

Judith Armstrong
The Russian History Wars
(Plus ça change, plus c'est un peu pareil)

[Dr. Armstrong's paper, originally presented at the recent conference of the ANZSA Study Group in Melbourne, is published as an occasional essay, a rubric new to this journal. It is the intention of the editors from time to time to vary the usual fare of academic articles with contributions of a more discursive and informal nature on topics of general interest to scholars in the field.]

The 'History Wars' in Australia have been fought for some years now between holders of the 'bleeding heart' and the 'black armband' versions of this country's past, using computers for weapons and the open page as the field of battle. In this ongoing conflict the principal issue has been the encounters between white settlers and the long-established indigenous inhabitants. Early on, particularly savage shots were exchanged over the application and interpretation of the words 'terra nullius', a term thought to have first been brought into general usage during the seventeenth century in order to designate an empty land, a no man's land, or a land unclaimed by any recognised sovereign.

In the eighteenth century the doctrine was invoked to lend legal force to the settlement of lands inhabited by 'backward' peoples without ownership of property or a system of law – at least as understood in the West. It was specifically quoted in 1889 by the Privy Council of the United Kingdom in its claim to possession of the Australian continent. The Council deemed that, prior to the arrival of Europeans, Australia was 'a tract of territory practically unoccupied, without settled inhabitants or settled law'. This was, of course, a legal fiction, part of the explanation for which may lie in the fact that rather than implying mere emptiness, *terra nullius* could also be interpreted as an absence of 'civilised' society.

In the present era, from the 1970s onwards, the controversy has been fuelled by a series of polemics by and against the camp of the historian Keith Windschuttle. Claims have been met with refutation and statistics with rebuttal, but most observers of the debate appear to be already partisan and thus remain true to their existing loyalties. The effective winners are historians

and departments of history across the continent, for no matter whether it is waged over historical record, political conviction, or innate prejudice, the battle has kept the discipline of history in the public spotlight.

However, there is nothing new under the Southern Cross, not even an academic History War. During the latter part of the year 2004, Australian eyes, like those of the rest of the world, were turned towards the leadership struggle in Ukraine; but anyone familiar with Russian history might have had a sense of déjà-vu. Such a person might have construed the opposition between the Europe-leaning challenger Viktor Yushchenko and the Russia-oriented incumbent Viktor Yankovich as a modern parallel of the Westerner /Slavophile debate which coloured so much of Russian culture and politics during the nineteenth century. Yet this opposition was not new even in 1840. There have been many instances in Russian history of a dichotomy between reform and tradition, the urgent desire to emulate the West confronted by an equal and opposite pull to retain everything felt to be innately Russian. The most obvious were Peter the Great's secular modernisations, bitterly deplored by many but nevertheless carrying the day.

Yet although, or perhaps because, this clash was manifested in different guises over more than a millennium, it is not unrelated to an increasingly striking, if negative, feature of Russia's contemporary political situation. The despairing apathy and almost complete disengagement from the democratic process of the majority of the population are traits which are regularly laid at the door of the increasing authoritarianism of the President. With Vladimir Putin hailed, usually balefully, as the new Tsar, it is interesting to speculate on whether a partial explanation of this development lies in Russia's own History Wars.

The *Russian Primary Chronicle*, a work as verbally picturesque as it is politically adroit, was written around the twelfth century for the purpose of giving a particular gloss to events that had occurred up to three hundred years earlier. Amongst its most famous anecdotes is its ingenuous recounting of the 'invitation' of the Novgorod Slavs to their Varangian invaders: 'Our land is great and rich,' they are reputed to have said, 'but there is no order in it. Come then to rule as princes over us.'¹ This invitation - genial? abject? coded? -

¹ Lionel Kochan, *The Making of Modern Russia* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1973), 15

having been accepted by the three brothers, Riurik, Sineus and Truvor, tradition and the chronicle then credited the Varangians with bringing culture, stability and political organisation to milling tribes naïve enough to declare themselves incapable of self-governance. As we know, Riurik's successor Oleg, prince of Novgorod, consolidated his position through a triumphal expansion towards the south, during which he captured Kiev and several other towns lying along the path that led to the riches of Byzantium. In 882 Oleg established the state of Kievan Rus, which was to remain under the governance of several generations of princely rulers.

