The tsar, after all, was one of them and would—if he were wisely selected—protect their interests. Mikhail and his successors did just this, and they became ‘true tsars’ as a result.

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\(^6\) On these dicta, see Poe, Marshall T. ‘A People Born to Slavery’: Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), appendix one.


\(^9\) On the Romanov’s campaign to stamp out pretenderism, see Mark C. Lapman, “Political Denunciations in Muscovy, 1600 to 1649: The Sovereign’s Word and Deed,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1982); N. I. Novombergskii, *Slovo i delo gosudarevy: Protessy do izgannya Ulozheniia Alekseia Mikhailovicha 1649 g.* (Moscow: A. I. Snegireva, 1911), and G. G. Tel’berg, *Ocherki politicheskogo suda i politicheskikh prestuplenii* (Moscow, 1912).
Though one reads occasionally in Muscovite didactic texts that the tsar should do this or that (take council, be merciful, be wise), he really had only two hard and fast duties: to produce a suitable heir and to rule the country in consultation with his boyars. There were, naturally, rules about how he would perform these two tasks, the former governed by Christian doctrine and the later by custom. Since the rights and obligations of Orthodox marriage are sufficiently well known (one wife, or at least one at a time), as is the process by which an heir is begotten, let us discuss the rules of Muscovite politics as they were practiced in their principle arena, the sovereign’s court (gosudarev dvor).

The sovereign’s court was the locus of political power in Muscovy. It was not a place (though the royal family did have quarters in the Kremlin called a ‘court’ or dvor), but rather a hierarchy of ranks. Figure 1 outlines them.

Figure 1: The Sovereign’s Court in the Seventeenth Century

As one would expect, higher ranks were more honorable than lower ranks, and generally less populous. To some degree, different rankholders did different things: the men in the duma ranks (boiare i dumnye liudi) advised the tsar in the royal council (duma), an ill-defined customary body whose power waxed and waned depending on the age of the tsar, the authority of those around him, and the number of councilors present. Those below the duma ranks (the sub-duma court ranks in Figure 1) generally worked as footmen of various sorts at court—serving at table, guarding the palace, performing in ceremonies, escorting emissaries and so on. Despite their modern ‘servile’ connotations, these lines of

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11For a bibliography of works on the gosudarev dvor, see O. Kosheleva and M. A. Strucheva, Gosudarev dvor v Rossii konets XV-nachalo XVIII ve.: katalog knizhnoi vystavki (Moscow: Gos. publchnaia istoricheskaia biblioteka Rossi, 1997).
employ were considered very honorable duty by high-born Muscovites (and certainly better than serving in the provinces). Finally, the administrators served in the chancelleries (prikiity). Because they performed servile work (writing), they were drawn from a less honorable class (sluzhibye liudi po prikiityu, or ‘service people by contract’) rather than from the ranks of hereditary servitors (sluzhibye liudi po otechestvu, or ‘service people by birth’).

As Figure 1 suggests, servitors sometimes moved through the ranks. The rules for entry into and promotion through the upper ranks were as follows. The men in the three duma ranks above dumny d’iak (boiarin, okol’nichii, dumny d’iak) were generally recruited from hereditary servitors in the sub-duma court ranks. Elected hereditary servitors could be appointed to any of these three ranks (that is, not dumny d’iak). Once they had assumed a rank, they could progress upward, for example, from dumny d’orovinu to okol’nichii or from okol’nichii to boiarin. Ranks could not be skipped after entry—one could not go directly from dumny d’orovinu to boiarin. Dumny d’iak were generally recruited from the ranks of d’iaki (who were themselves recruited from clerks (pod’iachi), all of whom were men of lower birth). Like their hereditary counterparts in the duma cohort, they could progress through ranks after appointment, again, without skipping.

To simplify a bit, the game of Muscovite politics had as its goal either advancement to the high ranks (for individuals and their families) or control of the composition of these ranks (for the royal family, or blocks of allied families). It bears mentioning that seventeenth-century politics had very little to do with policies and everything to do with persons. There may have been debate on this or that issue, but, as we’ve noted, everyone in the sovereign’s court was (to continue our metaphor) on the same team and pursued the same goal—the maintenance and, if possible, the expansion of the elite’s interests. Certainly there was conflict over issues. But it is telling that the Muscovites never developed a formal institution that might represent differing political agendas among notables. None was needed. The prime political question, it appears, was always who would pursue this common agenda, and only rarely whether it should be pursued.

