



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Post-Soviet Peter: New Histories of the Late Muscovite and Early Imperial Russian Court

Ernest A. Zitser

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 6, Number 2, Spring 2005 (New Series), pp. 375-392 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers  
DOI: 10.1353/kri.2005.0032



➔ For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/kri/summary/v006/6.2zitser.html>

## Post-Soviet Peter

New Histories of the Late Muscovite  
and Early Imperial Russian Court

ERNEST A. ZITSER

Evgenii Viktorovich Anisimov, *Gosudarstvennye preobrazovaniia i samoderzhavie Petra Velikogo v pervoi chetverti XVIII veka* [State Reforms and Peter the Great's Autocracy in the First Quarter of the 18th Century]. 331 pp. St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1997. ISBN 5860070632.

Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great*. xii + 187 pp. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. ISBN 0847696383. \$24.95 (cloth). ISBN 0847696391. \$17.95 (paper).

Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power, 1671–1725*. xii + 485 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. ISBN 521805856. \$85.00.

Lindsey Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography*. xv + 285 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. ISBN 0300094264. \$35 (cloth). ISBN 030010300X. \$18.00 (paper).

Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*. xxix + 602 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. ISBN 0300075391. \$60.00 (cloth). ISBN 0300082665. \$23.00 (paper).

Dmitrii Olegovich Serov, *Stroiteli imperii: Ocherki gosudarstvennoi i kriminal'noi deiatel'nosti spodvizhnikov Petra I* [Builders of Empire: Essays on the Governmental and Criminal Activities of Peter I's Companions]. 262 pp. Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo Novosibirskogo universiteta, 1996. ISBN 5761503859.

*Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, 2 (Spring 2005): 375–92.

Viktor Markovich Zhivov, *Razyskaniia v oblasti istorii i predystorii russkoi kul'tury* [Research in the History and Prehistory of Russian Culture]. 758 pp. Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul'tury, 2002. ISBN 5785902214.

One of the unexpected historiographical consequences of the demise of the Soviet Union, both as a state and as a civilization, has been a revival of interest in that most traditional of all Russian historical topics—the study of Peter the Great and all things Petrine (*petrovedenie*).<sup>1</sup> This revival cannot simply be attributed to the fact that the political and economic transformations of the late 20th century happened to coincide with a spate of Petrine tercentenaries, such as those commemorating the inauguration of the Russian navy (1695), Peter's "Great Embassy" to Europe (1697–98), or, most famously, the founding of St. Petersburg (1703). Rather, these post-Soviet Petrine celebrations are themselves a sign of Russians' renewed interest in a usable national past, and in particular in the historical period that has come to be identified (and even embraced) as the quintessential starting point of Russian modernity. Post-Soviet opinion polls gave Peter a higher approval rating than any other leader in Russian history (except perhaps for Russia's current president).<sup>2</sup> Judging by the flood of books produced in the last decade, this fact is not lost on Russian publishers, who have eagerly joined contemporary politicians in cashing in on the marketing of imperial nostalgia. Unfortunately, the actual intellectual content of what is sold to Russian consumers (and fobbed off on voters) suggests that much of contemporary *petrovedenie* fails to rise above the level attained in the first half of the 19th century, when the contours of the professional, academic study of Peter's Russia first took shape. If they address the historiography at all, most of the glossy commemorative volumes and popular biographies produced to coincide with the recent Petrine anniversaries simply echo the old debates about continuity and change, the degree of foreign influence on Russia's domestic development, and the inevitability of the choice between

<sup>1</sup> For a brief survey of the historiographical effect of the Soviet collapse on Petrine historiography, see Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought and Its Present Condition," in *Mesto Rossii v Evrope (materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii)/The Place of Russia in Europe (Materials of [an] International Conference)*, ed. Gyula Szvák (Budapest: Magyar Ruzsisztikai Intézet, 1999), 182–86, an addendum to his classic study *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For a discussion of the effect of the Soviet collapse on the other "turning point" of modern Russian history, see Stephen Kotkin, "1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks," *Journal of Modern History* 70, 2 (1998): 384–425.

<sup>2</sup> *Radio Free Europe/Radio Research Report* 2, 7 (1993), cited in Riasanovsky, "The Image of Peter the Great," 184.

Russia and the West. Regardless of which side of the argument they eventually land on, the participants in such endless (because ultimately ahistorical) quarrels fail to transcend the antinomies imported from German idealist philosophy by the Slavophiles and Westernizers. As a result, they do little more than perpetuate the commonly accepted myths about Peter the Great, the demiurge who supposedly dragged Muscovy kicking and screaming into the secular modern world.<sup>3</sup>

How gratifying it is, therefore, to review a selection of books that not only try to bring something new to the traditional picture of Peter, but also attempt to rethink the premises underpinning much of the old *petrovedenie*. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this revisionist strain in the historiography of Peter's reign has also drawn strength from the ideological consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The sudden fragmentation of the seemingly all-powerful Soviet state inevitably exposed the flaws of the "totalitarian" and "absolutist" interpretations of Russian politics and re-invigorated interest in such informal sources of political cohesion as patronage networks, court rituals, and imperial myths.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the repudiation of Marxist dogma has not only called into question all deterministic and teleological narratives of historical progress ("secularization," "modernization," "Westernization") but also encouraged historians to turn away from officially sponsored methodologies stressing economic history toward such neglected fields of study as cultural history and political anthropology.<sup>5</sup> The authors of the works under review, both Russian and Anglo-American, are acutely aware of the paradigm shifts underway in the field. That awareness has resulted in a sense, expressed most forcefully by Paul Bushkovitch, that despite the 300 years of almost obsessive attention to Peter the Great, the history of his reign "has

---

<sup>3</sup> Soviet historiography put its own, unique spin on the binary approach inherited from the 19th century, glorifying the emperor as a "military, naval and diplomatic genius, as the builder of his capital and his country, as on many counts the enlightener of Russia," while, at the same time, savagely condemning him for "prolonging 'feudalism' and drastically increasing the oppression of the people." See Nicholas Riasanovsky, review of E. V. Anisimov's *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress through Coercion in Russia*, trans. and ed. John T. Alexander (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), in *Slavic Review* 53, 2 (1994): 588–89, here 589; and Riasanovsky, *Image of Peter the Great*.

