What did Russians Mean When They Called Themselves "Slaves of the Tsar"?

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The Germans criticize the fact that here people of all ranks call themselves the “sovereign’s slaves.” But they do not consider that among them people call themselves “vassals,” and this word is not Latin, but German, and means “orphan,” and so all Germans once called themselves in their language. Similarly, the title “knecht” was once dignified, and even today Scotsmen call their dignified cavaliers “knechts,” that is, “slaves.”

—Iurii Krizhanich, Politika, 1663–66

The analysis of ritual plays an important role in efforts to reconstruct medieval mentalities. Often mute and always cryptic, medieval cultures rarely provide historians with the rich programmatic texts that facilitate the study of political ideas. In response to this relative dearth of treatises and manifestoes, scholars have turned to various forms of symbolic behavior for clues concerning the character of the medieval mind. Students of Muscovy are certainly no exception. Recognizing that Old Russia was particularly “silent” (as George Florovsky put it), historians of late have turned their attention to the iconography of Russian life in an attempt to divine the nature of Muscovite ideology, and particularly political ideology. Though much has been learned from recent studies of Muscovite rites, it must be said that most investigations in

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this vein have focused rather narrowly on what might be called “high ceremonies”—coronations, royal weddings, official banquets, ambassado­rial receptions, mass religious rituals, and so on. 3 Certainly there is good reason for the concentration on grand spectacles: insofar as they were the product of much official planning, they may be said to represent precisely the kind of complex, deliberate political expression that is so notably lacking in the corpus of surviving Muscovite texts. Yet the focus on high political ceremonies has evident limitations. Muscovite high rituals were often not created by the political elite who acted in them, but rather by a variety of (sometimes foreign) ideological consultants; therefore, it is no easy task to decide exactly who held the principles implied by particular ceremonies. Moreover, Muscovite spectacles (like all spectacles) were extraordinary, contrived displays designed to represent high ideals rather than mundane reality; thus, grand ceremonies are at best a problematic source for the reconstruction of everyday political consciousness.

If, however, one turns from high rites to quotidian forms of ritual interaction, more can be learned about the political consciousness of common Muscovites. A case in point is the Muscovite regalian salutation tsariu, gosudariu i velikomu kniaziu . . . [Name] b’et chelom, kholop tvoi (To the Tsar, Sovereign, and Grand Prince . . . [Name], your slave, makes obeisance), the standard written formula used by Russian servitors to address superiors in all manner of documents throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To be sure, like high ceremonies, the regalian salutation was invented by ritual specialists and seemingly expressed lofty ideals. In contrast to extraordinary court rituals, however, the salutation was neither an obscure rite understood only by elites nor a vehicle for the expression of obscure, otherworldly principles. Nearly every Muscovite knew the formula, for protocol demanded that it be used when servitors addressed officials. Petitions, reports, letters—any document issued to a superior within the government—bore the regalian address. Moreover, nearly every Muscovite could understand its language, for the lexicon of the address was part of everyday life in Muscovy. In a strictly hierar­chical society such as Old Russia, everyone, regardless of station, had a gosudar’, or “lord”; as Orthodox Christians and subjects of the tsar, all Russians were familiar with the common practice of bit’ chelom, “to strike one’s head” in humble submission; and, finally, actual kholopy, or “slaves,” were common in Muscovy, as any subject would have known. It seems reasonable to conclude on the basis of the widespread knowledge of the salutation and its seemingly simple language that, if any pre-Petrine ritual may be said to reflect popular political mentalities, it is this one.

In an attempt to elucidate the history and nature of Muscovite political mentalities, this essay will investigate three rather specific questions

about the regalian salutation. First, when and why was it introduced? Many scholars have argued that Ivan III adopted the formula in an attempt to propagate a patrimonial conception of kingship, one in which the grand prince was figured as a seignior, his realm as an estate, and his servitors as slaves. In support of this thesis, advocates of the “patrimonial” view, as we will call it, point out that in the salutation the grand prince is referred to as “master” while his subjects, prostrating themselves before him, demeaned themselves as “slaves.” The origins of the regalian salutation indeed have something to do with patrimonialism as a system of ideas, but its roots may also be traced to Ivan III’s campaign to win international prestige. As Muscovy rose to prominence, Ivan III developed a vocabulary of address that reflected both his status as the “master” (gosudar’) of his Rus’ian “patrimony” (votchina) and as the “sovereign” (gosudar’) of a great, independent principality. The second question turns from the origins of the salutation to its significance after the era of Ivan III: what did the regalian salutation and its terms mean for Muscovites in everyday life? Advocates of the patrimonial interpretation suggest that Muscovites believed in some sense that the tsar was in fact “master” of “slave”-subjects. To some extent this is borne out by the evidence. Nevertheless, it is clear that servitors using the salutation did not conceive of themselves literally as “slaves” to the tsar. They knew the difference between the ceremonial “slavery” implied by the language of the salutation and the actual slavery that existed everywhere in Muscovy. Moreover, as the salutation entered everyday administrative and social discourse in the sixteenth century, its terms lost much of their explicitly patrimonial sense and became polite mechanisms for addressing respected figures. The third and final question addressed below is this: if the salutation cannot be read literally as an expression of slavery, did it have any deeper meaning for Muscovite officials and servitors? It did: in ceremonial contexts, the terms of the address symbolically elevated the status of the tsar, provided his servitors with a respectful way in which to make claims on the government, and helped resolve tension within the governing class.

The Origins of the Regalian Salutation: Patrimonialism and International Prestige

In its fully articulated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century form, the regalian salutation contained three symbolically laden terms drawn, seemingly, from Muscovite colloquial speech—a designation for the grand prince, gosudar’; a term indicating the supplicant addressing the grand prince—kholop, if the supplicant were a royal servitor; and a phrase signifying some kind of obeisance, bit’ chelom.4 When and why did these terms enter the Old Russian regalian salutation? The word

4. The terms tsar’ and velikii kniaz’ (grand prince) have been excluded from consideration because they were traditional designations for political rulers in the east Slavic world. Unlike gosudar’, they denoted only those holding political power and could not be used sensibly in any other context.
gospodar’, meaning “lord,” “master,” or “owner,” is common Slavic. It appears in Slavic texts for the first time in the eleventh century. Documentary sources are for all practical purposes nonexistent for northeastern Rus’ before the fourteenth century, so any attempt to reconstruct the meaning of gospodar’ (or gosudar’, its northeastern variant) in official discourse must be speculative. The best evidence of the meaning of the term is provided by legal codes that suggest norms and uses. An examination of these codes indicates that gospodar’ and gosudar’ in general designated “lord,” and in more specific contexts meant “master” of slaves, “employer” of laborers, and “owner” of inanimate objects. Gospodar’ was first used with reference to the grand prince of Moscow circa 1450. Gosudar’ was first employed in this way at about the same time. Early examples from the 1450s and 1460s are scattered, a fact that suggests the terms were not sanctioned in official communications. Most researchers believe that gospodar’/gosudar’ probably became a part of the grand prince’s title in the 1470s. It is difficult to tell exactly when gosudar’ entered Muscovite administrative discourse, because no serial records survive before the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Beginning in 1474, however, diplomatic records appear in which gosudar’ is indeed attested. In that year, ambassadors to the Crimean Tatar Khan Megli Gerei were instructed to refer to Ivan III as gosudar’ moi (my Lord), a practice followed thereafter in the diplomatic protocols.