There were, in essence, three players in this contest. First, there was the tsar himself. In theory, he made all appointments to and promotions through the ranks. Yet in fact he did not rule alone, but rather with the aid of close relatives, advisors, and mentors. The existence of a small retinue of advisors around the tsar was recognized by the Muscovites themselves: Gregorii Kotoshikhin, the treasonous scribe who penned the only indigenous description of the

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14On the administrative class, see Natal’ia Fedorovna Demidova, Sluzhibaia biurokratiia v Rossii XVII v. i ee rol’ v formirovanii abiotitizma (Moskva: Nauka, 1987).


16This is not to say that these were the only political actors in Muscovy. Certainly there were others (the Church, elite women, etc.). These three, however, are the most significant for our limited purposes. On the Church in politics, see Georg Bernhard Michels, At War with the Church: Religious Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Russia (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). On elite women in politics, see: Isolde Thyret, Between God and Tsar: Religious Symbolism and the Royal Women of Muscovite Russia (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001).

17There are a number of well known examples: Mikhail and his father, Patriarch Filaret; the young Aleksei and Boris Ivanovich Morozov; Sophia and Prince Vasiliy Vasil’evich Golitsyn; Peter and his assembly of friends.
Muscovite political system, explicitly calls them the “close people” (блізких людей). These confidants would and could bend the tsar’s ear when it came to appointments and promotions. The second major class of players at the Muscovite court were old elite servitors, that is, men of very high, heritable status whose families traditionally held positions in the duma ranks. These were Muscovy’s aristocrats: for centuries, they had commanded Muscovy’s armies, administered Muscovy’s central offices, and governed Muscovy’s far-flung territories. Their right to high offices was guarded by mestnichestro, early Russia’s mechanism for protecting the order of precedence. Finally, we have men and families serving in the lower orders of the sovereign’s court—the thousands of stol’niki, dvoriane moskovskie, and striapchie who occupied minor offices in Moscow and the provinces. They could never reasonably hope to win appointments to the duma. Figure 2 describes the three interest groups within the system of ranks.

Figure 2: The Sovereign’s Court (circa 1620)

The contest over the duma ranks was not a fair one. The tsar held the most power—he, as we’ve said, made all the appointments. The old elite had considerable though less power—by Muscovite tradition, elite families had a special claim on the upper ranks, often passing them on through several generations. And the mass of courtiers had the least


19On them, see Crummey, Aristocrats and Servitors, passim.

20The literature on mestnichestro is large. For a recent treatment, see Nancy Shields Kollmann, By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1999), pp. 131-68.
power—only very occasionally would the tsar reach down into the lower rungs of the court to elevate a common itol’nik, but the possibility was always open.

Each of these parties deployed different strategies to gain victory. The tsar’s course was one of balance: he attempted to distribute just enough of the ranks to elite servitors so as to guarantee their allegiance, while at the same time reserving a portion for the purposes of patronage, reward of merit, or some other end. Members of the old elite pursued a strategy of maintenance: they fought to preserve their hold on the duma ranks by keeping new servitors out of existing positions and preventing the tsar from minting new seats. The common courtiers’ strategy was offensive: they used a variety of mechanisms to win favor with the tsar or elite (service, marriage alliances, etc.) in order to gain a place among the duma men.

Who Won? A Brief Overview of Seventeenth-Century High Politics

As Mikhail Romanov ascended the throne in 1613, he and the coalition of forces that supported him faced serious difficulties. There were several claimants to the crown (some arguably more legitimate than Mikhail Fedorovich), the country was occupied by Swedes, Poles and numerous rebel bands, and the economy was in shambles after many years of bloody civil war. No one was really sure who the ‘true tsar’ was. The Romanov party did the only thing it could to maintain power: issue a ‘national’ call to eject the foreigners, declare a de facto amnesty to those in other camps, and began the slow and painful process of reducing its opponents—alien and domestic—one at a time. First, the rebels were defeated (Zarutsky, Mniszek), then the otherwise distracted Swedes were pacified (the Treaty of Stolbovo, 1617), and finally the Poles were ejected (the Truce of Deulino, 1618). These measures shored up the Romanov’s hold on power. The return of Mikhail’s father, soon-to-be Patriarch Filaret, from Polish captivity in 1619 solidified it. For the first and last time in Russian history, father and son—the head of the church and head of the state—ruled together.

