

Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition. By J. Arch Getty. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. xx, 359 pp. Notes. Index. \$45.00, hard bound.

This book argues that “ancient” and “archaic” Russian practices of patrimonial politics predated Iosif Stalin and outlived him, transcending changes of regime and time. J. Arch Getty starts with an analogy between the personalism of the Stalin-Trotskii struggle and Vladimir Putin’s imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovskii, also equating Boris El’tsin’s crushing of the Duma in 1993 with Ivan the Terrible’s sack of Novgorod in the sixteenth century. Patrimonial rule, he maintains, “was the deep structure by which Russia had always been governed” (95). The most consistent message of this book is, in fact, that little changed: “Russia had always been ruled this way” (113).

The issue of continuities across radical breaks and regime changes in Russian history is an important problem. Many specialists on Soviet history rarely look beyond their own subperiod in the twentieth century, not to mention across the 1917 divide. Historically familiar features of *putinism*, including clan politics, make it more important than ever to evaluate continuity theories. Historians should discuss the issue Getty raises; early Russianists should weigh in.

Some of the best minds in the field, however, have already grappled with the thorny problem of continuity and change across the 1917 divide and the *longue durée*. One explanation, represented by Alfred J. Rieber’s works on “persistent factors,” is that ongoing constellations of dilemmas prompted very different political systems to come to similar responses. Getty does not cite Rieber’s work, but in passing he rejects its basic thesis. Another compelling approach holds that the Soviet new regime strategically used “traditional” methods and rituals effective with the population or rank and file and that they then took hold. But, in a section on the Lenin cult, Getty categorically rejects this as well.

Instead, Getty argues, rulers and ruled simply knew no other way. Step by step, almost unconsciously, the Bolsheviks fell into the patrimonial politics that had long before become “embedded somehow” (17) in Russian political culture. It is ironic that *political culture* is the glue holding Getty’s continuity argument together, for he is not at all concerned with the workings of culture, political or otherwise. The numerous citations of Pierre Bourdieu and anthropological literature are decorative, at least in terms of the big argument. Nor is Getty concerned with the concept of political culture and its different incarnations in political science since the 1960s or studies of the French Revolution in the 1980s. Instead, he takes his notion of *deep structures* from Edward Keenan’s famous 1986 article, “Muscovite Political Folkways,” in which it served as the hidden mechanism by which oligarchic practices persisted under an autocratic façade.¹ But Keenan’s work, as this suggests, was

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

all about oligarchy; the figure in the field most closely associated with asserting the modern power of Russian patrimonialism is Richard Pipes, blandly acknowledged here only in the company of others asserting Russian–Soviet continuities.

For Getty, political culture is part of the base, not the superstructure, to put it in Marxist terms. In this book, how it operates over radical historical breaks is something of a black box. Getty might as well have said that patrimonialism was part of Russian national character or Russian DNA, but he cannot, so he essentializes culture instead. Like writers before him who have seen the parallels between Muscovite and Soviet Russia, he has no way of tracing causal links across expanses of time. In a response to Keenan, Richard Wortman highlighted Keenan's already outdated understanding of political culture and the problems of glossing over the many changes of the imperial period.² Getty has done the same: "Little changed in the imperial period" (91).

Having presented us with the key to the entire course of Russian political history, Getty hides behind Clío's robes, calling his book a "somewhat old-fashioned empirical work of history" (20). Yet this work is profoundly ahistorical. The terms *ancient* and *archaic* are ubiquitous (but not *backward*, the term arguably most appropriate for its message). It does not matter whether we are talking about the sixteenth century or the nineteenth, Muscovy or imperial Russia: everything before 1917 is consistently lumped together as "old Russia."

In fact, the key to this book is neither Bourdieu nor even Keenan but the categories of Max Weber, applied with a profound literal-mindedness. The word *bureaucracy* is time and again accompanied by the adjective *rational*; and if it is not rule based and rational, it is patrimonial and not modern. Weber, of course, wrote about ideal types. But for Getty the binary opposition between patrimonialism and modern, rational bureaucratic rule appears—at least in most important matters of historical interpretation—to be absolute. Because arbitrary, personalistic intervention was rife in Soviet politics, for example, Getty is led to the conclusion that institutions held hardly any importance in the Soviet system other than as vehicles for Bolshevik "boyars" and clans.

Since rational, rule-based governance for Getty is ultimately the sole criterion of the modern, this work tilts against any notion of Soviet modernity. Citations of the relevant debates are fragmentary, and other Soviet phenomena connected to modernity—such as mass mobilization, state interventionism, the role of experts, scientism and quantification, interest groups, interwar collective politics, the dissemination of ideology, and so on—are not considered. In two chapters on the Central Committee, one on intraparty struggles in the 1920s, and three on clan politics under Stalin, there are plenty of hints that institutions, specialization, experts, and ideology did matter, and that some patron-client networks were connected to policy preferences and methods. Chapter 4, "The Party Personnel System: Downstairs at the Central Committee," is devoted to the personnel's striving for planning and rules. But

2. Richard Wortman, "'Muscovite Political Folkways' and the Problem of Russian Political Culture," *Russian Review* 46, no. 2 (April 1987): 191–97.

the interpretation is characteristically black and white: “The staff wanted rational bureaucracy. The elite wanted patrimonialism. . . . Patrimonialism won” (146).

