

A Muscovite Republic?

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As always, Oleg Kharkhordin has given us a thought-provoking challenge. He asks whether Novgorod should properly be called the “Third Rome” and whether Muscovite “autocracy” was by definition a tyranny; further, he implies that “republican” might actually be applied to pre-modern Russian politics. He shapes his musings around Anthony Kaldellis’s “revisionist” analysis of Byzantium. With these heady ideas, it is irresistible to reconsider “Muscovite political culture” in these terms.

Kharkhordin is interested in long historical continuity, concerned about some twists of politics today in Russia. Why, he asks, did Putin’s government insist on a vote of popular approval at the same time that functionaries were arbitrarily expanding control over the populace? Perhaps, he implies, this combination of “authority” and “power” reflects a long-term legacy of Roman/Byzantine political ideas in Russia.

Kharkhordin shapes his reflections around Cicero’s dictum that the most stable *res publica* was a mixed government that balanced monarchy, aristocracy, and people, while concentration of power in one hand was its most dangerous perversion. He finds in Kaldellis a tool kit of concepts potentially applicable to Novgorod and Muscovy.

Kaldellis begins with historiography: decades (since the 1930s) if not three centuries (since the Enlightenment) of “Byzantine Studies” have distorted the historical record by ignoring *politeia* in favor of *avtokratia*. European thinkers claimed republican values for the west and, by focusing exclusively on church-based ideology and ceremony, turned Byzantium into an absolute theocracy led by a divinely appointed emperor. Sovereignty resided in the ruler alone and society had no role. He remarks wryly that “no small dose of Orientalism has been poured into this recipe” (200). (I look forward to his promised book analyzing why precisely in the 1930s this argument took hold.)

In so doing, Byzantine Studies ignored a more significant, parallel ideology based on “popular sovereignty.” According to Roman “republican” theory, the emperor was legitimate only insofar as he served the common good, or else the people had the power to depose him in riotous “tumults.” Thus, familiar patterns of Byzantine politics: continual urban uprisings, emperors’ obsessive attempts to cultivate public opinion, popular acclamation of rulers, succession constantly contested rather than hereditarily ordained.

Kharkhordin brings these ideas to Novgorod and Muscovy. With his startling suggestion—“Could we then designate Novgorod the Great rather than Muscovy as the Third Rome?”—he displaces a theocratic and apocalyptic concept for a Kaldellian, Byzantine vision. Here “Rome” comprises a “republic” based in theory and practice on a precarious dualism of executive and popular power. In Novgorod as in Byzantium, the populace (*veche*) kept “monarchical” power (elected *posadniki*, invited princes, archbishop) in check with

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tumultuous uprisings. This treatment of Novgorod is a bit too sketchy for me, eliding the oligarchical element in Novgorodian politics, but Kharkhordin does give Novgorod's popular disturbances an intriguing theoretical frame.

What most captures Kharkhordin's attention is the great conundrum of Roman republican theory, that is, that the ruler was posited as above the law even though he was supposed to rule according to the law. "Power was not taken to be legitimate unless it was perceived to be lawful."¹ Being above the law put the ruler in a perpetual "state of exception" where he could use absolute power for good or for tyranny. Kaldellis cites Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt; René Girard's concept of a liminal sovereign space of "sacred violence" also relates. Here is that dangerous moment when an immoral ruler combines *auctoritas* (which should have resided in a different social body) and *potestas* (executive power) or, after Christianization, when he combines the "two swords" of spiritual and secular power. In the absence of institutional and constitutional controls, sources—*Mirrors of Princes*, ceremony, political theory, and laws—urged rulers to voluntarily impose moral restraint on themselves.

This is the crux of Kharkhordin's discussion of Ivan IV. Ivan's *Oprichnina* was that tyrannical concentration of secular and spiritual, of authority and power. The interchanges attributed to Ivan and Prince Andrei Kurbskii, Kharkhordin suggests, express two sides of Byzantine political thought—the ruler can claim extra-legal authority to save the republic, and he can be condemned for using that power selfishly. Kharkhordin archly asks whether an "autocracy" founded on such ideas will always threaten "a terrifying life without. . . any limit to arbitrary rule," an oblique reference to Putin.

Kharkhordin ends on a pessimistic note, but his tone is speculative and inquiring throughout. Never a fan of continuity theories in Russian history, I will demur on the sources of Putin's autocratic impulses: even if some Roman/Byzantine/Muscovite ideas endured across centuries into his political formation, many more modern ideologies contributed as well. On Ivan IV, however, I beg to differ. In the logic of the theory outlined by Kaldellis and Kharkhordin, Ivan IV is an illegitimate outcome, while much in Muscovite politics resonates and leads to a less deterministic, and less authoritarian, conclusion.