Aside from this single (albeit dramatic) innovation, the diarchy pursued a moderate course aimed at shoring up political support and recouping the considerable losses incurred during and after the Troubles. Even after the situation had stabilized, there was no general purge of elements who had fought for the ‘wrong’ side in the previous decades (though the Romanovs did turn hard on their former allies the Cossacks). Rather, the sins of the Time of Troubles were forgotten for all but a few. The old boyars returned to their high places, irrespective of what port they had sought in the storm of the Troubles. The administrative class took its station as well, again without suffering for its prior allegiances. And the central and provincial military servitors were prepared for the up-coming reckoning with Poland, which finally came in 1634.

Indeed, after the Romanov political settlement, Russian high politics were marked by a general peace for over thirty years. Certainly there were intrigues, schemes, and plots (many of which are unknown to us, hidden by the habit of not writing anything of importance down), but these were the quotidian affairs of every court in every country. The political quiet was shattered, finally, in 1648. Three years earlier, the young Aleksei Mikhailovich succeeded his much venerated father. Aleksei’s former tutor, Boris Ivanovich Morozov, became regent and packed the court and council with his cronies. Though a capable man, he was surrounded by the corrupt Miloslavskii clique (Aleksei’s first wife was a Miloslavskii; Morozov married her sister, thereby become the tsar’s brother-in-law). Calls of government corruption grew louder until Moscow and several other cities exploded in riots aimed a bring Morozov and the Miloslavskii’s down. The mob lynched officials, burnt houses and looted shops. At one point, the tsar himself was threatened by the angry
crowd. By all reports, this episode had a powerful effect on the youthful, pious ruler. Bowing to pressure, Morozov and the tsar's father-in-law were exiled (only to shortly return), corrupt officials (or at least those the crowd said were corrupt) were brutally executed, and the tsar resolved to reform the state in such a way as to make sure such things never happened again.

Aleksei turned to the able Prince N. I. Odoevskii for help. He headed a commission designed to solve all the unattended problems faced by Muscovy at one bold, legislative stroke. Perhaps recalling his father's fondness for public input (it had saved them once...), Aleksei called a massive assembly of 'all kinds of people' in Moscow for this purpose. In hindsight, it was a risky move for an immature leader still reeling from his first taste of popular protest. But the commission did its monumental work, the public acclaimed it, and Muscovy had a roadmap to permanent order—the Sobornoe Ulozhenie of 1649, one of the largest law codes of the early modern period. Like all successful compromises, there was something in it for everyone (or at least everyone who mattered): the powerful had their places next to the tsar affirmed; the gentry received the right to pursue run-away serfs and slaves as long as necessary to return them; and the common urban folks were promised that the corruption would be punished to the fullest extent of the law (which was, we should note, quite far). Again, peace reigned at court and in the country. Save two periods of urban unrest brought on by debasement of the silver with copper (1656 and 1662), all was quiet. Or so it appeared. Under the calm surface, however, an important struggle was occurring at the very heart of Muscovite high politics.

The greatest cause of Aleksei's reign (and his greatest triumph) was the Thirteen Years' War, his effort to recoup the losses suffered at the hands of the hated Poles. Personally marching off to battle in 1654, he took a direct interest in making sure his crusade was brought off successfully. In the course of his campaigning, Aleksei must (and here we are speculating) have judged for himself the merits (and demerits) of his soldiers, for he came back to the capital devoted to the idea of reforming, if not overturning, the existing political order. In the context of a rapidly evolving administrative and military context, the traditional boyar elite had become distinctly less useful. Even men of low status did not respect them, as Kotoshikhin’s unflattering portrait demonstrates. Talented men—regardless of birth—who were willing to serve and serve well were needed. Given the rules of appointment to the boyar ranks, such ‘new men’ had no chance to attain the highest honors. Merit was not being rewarded, at least in the way Aleksei believed it should be. Obviously, the rules had to be changed so as to allow the entry of the ‘new men’.

The tsar did not bring the ‘new men’ into the duma all at once. He could not do so without risking a costly and dangerous political battle with the old elites. Rather, he pursued a conservative approach, appointing a few ‘new men’ at

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23Longworth, Aleksei, Tsar of all the Russias, pp. xxx. Muscovy was under significant military pressure in the seventeenth century, and Aleksei initiated a number of important military reforms. See Hellie, Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy, pp. 181-201.