<sup>4</sup> This post-Soviet trend has coincided with the contemporaneous repudiation of the "absolutist state" paradigm in European historiography. For the most forceful statement of this revisionist position, see Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy* (London: Longman, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> On "political anthropology," defined as the study of the history of power relations in all their forms, material and symbolic, see Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); and M. M. Krom, "Politicheskaia antropologija: Nove podkhody k izucheniiu fenomena vlasti v istorii Rossii," *Istoricheskie zapiski* 4 (122) (2001): 370–96.

remained in large and crucial areas unknown.”<sup>6</sup> While there is more than a bit of revisionist bravado in this bold statement—not least because all modern Petrinists are indebted to earlier studies and source publications—there is also a grain of truth. For together, all the books under review demonstrate that new archival sources and new approaches to Peter’s reign can fundamentally alter the way we understand the late Muscovite and early imperial Russian court.

It seems especially fitting that the attack against the old *petrovedenie* was first joined by two former associates of the Leningrad branch of the Institute of History soon after the citizens of Leningrad formally reclaimed the prerevolutionary name of their city and re-dedicated it to Russia’s first emperor. Like some of their intellectual predecessors from the “St. Petersburg school” of Russian history, Evgenii Anisimov and Dmitrii Serov do not shy away from offering their readers a provocative and politically engaged analysis of the complex set of issues confronting contemporary Russian society. Political revolution and high-level corruption, imported ideology and the social costs of reform—these are the running threads of the historical narratives created by Anisimov and Serov in the 1990s in an effort to demonstrate how Russia’s past continues to influence its present. In both cases, the authors’ passionate engagement with the issues of the day and their commitment to popular history shares the polemical thrust of contemporary publicistic writing, particularly its search for viable historical alternatives and its attempt to fill in formerly prohibited “blank spots.” But regardless of whether one applauds Anisimov and Serov for their stance as public intellectuals or criticizes them for pandering to a non-academic audience, there is no doubt that their versions of early imperial Russian history pose a serious challenge to the hagiographic treatment of Peter the Great in Soviet-era biographies.

This polemical, debunking impulse is very apparent in Serov’s series of biographical “sketches” about the “political and criminal activity” of the men who helped Peter found imperial Russia. Even though the tone of this obvious gloss on such contemporary post-Soviet realities as political corruption and kleptocracy quite frequently skirts the line between the historical detective novel (*à la* Boris Akunin) and the scholarly monograph, Serov’s book does demonstrate two of the strengths of the new *petrovedenie*—an abiding interest in real people, not institutional or historical abstractions; and a significant shift of focus from the dominant personality of Peter onto the many other individuals who worked to build the empire—most literally in the case of Grigorii Grigor’evich Skorniakov-Pisarev, who oversaw the construction

---

<sup>6</sup> Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power*, 1. All subsequent page references for Bushkovitch refer to this book.

of Russia's first port on the Pacific Ocean. While this shift in perspective onto the "fledglings of Peter's nest" is not new,<sup>7</sup> Serov's emphasis on their checkered past certainly is. For example, Skorniakov-Pisarev was put in charge of construction in Okhotsk while serving a term of exile for graft and corruption, one of a number of politically motivated accusations that pepper his career (as well as that of other individuals analyzed in Serov's book). Serov's sketches about these (primarily second- or third-tier) administrators—men such as the infamous Solov'ev brothers, who managed to embezzle millions of rubles during their stint as the officials in charge of the government monopoly on foreign trade in Arkhangel'sk and who escaped punishment thanks to the influence of their protector and partner in crime, the royal favorite Aleksandr Danilovich Menshikov—rely on scrupulously documented archival research.<sup>8</sup> Service records, previously unpublished correspondence, and the papers produced by various criminal investigative commissions into elite corruption allow Serov to reconstruct the occupations, financial situations, genealogical connections, and, in some cases, the worldviews of Peter's "fledglings" with a level of detail rarely matched in previous studies of early modern Russian politics, most of which are hampered precisely by the lack of primary, written sources. Thanks to solid detective work, Serov successfully marshals all the available archival evidence and reaches definite conclusions about some of the criminal cases under his investigation, while making educated guesses about the merits of others. But since his sketches do not aim at a comprehensive analysis of political corruption or its causes, Serov's offhand reference to the many opportunities offered to unscrupulous characters by the massive upheaval caused by the "great reforms of the 1700s–20s" leads readers to believe that the institutionalization (if not the origins) of this "modern" problem must ultimately be traced back to the reign of Peter the Great (20).<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> This approach was pioneered by N. I. Pavlenko, the late dean of Soviet *petrovedenie*. See his *Ptentsy gnezda Petrova* (Moscow: Mysl', 1984); Pavlenko, *Poludержavnyi vlastelin: Istoricheskaia khronika* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1988); and Pavlenko et al., *Soratiniki Petra* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one of the most important contributions of Serov's monograph is its extensively annotated and archivally based name index (216–57), which will itself be a useful source base for the study of the Petrine ruling elite. The most detailed prosopographical study of Peter's court, however, remains the unpublished dissertation of I. Iu. Airapetian, "Feodal'naia aristokratiia v period stanovleniia absoliutizma v Rossii" (Candidate of Sciences diss., Moscow State University, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> This debatable point is juxtaposed with an overly idealized characterization of pre-Petrine chancery clerks, whom Serov sees as the harbingers of professionalism and virtue. For a less sanguine view of 17th-century administrative morals, as well as an in-depth explanation for government corruption in late Muscovy, see Hans J. Torke, "Crime and Punishment in the Pre-Petrine Civil Service: The Problem of Control," in *Imperial Russia, 1700–1917: State, Society, Opposition. Essays in Honor of Marc Raeff*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn and Marshall S. Shatz

