



G. M. HAMBURG, *Russia's Path Towards Enlightenment. Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500–1801*,

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The Twisted Paths of Faith and Reason: Recent Problems in the Study of Russian Enlightenment*

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Извилистые пути веры и разума: актуальные проблемы изучения российского Просвещения

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The voluminous study of Russian political thought recently published by Gary Hamburg covers a vast chronology from the 16th to the early 19th centuries. Hamburg, who currently holds the position of Otho M. Behr Professor of the History of Ideas at Claremont McKenna College in the USA, is well known among students of political ideas, for he published *Boris Chicherin & Early Russian Liberalism* in 1992 and edited the large collective volume *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930: Faith, Reason and the Defense of Human Dignity* in 2010. The book under review apparently marks the expansion of Hamburg's research interests into an earlier period of Russian history, while the title, which repeats the words "faith" and "reason," indicates the continuity of the research program (as Hamburg says, he plans to take the same theme forward with a new volume entitled *Russia's Road toward Emancipation: Politics, Faith and Community*,

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1801–1861). As Hamburg admits in the opening chapter, he started to write the book in 2010; the result, published six years later, was awarded the Marc Raeff Prize for the best book in Eighteenth-Century Russian Studies in 2016.

Hamburg—who begins the text by stating that the major inspirations for his study were the works of Vladimir Valdenberg, Quentin Skinner and Andrzej Walicki—builds his analysis around the concepts of faith, reason, and Enlightenment. By faith, he means “allegiance to Orthodox Christianity and engaging in Orthodoxy’s prescribed faith rituals,” emphasizing that Eastern Christianity was more of a “living religion” than one of dogmatic debate. Hamburg also introduces two conceptions of Enlightenment that co-existed in Russia: “One conception was based squarely on the Orthodox idea of spiritual illumination; the other stemmed from attempts to define enlightenment as rationality” (p. 22). As the latter conception provoked questions about whether it is possible for reason to exist outside the Orthodox Church, tensions between these two grew. From here, the importance of the concept of “secularism” in Hamburg’s theoretical model is clear. Since Hamburg follows Charles Taylor’s understanding of secular society as a society where religion is privatized by the individual and is merely one “human possibility among many,” the second concept of Enlightenment in his work appears to be Enlightenment as a vehicle of secularization. The author summarizes his research goal with the following question: “Did Orthodox Christian notions of faith, politics, and reason evolve slowly into Enlightenment conceptions of ethics, the just society, and rationality?” (p. 26)

The work is organized chronologically; it is a set of essays focused on the most prominent thinkers of different periods in Russian history. The first part is named “Wisdom and Wickedness, 1500–1689.” Hamburg starts with the *Sermon on Law and Grace*, *The Tale of Bygone Years* and Agapetos before shifting his focus to different intellectual phenomena of the 16th century: Iosif Volotskii, the *Domostroi*, Ivan Peresvetov, Feodosii Kosoi, Metropolitan Filipp (Kolychev), and the polemics of Ivan IV and Andrei Kurbskii. The 17th century is represented not only by Grigorii Kotoshikhin, Simeon Polotskii, and the Old Believers, but also by “Stepan Razin’s utopia.”

Yet the bulk of his work is dedicated to 18th-century Russia. The second part, “Ways of Virtue (1689–1762),” deals with the Petrine age, Feofan (Prokopovich), Ivan Pososhkov, the crisis of 1730, Dmitrii Golitsyn (who is described as a “virtue philosopher”), Vasilii Tatishchev, and Mikhail Lomonosov. Here, Hamburg states that

each of these thinkers regarded himself primarily as a Christian patriot devoted to the advancement of Russian interests through learning, rather than as a cosmopolitan devoted to the advancement of modern civilization through the disinterested practice of science.

Insisting that Russian political thought adhered to the religious concept of Enlightenment rather than replacing it with secular values, Hamburg emphasizes:

It is important to reject the notion that Peter’s reforms succeeded in secularizing Russia, and the related notion that Feofan “secularized Russian thought.” That binary is too simple. In the Petrine era, the tensions between Church and state were not resolved by legislative acts, but were thoroughly internalized in the psyches of the country’s most prominent, eloquent, and farseeing clergymen (p. 263).