24Kotoshikhin writes: “in many cases boyar rank is conferred not for intelligence but for exalted lineage, and many of them are unlettered and uneducated.” Kotoshikhin, O Rossii v tsarstvovanie Alekseeia Mikhailovicha, fol. 35v.

time. But even here his options were limited by the hold of the old elites over the upper ranks. Aleksei knew that they would likely grumble if he promoted men of lower status to the highest ranks in the duma orders, for these were the traditional preserve of the old elite. Neither could Aleksei make the more honorable of the ‘new men’ dumnyi d'uki, for that rank was deemed too low for the hereditary servitors in the sovereign’s court. Therefore Aleksei opted for a strategy that would at once appease the hereditary boiarstvo and permit him to promote the ‘new men’: he transformed the rank of dumnyi dvorianin. The chronology of events is telling. In 1650, Aleksei took the unprecedented step of appointing a fifth man to dumnyi dvorianin. Prior to that act, the largest number of dumnye dvoriane had been four (in 1634 and 1635), and ordinarily there had only been one. By the first year of the war, there were eight of them. During the war, he promoted 16 more. Among them we find many of Aleksei’s ‘new men.’ During the war the tsar began to promote his dumnye dvoriane into the ranks of okol’nichie. One of them, A. L. Ordin-Nashchokin, was made boyar in 1667 and served as effective prime minister until 1671. In that year another ‘new man,’ A. S. Matveev, took his place, though he was not promoted to boyar until 1674.

Under Aleksei, then, two prominent ‘new men’ came to rule Russia. Others exercised less visible but no less important roles as leaders in the chancellery system. In all, Aleksei appointed 48 low status ‘new men’ to the duma ranks. As we can see in Figure 3, the tsar entrusted them with a great number of Muscovy’s highest administrative offices.

Figure 3: Aleksei’s New Men in the Chancelleries

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<th>Chancellery Officers</th>
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<td>Elizarov, F. K.</td>
<td>1646</td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>1653</td>
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<td>Service Land [1643/4-63/4]</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Chistoi, N. I.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Grand Treasury [1630/1-46/7]; Orm [1641/2]; Ambassadorial [1646/7-47/8]</td>
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<td>1649</td>
<td>1664</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1651</td>
<td>1667</td>
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<td>Treasury [1639/40-44/5]; Ambassadorial [1645/6-66/7]; Novgorod Tax District [1645/6-63/4]; Seal [1653/4-68/9]; Monastery [1654/55]; Seal Matters [1667/8]</td>
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<td>Pronchishechev, A. O.</td>
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28On the rule of Ordin-Nashchokin and Matveev, and its impact on court politics, see Bushkovitch, Peter the Great, pp. 49-79.

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<th>Occupation</th>
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Particularly notable is the fact that Aleksei placed his ‘new men’ in the most important prikazy: the Military Service Chancellery (*Razriad*), arguably the most powerful prikaz in seventeenth-century Muscovy; the Service Land Chancellery (*Pomestnyi prikaz*), which administered estates given to the gentry throughout Russia; and the Ambassadorial Chancellery (*Posol’skii prikaz*), which controlled Muscovy’s foreign affairs.\(^{30}\)

Aleksei began the process of supplementing hereditary rankholders with competent ‘new men.’\(^{31}\) It is difficult to overestimate the impact of these appointments on the Muscovite political system. Aleksei’s alteration of duma appointment policy destroyed the equilibrium between the tsar and the elite families that ended the Time of Troubles. By the end of the Thirteen Year’s War, the tsar clearly had the upper hand in political matters. Aleksei had successfully transformed the duma ranks from a royal council controlled by hereditary clans into a font of royal patronage to be distributed as the tsar desired. The tsar no longer ruled exclusively with the duma men, but instead *via* special consular and executive bodies. Kotoshikhin described two of them. The first was a kind of privy council chosen from the “closest boyars and okol‘nichie” (*boiare i okol’nichie blizhnie*). Here Aleksei discussed affairs “in private,” outside the large council.\(^{32}\) Second, Kotoshikhin detailed the workings of the Privy Chancellery (*Prikaz tainikh del*), where the “boyars and duma men do not enter . . . and have no jurisdiction.”\(^{33}\) “And that chancellery,” he wrote, “was established in the present reign, so that the tsar’s will and all his affairs would be carried out as he desires, without the boyars and duma men having any knowledge of these matters.”\(^{34}\) Kotoshikhin’s understanding of Aleksei’s relation to hereditary duma men is clear: while he honored them, he did his real business with the ‘closest people.’ He was, it is true, hardly the first Russian ruler to surround himself with an inner circle of powerful advisors.\(^{35}\) He was, however, the first to do so since the political settlement that ended the Time of Troubles. For one of the few times in Muscovite history, the tsar had succeeded in liberating himself from the elite of which he was a part. Muscovy became a monarchy—or at least more monarchical—as it had been under Ivan III and Ivan IV.