Scholars of Muscovy will immediately identify with Kaldellis's argument that Byzantine studies has privileged theocracy over *politeia*. In the Cold War, historians including Arnold Toynbee, Richard Pipes, and Richard Hellie did the same, presenting Muscovy as a "patrimonial" state with a divinely appointed tsar of unlimited power, a state alien to "Western" values. Certainly we can find this ideology in Muscovite sources, and it was parroted by foreign travelers who observed court ceremony. But Kaldellis explains that in Byzantium such ideology "complemented" republican: "a superstructure of theocratic rhetoric was imposed, not as an alternative. . . but as a partner: its purpose was to counter the extreme vulnerability of the emperor in the face of the volatility and supremacy of 'public opinion' and the absence of any absolute source of political legitimacy."²

1. Anthony Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), 76.

2. Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*, 117.

So, if Muscovy paralleled Byzantium in theocratic ideology, did it also inherit “republican” ideals about the duties of the sovereign and rights of the people? Historians of Muscovy have an answer. With his “Muscovite Political Folkways” Edward L. Keenan launched a generation of scholars who explored autocracy in action, in theory, in ritual and symbolism. Their vision has been called a “consensus-based” political culture.³ Donald Ostrowski, Russell Martin, Daniel Rowland, Michael Flier, Brian Boeck, Valerie Kivelson, myself and others have found even in church-based sources evidence of an interactive relationship between ruler, “aristocracy” (boyar clans), and the people.

Many elements of Muscovite political life parallel Kaldellis’s Byzantium. Chronicles are full of eulogies to rulers that define their duties as patronizing the church, giving good justice, and protecting the people from harm.⁴ Keenan underscored the boyars’ cooperation with the ruler, while Valerie Kivelson showed that popular expectations of a reciprocal relation with the ruler were deeply engrained.⁵ To guide them, rulers were expected to seek advice, not only from boyars and churchmen but from “all the people.” Advice-giving was expected to lead to unanimity, as if consultation channeled God’s righteous will. The community envisioned as a united entity is ubiquitous in sources: the 1649 law-code explicitly instructed judges to administer the law “to all people of the Muscovite state, from the high to low ranks, fairly for all”⁶; chronicles describe the ruler engaging with “all the people.” Daniel Rowland calls this an imagery of “Godly community.”

Consultation, unanimity and Godly community were visually represented whenever the ruler was depicted. Sources are few but rather rich: the Pew of Monomakh and thousands of illustrations in the *Illuminated Chronicle* of the 1560s–70s show the ruler was always surrounded by advisors—boyars, bishops, and the people. When in the *Illuminated Chronicle* the ruler is depicted in public outside the Kremlin, he is imbedded in a crowd, worshiping side-by-side with his people in cross processions, not aloof and apart. The tsar’s consultation and unity with his people were also acted out. To resolve major issues (war and peace, alliances, law-codes) rulers summoned Councils of the Land (*zemskie sobory*), ritual re-creations of the body politic where advice was acclaimed unanimously. Similarly, the bride shows that Russell Martin has studied ritually played out a “collaborative” relationship between the elite and the ruler.⁷ In the 1640s, provincial gentry submitted waves of collective petitions against the “powerful people” in expectation of relief.⁸

3. Edward L. Keenan, “Muscovite Political Folkways,” *Russian Review* 45, no. 2 (April 1986): 115–81.

4. Nancy S. Kollmann, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), Ch. 5.

5. Valerie Kivelson, “Muscovite ‘Citizenship’: Rights without Freedom,” *Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 3 (September 2002): 465–89.

6. *Rossiiskoe zakonodatel'stvo X-XX vekov*, 9 vols. Chistiakov, O. I., ed. Moscow, 1984–94, Ulozhenie chap. 10, art. 1 in III: 102.

7. Russell Martin, *A Bride for the Tsar: Bride-Shows and Marriage Politics in Early Modern Russia* (DeKalb, Ill., 2012).

8. Paul Bushkovitch, *Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia: The Transfer of Power 1450–1725* (Cambridge, Eng., 2021), Chap. 4; and Valerie Kivelson, “The Devil Stole

Muscovite sources hold the people to high standards in advice-giving. Boyars were condemned for giving bad advice and “flattery,” for “not wishing well for the grand prince.” So also the people were criticized for not giving advice, for remaining “silent.” Commentators on the Time of Troubles criticized the “foolish silence of all the world when they did not dare to tell the tsar the truth”; others descry the people as “mute, like fish.”⁹ Given that through the eighteenth century Russian rulers solicited popular opinion (witness Catherine II’s requesting responses to her Legislative Commission), it is not surprising that in the next generation Aleksandr Pushkin understood the power of the “silence” of the people.

As in Roman and Byzantine theory, Muscovite sources accord the people even more dynamic roles. In Byzantium, succession was legitimate only when the people publically acclaimed the ruler; recently scholars have suggested, somewhat similarly, that succession in Muscovy was not hereditary but required designation. Rulers (generally following dynastic lines) named successors in testaments or “anticipatory” titles or ceremonies, and in moments of crisis (1598, 1613, 1682), acclamation by Councils of the Land demonstrated direct popular sovereignty.¹⁰ Violence could be used to defend and create legitimate power, as in the Time of Troubles when patriarch and provincial gentry mobilized the populace with the language of unanimity and Godly community to expel foreign invaders and select a new sovereign.