The lengthy third part, entitled “Straining toward Light, 1762–1801,” presents an analysis of a dozen leading Russian authors: Catherine II, Metropolitan Arsenii (Matsevich), Metropolitan Platon (Levshin), Nikita Panin, Denis Fonvizin, Gavriil Derzhavin, Ivan Tret’iakov, Semen Desnitskii, Nikolai Novikov, Aleksandr Radishchev, Mikhail Shcherbatov and, finally, Nikolai Karamzin. Hamburg’s conclusion is the following:

Russian thinking about politics through the end of the eighteenth century was a branch of applied Christian ethics or was heavily influenced by Christian ethics. It is therefore a basic error to interpret Russian political thinking before the nineteenth century as an exclusively secular pursuit (p. 30).

In each chapter, Hamburg proceeds with a methodical analysis of the works of each particular author. The problem, which is particularly important for a Russian reader, is that Hamburg includes long biographical discussions in his essays about the different authors, alongside abridged retellings of their writings. Imagine a study of Hobbes’ political ideas that always starts from a description of his biography! Of course, this problem is typical for most works on Russian political thought published in English, and for a clear reason: it is obvious that Tatishchev is far less familiar to the English reader than Hobbes. But at times it makes the narration rather monotonous, in contrast with the author’s otherwise lively manner.

There are some small inconsistencies in the text. For example, Hamburg says that Feofan “cited Grotius’s book *The Law of Peace and War*” (p. 249). However, Grotius’ treatise is typically translated into English as *On the Law of War and Peace* (*De Jure Belli ac Pacis*). Hamburg says that Feofan was most probably familiar with Hobbes; however, most recent studies do not verify this. While discussing Shcherbatov’s relations with Catherine II, Hamburg observes that Shcherbatov “hoped for her ‘august approval’ of his *History*, and signed the foreword ‘Your lowliest slave [*vsenizhaishii rab*], Prince Mikhailo Shcherbatov” (p. 625). But the phrase was at that time an official appeal to the empress, so Shcherbatov was just following etiquette, without any specific purpose of humiliating himself.¹ In discussing Russian writers’ adherence to the Orthodox Church, Hamburg notes that “Kheraskov, in spite of his adherence to Deism and mystical Freemasonry, did not campaign against the Orthodox Church, against ‘religious fanaticism,’ or against the autocracy”; while this is true in the first and third cases, Kheraskov did attack religious fanaticism harshly in his political novel *Numa Pompilius, or the Flourishing Rome* (1768).

Undoubtedly, Hamburg draws several interesting conclusions, and his study provides some important insights. The very emphasis on the religious patterns of Russian political thought is of great value. Hamburg’s characterizations of some historical figures are insightful and deep on many occasions. The book, which covers a great chronological span, offers a systematic view of the history of early modern Russian political thought.

However, there are three major problems which stalk Hamburg’s work throughout. First, Hamburg relies on only a limited number of Russian authors. For instance, he ignores such productive thinkers as Vasilii Trediakovskii, Friedrich Strube de Piermont,

¹ Hamburg makes the same mistake when noting: “About Anna’s humble subjects, Feofan spoke honestly at last. He described them as ‘we, your slaves’” (p. 262). And again, when speaking of Desnitskii, who “did not hesitate to use Muscovite language in describing his own status as a ‘servant’ or ‘slave’ of the crown” (p. 561).

and Vladimir Zolotnitskii, the author of Russia's first systematic treatise on natural law. The reason seems to be obvious: these authors were marginal in the historiographical tradition of the mid-20th century. Ivan Tret'iakov and Semen Desnitskii, secondary authors of the Catherinian age, were of great importance for Soviet historians since they presented a progressive Smithian political economy; therefore, their works were republished and read again and again. In contrast, the theory of natural law was of less interest to Marxists, and therefore Zolotnitskii or Strube were not republished or studied. Another example is the number of religious writers and preachers, such as Simon (Todorskii), Silvestr (Kuliabka), Amvrosii (Iushkevich), Gavriil (Popov), and Irinei (Klementievskii), to name but a few, who produced lots of "political theology" throughout the 18th century (the same opinion is expressed by Gary Marker, who wrote a generally favorable review for *The Russian Review* [MARKER 2017]). These authors, who knew several languages (including Latin and Greek), were sensible to Western influences [KISLOVA 2015].