To the extent that Serov's indictment of Peter's cronies emphasizes the Petrine origins of contemporary political problems, his argument begins to echo the controversial and highly ambivalent characterization of the reign previously advanced by Evgenii Anisimov.

In a popular biography published in 1989, Anisimov argued that Peter's reforms—and particularly his use of coercion in the name of progress and order—prefigured the “police state” of Iosif Stalin.<sup>10</sup> Unlike most late Soviet accounts, Anisimov's biography took a negative view of Peter's military victories and imperial conquests and was generally disparaging of his domestic reforms—though in a much more sophisticated way than Anisimov has usually been given credit for.<sup>11</sup> His 1997 scholarly monograph on “autocracy” and the Petrine reforms of the government administration (*Gosudarstvennyye preobrazovaniia i samoderzhavie Petra Velikogo*, reviewed here) continues the reappraisal begun with the publication of his biography. Like the earlier volume, this dense, carefully researched study does not elaborate a systematic and direct critique of the old Soviet paradigm. What it does is demonstrate the proposition that despite Peter's best efforts—or rather, precisely because of them—the “collegiate” system of government introduced in the latter part of his reign simply could not accomplish the task that its designers set for themselves. Regularity, transparency, accountability, and an orientation toward the general welfare were constantly undermined by the workings of the old Muscovite clientage system; a basic understaffing of the Russian administrative machine; and, most important, the repeated and unchecked intrusion of the reforming tsar himself. Indeed, on the basis of his research into Peter's central administrative reforms, Anisimov comes to the same general conclusion made by Vasilii Kliuchevskii in his famous lecture on the Petrine period: autocracy and legality are ultimately incompatible; and no amount of frenetic activity, no matter how well-meaning, can ever square that circle (289–90).<sup>12</sup>

---

(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988), 5–21; Peter B. Brown, “Neither Fish nor Fowl: Administrative Legality in Mid- and Late-Seventeenth-Century Russia,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, 1 (2002): 1–21; and Brown, “Guarding the Gate-Keepers: Punishing Errant Rank-and-File Officials in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, 3 (2002): 224–45.

<sup>10</sup> E. V. Anisimov, *Vremia Petrovskikh reform* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> As Nicholas Riasanovsky has noted, Anisimov belongs neither to the camp of those historians who “condemn the reforms as misdirected, as doing harm rather than good or as totally ineffective” nor to that of those who “downgrade his significance by stressing the historical process over personality and by arguing that Russian history would have advanced much the same way without him as with him” (Riasanovsky's review of Anisimov, *Slavic Review* 53, 2 [1994]: 589).

<sup>12</sup> V. O. Kliuchevskii, “Kurs russkoi istorii,” *Sochineniia*, 9 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1987–90), vol. 4, 203–4. Anisimov does point out (282, 287–88), however, that Peter's “interference” in

While this conclusion is not new,<sup>13</sup> Anisimov's method of demonstrating the dilemma faced by Petrine legislators relies on the innovative methodology of a reconceptualized administrative history. In an attempt to present an alternative to the decree-driven narratives written by the legally trained representatives of the "state school" of Russian history, Anisimov shifts the emphasis from the promulgation of royal edicts to their actual implementation and from the texts of these documents to the people who wrote them and then strove to implement their ideals. Consequently, this new administrative history aspires to be as much a history of mentalities and cultural practices of the Muscovite political elite as a historical narrative about legal reforms and counter-reforms. Comparing the text of the plans drawn up by Heinrich Fick, Peter's chief foreign adviser, with the actual administrative paperwork of the new central state institutions allows Anisimov to demonstrate how fiscal, staffing, and political constraints actually affected the nascent, chronically cash-strapped, and still relatively minuscule bureaucracy of Peter's "police state." Although his detailed statistical analysis of the central government before and after the reforms of 1718–24 demonstrates an unprecedented growth in the number of salaried state officials (205–20, 293–307), that number pales in comparison to the ratio of officials to population in other centralized, military-bureaucratic monarchies like contemporary Prussia—a point that would surely have placed Anisimov's figures in perspective had it been made in the monograph itself.<sup>14</sup> As a result, his own scrupulous historical research tends to undermine any broad assertions about the actual reach of the intrusive "police state" and demonstrates just how far Petrine Russia really was from that of Stalin. Indeed, contrary to the book's stated focus on "autocracy," the real problem appears to have been not too much Kremlin control but rather under-government and lack of accountability: a few thousand state officials—both members of the ruling

---

the working of various government agencies was not an example of autocratic caprice but of a deliberate attempt to redefine the royal job description. For a thoughtful discussion of the evolution of this new job description, see Cynthia H. Whittaker, "The Reforming Tsar: The Redefinition of Autocratic Duty in Eighteenth-Century Russia," *Slavic Review* 51, 1 (1992): 77–98.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is almost exactly like the position of M. M. Bogoslovskii, *Oblastnaia reforma Petra Velikogo: Provintsiiia 1719–1727 gg.* (Moscow: Izdanie Imperatorskogo obshchestva istorii i drevnosti rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom universitete, 1902); and Claes Peterson, *Peter the Great's Administrative and Judicial Reforms: Swedish Antecedents and the Process of Reception* (Stockholm: Nord. bokh. [dist.], 1979), both of which are present in Anisimov's extensive bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> This important comparative point was made in the course of a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of 18th-century Russian monarchy by I. V. Kurukin, *Epokha "dvorskikh bur'": Ocherki politicheskoi istorii poslepetrovskoi Rossii, 1725–1762 gg.* (Riazan': NRIID, 2003), 241–42.