7. SDRla XI–XIV, 2:373; SRla XI–XVII, 4:100; Sreznevskii, 1:563.
13. “PDS (Crimea),” no. 1:3.
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"Dar' Russki zemli" (Grand Lord of the Rus'ian land) is found in a royal writ of 1484. And the term appears in what must have been a standard administrative missive (gramota) among diplomatic documents dating from 1489. It reads: "September, 98. The namestnik Fedor Khovanski sent this document concerning the Nogai envoy from Murom. 'To the gosudar', Grand Prince Ivan Vasil'evich of all Rus', your slave, Fedorets Khovanski offers his humble greetings." The salutation "To the gosudar'" is found in each subsequent missive inscribed in the Crimean diplomatic documents. Gosudar' is also used with reference to the grand prince in a variety of other administrative charters in the last quarter of the century. The title is ubiquitous in sources of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was a mandated element in the salutations of chelobitnye (petitions) and otpiski (dispatches).

Why was gosudar' added to the grand prince's title and made part of the regalian salutation in the last quarter of the fifteenth century? According to the logic of the patrimonial interpretation, gosudar' was included to reflect the grand prince's pretension to be patrimonial lord of the Rus'ian lands. After about 1475, the Muscovite grand prince proclaimed himself to be both ruler and master of an expanded Muscovite realm, and the adoption of gosudar' was, according to the patrimonial interpretation, an expression of this fact. The late imperial legal historian Mikhail Diakonov gave a characteristic account of the way in which the grand prince/ruler came to be gosudar'. Once the Muscovite grand prince had incorporated, at least in theory, "all Rus" into his patrimony, "private, domestic service could not be separated from state service, for there was no [conceptual] distinction between the two." Therefore," Diakonov concluded, "free servants and even service princes [of Muscovy] began to call the sovereign princes they served 'gosudar' and 'gospodar'."

Diakonov is probably correct that there was no well-developed distinction in early Muscovite law between the grand prince's authority and the powers of an abstract state. It is true that terms implying such a difference—zemlia (land), kniazhenie (principality), gosodarstvo (state or authority)—are well attested in the period. But no

15. Ibid., no. 23:81.
16. Ibid., no. 29:110, no. 31:118, no. 33:133, no. 35:148, and so on.
17. See the documents in Lev V. Cherepnin, ed., Akty sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi istorii severnovo-vostochnoi Rusi kontsa XIV-nachala XVI v., 3 vols. (Moscow, 1952–64) (hereafter ASEI). Also see the numerous references in Georgii E. Kochin, Materialy dlia terminologicheskogo slovaria Drevnei Rossii (Moscow, 1937), 69.
20. On zemlia, see Sreznevskii, 1:972–76 and SRIa XI–XVII, 5:376–77. On kniazhenie,
known Muscovite author of the era used one of these terms as the basis for a conceptual distinction between the office of the prince and the officeholder. Thus it was difficult within contemporary Muscovite categories to serve “the state”; one could only serve the “master” in his realm. Moreover, the impression that gosudar’ was understood in the sense of patrimonial lord by the men who introduced the term into the regalian salutation is strengthened by two other usages characteristic of political discourse circa 1500. First, as we will see in greater detail in a moment, the grand prince’s servitors were beginning to call themselves “slaves” in the reign of Ivan III. If the grand prince’s men were kholopy, then their prince could only logically be gosudar’, the standard term for “slaveholder” in contemporary Muscovite legal terminology. Second, Muscovite documents of the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century often refer to the realm as the grand prince’s otechina or votchina, meaning “patrimony” or, in a more specific legal context, an “allodial estate.”

Though the technical word for the owner of a votchina in Muscovite legal terminology was votchinnik, gosudar’ was doubtless the way in which those employed on allodial estates deferentially referred to their master.

Though the patrimonial interpretation of the introduction of gosudar’ into the regalian salutation is persuasive, a closer examination of the international context suggests additional reasons why Ivan III and his councilors might have adopted the term. At the time gosudar’ became part of the grand prince’s title, the term was being used to designate “sovereign” by a variety of powers closely connected with Muscovy: it had been part of the title of the rulers of Lithuania (gospodar’) and Moldavia (hospodar) since the fourteenth century; it was used in the title of Novgorod; and it was the Slavic translation of a part of the title of the Byzantine emperor, despotes. Given Ivan III’s well-known desire for international recognition—and specifically titular recognition—it seems only logical to look to the international arena for an explanation of the adoption of gosudar’ in the sense of “sovereign.” This context certainly


offered him motive: the gospodar’ of Lithuania was his chief competitor for rule over “all Rus’”; gosudar’ Novgorod (Lord Novgorod the Great) was subdued by the Muscovites in 1478; and Ivan’s court was filled with Italo-Greeks (members of Sophia’s entourage) who could tell him he was the new despotes, Slavonicized as gosudar’. Seen in this light, it seems evident that in adopting gosudar’ Ivan III wanted to be “sovereign” of a great principality as well as “master” of his subjects. This gloss is confirmed by the appearance of the modifier gosudarev in the royal salutation. In documents of the 1490s the phrase kholop tvoi gosudarev appears. This cannot mean “the master’s slave,” for this would be a kind of redundancy: every slave had a master. It must mean something akin to “the sovereign’s slave,” for not every slave directly served the grand prince.

