

A Companion to Russian History

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What is a 'Companion' for? Abbott Gleason concludes his intelligent and wide-ranging introduction with the hope that this volume will attract 'that vaguely defined entity, the general reader', that it will be a 'stimulating supplement to college courses' which primarily draw on monographs and textbooks, and that it will be useful to professors teaching general courses on Russian history and to graduate students who need to review the field before preliminary examinations (p. 12).

How far does this book meet those specifications. It consists of a series of essays which focus on particular themes in Russian history. Each of them is written by a known specialist in the field, and each provides an outline of its subject. Beyond that, they have little in common. Some are brilliant, wide-ranging and thought-provoking pieces (Christopher Ely on civil society in late Imperial Russia; Louise McReynolds on popular culture; William Odom on Russia's history and its future). Some are conscientious summaries of their subject, with a personal interpretation but relatively little attention to historiography (George Majeska on Rus' and the Byzantine Empire; Richard Hellie on slavery and serfdom; David Engerman on the Cold War; Robert English on the reforms of Khrushchev and Gorbachev). Finally some contributors give a lot of attention to interpretive issues and the way different historians have approached their subject (Donald Ostrowski on the Mongols and Rus'; Nancy Kollmann on Muscovite political culture; Lynne Viola on Stalinism in the 1930s; Robert Daniels on the fall of the Soviet Union). All the authors, however, have in common that they offer abundant footnotes and recommendations for further reading, which most readers will find useful if they want to follow up any of the ideas.

A relatively short review obviously cannot provide a full account of 28 such heterogeneous essays. All I can do here is to offer an overview of the way some of the principal interpretive issues are treated. The Companion appears at a time when, after more than a decade of upheaval, Russia appears to be returning to familiar features of its past: a centralised authoritarian state aspiring to great power status, a passive and amorphous society, weak rule of law, pervasive corruption, an economy depending on the export of raw materials and energy, and a brilliant cultural and intellectual life muffled by political imperatives. Historians can see a new relevance in studying not just Stalin, but also Tsarist Russia, and even the Muscovite Grand Duchy.

William Odom argues for this view, starting from our disappointment that the creation of a market economy

and multi-party democracy in the 1990s was not sustained. Odom rightly points out that neither market nor democracy were authentic, let alone secure, at that time, so our disappointment is perhaps overdone. Drawing on the 'institutional school' of economics of Douglass North and the historical work of the Swedish economist, Stefan Hedlund (1), Odom contends that Russia was locked centuries ago into a noxious 'path dependence', in which a predatory state deprived economic actors of the secure property and reliable contracts they needed for taking entrepreneurial decisions. At various junctures (under Catherine the Great, under Alexander II, in the Stolypin land reforms, under Gorbachev and Yeltsin) reforming leaders tried to pull Russia off the path, but each time they were thwarted, and the 'Muscovite lock-in' was restored. In Putin's Russia senior officials in the coercive (*silovye*) ministries have taken control of the major energy companies, which as a result are in the grip of rent-seeking bureaucrats and are unable to innovate as they need to do if they are to remain viable in the in the global economy.

In one of the most useful and important essays, Richard Hellie substantiates this view by outlining how slavery and serfdom developed in parallel with what he calls the 'Agapetos state' (roughly: rule by God's chosen) in both its Orthodox and Marxist variants. Slavery originally arose as a result of the frequent wars on the southern steppes, in which the victors would enslave the vanquished. The latter were almost always from an alien ethnos, as was usual with slaves. At that stage land was plentiful, so serfdom was not needed as a way of fixing working hands to the soil. Then, as land became scarcer between the late 15th and mid 17th centuries serfdom grew up alongside slavery. The service cavalymen who kept the frontiers secure required peasants to cultivate their land-holdings and enserfed them to prevent them absconding. Slavery declined and was finally abolished in the early 18th century because slaves neither paid taxes nor did military service, but the state needed peasants to do both. Serfdom however became more like slavery, so that in a sense the two institutions merged. Although serfdom was abolished in 1861, many of its restrictions survived: peasants continued to be bound to the land commune till Stolypin abolished that bond in 1907. The Soviet authorities however *de facto* restored serfdom when they collectivised the farms in the early 1930s, and only when internal passports, needed for free movement around the country, were at last granted to collective farmers in 1957 (or even as late as 1980, according to a recent authoritative account (2)), was half a millennium of bondage finally brought to an end.