elite and their administrative staff—running individual protection rackets in the name and often, as in Muscovite times, on the personal instructions (*prikazy*) of Russia's theoretically absolutist monarch.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, from Anisimov's own account, it appears that Peter's stated intention to reorganize the Muscovite chancellery system derived less from an appreciation of Muscovy's supposed "systemic crisis"<sup>16</sup> than from a sober assessment of the importance of normative change, participatory stakeholding, and technical know-how for insuring the proper administration of his realm in both war and peace (172–74, 246).<sup>17</sup> Politicians inspired by the ideals of the "well-ordered police state,"<sup>18</sup> including Peter and his team of technical experts, believed that properly drafted legislation—like the cogs of a well-designed and smoothly functioning clock—would automatically instill respect for the rule of law and regularity among a social elite accustomed to running the government for its own purposes. All that the legislators needed to do was to wind the clock and to set it in motion. Time and some forceful corrective actions—like the criminal investigations analyzed by Serov—would do the rest. As Anisimov's study repeatedly demonstrates, however, material-incentive-based systems for inculcating administrative probity and reducing corruption were not enough to change the affect or to instill a sense of personal responsibility, especially in a religious and honor-based culture like the one in which Peter lived and worked. This kind of reform (*preobrazovanie*) or, better, transfiguration (*preobrazhenie*)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Anisimov's discussion of the persistence of *prikazy*, as both personal royal commands to trusted courtiers and as informal state institutions, is one of the strongest parts of his book—and a valuable corrective to popular misconceptions about the "withering away" of the Muscovite chancellery system (41, 46, 48, 142–43).

<sup>16</sup> A term borrowed by Anisimov (10–12) from Aleksandr Kamenskii's structural-functional description of the political, economic, and moral dilemmas experienced by late 17th-century Russian political elites. See Aleksandr Kamenskii, "The Systemic Crisis in Seventeenth-Century Russia and the Petrine Reforms," trans. Lindsey Hughes, in *Russia in the Reign of Peter the Great: Old and New Perspectives*, 2 vols., ed. Anthony Cross (Cambridge: Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia, 1998), vol. 1, 1–11.

<sup>17</sup> Anisimov (14–15) goes to great lengths to disprove Pavel Miliukov's assertions that Peter never had (or, indeed, was even capable of formulating) any kind of "plan of reform," and that the reorganization of the state machinery was dictated purely by the "demands of war." See P. N. Miliukov, *Gosudarstvennoe khoziaistvo Rossii v pervoi chetverti XVIII stoletia i reforma Petra Velikogo*, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1905).

<sup>18</sup> For the classic definition of this term, see Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Marc Raeff, "Transfiguration and Modernization: The Paradoxes of Social Disciplining, Paedagogical Leadership, and the Enlightenment in 18th-Century Russia," in *Aleuropa—Ancien Régime—Frühe Neuzeit: Probleme und Methoden der Forschung*, ed. Hans Erich Bödeker and Ernst Hinrichs (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991), 99–115.

required a focus on changing the hearts and minds of the old Muscovite ruling elite—not just through didactic and punitive legislation but also through transformative activities that employed the power of community disapproval and appealed to emotion as well as to reason.<sup>20</sup> To see Peter as capable of such creative political acts requires not only a reconceptualization of his image but also a shift of focus from the official legislative sources on which this image has traditionally been based. No matter how much light they may shed on the “bureaucratization of autocracy,” Anisimov’s statistics on the number of decrees written or personally signed by Russia’s royal lawgiver (278–82) simply cannot offer the change of perspective needed to effect that kind of epistemological shift.

What can help to effect this change in perspective is the effort, apparent most clearly in the work of Lindsey Hughes, to direct scholarly attention to the political significance of Peter’s so-called “amusements”—especially the hazing rituals that the tsar-legislator continuously staged throughout his 30-year reign and which he enshrined, with all the solemnity of a formal government institution, in the statutes of the “Most Comical and All-Drunken Council” (*veshuteishii i vsep’ianeishii sobor*)—a document that he also wrote in his own hand. Indeed, one of the most important innovations in Hughes’s new biography (*Peter the Great*), as well as in her earlier, encyclopedic survey of the reign (*Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*), is its welcome focus on what she has dubbed the “alternative history” of Peter’s court, including such phenomena as the tsar’s use of carnivalesque disguise and parody, jester weddings, and mock war-games.<sup>21</sup> This is precisely the kind of material that professional historians had previously left to the authors of historical potboilers, and its reclamation is one of the aspects that make Hughes’s studies so novel—and so novelistic. By offering startling but completely documented examples of the tsar’s strange and (deliberately estranging) behavior—an account arranged year by year, sometimes day by day, as in the case of her biography, and based on intimate, internal sources, such as Peter’s personal correspondence and his secretary’s daily log—Hughes’s narrative confronts modern readers with Peter’s personality in all its Baroque complexity. In the process, it also demonstrates—not least by the numerous illustrations accompanying both her books—that the mobilization of Peter’s *persona* was itself an important tool in the politics of the reign. If we extend this reading to the carnivalesque world that Hughes so successfully integrates into the by-now-familiar narrative of the reign, we