The phrase bit’ chelom first appears in Russian sources in the early fourteenth century. A corresponding noun, chelobit’e, appeared shortly thereafter. Bit’ chelom was probably borrowed from the Mongol administrative lexicon. The phrase is a calque of the Turkic bas ur-, which in turn is a derivative of the Chinese k’ou t’ou, both of which mean, literally, “to hit the head,” and, figuratively, “to make obeisance.” In the two centuries that followed the phrase’s passage into Russian, it took on two basic meanings. The first is “to humbly greet.” The phrase is used in this sense in Muscovite diplomatic exchanges beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century: the Muscovites generally insisted that inferior powers (Novgorod, Pskov, Prussia, Livonia) use the phrase when addressing the tsar. Due to a lack of sources it is difficult to tell exactly when bit’ chelom became a part of the official salutation used by Muscovites themselves. The first official missive with bit’ chelom in the sense of “to humbly greet” is the 1489 gramota from Fedor Khovanskii cited above. The phrase appears in every subsequent missive in the diplomatic protocols and was a standard element of administrative communications throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The second sense is “to request” or “to bring a complaint against.” It is found in

33. Sreznevskii, 3:1490; SRla XI–XVII, 1:188.
34. Usmanov, Zhalovannie akty, 196; Croskey, “The Diplomatic Forms,” 257–59; Croskey, Muscovite Diplomatic Practice, 117.
35. “PDS (Crimea),” no. 23:81.
this meaning in the first surviving administrative charters from northeastern Rus’ around 1400. 36 In the fifteenth century the phrase is found frequently in the preambles to a variety of documents meaning “to humbly approach someone with a complaint or request.” 37

Why was bit’ chelom included in the regalian salutation? Unlike gosudar’, the phrase cannot have been adopted in connection with the rise of Muscovy, for it had been borrowed from the Mongols long before the triumphant era of Ivan III and was already a common expression used by inferiors to address superiors in Rus’ in the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, its continued use by the Muscovites in the later fifteenth century and its inclusion as a formal element in the regalian salutation may have been related to the propagation of a patrimonial conception of kingship. If the grand prince was to play the role of patrimonial “master” and his servitors were to be his “slaves,” then it was perhaps understood to be only fitting that his men address him with the ritual submission appropriate to the relation between master and slave. Indeed those who formulated the salutation had other terms at their disposal that could have been used to signify the idea of a “humble greeting” or “request” (prositi [to request], moliti [to entreat], and poklonitisia [to bow]), but these terms were not chosen for inclusion in the official formula. 38 Clearly, bit’ chelom was considered more dignified than other terms. But the reason for its selection probably had less to do with patrimonialism than international conventions of address. When the salutation was standardized in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the Muscovites’ primary frame of reference for imperial style was distinctly eastern, as can be seen in their adoption of the titles khan and tsar. 39 As we have seen, the Rurikid probably translated the Turkic phrase “bas ur-” as “bit’ chelom.” They also followed their eastern neighbors in making bit’ chelom the standard form of address to a superior by an inferior. 40 It seems reasonable to suggest that Ivan III simply transferred this usage into the domestic administrative lexicon: his subjects were inferiors, therefore they must “strike their heads” before him.

The word kholop is common Slavic. 41 It appears for the first time in the eleventh century and occurs regularly thereafter. 42 From its earliest appearance, kholop was an official term for “slave,” and it continued

36. ASEI 3: no. 5 (1391), no. 6 (1392 or 1404), no. 7 (1397).
37. ASEI 3: no. 18 (1474), no. 37 (1451–61), no. 38 (1453–54), no. 109 (1487), and so on. Also see the numerous citations in Kochin, Materialy dlia terminologicheskogo slovaria, 28.
40. Usmanov, Zhalovannye akty, 196; Croskey, “The Diplomatic Forms,” 257–59; Croskey, Muscovite Diplomatic Practice, 117.
41. Fasmer, Etimologicheskii slovar’ Russkogo iazyka, 1:446.
42. Sreznevskii, 3:1384.
to be used in this capacity in Muscovite law well into the seventeenth century. Gustav Alef suggests that kholop tvoi had become a sanctioned part of the regalian salutation by the late 1480s. Due to a lack of documentation, it is impossible to determine exactly when the phrase gained widespread currency among Muscovite servitors. It does not appear as a self-address in administrative documents directed toward the grand prince until 1489. Thereafter it is very commonly found in Muscovite administrative discourse: kholop tvoi is universal in dispatches and petitions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries addressed to the grand prince.

Many scholars have suggested that kholop tvoi, like gosudar’ and bit’ chelom, was introduced into the regalian salutation as part of a court-sponsored campaign to promote the idea that Ivan III was the patrimonial lord of Rus’. Alef, for example, argues that once the Muscovite magnates had lost the “right of exit,” they were in effect the grand prince’s bondsman. Thus, as Ivan III’s status rose, that of his men fell—Ivan became “master” and his servitors became “slaves.” “Ceremonial address,” Alef wrote, “emphasized the political distance between lord and even the most distinguished servant. By the late 1480s even privileged court members joined the ordinary courtiers in a common form of address. They identified themselves as ‘kholopy’ to their sovereign. In the parlance of that time kholop meant slave.” The patrimonial interpretation of the entry of kholop tvoi into Muscovite administrative discourse is supported by the absence of the idea of an independent “state,” the adoption of gosudar’ as a royal title, and the use of votchina as a term for the realm. All these facts suggest that the court sought to model political relations on patrimonial relations. Nonetheless, this explanation of the introduction of kholop in the formula is incomplete, for it ignores the international context of Muscovite regalia. The use of “slave” as a designation for elite servitors was well established in the Tatar-Turkic world, an environment the Muscovites knew well. But it is more likely that kholop tvoi was borrowed from Byzantine diplomatics. Long before kholop tvoi is attested, an analogous term of self-identification—“slave of God” (rab bozhii)—is found in Muscovite charters: “In the name of the father, son and holy

45. “PDS (Crimea),” no. 23:81.
spirit, lo I, evil, sinful slave of God, Ivan, . . .”50 This biblical trope was taken from Greek practice.51 In late Byzantine terminology, subjects were called “slaves” of the emperor (dulos tes basileias), a phrase that was apparently understood to signify humility and fidelity, not servility.52 Hence the title was considered honorable among Byzantine elites, a symbol of their status as servitors of the most powerful ruler in the world.53 It is not far-fetched to believe that the same Italo-Greeks who may have placed gosudar’ in Ivan III’s title also suggested that his servitors should address him with the gesture kholop’ tvoi.