Taking this into account, it is rather surprising that the book starts with a reference to Quentin Skinner's methods as a source of inspiration. The book reproduces the very position Skinner was so critical of—namely, the reduction of the history of political thought to a textbook with a focus on a handful of "doctrines" [SKINNER 2002: 59].

Second, Hamburg's analysis rests on the contradistinction of Muscovite tradition and Western influence. Both are understood as monolithic intellectual structures. This explanatory model is dangerous, for it tempts the researcher to substitute mere classification in binary terms for textual analysis. It is no surprise that Hamburg at times starts to speak in a disturbingly pejorative way: of the members of the Legislative Commission, he says, "Desnitskii's learned references to Roman law, his oblique criticism of autocracy and of serfdom, his talk about commercial republics, his comments on Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, must have sounded like the twittering of birds" (p. 556). The existence of Russian tradition turns out to be a consequence of Russia's despotic political system: "The tragedy was that, even under Catherine's relatively benign rule, Russia did not entirely escape the sixteenth-century pattern of burying its intellectual richness under a superficial conformity" (p. 676). And since Russia's historical tradition is by essence religious and despotic, European innovations could appear only in conflict with that tradition. It's a zero-sum game!

Such an understanding of Westernization may have led to curious methodological assumptions. For instance, when Hamburg speaks of the crisis of 1730, he uses the contradistinction of Western Enlightenment and Russian tradition in a manner reminiscent of Georgii Storm's *Hidden Radishchev*, a Soviet classic on the use of Aesopian language:

In the conditions of the absolutist state in which he lived, Golitsyn had to hide his knowledge from other members of the elite, to dissimulate his disagreements over the direction of his country, to pretend that he was a loyal subject of a crown he could not completely respect. When he finally spoke to the Supreme Privy Council in 1730, he did so forcefully, but without laying out the full justification for his program, and even without spelling out the entire program at one sitting of the council. He then let others formulate the basic components of a plan he had long contemplated, thus making them jointly responsible for its composition (p. 301).

In other words, it is not necessary to study whether Golitsyn actually had a plan, since the researcher can always reconstruct it by simply referring to an explanatory model based on the opposition between Enlightenment and tradition. And if Golitsyn's actions were supposedly directed against tradition, then—by the logic of a zero-sum game—these actions inevitably had to be inspired by Enlightenment principles, even though Golitsyn avoided “spelling out the entire program.” These assumptions, which are scattered across the book, are all derived from the same model of interpretation, regardless of whether Hamburg is calling Semen Desnitskii's Senate design “a broadly representative legislature” or insisting that Nikita Panin championed religious toleration.

It is probable that the opposition of secularism to religion worked fine at the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays, however, it can hardly serve as a reliable method of study. Turning away from the Skinnerian study of vocabularies and manners of speech to embrace the history of monolithic doctrines undermines the validity of one of Hamburg's most important and valuable ideas, namely, the emphasis on the importance of the concept of *virtue* in Russian political culture. Since the binary explanatory system requires him to classify each intellectual phenomenon as either Western or traditional, Hamburg considers *virtue* to be solely in the domain of traditional, moralistic, and religious culture. The very concepts remain unproblematic: summarizing the development of Russian political thought by the end of the 17th century, Hamburg notes:

The Muscovite legacy ultimately inheres in the complexity of Orthodox thinking about politics: from the simple assumption that good Christians must pursue virtue and attempt to build just societies, there followed profound disagreements over how to do so (p. 217).

In other words, Hamburg sees the whole discourse on *virtues* as something simple, while in fact there was no single concept of *virtue* in 18th-century Russia (and, probably, even before the 18th century). Perhaps an analysis of church sermons and ethical manuals might add something to this field, as well as an inquiry into 18th-century legislation regarding the nobility's privileges (based on a specific concept of noble *virtue*). Unfortunately, the black-and-white explanatory model and narrow scope of historical sources prevents Hamburg's study from examining the conceptual differences among the definitions of *virtue* in 18th-century Russian public thought.