---

<sup>20</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see Ernest A. Zitser, *The Transfigured Kingdom: Sacred Parody and Charismatic Authority at the Court of Peter the Great* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Lindsey Hughes, *Playing Games: The Alternative History of Peter the Great* (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 2000).

can see that the tsar's amusements were not the side-effects of Peter's gross sense of humor or his manner of "letting off steam in male camaraderie" (as Hughes herself suggests [*Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, 256–57; *Peter the Great*, 147]) but rather important constituents of life at an early modern court: a life in which the separation of private and public (or seriousness and play) did not mirror that of the modern, bourgeois household; and in which access to a monarch's person was more important than, and often a precondition for, the attainment of a coveted title or the enactment of some reformist legislation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while it is possible to dispute Hughes' particular interpretation of Peter's parodies,<sup>23</sup> it is quite clear that her work as a whole signals a radical departure from previous, anachronistically modernizing accounts of the reign, in which an enlightened despot guided the actions of an all-powerful bureaucracy committed to forced-draft industrialization, and in which, as she says with wry British wit, the production of "pig iron featured strongly."<sup>24</sup>

While Hughes's narrative offers the best description in any language of the feel and texture of court life in the reign of Peter the Great, the most sustained argument for the new court history—one centered on patronage networks and questions of royal access and authority (though not, curiously enough, on the spectacular representations of that authority)—can be found in the work of Paul Bushkovitch. Taking his cue from the work of other early modernists like Stepan Veselovskii, Aleksandr Zimin, Robert Crummey, and Nancy Shields Kollmann, as well as the pioneering work on 18th-century Russian politics by John P. LeDonne, Bushkovitch offers an account that puts the clans that composed the Russian political system (and the interests that drove their behavior) front and center of his narrative. Bushkovitch situates Peter's reign within the generation-long conflict for the Alekseevan succession—a period of unrest that followed the death of Peter's father, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich Romanov, and that witnessed the formation of factions around the competing courts of the two distaff sides of the Russian royal house, the Miloslavskii and the Naryshkins. Indeed, more than a third of his 440-page monograph (*Peter the Great: The Struggle*

<sup>22</sup> See the pioneering discussion in Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); and Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). See also Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994); and John Adamson, "The Making of the Ancien-Régime Court, 1500–1700," in *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics, and Culture under the Ancien Régime 1500–1750*, ed. Adamson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), 7–41.

<sup>23</sup> As Zhivov does in *Razyskaniia*, 428–31.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes, *Playing Games*, 1.

for Power, 1671–1725) and almost half of the popular synopsis (*Peter the Great*) is devoted to the literally blow-by-blow account of Muscovite high politics in the three decades preceding Peter's *de facto* assumption of power in 1689. Such an emphasis on the political *longue durée* allows Bushkovitch to offer the best account to date of the actual functioning of the aristocratically dominated, clan-based political system of late Muscovite Russia, while giving him the leisure to demolish a number of ingrained historical "myths"—such as the one about the supposed role of Old Belief in the Tsykler-Sokovnin conspiracy of 1697, "the first serious case of opposition to Peter on the part of the court elite."<sup>25</sup> Bushkovitch's interest in the lives and lineages of the people—both men and women—who made policy or influenced its implementation allows him to flesh out the participants in the political and cultural conflicts that are frequently passed over in narratives about the faceless processes of "modernization" or "secularization." As a result, he succeeds in reconstructing the rough-and-tumble politics of the late 17th-century Muscovite court, a world that helped to shape Peter for more than half his life and which he spent the other half trying to harness for his own purposes.

Leaving an analysis of the purposes of Peter's actions largely to one side—Bushkovitch accepts as a truism that Peter sought to Westernize Russia, although he is careful to point out the multiplicity of the "West" involved and the "untraditional" but still Orthodox mindset of people often seen as constituting the "conservative opposition" (340, 424)—Bushkovitch concentrates on the methods and tactics by which Peter attempted to govern. Not surprisingly, he discerns a pattern familiar from studies of other early modern courts: one in which a weak and inexperienced young monarch initially relies on his relatives and well-born advisers until a moment arrives when he attempts to take the reins of power and actually rule. At this point he is forced to circumvent the existing networks of influence, either by playing off competing factions or by appointing a royal favorite who can deflect criticism from the person of the monarch and serve as the gatekeeper for individuals eager to exploit their proximity to the centers of power and patronage.<sup>26</sup> In Bushkovitch's telling, the political history of Peter's reign can perhaps best be likened to the pendulum swings between different sets of policies: one in which royal favor (and access to the royal person) was farmed out to a few select intimates, and another in which it

---

<sup>25</sup> As Bushkovitch demonstrates, this opposition was fueled more by thwarted personal ambitions and wounded pride than any specific "cultural" issues (88, 197).

<sup>26</sup> For a pan-European perspective on the institution of royal favoritism, see John Huxtable Elliott and Laurence W. B. Brockliss, eds., *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

was more evenly distributed among a number of competing aristocratic factions. When this early modern system of checks and balances functioned properly, Bushkovitch suggests, there was a high degree of unity among the ruling elite, which allowed for the successful coordination of the war effort and of the requisite institutional reforms. When it was out of balance, dissension threatened to scuttle developments both at home and abroad. It was this oscillation between the policies of “open” and “closed” royal access that made the actual mechanism of the “well-ordered police” state tick.<sup>27</sup>