In sum, the scattered and incomplete record suggests that the Muscovite regalian salutation was standardized in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, though this is by no means certain. The specific terms of the salutation were chosen in relation to two agendas, one internal and the other international. It seems reasonably sure that the men who composed the salutation wanted to project the image of the Muscovite grand prince as a patrimonial lord, at least in a metaphorical sense. To them, the authority of the Muscovite monarch was like that of a master over slaves. Thus they mandated that servitors call him gosudar’ and themselves kholopy. Further, they stipulated that supplicants should approach the grand prince with what they understood to be appropriate humility in the form of a “head striking” bow. But patrimonialism was not the only context the court had in mind when it contrived the salutation. Ivan III was aware that the rulers of the great kingdoms on his borders were referred to as “masters,” that their subjects called themselves “slaves,” and that they prostrated themselves before their princes. Given Ivan’s pretensions to imperial grandeur, it was only natural for him and his confidants to mimic these trappings of princely power. If the Lithuanian ruler was “master,” he would be as well; if the subjects of the Byzantine emperor called themselves “slaves,” his subjects would too; and if Tatar servitors bowed low before their khan, his men would “strike their heads” before him.

The Meaning of the Regalian Salutation: From Patrimonialism to Politeness

Historians have paid much more attention to the meaning of the regalian salutation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than to the logic behind its assembly in the reign of Ivan III. Indeed, since the early part of the sixteenth century, commentators have wondered about

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the peculiarly submissive fashion in which even high-born Muscovite courtiers addressed their prince. Generally speaking, most have interpreted the terms of the regalian salutation to be a reflex of a patrimonial mentality, that is, a belief that the tsar was the “master” of “slaves.” The imperial ambassador Sigismund von Herberstein may properly be called the founder of this view. In *Rerum moscoviticarum* (1549), he offered the first extended analysis of Muscovite institutions in terms of patrimonial authority. “The grand prince,” he wrote, “holds unlimited control over the lives and property of all his subjects.”

Herberstein was also the first to cite the regalian salutation as evidence of the grand prince’s power. He told his confederates that “all confess themselves to be the *chlopos*, that is, slaves of the prince.” In the decades following the publication of *Rerum moscoviticarum*, Herberstein’s depiction of Russian society and his gloss of the regalian salutation spread. The English ambassador Giles Fletcher argued in *Of the Russe Commonwealth* (1591) that the Russians’ humble form of self-address reflected an equally humble reality. Fletcher wrote that Ivan IV made the Muscovite elite “not onely his vassals, but his *Kolophey*, that is his very villians or bondsmen.” He continued: “For they so terme and write themselves in anie publike instrument or private petition which they make to the Emperour. So that nowe they hold their authority, landes, lives and all at the Emperours pleasure, as the rest do.” By the mid-seventeenth century, Herberstein’s vision had become commonplace in European Moscovitica, as can be seen in Adam Olearius’s famous description of Russia. The Holstinian scholar wrote: “In addressing the tsar the magnates must unashamedly not only write their names in the diminutive form, but also call themselves slaves, and they are treated as such.”

The eighteenth century saw further elaboration of the patrimonial approach. Montesquieu may be taken as the great modern proponent of the theory that “despotism” constitutes a distinct type of political culture. Following Aristotle, he depicted despotism as a regime in which a single master rules over the lives and property of all his fear-

55. Herberstein, *Notes upon Russia*, 1:95. Major rendered *servos* as “serf,” although “slave” would seem to be a more accurate translation. For the original, see Sigmund von Herberstein, *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii* (Vienna, 1549; reprint, Frankfurt am Main, 1964), 49.
ful, servile subjects. As is evidenced by the numerous references to Russia in *The Spirit of the Laws*, descriptions of Muscovy must have played some role in Montesquieu’s formulation of the concept of despotism. His primary source on Russia seems to have been John Perry’s *The State of Russia under the Present Czar* (1716), a book heavily dependent on the Herbersteinian tradition. There the French theorist read that “all the Subjects of Russia, as well the highest Lords as the meanest Peasants in all Petitions and Business of Law, or otherwise . . . write themselves *Golups* or Slaves to the Czar.” This was good evidence for Montesquieu’s contention that Muscovy was a despotism. Montesquieu’s figuration of Muscovy was hardly unique among eighteenth-century social philosophers.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russian historians investigating, inter alia, the regalian salutation advanced a full-blown “patrimonial theory” of Muscovite society. The patrimonial theory holds that in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Muscovite rulers succeeded in imposing seignorial authority on independent appanage principalities and city-states, effectively making the grand prince “master” (gosudar’) and all his subjects “slaves” (khloopy). Elements of this interpretation are common in “state-school” historiography, with its schema of social evolution from “a patriarchal tribal system [*rodovoi byt*] to a modern state system.” Boris N. Chicherin, for example, emphasized that the appanage princes claimed Rus’ as their patrimony (votchina) and called themselves its patrimonial lords (votchinniki). Because of the patrimonial understanding of political authority, the “principle of private law,” as Chicherin put it, dominated all Russian governmental relations prior to the mid-sixteenth century. Chicherin flatly states that “in Russia, eastern despotism served as a model” for government. The most artful and influential renditions of the patrimonial theory were drafted by Vasilii O. Kliuchevskii and Aleksandr E. Presniakov. The two late imperial historians understood the formation of Muscovite autocracy...
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differently: Kliuchevskii described it as the spread of Muscovite seignorial authority over other Rurikid principalities; Presniakov viewed it as the concentration of Rurikid seignorial power within the Muscovite principality. In either case the result was the same: the creation of a “patrimonial autocracy” (votchinnoe samoderzhavie). In support of this thesis, both cited the fact that in communications with the sovereign, servitors referred to themselves explicitly as “slaves.”

A great many contemporary historians of Muscovy have, like their predecessors, seen the regalian salutation as a reflex of some sort of patrimonial political mentality. They generally offer glosses of the crucial terms in the salutation to bolster their view. Though it is usually understood to mean “sovereign,” modern advocates of the patrimonial approach note that gosudar’ could also indicate “master” or “owner,” particularly of slaves. For example, Richard Pipes describes the grand prince as “a counterpart of the Greek despotes, the Roman dominus, and the Russian gosudar’, that is lord, master, outright owner of all things.” Similarly, modern historians have advanced the view that the phrase bit’ chelom is evidence of ingrained servility toward tsarist authority. They point out that bit’ chelom meant “to petition,” but literally (and more significantly) “to strike one’s forehead [on the ground].” On this gloss, chelobitnye were “petitions,” but also (as one commentator puts it) “forehead-knocking charters.” Bit’ chelom was “a demeaning, slavish ritual” the symbolism of which is clear—untrammeled submission to the grand prince-seignior. The Muscovite self-ascription kholop tvoi is the strongest linguistic evidence adduced by supporters of the patrimonial interpretation. Citing the use of the term by Muscovite servitors, Michael Cherniavsky concluded that Vasilii III believed that all his subjects were “slaves.” Pipes argues that the crown used kholop to “humiliate any-

70. Vasilii O. Kliuchevskii, Istoriia soslovii v Rossii, in Sochineniia v deviatii tomakh (Moscow, 1987), 6:307; Aleksandr E. Presniakov, Moskovskoe tsarstvo (Petrograd, 1918), 44.


72. Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, 21.

73. Kollmann, “Ritual and Social Drama,” 498.


76. Cherniavsky, “Khan or Basileus?” 73.
one who by virtue of ancestry, office or wealth may have been inclined to become self-important,” thereby strengthening patrimonial power.77

The patrimonial gloss of the social terminology of the regalian salutation is in many respects convincing. For most of the Muscovite period, gosudar’ was the official term for “slaveholder.”78 Similarly, until the later seventeenth century, the institution of slavery flourished in Muscovy and slaves were indeed called kholopy.79 Finally, as foreign visitors commonly reported, slaves and serfs often prostrated themselves before their masters in a gesture called bit’ chelom.80 Thus, in a strictly linguistic sense it is possible that Muscovites conceived of the tsar as a seignior and themselves as humble slaves, as the patrimonial interpretation suggests. Yet, on closer inspection, this seems unlikely for the simple reason that the tsar and his servitors undoubtedly realized the difference between the “slavery” implied by the regalian salutation and actual slavery, an institution they knew well. Unlike actual slaves, Russian servitors were in many instances quite rich and powerful, particularly in the case of courtiers. Unlike slaves, such men often enjoyed very high social status in the court and country. And finally, unlike actual slaves, they worked in institutions (the court, chancelleries, provincial offices, and the army) governed by conventions that de facto limited the tsar’s authority. Russian elites and common servitors indeed believed that their prince was extremely powerful and that they were dependent on him for their lives and livelihoods. The point is rather that they did not use the native Muscovite concepts of literal “lordship” or “slavery” to capture this relationship. Rather, they understood the language of salutation to be a metaphorical representation of their condition vis-à-vis the crown.81

This fact is reflected in the evolution of the meanings of the terms in the regalian salutation over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the reign of Ivan III, gosudar’ may have suggested

77. Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, 180.
80. See, for example, Jacob Reutenfels, “Skazanie sviatleishemu gertsogu toskanskymu Koz’me Tret’emu u Moskowii [1671],” Chizhui v Imperatorskom obschestve istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom universitete (hereafter ChOIDR) (1905), bk. 3:86: “When the tsar goes past, then all bow to him, falling down and touching their heads to the very ground: in their language this is called bit’ chelom.” For other examples in which ritual prostration is identified as bit’ chelom, see Daniel Printz von Buchau, “Nachalo i Vozvyshenie Moskovii [1578],” ChOIDR (1876), bk. 3:53; Paul of Aleppo, The Travels of Macarius Patriarch of Antioch, Written by his Attendant Archdeacon, Paul of Aleppo, in Arabic [1653], trans. Francis C. Belfour, 2 vols. (London, 1829–36), 1:263; and Augustin Meyerberg, “Puteshestvie v Moskoviiu Barona Avgustina Maierberga [1661],” trans. A. N. Shemiakin and intro. O. M. Podoiskii, ChOIDR (1873), bk. 4:65.
patrimonial lordship to the once free servitors who sought quarter at the grand prince’s court. But it is difficult to agree with Pipes, for example, that it continued to be understood predominately in the sense of dominus thereafter. Rather, the evidence suggests that it came to mean simply “sovereign” or “lord” in a generic sense having little to do with ownership of slaves. First, in written correspondence addressed to the grand prince, gosudar’ was always accompanied by tsar’ and velikii kniaz’. Thus “tsariu, gosudariu i velikomu kniaziu” (To the Tsar, Sovereign, and Grand Prince) was a semantic unit designating the grand prince and the grand prince alone. In this context, gosudar’ was probably understood, first, in the sense of “sovereign” and only by metaphorical association as “slaveholder” or “patrimonial lord.” Second, “slaveholder” was not the only meaning of gosudar’ in Muscovite parlance. In the seventeenth century, the term also functioned as a polite form of address indicating little about the addressee’s legal or social status. For example, in a letter of the late seventeenth century, Fed’ka Belin employed a common convention in addressing his brother as gosudar’. Finally, perhaps due to the use of gosudar’ as a decorous address, the official term for “slaveholder”—which had been gosudar’ for centuries—was replaced by boiarin. Boiarin, in fact, is the standard word for “slaveholder” in the Ulozhenie of 1649. Given all this, it seems likely that a Muscovite writing the regalian salutation would have at least recognized the difference between gosudar’-slaveholder and gosudar’-sovereign, though the metaphorical link uniting these two senses would have perhaps been registered.

Similarly, bit’ chelom may have reminded servitors circa 1500 of their recent submission to the Muscovite grand prince cum patrimonial lord. But by the mid-sixteenth century (and probably much earlier), the phrase and the act it designated do not seem to have indicated anything particularly servile or patrimonial. If bowing was a conventional form of respectful greeting throughout Muscovite society, its use would not have denoted anything out of the ordinary to Russians. Indeed, this seems to have been the case. Exaggerating somewhat, the French mercenary Jacques Margeret claimed that, aside from bowing, the Muscovites knew “no other signs of respect.” As the foreign visitors pointed out, the Muscovites used different sorts of bows depending on the degree of deference they wanted to show. “They regard striking the forehead,” Herber-

82. Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, 127.
83. For many examples, see Sergei I. Kotkov, ed., Pamiatniki delovoi pis’mennosti XVII veka: Vladimirskaia kraia (Moscow, 1984), 149–220.
84. Ibid., 324. Also see the numerous examples in Sergei I. Kotkov, ed., Gramotki XVII–nachala XVIII v. (Moscow, 1969). The editors of SRla XI–XVII, 4:109 note this usage.
86. Jacques Margeret, The Russian Empire and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy [1607], trans. and ed. Chester S. L. Dunning (Pittsburgh, 1983), 33. The French mercenary was not quite correct: many foreigners reported kissing the tsar’s hand, but, they wrote, this rite was reserved almost exclusively for the grand prince and was only performed during audiences.
stein wrote, "as expressive of salutation, rendering thanks, and everything of that kind. For whenever anyone makes a petition, or offers thanks, it is the custom to bow the head; if he wishes to do so in a very marked manner, he bends himself so low as to touch the ground with his hand; but if he desires to offer his thanks to the grand duke for any great favor, or to beg anything of him he then bows himself so low as to touch the ground with his forehead." 87 The final, most deferential gesture described by Herberstein was called bit' chelom, and it shocked many foreigners. Olearius, for example, was surprised that Russian notables were required to "appear daily at court, and beat their heads to the tsar." 88 But one should not confuse the European perspective and the values that informed it with the Muscovite understanding of deep bows. The visitors were unaccustomed to prostration, particularly by magnates, and interpreted it as a sign of servility. For the Muscovites, deep bowing was simply the most respectful way in which one could greet any superior. They had no wider perspective in which to evaluate the act. Moreover, both of the original meanings of the phrase (as opposed to the act) bit' chelom—"to humbly greet" and "to request"—underwent further development in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that blanched them of explicitly patrimonial connotations. Bit' chelom became the standard polite mode for written greetings, not only for the grand prince, but for people of any rank. 89 This is clear in seventeenth-century letters (gramotki). To return to our example, Fed'ka Belin bit chelom to his brother. 90 The evolution of bit' chelom in the sense of "request" was stimulated by the formation of the Petition Chancellery (chelobitnyi prikaz) in the 1550s. 91 At about that time, the phrase came to mean "an official request or complaint addressed to the tsar." It is used in this sense in post-1549 Muscovite legal codes. 92 Following this signification, the terms chelobitnaiia (a petition) and chelobitchik (a petitioner) entered the Muscovite legal lexicon. 93 In short, Muscovites using bit' chelom in the regalian salutation did not understand it to mean "to strike one's forehead in servile submission." The phrase simply meant "to humbly greet" or "petition." In everyday usage, the phrase bit' chelom in address to the tsar was not necessarily a token of patrimonial servility—it was simply what decorum and the law required.

Finally, it seems sensible to suggest that the term kholop, when used

87. Herberstein, Notes upon Russia, 2:125. For similar treatments of this hierarchy of bows, see Raffaelle Barberino, "Puteshestvie v Moskoviiu Rafaelia Berberini [1565]," ed. and trans. Vasili I. Liubich-Romanovich, Syn otechestva, 1842, no. 7:12; Printz, "Nachalo i Vozvyshenie Moskovi"i," 53; Margeret, The Russian Empire, 33; and Augustin Meyerberg, Album Meierberga: Vidy i bytovaya kartiny Rossii XVII veka [1661], ed. Friedrich von Adelung and A. M. Loviagin (St. Petersburg, 1903), 148–49 and fig. 84.
88. Olearius, The Travels, 220.
89. Volkov, Leksika russkikh chelobitnykh XVII veka, 36.
90. Kotkov, Pamiatniki delovoi pis’mennosti, 249.
92. Sudebnik of 1550, arts. 7, 8, 24, 70, 72, 78, 79, 85, and 100 in Grekov, ed., Sudebniki XV–XVI vekev.
in reference to formerly free princes of Ivan III’s era, carried with it demeaning connotations derived from its patrimonial associations. But once the term is placed within the context of the mature Muscovite petitionary hierarchy, it seems clear that kholop did not retain its explicitly patrimonial sense. In fact, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, kholop tvoi was the official petitionary designation for the highest rung of Russian society. According to Muscovite protocol, service people addressing the grand prince were to use “your slave” (kholop tvoi), taxpayers “your orphan” (sirota tvoia), and clerics “your pilgrim” (bogomolets). 94 All this is described in some detail by Grigorii Kotoshikhin and, interestingly, by the imperial diplomat Augustin Meyerberg. 95 Seen in this context, kholop tvoi designated both submission and relative honor. Iurii Krizhanich, an astute observer of Muscovite affairs, made this explicit. He understood the Bible to say that all subjects, and especially military servitors, are “slaves” of their prince. 96 He distinguished this sort of political dependence from economic bondage, which he condemned. 97 Of political slavery he wrote: “To be tsar is to serve God, but to be the slave of the tsar of one’s own people, this is honorable and is actually a kind of freedom.” 98 This honorable sense of kholop is reflected in the passage of the term into epistolary discourse, where it seems to have been used by inferiors of any sort writing to their superiors. 99 It is true that Krizhanich called on well-born Muscovites to stop calling themselves “slaves,” but this was part of his effort to raise the image of Russians in the eyes of Europeans. 100 He knew the foreigners would not understand the more subtle, honorable sense of “slave,” and in this he was right. 101

In conclusion, a careful analysis of the semantics of the mature regalian salutation suggests that the patrimonial interpretation neglects both the social context and historical evolution of its key terms. Because actual bondage existed in Muscovy, servitors could easily distinguish their “slavery” from the “slavery” of literal human chattel. For this reason, they must have perceived that they were “slaves” only in a ceremonial sense. This understanding developed over time. When the address was first introduced in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, servitors

94. Kotkov, Pamiatniki delovoi pis’mennosti XVII veka, 149–220.
100. Krizhanich, Politika, 603.
101. Krizhanich mentioned that Europeans singled out the use of “the sovereign’s slaves” for particular censure. Ibid., 546–47.
would have recognized that the novel usages represented in the salutation were drawn, at least in part, from the lexicon of actual patrimonial relations. They could recall a time when their prince was not "master," they were not "slaves," and prostration was not required when addressing the crown. As Ivan III's innovations became a routine part of the Russian administrative and social intercourse, however, the patrimonial meanings of gosudar', kholop, and bit' chelom were joined and perhaps even supplanted by more polite significations used by respectable people throughout Muscovite society—"lord," "servant," and "humble greetings." What had once been the vocabulary of patrimonialism had become the lexicon of dignified deference in both administrative and social discourse.

**The Function of the Regalian Salutation: Royal Status, Reciprocity, and Order**

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the evocative language of the salutation was without deeper meaning. For its social terms operated on two levels after the era of Ivan III: a "surface" level in which the terms were understood as conventional forms and a metaphorical level in which the terms designated symbolic social roles. This can be seen in table 1.