Getty pays lip service to the notion that ideology has some importance, but he thinks it has been greatly overemphasized and that it is possible to disaggregate ideology from practices entirely. Ideology is neither an important sphere in Soviet history with its own dynamics nor intertwined with other historical factors. One consequence is that the provincial “little Stalins” and the Bolshevik “grandees,” so important to the work, are treated as homogeneous groups. We learn little about the outlooks of key actors except that they belonged to clans and were motivated by greed and protecting their own. For example, Matvei Pogrebinskii, a client of secret police chief Genrikh Iagoda, is typically described as involved in “shady dealings”: he was “known as the ‘tsar of thieves,’ and friend and protector of ‘criminal brotherhoods from the prison camps whom he reeducated and remade, and the devil knows what’” (173). One might never infer that Pogrebinskii was for fifteen years the main figure behind the NKVD’s Bolshevo children’s commune for juvenile delinquents—a centrally important institution in terms of ideology and cultural diplomacy and also influential in Soviet culture and society. The Smolensk affair of 1928 is described solely in terms of corruption and orgies. But, as E. V. Kodin has shown, Smolensk province was a bastion of NEP in agriculture and the crackdown had all-union significance. This is political history with not just the ideology but the policy left out.

A frustrating feature of this book is that it is riddled with caveats and contradictions, for which it would be useful to construct a typology. One set of caveats has to do with simply acknowledging historical change. Of course, “Bolsheviks were not boyars and it would be foolish to equate the two” (45). Foolish or not, Getty does equate them throughout the book by referring to Bolshevik “boyars,” “grandees,” “nobles,” and “the king’s men.” The most important contradiction concerns the fusion or coexistence of modern phenomena with patrimonialism. At numerous points, Getty is on much firmer ground when speaking about their combination, in line with theories of neotraditionalism and neopatrimonialism. But in the bulk of the work the *neo* in *neopatrimonialism* is absent entirely. Thus, “the Bolsheviks could have chosen modern, bureaucratic tools of rule, but they didn’t” (18). They became the “heirs, if not the prisoners” of “their thousand-year-old culture and functional practices” (66). Even after the terror, “little had changed” (267).

In the three chapters on prewar Stalinism, Getty’s earlier work on center-periphery conflict driving the terror is updated in terms of a drawn-out battle between the central Stalin clan and regional party clans. The regional clan leaders are depicted as pushing for mass violence, and at the crucial moment in the spring and summer of 1937 Stalin is depicted as acquiescing to “regional barons’ warnings” and “regional input” (230). Getty clearly believes that his excursion into Muscovy bolsters his longstanding views on center-periphery conflict in the Great Terror and that his material on the 1930s bears out his new interpretation of old Russia. But what this book really does is expose the parallels in his thinking about both problems—Russian history and the 1930s. In both cases he reduces complex processes to a single dynamic, privileges

it above all others, and through this reductionism excludes other vectors of analysis.

In the end, the deep structures elucidated in this book are not cultural or historical but historiographical. During the postwar rise of Soviet studies, the “totalitarianism school” was split between those emphasizing totalitarian uniqueness and others depicting a totalitarian variant on modern industrial society. In its day, revisionism, while delving into historical particularity, often emphasized phenomena identified by social science as modern—most famously, Sheila Fitzpatrick’s “social mobility”—to counter the totalitarian notion of Stalinism as *sui generis*. But in the 1990s members of a “modernity school” emphasized state projects of transformation and ideology, sometimes with an explicit rehabilitation of their totalitarian “grandfathers,” while Fitzpatrick and others began to stress the personalistic, hierarchical nature of Stalinist politics and society, pointing to such phenomena as *blat* and patronage. The theory of neotraditionalism was advanced as a rival to the notion of modernity, emphasizing the combination of traditional and modern features. Getty, while inconsistent in his rhetoric, takes this one step further in substance, moving from neotraditionalism to patrimonialism *tout court*.

By the cunning of historiography, then, Getty, the former archrevisionist, has now aligned himself with an interpretation of Russian history that most closely resembles Richard Pipes’s. But even for Pipes the rise of the modern police state in the late imperial period was a crucial innovation. Insofar as he depicts Russian politics as fundamentally the same whatever the historical period, and reduces all politics to clan politics, Getty reinforces the essentialism of popular prejudice.

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Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–1970. By Polly Jones. Eurasia Past and Present. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. xii, 360 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00, hard bound.

In 1954, one year after Iosif Stalin’s death, Il’ia Erenburg’s novella *The Thaw* provided a profoundly influential metaphor of post-Stalin transition. Indeed, literary works constituted an early means of tracking changes in the Soviet Union; George Gibian’s study of thaw literature dubbed the period after Stalin’s death the “interval of freedom.” More recently, historians have vigorously contested the metaphor and charted studies in many fields—family life, criminal justice, architecture—in the wake of Stalin’s death. Nonetheless, both the thaw metaphor and the tendency to understand the thaw as a literary phenomenon persist.

Polly Jones’s study of Soviet literary and, to a lesser extent, historical writing in the decade and a half after Stalin’s death can thus be understood as a return to well-trod ground. However, she arrives armed with an impressive range of archival sources that allow her to construct a detailed picture of the