Later, however, the chronicle's enshrined version of the 'invitation' was challenged by an opposing claim, and a minor history war known as the Normanist controversy erupted in academe. In the view of modern historians², this rather narrow controversy has already become obsolete, new socio-economic considerations having suggesting wider interpretations, while the chronicle itself, being written by many hands and containing many imaginative passages, can be used to drum up support for either side.

Nevertheless, the story of invitation has not been eradicated, and is still invoked as a kind of pointer to the Russian temperament. Briefly, the Normanists upheld the chronicle's picture of the complacent disorganisation of the Rus and the princely qualities of the Varangians, while their opponents asserted the contrary: far from being natural leaders, the Varangians were culturally and numerically *inferior* to the Slav tribes. They were in fact mere mercenaries, incapable of organisational skills, and with very little to offer other than brute force. This interpretation has received support from contemporary opinion, which looks to evidence suggesting that the Varangians left little imprint on the laws, political institutions, social organisation and beliefs of the Rus, and failed to make any lasting impression on either the land or its literature, the argument from the existence of a few Russian geographical names deriving from Scandinavian languages being hardly strong enough to decide the whole case.

The status of the tribes that the Varangians encountered, the original 'disorganised' inhabitants of the land that was about to become Kievan Rus,

² See Robert Auty and Dimitri Obolensky, *An Introduction to Russian History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), 52-58.

has also been brought into question. One side of the argument, upheld for example by the historian Klyuchevsky³, claims that the arriving Varangians found *already in place* towns and satellite areas over which they could exert little or no influence, since they were inhabited by hunters, fisherman, and beekeepers who traded their products through already developed markets and knew how to fortify their towns when necessary. The opposing view claims that the tribes were living in a closed economy with a feudal, agricultural base, and that towns only began to spring up in the ninth and tenth centuries, that is, after the arrival of the Varangians.

The first position constitutes the ‘Westerner’ view, held over time by liberal historians and reformist groups such as the Decembrists. It is also said to be supported by recent archeological findings, which appear to make a case for the cultural advancement of the Slavic tribes and for ‘civilised’ customs based on practices derived from ancient Scythian, Gothic, Roman and Greek influences. Holders of this view conclude that the state of Rus had evolved spontaneously long before the Varangians were ‘invited in’, and, moreover, had developed a liberal, republican form of government that was only *eroded* by the system of authoritarian rule introduced by Oleg and his descendants.

The contrary interpretation was traditionally held by historians of strong Slavophile leaning, and also by Soviet historians. One of the former was Nikolai Karamzin, better known perhaps as the author of the sentimental novel, *Poor Lisa*. Karamzin played a stand-out role in the Russian History Wars, claiming unequivocally that before Riurik and his descendants took over, Rus had been nothing but an ‘empty space’⁴ with ‘wild and warring tribes living on the same level as the beasts and birds’. In other words, Rus was declared by this eminent nineteenth-century historian to be *terra nullius*, an unclaimed and uncultivated territory.

Karamzin, not surprisingly, became a court favourite of the autocrat Nicholas I, but in fact he had not always been a monarchist. Until the French Revolution, he had located himself firmly in the Westerners’ camp; but from

³ Quote in above, 55.

⁴ N.M. Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo*, Vol.1, (St. Petersburg 1842-3), 43, quoted in Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2003), 135.

1789, and in a more extreme fashion after 1812, allied himself with the many who changed tack, championing a return to unquestioned absolutism. These views he had expressed in a short book called *A Note on the Old and New Russia*, the publication that first earned him the favourable attention of the Tsar. But, during the burning of Moscow in 1812, Karamzin saved from the flames that were engulfing his house and library one precious item, a notebook containing the draft of a more ambitious work he was going to call *A History of the Russian State*.⁵

Alexander invited the homeless historian to install himself in the Anichkov Palace, where Karamzin worked in comfort towards the completion of this vast *History*. Six years later, in 1818, he published the first of its twelve volumes; the last appeared in 1826. The work received much acclaim, earning the plaudits even of Pushkin, despite its unashamedly Slavophile tone. Karamzin had chosen his moment well, for, to the chagrin of the liberals, the crushing of the abortive Decembrist revolt of 1825 had aroused strong sympathy for the Slavophiles' belief in strong, centralised rule.