What is interesting about the roles assigned on the deeper, older level of meaning is that they were, as we have seen, plainly fictional. The tsar realized he was not a patrimonial "master," and Muscovite servitors knew they were not literally "slaves." One is forced to conclude, then, that the court and its servitors were knowingly participating in a kind of political theater, a play in which the tsar acted out the role of "master" and they acted out the role of "slaves."102

Interestingly, the master-slave drama was not confined to the formula of the salutation but was in fact performed on a daily basis at court. Striking evidence of this is found in the accounts of foreigners. To begin with, foreigners frequently noted that important Muscovite magnates seemed to go out of their way to demonstrate their submission to the grand prince. "It is their custom and manner," Olearius observed, "to be servile and to make a show of their slavish disposition."103 The most obvious signs of this enthusiasm were of course the use of the self-ascription "slave" and the habit of ritual prostration, items the foreigners almost never failed to record. Even more suggestively, the foreigners often noted that Muscovite elites routinely claimed that they, like slaves in a household, owed both their lives and properties to the grand prince. The Englishman Richard Chancellor, writing in 1553, was the first to record such


Table 1
The Dual Meanings of the Social Terminology of the Regalian Salutation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Surface Meaning</th>
<th>Metaphorical Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gosudar'</td>
<td>&quot;lord&quot; or &quot;sovereign&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;master&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kholop</td>
<td>&quot;humble servant&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;slave&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bit' chelom</td>
<td>&quot;to humbly greet&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;to strike one’s head in submission&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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a statement. A Muscovite, he reported, will “say, that he hath nothing, but it is Gods and the Dukes Graces.” Later commentators transcribed many similar sayings. In 1558, Alessandro Guagnini reported that Muscovites “confess that they are the most abject and vilest slaves of the grand prince, and they say that all their movable and immovable property is not theirs but rather the grand prince’s.” In the same year, the imperial legate Daniel Printz noted that Muscovites claimed that their property belonged to the grand prince. In 1586, Antonio Possevino heard the same thing: “They incessantly declare that they owe their lives, their health, and all their worldly possessions to him and convey the impression that they attribute everything to the grace of God and the mercy of the great tsar.” Moreover, such statements were not confined to the reign of Ivan IV. Olearius heard them in the mid-seventeenth century. “To demonstrate their humility and sense of duty,” he noted, “they say that everything they have belongs not so much to them as to God and the grand prince.” Later in the seventeenth century, Augustin Meyerberg, Jacob Reutenfels, and Johann Georg Korb all recorded that Muscovites swore all they possessed belonged to the grand prince. Some of the travelers learned of these statements by reading the accounts of their predecessors. But given the number of foreigners who independently


108. Olearius, The Travels, 174; also see 147.


110. On the custom of "borrowing" in European Moscovitica, see Walter Leitsch, “Herberstein’s Impact on the Reports about Muscovy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth
reported them, it seems clear that Muscovite courtiers indeed said that the grand prince owned their property. Of course they knew this to be literally false: Muscovite law described a kind of private property, even if it was not very well protected.\(^{111}\)

Why did the court insist on maintaining the fiction that the tsar was the “master” of “slaves”? The most powerful reason had to do with the logic of the Muscovite status hierarchy. More than most premodern states, Muscovy was a strictly hierarchical society. Rank (chin) and honor (chest') were strictly regulated by the government, as is borne out by the numerous ranked lists of high officers and the ample legislation protecting the honor of every social class in the hierarchy.\(^{112}\) At the apex of the status pyramid stood the tsar and his family. Naturally the court took every measure possible to ensure that the tsar’s exalted status was maintained and projected. From the court’s point of view, the requirement that the top rung of the Muscovite social order call themselves, paradoxically, “slaves” when addressing the tsar did just this. For if even powerful magnates were “slaves” to the grand princely “master,” then his honor must be immeasurably greater than any other member of the hierarchy. In short, from the court’s perspective, the status of the tsar was inversely proportional to the status of his elite servitors—his honor rose as theirs fell. Judging by the accounts of foreigners, this ceremonial distancing mechanism was quite effective. Visiting Europeans were, as we have seen, amazed that nobles called themselves the tsar’s “slaves” and, having observed this fact, often drew the conclusion that the tsar’s authority was overwhelming. Margeret’s argument is typical of many foreigners, and, one might imagine, many Muscovites as well: “I consider him to be one of the most absolute princes in existence, for everyone in the land, whether noble or commoner, even the brothers of the emperor, call themselves kho1opy gosudaria, which means ‘slaves of the emperor.’”\(^{113}\)

A second force impelling the court to maintain the master-slave fiction had to do with the symbolic function of slave holding in Muscovite society. Muscovite slaves were, for the most part, domestics; they served as household lackeys rather than as field hands producing goods

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\(^{111}\) On Muscovite property law, see George G. Weickhardt, “Due Process and Equal Justice in Muscovite Law,” Russian Review 51 (1992): 463–80, and Weickhardt, “The Pre-Petrine Law of Property,” Slavic Review 52, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 663–79. It should be noted that Weickhardt’s survey is based entirely on Russian statutes that may not have been followed in practice. Moreover, the statutes certainly did not reflect what might be called the everyday “ethos” or “spirit” of Russian property relations, something that is perhaps better registered in the popular proverbs about the tsar’s power recorded by European visitors.


\(^{113}\) Margeret, The Russian Empire, 28.
for exchange. Moreover, though slaves were not terribly expensive in Muscovy, they seem to have been purchased predominantly by well-established magnates, merchants, and servitors. Given these two considerations, it seems sensible to agree with Richard Hellie that the value of slaves in Muscovy was symbolic rather than economic. They were a visible luxury used by men of means to demonstrate their wealth and status to the world. The observations of foreigners confirm that Muscovites viewed slaves as status symbols. According to Margeret “the wealth of one and all [in Muscovy] is measured by the number of men and women servants that one has and not by the money that one possesses.” So that his reader would not be confused, Margeret made clear that these “servants” were in fact heritable “slaves.” In 1611, the Polish officer Samuel Maskiewicz corroborated Margeret’s observation, writing that the number of slaves held by a man was “proportional to [his] honor.” In the mid-seventeenth century, Paul of Aleppo noted that in Muscovy “every rich man” kept numerous Tatar slaves in his house. Olearius agreed: “The slaves and servants of the magnates and other lords are countless.” Paul, Olearius, and other commentators of the second half of the seventeenth century remarked that Russian magnates and their wives often appeared in public with large groups of domestic slaves. If the number of slaves one held was directly proportional to one’s status, then it stood to reason that the tsar would have the most slaves. And indeed this was the case, for according to the ceremonial conventions of the regalian salutation, the entire Muscovite service class—numbering hundreds of thousands—was held in bondage to the grand prince. Again, judging by the impressions of foreigners, this technique for elevating the dignity of the tsar proved effective. The foreigners, and particularly foreign ambassadors, were shocked by the fawning behavior of the hordes of courtier—“slaves” who constantly surrounded the tsar. “The majesty of the tsar’s office,” Meyerberg wrote, “is sumptuously displayed by innumerable quantities of courtiers, among them many famous for their notable lineages. All the boyars are required to appear at court before noon daily to honor him. They gather there like ants to an anthill.”