The best demonstration of this argument can be found in the *dénouement* to Bushkovitch’s monograph, which devotes two full chapters to the domestic and geopolitical determinants of Peter’s conflict with his first-born son, Tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich. Bushkovitch’s analysis of the politics surrounding the flight, extradition, trial, and mysterious death of the hapless tsarevich seems to offer a perfect test case of the propositions advanced earlier in the book, for as Bushkovitch convincingly demonstrates, this episode was less the poignant family quarrel of popular legend than a serious political standoff (420).<sup>28</sup> In this confrontation, Peter’s party (led by his once and future favorite, Menshikov) squared off against a loose coalition of disaffected Muscovite aristocrats (headed by the Dolgorukii clan, the future instigators of the “constitutional crisis” of 1730) who rallied behind the banner of Aleksei’s candidacy for the throne. The unprecedented level of support enjoyed by Aleksei, even after his flight abroad and his reputed treasonous dealings with foreign powers, was not just a sign of dissatisfaction with Peter, his policies, and his favorites, although that was certainly the case. More important, it was also a sign of the internationalization of Russian court politics, which once again (as during the “Time of Troubles” [1598–1613]) became a significant element in the geopolitical machinations of the major European powers, especially those involved in the 20-year conflict between Russia and Sweden known as the “Great Northern War” (1700–21). Indeed, Bushkovitch is so convinced of the fundamental political importance of this episode that he concludes his book on the proposition that Peter’s successful prosecution of the case against his own prodigal son (and his aristocratic supporters) “was the greatest spur to Peter’s reform in the history of the reign, even greater than the Northern War” (425). While some 18th-century

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the important distinction between “open” and “closed” styles of royal access, see David Starkey, “Court History in Perspective,” in his *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London: Longman, 1987), 1–24; and Brian Weiser, *Charles II and the Politics of Access* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Bushkovitch’s analysis of this standoff can serve as an independent source of confirmation for the Russian archival findings contained in Sergei Efimov, “Politicheskii protsess po delu tsarevicha Alekseia” (abstract for Candidate of Historical Sciences diss., St. Petersburg: Institut rossiiskoi istorii, Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk, 1997).

experts may disagree with this characterization—especially considering the number of reform projects begun earlier in the reign<sup>29</sup>—there is no denying that Bushkovitch's account of this episode will serve as an important starting point for all discussions of the Petrine succession for decades to come.

Future scholars will be indebted to Bushkovitch not only for his insightful analyses of Petrine court politics but also for the extensive citations from original primary sources that he (and his munificent publisher) generously included in the footnotes to his scholarly monograph. Bushkovitch's use of these foreign-language archival documents—in Latin, French, Dutch, German, and Swedish (not to mention Russian)—is not only a linguistic *tour de force* but also a historiographical one. It is also, perhaps, the most controversial aspect of his work. For in an effort to address the “silence” of contemporary Muscovite sources about the actual processes of decision-making and policy implementation at the highest levels, Bushkovitch turns to the stories, rumors, and innuendoes-offered-as-fact in foreign diplomatic accounts. Any assessment of the veracity of these dispatches must address several factors, including their writers' knowledge of Russian language and customs, the institutional position from which their observations are made, and the reliability of their informants. While Bushkovitch does attempt to identify the government insiders who provided the diplomats with their information, his work would have benefited from a more in-depth discussion of these and other related methodological questions.<sup>30</sup> At issue here is not just a matter of whether some court scandal or policy action is described correctly in a particular dispatch; but more important, whether there was a good fit between the language in which foreign diplomats described Muscovite political realities and the language of Russian contemporaries themselves.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, Bushkovitch's exceedingly compressed treatment of this important issue in the epilogue (426–44) is not likely to satisfy those critics who suspect that the very nature of his sources leads him to gloss over the immanent cultural processes by which foreign (and primarily secular) ideas entered into Russian political vocabulary.

---

<sup>29</sup> See James Cracraft's review of Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power*, in *The Journal of Modern History* 75, 2 (2003): 475–77, here 476.

<sup>30</sup> For a methodological discussion of the uses of 18th-century diplomatic sources, see V. P. Naumov, “Nekotorye osobennosti istochnikovedcheskogo analiza diplomaticheskikh reliatsii XVIII v.,” in *Istochnikovedenie i kraevedenie v kul'ture Rossii: Sbornik k 50-letiiu sluzheniia Sigurda Ottovicha Shmidta Istoriko-arkhivnomu institutu*, ed. V. F. Kozlov et al. (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2000), 145–48.

<sup>31</sup> As Bushkovitch shows in his insightful introductory chapter, members of the 17th-century Russian elite had radically different notions of politics from their Western counterparts, even when they experienced such structurally similar early modern phenomena as the royal court, patronage, and favoritism (14–48).

As the latest book by Viktor Zhivov demonstrates, these processes began well before and lasted well after Peter's reign and cannot be subsumed by the use of such capacious yet singularly unhelpful descriptive terms as "Westernization" or "secularization." Unlike some of his mentors from the Moscow–Tartu school of Russian semiotics, Zhivov rejects any impulse (on the part of historians as much as Russian literary scholars) to reduce the polyvalent culture of Muscovy to fixed and anachronistic oppositions between secular and religious worldviews, Western or Russian influences, or pre- and post-Petrine eras. As his collection of articles convincingly argues, these well-worn historiographical tropes not only obscure the crucial significance of the 17th century, with its "far-reaching transformation of the cultural system," but also exaggerate the significance of "Western influence," which can apply equally well to the Russia of the 15th as to that of the 21st century (323). Zhivov's original revision of the evolution of Russian cultural history, however, still retains the Russian semioticians' inordinate focus on "strains and ruptures" (*izlomy i nadryvy*)—the title of the third section of his collection of essays, which, not coincidentally, is focused on Peter's cultural reforms—as well as their subversive, Bakhtinian polemic against the "monological" discourse of the Soviet political establishment. That emphasis on political conflict and cultural discontinuity goes a long way toward explaining why the reign of Peter the Great is so central—in terms of both content and organization of the book—to Zhivov's enterprise and why the tsar's "carnavalesque" parodies of church and state constitute such an important component of his analysis of the period in question.