At times, this explanatory model makes the analysis rather imprecise. Let's take, for example, the chapter on Shcherbatov's understanding of *virtue* in the *Journey to the Land of Ophir*:

The Ophirians had slowly realized that, in olden times, they had flattered their leaders, had pretended that their leaders' paper plans for model cities were feasible, and had succumbed to a general corruption of morals. The Ophirians now recognized that their leaders should be respected rather than flattered, and that there is no point in pretending that paper plans are necessarily feasible. They had become realists with respect to city planning and all other governmental projects. The Ophirians had also recovered their moral sense [. . .]. They now found disorderly lives shameful, and they claimed to pursue virtue in all things (p. 635).

This lengthy quotation shows the negative effects of treating *virtue* as a simple, univocal moralist formula: Hamburg fails to grasp the social mechanics of *virtue* that

Shcherbatov was describing in detail in his utopia. The notion of “paper cities” was used by Shcherbatov as a detail to demonstrate his criticism of Catherine’s urban policies (the reconstruction of Tver, to be exact): by no means can it be read as his explanation for the emergence of *virtue*. Hamburg omits Shcherbatov’s idea of restricting luxury and commerce to create a social environment suitable for moral revival. In Hamburg’s analysis, the *virtue* of the Ophirians looks like a simple refusal to flatter monarchs and to live shamefully; but, in fact, Shcherbatov saw quite clearly that *virtue* is grounded not only in the personal choice of whether to live shamefully or not, but also in social conditions, thus echoing the European tradition from Machiavelli to Montesquieu.

Shcherbatov, according to Hamburg, wanted to construct a “crazy hybrid” of the “best features of Muscovy” and the “best elements of European modernity”; however, “few Russians shared his appreciation for Muscovy, and fewer still his austere commitment to the virtuous life.” This contradicts Hamburg’s own idea that *virtue* was the key element in the understanding of politics in Russia. Moreover, Shcherbatov’s views were rather common in 18th-century Russia, and the features which he attributed to imaginary Ophir and historical Muscovy were partially drawn from Western political, ethical, and historical literature, usually following the pattern of Ancient Rome. Yet Hamburg says nothing of these Roman patterns, instead explaining Shcherbatov’s ideas through his biography:

He was a legatee of Muscovite family values caught in the dynamic but corrupt world of Catherine II, a Russian traditionalist and yet simultaneously a European cosmopolitan [. . .] In the future, Catherine made use of Shcherbatov’s talents as historian, but she never trusted him with the high office that might otherwise have been proffered to a person of his background and attainments.

But Shcherbatov was born in 1733, a long time after the Petrine reforms had been launched; what specific kind of “Muscovite legacy” was he supposed to have received? Equally, Shcherbatov’s career was far from unsuccessful: he was the head of the Collegium for State Income from 1778 to 1784, and—during his time in the office—participated actively in the discussion about laws on luxury, along with the most powerful officials of his time, General Procurator Aleksandr Viazemskii and the head of the Collegium for Commerce, Ernst Munnich; Shcherbatov’s ideas on luxury here were similar to the views he put on paper in his unpublished works.

Yet another example of the deficiency of the binary explanatory model is the chapter on the Old Believers. Hamburg investigates whether Avvakum legitimized active resistance (“armed rebellion”) to the crown, concluding that Avvakum’s ideas on resistance were rather “murky” (p. 180). But Hamburg says nothing about the Old Believers’ readiness to resist by killing themselves; apparently, such a concept does not fit the book’s explanatory model.