As Valerie Kivelson has noted, the people’s legitimate options for resistance—“consultation, supplication, indignation, riot”—even included disorderly violence.¹¹ Like the ruler, the people also claimed a “state of exception.” Riots in Moscow of 1648 and 1682 exemplify how such liminal spaces, for people and ruler, were mobilized to restore the common good. In 1648, crowds streamed into the Kremlin and secured face-to-face conversations with Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich; they demanded protection against boyar corruption and crippling taxes. For three days the tsar met with the crowd, who demanded specific boyars be turned over to them; sources specify that the crowd spoke “*mirom*,” in unanimity. Meanwhile, rioters burned, ransacked and murdered across the city. Parallel to their state of “il-legality,” the tsar stepped into his “state of exception.” He sacrificed to the crowd two boyars, to their immediate torture and death. The tsar personally spoke, negotiated and pleaded with the crowd and even took a solemn religious oath. Satisfied with two deaths and promises of reform, on the third day the crowd recessed. In

his Mind: The Tsar and the 1648 Moscow Uprising,” *American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (June 1993): 733–56.

9. Daniel Rowland, “The Problem of Advice in Muscovite Tales about the Time of Troubles,” *Russian History* 6, no. 1 (January 1979): 259–83.

10. Bushkovitch, *Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia*; and Russell E. Martin, “Anticipatory Association of the Heir in Early Modern Russia: Primogeniture and Succession in Russia’s Ruling Dynasties,” in Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H.S. Dean, Chris Jones, Russell E. Martin, and Zita Eva Rohr, eds., *The Routledge History of Monarchy: New Perspectives on Rulers and Rulership* (London, 2019), 420–42.

11. Kivelson, “Muscovite ‘Citizenship,’” 474.

1682 the same ritual drama was played out.¹² This is precisely what Kaldellis calls “republican” popular sovereignty.

And that returns us to Ivan the Terrible. Is Kharkhordin’s fear justified that autocrats, living in a constant state of exception, will inevitably wield power arbitrarily? I think not. The ruler’s “exceptional” power was intended to serve the good of society, as Aleksei Mikhailovich did in 1648; Ivan IV’s use of his “state of exception” was illegitimate. He did not accomplish social good with the *Oprichnina*: his accusations of treason were ill-founded and his mass purges and wholesale destruction around the realm had no systematic target and no lasting positive result.¹³ The *Oprichnina*’s uniqueness proves the rule: no other Muscovite ruler so overstepped his lawful duty.

The only catch is, why did the people not revolt against Ivan, activating their “republican” right to do so? They certainly revolted against injustice in 1613, 1648 and 1682. We do not know of popular uprisings against Ivan, although admittedly chronicle sources die out and secular histories are lacking. Boyars fearful of Ivan fled, rather than organize opposition. The exchange attributed to Ivan and Kurbskii represents opposition, but it was not mass, not decisive, and probably not even contemporaneous. And the people were quiet.

We can speculate why the crowd did not behave in a “republican” way: perhaps in Ivan’s time Moscow lacked a critical mass of population analogous to Constantinople’s energized populace, a density that supported righteous revolt in the seventeenth century; perhaps *Oprichnina* violence was too scattered to make an impression in Moscow. Given the violence of 1648 and 1682, I would not argue that Roman/Byzantine republican ideas did not arrive in Muscovy, but perhaps they had not sufficiently penetrated in the sixteenth century, when even the elite was generally illiterate. And in any case, church writings had a weakly developed concept of a right to resist.¹⁴ These are possibilities, but I am most persuaded that other impulses were stronger in this culture than Kaldellis’s “republican” values. As Keenan reminded us, this political culture, fearful of chaos in a subsistence society and deeply under-resourced polity, preferred equilibrium to revolt. Infighting among the boyars at court, for example, was routinely resolved with reconciliation: after Ivan IV’s minority, after the *Oprichnina* and through the seventeenth century, the number of boyars was expanded to compensate all sides in court struggles, marriages were arranged across factions. Even when the populace erupted in the seventeenth century, the boyar elite did not, as if having learned a lesson from the violence of the *Oprichnina* and Time of Troubles. Muscovite political culture had origins in more than Byzantium.

So, should we speak of a Muscovite “republic”? I have never thought that “consensus” fully expressed Muscovite political culture and certainly

12. Girard and Agamben are applied here: Nancy S. Kollmann, *Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2012), ch. 17.

13. Kollmann, *Crime and Punishment*, 311–21.

14. Daniel Rowland, “Muscovy,” in Howell A. Lloyd, Glenn Burgess, and Simon Hodson, eds., *European Political Thought 1450–1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy* (New Haven, 2007), 267–99.

“republican” would need a lot of explanation to convey more. Terminology is always vexed; what matters is understanding. Muscovite political culture was more than religiously based, the power of the ruler was *de facto* limited by dense networks of theory, custom, and political pragmatism, “autocracy” was not absolute, and multiple social forces played a role in keeping the realm legitimate. Muscovy was not as turbulent as Byzantium, but its political culture was no less complex.