In an essay that echoes Hughes's call for a renewed focus on the alternative history of Peter's reign ("O prevratnostiakh istorii, ili o nezavershennosti istoricheskikh paradigim" [On History's Wrong Turns, or the Imperfections of Historical Paradigms]), Zhivov argues that every account of Peter's "greatness" entails a corresponding element of "forgetting," a moment of silence about those aspects of his rule that could not be talked about or easily subsumed into the standard Enlightenment narrative (705, 707). That is why Zhivov's account of the reign avails itself of the archeological approach—if not all the techniques and the jargon—of postmodern hermeneutics. In Zhivov's interpretation, the micro-mechanics of power—whether expressed in the introduction of the new, secular Russian alphabet, the forced shaving of beards, or the staging of drunken parodies of church sacraments—are as important as the macro-mechanics of warmaking and state-building. Indeed, as Zhivov's seminal essay on the political significance of Petrine cultural reforms ("Kul'turnye reformy v sisteme preobrazovaniia Petra I" [Cultural Reforms in Peter I's System of Transformation]) demonstrates, one cannot fully grasp the meaning of the big, structural changes without a proper understanding of the small, semiotic ones. Zhivov's close

analysis of Peter's innovations in the sphere of liturgy and court ritual suggests that Peter's "cultural revolution" was a systemic part of his reformist activity.<sup>32</sup> By tapping into their audience's (and participants') belief in the transformational power of sacramental and magical rites, these spectacles became an indispensable element in Peter's deliberate attempt to inculcate a new system of values and to effect nothing less than a political "conversion" (382–83).<sup>33</sup> Inductees into the new "civic cult" of the first Russian emperor were forced to profess (and to demonstrate) their faith in the power of a reforming monarch who could not be bound by any human laws and who was charged by God himself to effect needed changes in everything from clothing styles to forms of central government administration: a divinely appointed, charismatic ruler who could, in the words of the 1721 text urging Peter to accept the imperial titles of "Father of the Fatherland" and "Peter the First," single-handedly bring his realm from "darkness to light" and from "non-being to being."

Zhivov's discussion demonstrates that the ideals (and sometimes the very wording) expressed in such lofty panegyrics to Russia's "anointed one" derived their power from the religious texts and ceremonies on which they were frequently modeled (401–2). This insight relies on a recognition of the fact that the authors and organizers of late Muscovite and early imperial royal spectacles lived in a cultural milieu that allowed them to shift into different registers and to integrate every trope—both sacred and profane—necessary to reach their target audience. This is the same kind of highly stylized, emotional language as that used by the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church and the "confessionalizing" Protestant monarchies, a language that Russian literary scholars have come to characterize as the Russian variant of the pan-European Baroque.<sup>34</sup> As Zhivov demonstrates, this is the language not only of the academically trained Ukrainian clerics hired to staff Peter's ecclesias-

---

<sup>32</sup> This is also the basic insight of the pioneering work of James Cracraft, who has devoted several volumes to demonstrating the importance of Peter's "cultural revolution." A comprehensive assessment of Cracraft's achievement, particularly his efforts to shift *petrovedenie* toward the study of things cultural, must await the appearance of the final installment of his trilogy. For a succinct summary of his argument, see James Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Zhivov's reference to the importance of religious ritual in the process of political conversion demonstrates that his court-centered reading of Petrine cultural reform can accommodate not only the history of the Russian Orthodox Church but also such topics as witchcraft beliefs, antinomianism, and popular religiosity. For an example of his attempt to come to grips with popular religion, see his essay "Dvoeverie i osobyi kharakter russkoi kul'turnoi istorii" (*Razyskaniia*, 306–16).

<sup>34</sup> Dmitrii S. Likhachev, "The Petrine Reforms and the Development of Russian Culture," trans. Avril Pyman, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 13, 1–2 (1979): 230–34; and L. I.



tical administration and to defend his “canonic fictions”—such as the one about the nominal subordination of the “temporarily” patriarch-less Russian Orthodox Church to the ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople<sup>35</sup>—but also a discourse employed by the tsar and his courtiers in their private correspondence with one another. Zhivov’s focus on this mutually shared, religiously inflected political language allows him to include discussions of such diverse topics as the political implications of the official hierarchical vow pronounced by Orthodox bishops during their ordination, as well as its carnivalesque opposite, the Bacchanalian oath sworn by the successive “Prince Popes” of Peter’s Most Comical and All-Drunken Council.<sup>36</sup> In effect, by shifting the research agenda from royal decrees to political acts (both real and parodic), Zhivov succeeds in integrating seemingly disparate and previously inexplicable cultural phenomena while opening up new lines of inquiry into the relationship between Muscovite “political theology” and the cult of Peter the Great.<sup>37</sup>

Zhivov’s basic insights about the “sacralization” of Russian monarchy, even during the supposedly “secularizing” reign of Peter the Great, will continue to inform all future attempts to analyze the languages of power at the late Muscovite and early imperial Russian court. What will probably not survive future scholarly scrutiny is the meta-language in which Zhivov describes these early modern cultural practices. References to such organizing concepts as “propaganda,” “mass psychology,” and “terror” (382, 404–5 n. 13) reveal the degree to which Zhivov’s sophisticated reading of Muscovite texts continues to rely on Soviet-era constructions of the political. As I have argued elsewhere, these anachronistic notions are more appropriate to the arena of modern mass politics than to that of the early modern court, positing as they do the existence of a “public” often missing during the staging of the most important Petrine political sacraments—such as the private ceremonies