114. See Hellie, Slavery in Russia, 20 and 490–95.
115. Ibid., 591 and 612.
117. Margeret, The Russian Empire, 32.
118. Ibid., 32.
Paradoxically, the service elite also derived benefit from the ceremonial humiliation that seemingly (especially in the eyes of foreigners) dishonored them. In order to comprehend how this could be the case, one must place the ceremonial “slavery” of the service class into the context of actual Muscovite slavery. One of the distinguishing features of Muscovite slavery was the requirement that masters care for their bondsmen. Russian masters were legally obliged to feed their slaves. If they did not, the slaves could petition the government for redress and, if the owner proved recalcitrant, the slaves would be freed. More generally, slaveholders were under a moral obligation not to mistreat their slaves and to provide for them, as may be seen in the admonitions of the Domostroi.

In sum, while it would be a mistake to see the relation of master to slave in Muscovy as one of hard and fast reciprocal rights, slaves could expect that they would be protected by their owners. In this sense, the ceremonial proclamation that one was the tsar’s “slave” carried with it distinct implications for the tsar. He, like an actual slaveholder, was obliged to protect his charges from injury. Though a small number of programmatic texts stress this obligation, perhaps the best evidence that Muscovite custom required the tsar to care for his men is found in the constant hum of complaints that were registered literally daily in thousands of petitions for relief from servitors throughout Russia. Each of these documents, interestingly, begins with the proclamation that the servitor was the tsar’s “slave.” What follows this self-effacing gesture seems to be the pleadings of a humiliated subject. The underlying rhetoric of the petitions, however, was not that of servility but rather of entitlement. The petitioners were in essence saying “We have suffered as required for you, now, if you please, do your part and protect us.” The tsar was, of course, not legally obliged to do anything of the sort: Muscovite political culture

125. Vladimir V. Kolesov, ed. Domostroi (Moscow, 1990), chap. 28.
127. See, for example, Metropolitan Makarii’s benediction performed at Ivan IV’s coronation on 16 January 1547, where Makarii counsels Ivan to preserve the realm and keep his flock unharmed. Elpidifor V. Barsov, ed. Drevne-russkie pamiatniki sviaschennogo venchaniia tsarei na tsarstvo, ChODR 124 (1883), bk. 1:58. Makarii borrowed this admonition from the sixth-century Byzantine Deacon Agapetus’s benediction to Emperor Justinian. For an analysis, see Miller, “The Coronation of Ivan IV,” 559–74. On the origin of the text in Agapetus, see Ihor Shevchenko, “A Neglected Byzantine Source of Muscovite Political Ideology,” Harvard Slavic Studies 2 (1954): 141–79. For a similar statement, again borrowed from Agapetus, see Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei (St. Petersburg, 1846–), vol. 21, chap. 2 (Stepennaia kniga), 609–11.
was not contractarian. But in the course of everyday affairs it was to be expected that the “master” would show mercy, if not because God’s commandments and custom required it, then because from the point of view of imperial administrators, it seemed both equitable and efficient to keep one’s “slaves” satisfied.

More generally, the master-slave metaphor can be said to have served the collective interests of both the tsar and his men by helping to pacify the political order: Every successful early modern kingdom, Muscovy included, was beset by competing interests within the governing class: the crown and royal family fought to secure its place among elite clans and gain legitimacy among commoners; magnates fought among themselves for preferment at court; and provincial nobles and servitors struggled to avoid onerous state service, gain control of the peasantry, and ensconce themselves in the provinces. Naturally, if they hoped to govern effectively, the elites who ruled early modern societies had to forge strategies to diffuse dangerous infighting and get on with the business of government. In a generic sense, the basic Muscovite political strategy could properly be called “absolutist.” With ruthless consistency, the court insisted that the tsar, standing far above any particular interest, held all power in the state. The master-slave metaphor functioned to reinforce this notion. In the scenario implied by the salutation, the tsar was imagined—metaphorically, of course—as the merciful “master” of elite “slaves.” He ruled and they obeyed. Though this scenario was fictitious, it served as a ceremonial representation of the ideal of absolute sovereignty, an imaginary space in which political conflict as such was impossible. What well-treated “slave” would question the will of his “master?”

Conclusion

The Muscovite regalian salutation was born in the last quarter of the fifteenth century of a court-sponsored effort to increase the domestic and international prestige of the Muscovite grand prince. The men who formulated the salutation at this time wanted to project the image of the

129. George Weickhardt has argued that Muscovites (particularly the framers of the Ulozhenie of 1649, Kotoshikhin, Simeon Polotskoi, and Krizhanich) believed that “the ruler and the laws derived their legitimacy from a contract or from popular consent.” He even sees similarities between these “Russian” ideas and the thought of John Locke. See George G. Weickhardt, “Political Thought in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” Russian History/Histoire Russe 21 (1994): 337. Leaving aside the question whether Kotoshikhin, Simeon, and Krizhanich could be considered representative of Muscovite political thought, it seems that Weickhardt’s thesis overreaches the evidence. There was certainly some sense in which all Muscovites believed the ruler was beholden to the people. But to speak of a “contract” is to ignore the informal framework of Muscovite political culture and, more importantly, the indisputable fact that no Muscovite ever composed a contractarian political philosophy that explicitly bound the activities of the tsar to the will of the people.

tsar as a patrimonial lord (gosudar’ as “master” or “slaveholder”) and great territorial monarch (gosudar’ as “sovereign”). In keeping with this new persona, the tsar’s servitors were identified as “slaves,” and they were directed to greet the grand prince with a humble bow. As the sixteenth century wore on, these usages became standard elements in the evolving Muscovite administrative lexicon, and they also entered nongovernmental (private) discourse. As the terms were routinized, they lost much of their explicit connection with the patrimonial image of kingship that, in part, gave rise to them. In mature Muscovite administrative and social discourse, gosudar’ came to mean “sovereign” or “lord,” kholop came to mean “servant,” and bit’ chelom came to mean “to humbly greet” or “to request.” The ideologically laden language of the salutation was transformed into a means of polite social intercourse, not necessarily restricted to the sphere of the court. Yet the older, patrimonial meanings did not disappear entirely. They remained as metaphors for the relation between the tsar and his servitors. In Muscovite ceremonial speech, the tsar was figured as benevolent “slaveholder” and his men as humble, supine “slaves.” The preservation of this fiction served the interests of both the tsar and his servitors: it elevated the status of the former and provided a mechanism by which the latter could respectfully request the grand prince’s aid. In addition, the master-slave metaphor served the common interests of both the tsar and his men in that it helped to suppress wasteful political infighting by fostering the notion of an absolute ruler.