The confusion of slavery and serfdom in their relation to the state extends the widely accepted view of Richard Pipes, that the Russian state is 'patrimonial', that is, that its leaders do not distinguish between power and property, and hence treat their political subjects as their personal slaves.(3) This is persuasive up to a point. But there is an alternative, or at least supplementary, view. Unlike Odom and Hellie, Nancy Shields Kollmann gives a full picture of the varied historiography of her subject, 'Muscovite political culture'. She agrees that already from the 15th century subjects had neither legal rights nor stable representative institutions through which to articulate their opinions and interests. But she disputes whether the tsar's rule was 'patrimonial', in the sense that all public goods – population, land, natural resources – were his unlimited property or that the entire population were his slaves. Though giving full attention to alternative views, she argues that Muscovite autocracy was absolute mainly in rhetoric; in practice it was limited by powerful families and court factions, by tradition, by moral obligations and by God's law if not by human ones. (One might add that, if the tsar was not felt to be fulfilling those obligations, pretenders might well appear). For internal peace the tsar had to promote a consensus between his various elites. Similarly, the property of elites, though not freehold in the Western sense, was jealously defended, if necessary at law, and was normally held to imply obligations to the inferior social strata that lived on it. She draws attention to recent studies by Michael Flier on the imagery and ceremony of autocracy, such as the Tsars' pilgrimages of holy places; by Valerie Kivelson on the culture of the service gentry (4); and by Isolde Thyret on the way royal women used religious ideas to intercede with their lords and masters.(5)

It remains true that so powerful did the state become, and such has been the passivity of society that there has been little or no public space in which non-conformists could articulate their views. 'Other-thinkers' lived semi-underground, in their own coteries, with their own rather hermetic discourses and practices. Nadieszka Kizenko draws attention to the current in Russian historiography which regards the church schism of the 17th century and the development of the Old Belief as a reassertion of ancient Russian traditions of

grass roots self-governance against an increasingly encroaching state and authoritarian church. Many Old Believers abandoned their communities and fled to the peripheries of the empire, where they could defend their traditional liturgical practices against the church authorities, who were trying to impose major symbolic innovations through the power of the state.

Similarly, Gary Morson shows how the oppressiveness of the state in the 19th century drove thinking men and women to fashion an ideal out of its victims, the *narod*, mostly peasants, seeing in them a truth which the regime, its officials and polite society were all trying to ignore or suppress. These idealisers of the *narod* were the 'intelligentsia' – a Russian concept now used all over the world. To emphasise their otherness, the intelligentsia systematically denied everything taught in state or church schools and along with it the etiquette of the *beau monde*. Women cut their hair short, wore drab, unkempt clothes, smoked cigarettes, and conducted their lives in dusty rooms among piles of newspapers, journals and political pamphlets. Morson also gives full attention to the intelligentsia's critics, notably Tolstoy, Dostoevskii, Chekhov and the authors of the *Vekhi* (Signposts) essay collection of 1909, who argued that the intelligentsia were as narrow-minded, philistine and intolerant as the regime which oppressed them, and that if they ever came to power they would install a reverse autocracy which might be even more destructive. Morson goes so far as to assert that this counter-intelligentsia tradition constitutes 'Russia's greatest contribution to world thought' (p. 273).

One of the great divides of Russian history has been that between Russia and the West. To be a great power capable of standing up to the European great powers just the other side of a vulnerable frontier, Russia's elites had to adopt a European culture. Gary Marker points out that in the 18th century the nobles adopted Europeanisation with enthusiasm, as a positive and civilising development, and it inclined them to support the autocracy which sponsored it. For the clergy Europeanisation was less auspicious: their education system was increasingly influenced by the Jesuits and was displaced from the church's Greek roots in favour of a Latinate culture and theology. Nobles and urban elites increasingly distanced themselves from the Orthodox Church and took up Freemasonry as an outlet for their spiritual needs. Eventually this alienation from the church became alienation from the state, though this did not become fully apparent till the failed Decembrist rising of 1825.

As Europeanisation spread downwards in the social scale and began to affect all social classes, it made the autocracy appear more and more of an anomaly. As Daniel Field points out, the reforms of Alexander II, intended to lay the basis for civil society, actually created new foci for opposition to autocracy. In a thoughtful and wide-ranging essay, Christopher Ely argues that civil society does not always generate stable and peaceful democracy and the rule of law, nor it is always tolerant and peaceful. If it is a forum for conflicting social, ethnic and religious interest groups, it may be intolerant and violent. By the turn of the 19 and 20th centuries, Russia's cities had become turbulent melting-pots in which harshly exploited workers, ethnic minorities with grievances (especially but not only Jews) and an increasingly anxious middle and upper class contended for political influence in their different ways. Its lively and talented intellectuals tended to propose totalising solutions to political problems. All this meant that insoluble conflict was pre-programmed into the constitutional political structures created rather abruptly in 1905: a representative legislative assembly, political parties and a largely free press. At the same time, this very diversity and effervescence generated one of the most remarkable periods of European cultural and intellectual history, analysed in Andrew Wachtel's essay on modernism.

This turbulence lies behind the state collapse and revolution of 1917. In traditional accounts of Russian history, 1917 gets centre stage as a cardinal event. Here, in an interesting but not altogether successful innovation, two authors, Melissa Stockdale and Mark von Hagen, treat it as an epiphenomenon of the First World War. According to Stockdale, Russia's relative economic backwardness in the long run doomed its efforts in an unexpectedly long war which seriously tested all the combatant powers. In particular its under-developed rail network made it unable both to respond flexibly to the needs of the front (including moving troops fast from one sector to another) and to feed the urban population: hence the fatal food shortages which sparked the February Revolution. The huge unequally distributed casualties, sacrifices and hardships, especially in the cities, and the lack of any prospect of victory had eroded the population's will to go on

fighting. Moreover, by refusing to share power more widely, the government and emperor made themselves the 'sole owner' of the defeats and difficulties, and so faced accusations of 'stupidity or treason'. The regime lost both credibility and legitimacy.