Also, speaking of Western influence on Russia, which “should not be underestimated,” Hamburg shapes this influence to conform with the explanatory model. The Western contribution he talks about includes Montesquieu, Rousseau, Beccaria and the German cameralists, Smith, and so on. He fails to recognize, though, that Roberto Bellarmine, the Spanish anti-Machiavellists, and St. Augustine were also Western authors, and that in the world of printed texts and manuscript translations, they were much more

popular than, say, Smith. In other words, the realm of ethics in Westernized Russia was also dominated by European authors; but to recognize this would at the same time disrupt an explanatory model based on the clear opposition between Russia and the West, ethics and politics. And Hamburg is aware of this; for instance, he productively discusses the influence of Justus Lipsius on Artemii Volynskii and Vasiliï Tatishchev, but assigns Lipsius two roles: in one case, Lipsius appears as a source of inspiration for circumscribing royal power with the expertise of wise advisors (thus being a manifestation of European Enlightenment replacing Russia's essential culture of obedience and autocracy), while in the other case, Lipsius is characterized merely as an "ardent Catholic" whose influence was dissolved within Russia's own religious tradition. As a result, Hamburg remains silent about Lipsius when discussing European influence in general; an "ardent Catholic" is not the kind of European Enlightenment thinker about whom the binary explanation speaks.

In addition, the use of "Western Enlightenment" and "Russian tradition" as labels always leads to the risk of confusion. Thus, Hamburg marks Catherine's ideas on liberty, formulated in her *Instruction*, as controversial: he considers the arguments of point 38 to be part of a "positive liberty" tradition, and the concepts from points 41 and 42 to be a borrowing from Montesquieu as a "rudimentary sketch" of "negative liberty." But, in fact, Catherine was following Montesquieu in defining liberty in both cases, and so her definition of liberty was generally leaning toward "negative liberty," provoking angry comments from Aleksandr Sumarokov. Sumarokov noted that honest persons knew the truth in their hearts and therefore "laws are prescribed for those who fight the truth [*boriushchim istinu*]" [STENNIK 2006: 135], while Catherine and Montesquieu insisted that liberty is "the right to do whatever the laws do not prohibit."

These confusions might have been avoided had Hamburg relied more on the existing body of historical studies. But Hamburg's book almost totally omits the recent historiography, which is the third and probably most serious problem of this volume. The most recent work on Shcherbatov's thought which Hamburg mentions is Ivan Fedosov's book [FEDOSOV 1967]. The most recent work on Panin's political ideas is David Ransel's solid work [RANSEL 1975], though Hamburg also quotes Oleg Omelchenko's marvelous study of 2001 on the Commission of the Noble Liberty; yet he remains silent with respect to recent works on Panin [PLOTNIKOV 2000; POLSKOY 2010]. Speaking of toleration and faith in 18th-century Russia, Hamburg never quotes any book on toleration issues, even the fundamental work by ANDREI RIAZHEV [2006]; it seems like Hamburg's equation of pre-modern society with the realm of fanatical adherence to the Church prevents him from analyzing the complexity of the toleration policies developed in Catherinian Russia. The same could be said in relation to the earlier periods studied by Hamburg. These examples could be multiplied. This historiographical isolation at times really surprises the reader: investigating whether Tsar Vasiliï Shuiskii was really proposing a "Bill of Rights" to his subjects, Hamburg polemicizes with. . . Sergei Solov'ev. In a rather loose outline of Avvakum's political ideas, he argues with Sergei Berdiaev and Konstantin Leont'ev.

There is also one omission that we would like to stress specifically. Hamburg refers to Boris Uspenskij's *Tsar and Patriarch* [USPENSKIJ 1998] twice in the opening chapters when talking of medieval political thought, but he never refers to Boris Uspenskij's and Viktor Zhivov's fundamental study of early modern Russian political culture, "Tsar

and God” [ZHIVOV, USPENSKIJ 1994]. Here Uspenskij and Zhivov posed the crux of the matter with poignancy: the rhetorical strategies of the sacralization of the monarch in 18th-century Russia were not part of tradition, but rather a Western innovation introduced in the late 17th century. Is it possible to seriously discuss the problem of the secularization of 18th-century Russian political culture without referring to this important thesis?

There are some major omissions in the English-speaking historiography too, the most notable of which is that Max Okenfuss’ controversial study of Latin humanism in early modern Russia [OKENFUSS 1995], which provides conclusions that correspond with Hamburg’s own ideas, is not mentioned at all. The splendid study by ELISE WIRTSCHAFTER [2003] is totally omitted, even though Wirtschafter’s work contains some important conclusions describing the phenomenon of “moral monarchy” based on personal *virtue*.

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