LETTERS

To the Editor:

May an ordinary graduate student of Russian history be permitted to speculate that Professor Jackson's review of James Billington's *The Icon and the Axe* (*Slavic Review,* March 1967) is quite possibly the most fatuous piece of criticism your journal has ever printed? *The Icon and the Axe* may be, as your reviewer suggests, "one of the most significant books on Russia to appear since World War II," even "a masterpiece," but no one who has read the book will doubt that it deserves better treatment in the pages of what is surely the outstanding American journal in the field of Russian history. It has been left to the *Russian Review* to publish Professor Riasanovsky's intelligent and pointed appreciation of the work (January 1967).

Does Professor Jackson seriously mean to suggest that the place in undergraduate history courses presently occupied by any one or all of the "eight general surveys of Russian history published in English from 1952," which he lists (page 119, note 1), should be taken by this "highly controversial, personal, and idiosyncratic interpretation of the history of Russian culture"? And that existing textbooks, with their tiresome attempts to achieve "the three sacred cows of . . . coverage, balance, and impartiality," must be altogether dispensed with in favor of a lightened "factual load," "fresh new interpretations," and a "book [that] will jolt"? And does he wish that undergraduates should study not history but historiography, so as to learn not about Russia's past but "the excitement of living on a somewhat exotic intellectual frontier"? These seem to be his main contentions. But are either his sweepingly negative criticisms of the works cited (by Clarkson, Florinsky, Riasanovsky, *et al.*) fair, or apposite, or his breathless praise of Billington's "so bold and brilliant book" justified, even by his own criteria? Fact for fact, the contents of *The Icon and the Axe* must compare favorably with any other single-volume study of the Russian past; as for interpretation, Professor Riasanovsky [writes]: "His [Billington's] general position can perhaps be best related to the Russian cultural and in particular intellectual renaissance in the years preceding the Revolution, with its emphasis on religion, on cultural autonomy and complexity, and on recurrent themes and patterns in history." In the treatment of his material Professor Billington will be seen to have employed a number of antique theories; so that, by some readers anyway, his text will be approached as one approaches the work of an important Soviet historian—by reflexively tearing away the interpretive cellophane from the rich factual meat it wraps, which may then be digested. Similarly, it was perhaps due to an excessive admiration for Billington's "literary talent" that your reviewer could condemn, say, Florinsky's style while quoting at length two alarmingly flashy but not untypical passages from Billington's book (pages 120, 122–23), which are then judged "poetic and suggestive. . . . [Billington] ably uses metaphor and simile to capture the tone and flavor of an age in a single sentence or paragraph," we are told. What indeed is one to make of a history book that could prompt its admiring reviewer to observe heavily: "In Part V . . . Billington opens by exploring the levels of meaning attached to the sea." Fortunately, one had read the book before the review.

In any case, was Professor Jackson right to compare the works of Florinsky, Riasanovsky, *et al.*, with Billington's, as "other efforts in its genre"? Does he in fact consider *The Icon and the Axe* either a textbook or a survey? On this crucial point

(so he has constructed his article) he remains obscure: thus, "Because Billington has managed to breathe new life into a rather tired old form, the historical survey, his book is a useful point of departure for a query into current practices in English-language surveys and textbooks in Russian history" (page 119); "Billington's book is not a textbook, at least in the usual pejorative [*sic*] sense of the word. But is his not what our textbooks ought to be?" (page 121); "Billington's work cannot be pigeonholed.... One is forced to conclude that his work is *sui generis*" (page 124); and (the concluding sentence of the article) "It might even inspire some enterprising scholar to write a better textbook of Russian history" (page 127).

Over here *The Icon and the Axe* costs £5. Shouldn't your readers have been given better grounds for investing that much money in one book?

May 18, 1967

J. E. Cracraft
St. Antony's College
Oxford

To the Editor:

The review by Ethel Dunn of Klibanov's book on the Russian sectarians [*Slavic Review*, March 1967] disturbed me as I could not make out whether she agreed with Klibanov's interpretation of the sectarian movement or not. The attitude of Klibanov towards the sectarians, I take it, was influenced by Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, whose five-volume work on the sectarians was published in 1911.

The revolutionists had, at one time, believed that the dissident sects could be enlisted as allies in their struggle against the government. To this end, Bonch-Bruevich had been instructed by the Central Committee of the Social-Democratic party to undertake a thorough investigation of the sects, out of which emerged his voluminous work. The result was complete disillusionment of the Social Democrats with the sectarians as prospective allies. Klibanov has apparently followed Bonch-Bruevich in his interpretation.

But this disillusionment has, apparently, turned into hostility, and it is necessary to denigrate them in some way. I cannot speak with confidence of all the sectarians nor do I hold a brief for them, but of the Dukhobors, of whom I know something, surely it is absurd to ascribe purely economic motives to their decision to emigrate to Canada. I could not help wondering whether either the author or reviewer was familiar with the publications of the Dukhobors that were printed in England by Tolstoi's publishing house.

The Dukhobors had always been pacifist but after the introduction of universal military service had compromised with the government by doing noncombatant service. However, Peter Verigin, coming under the influence of Tolstoi, had induced his followers to refuse to bear arms. Verigin was himself sent into exile, and the Dukhobors turned over to a disciplinary battalion. The bonfire that consumed their rifles was what led to the infliction of severe flogging. In the storm that followed, Tolstoi intervened to persuade the government to allow the Dukhobors to emigrate.

Whatever one may say of the Dukhobors, mercenary motives have played almost no part in their history.

June 16, 1967

Stuart R. Tompkins
211 Lagoon Road
Victoria, B. C.
Canada