Mark von Hagen emphasises the long term consequences of the First World War, insisting that the period 1914–23 should be seen as a continuum, in which the practices of mass national war were assimilated by whole populations as well as by governments. Young men became accustomed to violence as a way of solving problems. Mass destruction and death became a routine part of life, and generated powerful loyalties and hatreds. Many practices taken over by the Bolsheviks – registering, surveillance and categorising of the population, mobilisation and propaganda, mass deportations, the prophylactic use of violence (and, one might add, economic planning) originated in the war.

All this is valuable, and well represents recent historiography, but tells us little about the way the Bolsheviks actually seized power, used it and persuaded many of the workers, peasants and soldiers to support them. Or how they then set up their own ruling elite, and how that elite debated and later competed with each other, eventually murderously, over the most appropriate way to impel their country towards socialism. This is more familiar stuff, no doubt, from older histories, but should a 'Companion' not give it at least some attention? Lynne Viola demonstrates what the result was: 'A weak state founded upon governance through force rather than through routine administrative channels, never mind laws' (p. 373).

Louise McReynolds's piece is in a category of its own, since it offers a brief account of historians' general approach to the subject of popular culture in the last century. Historians of Russia, she charges, were slower than most others to learn from anthropologists, from thinkers like Gramsci, Foucault and Bourdieu and from analysts of popular culture such as Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson. Trapped in Cold War attitudes, they remained fixated on elite culture, on its bearers in pre-revolutionary Russia and in the Soviet underground. Russians' tendency to identify elite culture with Western culture reinforced this limited view. Soviet culture was written off as an artificial aesthetic serving the purposes of political propaganda. Only in the late 1970s and 1980s did a counter-current begin to emerge, when first Vera Dunham (6) and then Katerina Clark (7) showed that Stalin Prize novels had their roots in pre-revolutionary culture and in the tastes and attitudes of the Soviet ruling class. A little later Jeffrey Brooks (8) revealed the existence of a popular Russian culture disseminated by the press and publishing houses for consumption by newly literate peasants and workers. With the end of the Soviet Union, attitudes changed, and the source base increased exponentially, so that now we have histories of gender, consumption, leisure, gossip, sport.

I have already mentioned one serious lacuna in this collection. There are others. Elizabeth Wood, for example, analyses the 'woman question' and feminist movements in Imperial Russia, but has little to say about the Soviet Union, and nothing at all about Soviet family legislation, which attempted to liberate women but ended by subjecting them to a new form of oppression, the famous 'double burden'. This is an especially intriguing and important aspect of gender studies in Russia, so it is disappointing that it is also not taken up in the other essay where it might have been relevant, that of Lynne Viola on Stalinism and the 1930s.

Similarly Robert Geraci offers a lucid survey of Tsarist government policy towards ethnic minorities, highlighting its inconsistencies and the fact that it tended to become more repressive in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – a major contributory factor in the violence of the revolutions of 1905–6 and 1917–21. But no one considers substantively the Soviet approach to the nationality question, which was complex and double-edged, not to say contradictory. In essence the Soviet regime both tried to liberate the non-Russian nationalities – through cultural and educational policies – yet also oppressed them through the planned economy and military policies, through the tightly centralised Communist Party and through state terrorism directed against 'bourgeois nationalism'. As Lynne Viola notes, under Stalin 'extreme centralisation and the instrumental use of repression became virtually the primary method of governance' (p. 372). The non-Russian nationalities suffered under it at least as much as the Russians. Robert Daniels rightly identifies national discontent as one of the major causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but can only detail its

very late manifestations.

Gleason has given his authors freedom to write in their own way, and some do so brilliantly. But inevitably the result is patchy. No general work can deal with everything, but some of the lacunae in this collection are serious. Apart from the ones mentioned above, there is nothing sustained on military policy or the armed forces; on foreign policy, or on geopolitics and the strategic problems of empire; and there is very little on the Orthodox Church or the other major religions of the empire after the 18th century. These are not minor gaps, but issues which have helped to shape the overall course of Russian history.

Its inconsistencies and lacunae render this volume unsatisfactory in some respects, but it can nevertheless be recommended as an up-to-date and well written guide to many important issues in Russian history, likely to be useful to everyone from senior school pupils to scholars seeking guidance in unfamiliar fields.

Notes

1. Stefan Hedlund, *Russian Path Dependence* (London, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Manfred Hildermeier, *Geschichte der Sowjetunion, 1917–1991* (Munich, 1998), p. 924.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York, 1974).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Valerie Kivelson, *Autocracy in the Provinces: the Muscovite Gentry and Political Culture in the Seventeenth Century*, (Palo Alto, CA, 1996).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Isolde Thyret, *Between God and Tsar: Religious Symbolism and the Royal Women of Muscovite Russia* (De Kalb, IL, 2001).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge, 1976).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Fiction* (Chicago, IL, 1981).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ, 1985).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4647>