But only for a moment, for Aleksei’s new order proved untenable. He was strong enough and clever enough to use his novel tool of patronage sparingly. His successors were neither. As a result of their political insecurity, Fedor, Sophia and young Peter—together with those who urged them on—were forced to ‘go to the well’ of duma patronage often in order to win support among the boiarstvo. They made hordes of appointments from the ever expanding court in a desperate effort to curry favor. The result can be seen in Figure 4.

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\(^{30}\)On the *prikaz* system, and the importance of these chancelleries in particular, see Peter B. Brown, “Muscovite Government Bureaus,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 10: 3 (1983), pp. 269-330.

\(^{31}\)Crummey, *Aristocrats and Servitors*, p. 28.

\(^{32}\)Kotoshikhin, *O Rossii*, fol. 36.


\(^{34}\)Kotoshikhin, *O Rossii*, fol. 124.

Figure 4: The Size of the *Duma* Ranks, 1613-1713.

The *duma* ranks ballooned, and thereby lost their meaning even as royal patronage. Aleksei’s weak successors had, in essence, devalued the currency bequeathed to them by their father. What Aleksei had carefully designed as a mechanism to bring new talent into the political class resulted, under his children, in the destruction of that class. Confusion reigned among the elite; *mestnichestvo*—a nuisance from the point of view of the crown and meaningless from the point of view of the old elite—died an unmourned death.36 As early as 1681, even the wise old men of the traditional elite—led in this instance by Vasilii Golitsyn—were actively searching for a new order to replace what had obviously been broken.37 They failed, and it would be to Peter, who personally witnessed the corruption of his father’s legacy, to forge a new and profoundly monarchical political system.

**The Chancelleries**

While the boyar and court elite led Muscovy, chancellery personnel—the *prikaznye liudi*—administered it. They were, as we’ve seen, distinctly second-class citizens at court, ‘employees at will’ serving at the pleasure of the tsar—or not. But the state was growing rapidly in the seventeenth century, and with it the administrative burden of far-flung, complex operations. Since the *prikaz* personnel had needed organizational skill and a deep knowledge of affairs, the elite generally kept them employed and reasonably satisfied—the state could not run without them. If a chancellery man performed well and had the proper connections, he could advance, first, through the administrative ranks (*pod’iashi to d’iak*) and, then, to the *duma* (though very rarely and almost always to *dumnyi d’iak*, no further). This *cursus honorum* was steep: only a

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small proportion of all clerks (pod'iaschii) were made d'aki and d'aki were made dumnii d'aki. As we've noted, late in the century some of the prikaz people occupied important positions in the government, and one served as de facto prime minister. This remarkable shift upward was a reflection of the growing importance of administrative work for the state.

The world of the prikaz people was different from that of any other Muscovite in a number of ways. First, the chancellery employees were literate, a fact that differentiated them from even most members of the elite (Kotoshikhin called the latter “unlettered and uneducated”). As the century drew to a close, a few of them would even develop a taste for something we might sensibly call ‘literature’ (most all of it imported), a first for Muscovy. Second, the prikaz people worked in offices run in quasi-rational fashion. The chancelleries had many of the trade marks of the classic Weberian bureaucracy: written rules, regular procedures, functional differentiation, reward to merit. This is not, of course, to say that prikaz employees were insulated from the winds of nepotism, favoritism and even caprice. Far from it: most prikaz people were sons of prikaz officials, all had patrons, and not few were summarily dismissed without cause. Nevertheless, the rudiments of the modern administrative office were all present in the prikaz. Finally, chancellery workers lived in Moscow cheek-by-jowl with the elite: the prikaz were located in the Kremlin and Kitaigorod and their employees lived in the environs. This proximity gave them access to power that was unimaginable for the typical Russian.

As the interests of the state expanded, so too did the ranks of the prikaz. The number of prikaz people grew significantly in the seventeenth century, from a few hundred in 1613 to several thousand in 1689. The vast majority of them were lowly clerks (pod'iaschii). These men did most of the work in the offices, and their numbers expanded mightily during the century: in 1626 there were around 500 of them in the Moscow offices; by 1698 there were nearly 3,000. As in all Muscovite institutions, we find hierarchy among the clerks—junior (mladshii), middle (srednii), and senior (starshii). If a man were particularly lucky, he might be appointed to d'ak. D'aki ordinarily commanded the chancelleries, serving together with an extra-administrative servitor (usually a man holding duma rank). They could be tapped for other services as well, as Kotoshikhin tells us: “they [d'aki] serve as associates of the boyars and okol'nichie and duma men and closest

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39Kotoshikhin, O Rossi, fol. 35v.