---

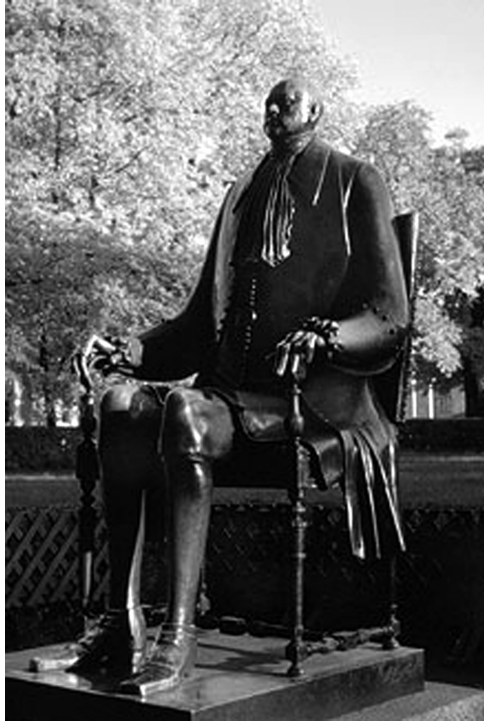
Sazonova, *Poeziia russkogo barokko: Vioraia polovina XVI—nachalo XVIII veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> See “Tserkovnye preobrazovaniia v tsarstvovanie Petra Velikogo” and “Vopros o tserkovnoi iurisdiksii v rossiisko-ukrainskikh otnosheniakh XVII—nachala XVIII veka,” in Zhivov, *Razyskaniia*, 364–80, 344–63.

<sup>36</sup> “Kul’turnye reformy v sisteme preobrazovaniia Petra I,” in *ibid.*, 412–16.

<sup>37</sup> Zhivov’s contribution to the study of Muscovite “political theology”—a term first introduced into Russian historiography by Michael Cherniavsky (*Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961]) to describe the symbolic transference from things ecclesiastical to things monarchical—builds on his and B. A. Uspenskii’s important essay on the “sacralization” of the Russian tsar, which is not included in this collection. See “‘Tsar’ i Bog’: Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii monarkha v Rossii,” in Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Moscow: Shkola “Iazyki russkoi kul’tury,” 1996), vol. 1, 205–337.

Figure 1. Mikhail Shemiakin, “To the founder of the great Russian city, Emperor Peter I, from the Italian sculptor Carlo Rastrelli and the Russian artist Mikhail Shemiakin” (1991). Peter-and-Paul Fortress, St. Petersburg, Russia



accompanying the inauguration of the “Transfigured Kingdom,” the playful instantiation of the select “company” of true believers in Peter’s charisma.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, Zhivov appears to echo the polemical literary strategy of his St. Petersburg–based colleagues, who, as we have seen, modernize their narrative in an attempt to offer a critique of the Peter of Soviet ideology. Relative to Anisimov or Serov, however, Zhivov does a much better job of demonstrating the role of deliberate self-fashioning and mythmaking in Peter’s efforts to propagate his iconic status (and, simultaneously, to demonize the Muscovite “other”). It is this attention to the mythopoeic processes at work during

<sup>38</sup> Ernest A. Zitser, “Politics in the State of Sober Drunkenness: Parody and Piety at the Court of Peter the Great,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 51, 1 (2003): 1–15. For a cogent critique of the “propagandistic” approach to court spectacles, as well as a discussion of how this approach is often allied with the increasingly discredited “absolutist state” paradigm, see Adamson, “Making of the *Ancien-Régime* Court,” 34–35, 40.

Peter's reign (and beyond) that allows Zhivov to shed more light than has previously been done on the nature of the discursive practices that (re-)produce the supposedly radical disjuncture between the late Muscovite and the early imperial periods of Russian history.

Zhivov's essays on the court culture of Peter the Great, like all the works under review, offer a clear demonstration of Hughes's contention that what we are currently witnessing is the creation of a new, "post-Soviet," and perhaps even "post-modern Peter" (*Peter the Great*, 243). While it is not yet clear what this new Peter will look like, it is quite obvious that he will be closer in spirit to the transgressive grotesquerie of Mikhail Shemiakin's "Bronze Stay-at-Home" (*mednyi siden'*) than to the monumental didacticism of Étienne Falconet's "Bronze Horseman" (*mednyi vsadnik*). For like Shemiakin's carnivalesque parody of Falconet's famous equestrian statue—depicting "an ill-formed freak, unnaturally small-headed, bald, bug-eyed, and spindly-limbed," seated in a chair instead of on a charger<sup>39</sup> (see Figure 1)—the contemporary revision(s) of the Petrine myth desacralize the reforming tsar and subvert the official, Enlightenment narrative of historically progressive imperial rule. Only time will tell whether this new, post-Soviet re-evaluation of the Petrine legacy will permanently revolutionize the field of *petrovedenie* or whether, like carnival itself, it will disappear with the inevitable re-imposition of the old, officially sanctioned moral and political order.

Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies  
Harvard University  
625 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Floor  
Cambridge, MA 02139 USA  
zitser@fas.harvard.edu

---

<sup>39</sup> For an insightful discussion of Shemiakin's work in the context of the evolving image of Peter the Great, see Hughes, *Peter the Great*, 245–46, here 245. See also Mariia Virolainen, "Dva Petra (Pamiatniki Fal'kone i Shemiakina)," in her *Rech' i molchanie: Siuzhety i mify russkoi slovesnosti* (St. Petersburg: Amfora, 2003), 282–86; and D. V. Bobyshev, "Mednyi siden'," *Peterburgskie chteniia po teorii, istorii i filosofii kul'tury*, no. 1 (1993): 309–15.