43Demidova, Sluzhilaia biurokratia, p. 23.
men in the chancelleries in Moscow and in the provinces, and of ambassadors in embassies; and they . . . administer affairs of every kind, and hold trials, and are sent on various missions.”

Like the pod’iachie, the numbers of d’iaki grew in the seventeenth century: in 1626 there were around 50 serving in the chancelleries; by 1698, there were roughly twice that many. Of the roughly 800 men who served as d’iaki in the century, only 47 ever achieved the exalted status of dumnyi dvorianin. These men were super-secretaries: they attended the royal council (though they were required to stand during the proceedings), advised the tsar, and administered the most sensitive affairs. Of them, 13 achieved the rank of dumnyi dvorianin; four, okol’nichii, and one, boyar. Naturally, all of these men were advanced late in the century, after Aleksei Mikhailovich had ‘opened the ranks to merit.’

The number of chancelleries themselves grew in the seventeenth century as well. In the ten years following the accession of Mikhail, the number rose from around 35 to around 50; thereafter, the number varied between 45 and 59. These figures are, however, misleading on a number of counts. First, most chancelleries were quite short-lived, reflecting the fact that they were often created on an ad hoc basis to fulfill a specific mission (for example, the collection of a tax, or the investigation of a particular affair). Only the largest chancelleries administering the most central functions—the Military Service, Service Land, the Ambassadorial and so on—operated continuously throughout the century.

44 Kotoshikhin, O Rossii, fol. 37v.
45 Demidova, Sluzhilaia biurokratiia, p. 23.
46 Kotoshikhin, O Rossii, fol. 33 ff.
48 On all that follows concerning the prikazy, see Brown, “Early Modern Russian Bureaucracy” and idem, “Muscovite Government Bureaus.”
### Figure 5: Numbers and Type of Chancelleries Per Decade, 1610s-90s

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Though the chancelleries were not officially arranged in any ‘organizational chart,’ we can gauge their administrative...

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scope by placing them in functional categories. What is most apparent in Figure 5 is the concentration on military and foreign affairs—the prikazy were primarily instruments of war-making. Most of them were either directly engaged in provisioning the army (the military chancelleries, and we should include the Service Land Chancellery here as well) or funding the army (the financial chancelleries). Though the foreign affairs chancelleries were fewer in number, one of them—the massive Ambassadorial Chancellery—was a locus of state power which controlled far flung territories. Chancelleries in these categories were the largest, best funded, most powerful, and most honorable of all the administrative organs in the central government.

Like the work-a-day lower court nobility, the chancellery personnel grew more powerful during the course of the century for the simple reason that the tsar found their services increasingly indispensable. Modern states cannot operate without relatively efficient—or at minimum, effective—bureaucracies. They collect the taxes, recruit personnel, and organize complex affairs generally. Throughout early modern Europe, states were traveling a road that made them more and more dependent on the offices of well-trained, skilled administrators. So it was in Muscovy. By the close of the century, the status of both administrators and administrative work had risen appreciably. More and more of them were elevated to the royal council, and increasingly hereditary military servitors of very high status (the old boyars and ‘new men’) opted to serve the tsar in the prikazy.50 The once entirely martial ruling class gained a hybrid character, working with near equal frequency in the court, army and offices. It was a common story, one that has parallels in Prussia, France and all other successful early modern states.51

Other Central Institutions: the ‘Boyar Council’ and ‘Assembly of the Land.’

The tsar, the court and the prikazy were the central stable elements of Muscovite governance throughout the seventeenth century. This being said, there were two other institutions, quite different in character, that we find in era: the so-called “boyar council” (boiarskaia duma) and “assembly of all the land” (zemskii sobor). Both have been the subject of considerable controversy. Early historians, with their eyes to the west, saw in them formal counsel and even representative bodies, the Russian analogues to peer councils and parliaments. Later historians called these views into question, noting that both terms were invented by eighteenth-century Russian historians and that there is very little in law or custom that defined the competence or operation of these bodies. With this in mind, let us look at what is known about these institutions today.

The phrase boiarskaia duma, though a later coinage, has come to stand for the regular high councils held at the courts of Kievan, Appanage, and particularly Muscovite princes from the ninth to the early eighteenth century.52 It appears in


52The literature on the boyar elite (what we have called the duma ranks of sovereign’s court) is immense, while studies of the duma per se are few (largely due to a lack of sources). The standard treatments, all somewhat dated, are: V. O. Kliuchevskii, Boiarskaia duma drevnei Rusi. Opys istorii pravitel'stsvennogo soderzhania v sviazi s istoriei arkhitektra, 3d ed. (Moscow: Sinodal'naia typ., 1902); S. F. Platonov, “Boiarskaia duma—predshhestvnya senata,” in idem, Stati po russkoi istorii (1883-1912) (2nd ed; St. P., 1912), pp. 447-94; V. I.
The princely council underwent considerable development in connection with the rise of Muscovy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. To the old Muscovite service families were added immigrants from defeated appanages, the Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Tatar Khanates. These new arrivals were at first given minor positions in the grand princely administration and later, after they had been tested, were given high court rank and served as councillors. Records of this era permit the identification of most of those holding these ranks, something impossible in the Kievan and Appanage periods. The evidence suggests that the number of men holding “councilor ranks” (dumnye chiny) was small, hovering around 15 members in the years of Ivan III and Vasili III, though it increased in size to about 50 under Ivan IV. In this period the competence of the duma — or at least of certain members of the council — is suggested in legislation and legal documents for the first time. The Law Code (Sudebnik) of 1497 directs that the “boyars and familiars are to administer justice” (суди сюд боиарам и окольничим), and it is known from surviving cases that they did so. In like measure, the duma seems to have had some legislative authority, as can be seen in the oft-repeated Muscovite formula ‘the lord orders and the boyars affirm’ (государ ukazal i boiare prigovorili). Despite these hints, the exact boundaries of the duma’s independent competence, if any, remained unregulated.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century foreigners provided some sketchy evidence of the operation of the council. They report seeing the council arrayed during ambassadorial audiences. However it is evident that on such occasions the members played highly scripted roles that probably did not reflect the proceeding of ‘private’ council meetings. According to the English Ambassador Giles Fletcher, central and provincial administrators, as well as private suitors, appeared before the duma on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at seven in the morning. The foreigners

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55Poe, A People Born to Slavery, pp. xxx.

generally dismissed the duma as an ineffectual body, but this is not entirely accurate. The council was very active during the Time of Troubles and succeeded in imposing an oath on tsar Vasilii Shuiskii in 1606. According to Kotoshikhin, a similar oath was taken by Mikhail Romanov in 1613, but this is uncorroborated.

In the seventeenth century, the competence of the council, as well as its exact composition and mode of operation, remained undefined—there was no constitution or even coherent (and inscribed) custom detailing who was (or should be) on it, or what it was to do (other than deliberate with the tsar). Kotoshikhin thoroughly describes general congresses of council members in which affairs were discussed and legislation was considered, affirmed, and sent to the chancelleries for promulgation. He tells us that “although [Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich] used the title ‘autocrat,’ [he] could do nothing without the boyars’ council.” His father, in contrast, did quite a bit without their council. He favored smaller groups of familiars (the близкие люди) over the mass of courtiers who were coming to occupy the duma ranks. By the second half of the century, the number of men who held these ranks was in all probability too large for all of them to serve as councilors, and there is no evidence that they did so. The duma ranks, as we’ve said, had turned into a source of patronage for weak monarchs and thus the councilors—at least most of them—were deprived of their council.

The history of the земские соборы is just as controversial and murky. The phrase itself was coined by the radical Slavophile Konstantin Aksakov around 1850. It is found in no Muscovite source. Nineteenth-century Russian historians of a liberal bent tried their best to make out of the thin evidence a ‘proto-parliamentary’ body that—but for the unbridled power of self-seeking tsars and boyars—might have led Russia to enlightened liberal democracy. More sober historians, focusing on the evidence rather than projecting their fantasies on bygone eras, contradicted this rosy interpretation. The battle continues.

What can be said with confidence is this. Some sort of popular assembly was first called by Ivan IV and, thereafter, occasionally by his successors. The regime of Mikhail Romanov—weak and attempting to establish its legitimacy—seemed particularly fond of them (he was ‘elected’ by one), though his father was not. Though the assemblies (usually called sobory) could be assigned very specific tasks—for example, ratification of the Уложения of 1649 (called ‘Соборное

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57Poe, A People Born to Slavery, pp. xxx.
58Kotoshikhin, O Rossii, fols. 184-85v.
59Kotoshikhin, O Rossii, fol. 35v-36.
60Kotoshikhin, O Rossii, fols. 185v-86.
61Kotoshikhin, O Rossii, fols. 36-36v.
because it was affirmed by a sobor—they were generally organized by the government to take stock of opinion on affairs domestic and international.

The composition of the assemblies was never set, though they appear to have had two salient characteristics—they were elite (almost entirely composed of high-born military servitors) and they were *ad hoc* (the government often simply gathered servitors and clerics already in Moscow). Some were large—several hundred delegates; others were small—several dozen delegates. The assemblies were not regularly conferred according to any schedule. Rather, they seem to have been called in moments of doubt or crisis. Delegates almost always support the government; there was no forceful ‘debate’ as far as we know. Their exact competence—like the royal council—was never defined in law or custom, though they were consulted on a wide range of affairs. As we can see in Figure 6, some acclaimed tsars, others declared war, while others still adopted legislation.

**Figure Six: Seventeenth-Century ‘Assemblies of the Land’ and their Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1613</td>
<td>chose Mikhail as tsar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1614</td>
<td>advised on stopping movements of Zarutskii and the cossacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1616</td>
<td>discussed conditions of peace with Sweden and a monetary levy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1617</td>
<td>advised on a monetary levy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1619</td>
<td>advised on raising of Filaret to the patriarchal throne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1621</td>
<td>advised on war with Poland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1622</td>
<td>advised on war with Poland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1632</td>
<td>advised on the collection of money for the Polish campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1634</td>
<td>advised on the collection of money and on the Polish campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1637</td>
<td>advised on an invasion of the Crimean Khan Sefat Girey and the collection of money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1639</td>
<td>advised on response to Crimean treatment of two Muscovite envoys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1642</td>
<td>recommended support of Don Cossacks in relation to the taking of Azov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1645</td>
<td>chose Aleksei as tsar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648</td>
<td>advised on the composition of a new law code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648-49</td>
<td><em>Uleznennie sobor</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>advised on the movement of people into Pskov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1651</td>
<td>advised on Russo-Polish relations and Bohdan Khmel’nyt’s’kyi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1653</td>
<td>advised on war with Poland and support of Zaporozhian Cossacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1681-82</td>
<td>advised on military, financial, and land reforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1682</td>
<td>chose Peter as tsar (April 27); chose Peter and Ivan as co-tsars (May)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1683-84</td>
<td>advised on peace with Poland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Delegates were called as a matter of service obligation (and sometimes viewed said service as onerous), not as a matter of ‘right.’ Neither in years without assemblies, nor in the year they were extinguished finally, was there any protest or even mention of them in Muscovite sources. Foreigners, who were often careful observers of Russian politics, very rarely note them and when they do attribute little importance to them.66

Concluding Remarks

In the end, the seventeenth-century Muscovite state proved to be quite robust. Even after it was almost totally taken apart in the malestrom of the Time of Troubles, the triptych tsar-court-prikazy re-emerged rapidly and in full form. The ruling class wasted no time or effort on costly government experimentation in 1613. It simply picked itself up and got down to business. And its business was rule, plain and simple. For the tsar, his court and the men of offices, the entire point of the state was to rule over others and live off them. Never was this point seriously questioned. One must admire the single-minded purpose this sort of concentration bespeaks. While other early modern states (whatever their form) might pursue any number of goals—fostering science, patronizing the arts, educating the public, spreading the Good Word—the Muscovite elite focused nearly all its energy in ruling others or conquering others so that they might rule them. Domination was their raison d’etre.

As the century closed, this focus was, for good or ill, lost. Peter and his cohort were enamored of a different vision of the state and its goals, one that was as new to Russia as it was profoundly alien to the Muscovite spirit. Aleksei Mikhailovich could no more have said he was the ‘first servant of the state’ than he could have sworn off the Orthodox faith. He could not serve the state because he owned the state. It was his instrument to do with as his master—God in Heaven—commanded. Neither could his servitors have said they were serving anything like the ‘common good.’ Such a thing was impossible, for they were honorable men and truly honorable men served only God and his representative, the tsar. As for he rest—all those who were neither tsars nor servants of tsars—they just didn’t matter.

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66 Poe, A People Born To Slavery, pp. xxx.
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