Karamzin's *History* thus acted as a successful exercise in damage control following the disturbing events of 1789, 1812, and 1825, catalysed by one of his main tenets concerning the correct interpretation of Moscow's subjugation, in the late fifteenth century, of the hitherto independent, self-governing city of Novgorod.

The reason for his particular interest was that Novgorod, and the similarly independent town of Pskov, had become important icons for the post-1812 liberals. Obligated to rethink their admiration for French jacobinism, they had seized on these two historic republics as representing a link between the democratic traditions of ancient Greece and Rome and their own campaign for a more liberal regime in contemporary Russia. Karamzin took up the cudgels against this reclamation of republicanism, arguing that Moscow's conquest of Novgorod had been a necessary step on the way towards the formation of a Russian unitary state. He further argued that the necessity had been recognised as such by the city's own citizens, who were intelligent enough to understand Moscow's onslaught as a kind of re-enactment of the invitation to the Varangians. Just as the tribes had recognised the benefits of strong princely

⁵ Figes, 130-132 and ff.

rule, so the Novgorodians rated freedom a lesser good than order and security and were in a frame of mind to accept governance by Moscow. According to Karamzin, the Novgorodians *chose* to subject themselves to an autocracy; they *preferred* a Tsar in Moscow because they could see that their own internal squabbles only played into the hands of the despotic boyars. Karamzin himself had concluded that the republic of Novgorod would very likely have ended in all-out despotism had it not wisely subjected itself to centralised rule.

His was not of course the only voice to be heard. Against his insistence that ‘The history of the nation belongs to the Tsar,’ the Decembrist historian Muraviev was countering, ‘History belongs to the people’. But Karamzin’s unashamedly propagandist aim was, as Billington remarks,⁶ disguised by the calm sophistication of his arguments. Setting out a neat political hierarchy in which he deemed Anarchy to be the worst possible political system and Despotism the second worst, he allowed that Republicanism was theoretically good, but unfortunately only possible in small countries. Oligarchy he ruled out on the grounds that it led to fragmentation, *ergo* an autocratic monarchy was best for all, at least in a country the size of Russia. And the proof of this royal, if tautological, pudding? Only an autocratic Russia could produce heroes like Ivan III, the conqueror of Novgorod.

To bring his point home to readers of fiction rather than history, Karamzin wrote a story called “Martha the Leader of the City, or, The Subjugation of Novgorod”, in which one of the local characters admits that resistance would truly have led to the destruction of the city, whereas ‘sound reasoning’ pointed to the wisdom of voluntary sacrifice. ‘There is no order without autocratic power’, complacently agrees one of the conquering princes.

The logic of Karamzin’s argument, from the ‘*terra nullius*’ that was ancient Rus to the post 1825 justification of autocracy, may be thought to have died along with other ‘cursed questions’ that harassed the nineteenth century Russian intelligentsia. But, as has been convincingly argued in an excellent article recently published in the *Russian Review*,⁷ the influence of a Slavophile

⁶ James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture* (New York, Vintage, 1970), 262-264.

⁷ The article “Power as a Burden: The Slavophile Concept of the State and Lev Tolstoi”, by Dr. Pål Kolstø of the University of Oslo, was, at the time of writing, to be

mode of thought can be detected long after the movement might appear to have died out, cropping up in individuals who could never be accused of card-carrying fanaticism. The mighty Tolstoy, for example, was far too wide-ranging, and/or idiosyncratic, to be claimed absolutely by either the Westerner or Slavophile camps, yet he gave grounds for comfort to both. In his youth he explicitly shared with the universalising, enlightenment-inspired Westerners the belief that human nature is *not* defined by national characteristics, but in his later years championed a profound sense of identity with the Russian nation, declaring its role in the world to be essential and unique. But this was not the first time he had expressed sympathy for the Slavophile viewpoint. During the 1850s he had been attracted by the position adopted collectively by Sergei Aksakov and his two sons, Konstantin and Ivan.

Konstantin Aksakov was a committed monarchist, but a rather unusual one. In 1855 he had produced a paper 'On the internal situation of Russia', which he hoped might exert some influence over the incoming Tsar Alexander II. In it he propounded the view that the Russians were an essentially *non-political* people who did not *want* to participate in the business of the state; for them, true freedom was an inner moral and spiritual quality that could only be *jeopardised* by any engagement with politics; thus the invitation to Riurik, which Aksakov accepted more or less as described in the chronicle, was extended, not because the Rus were incapable of governing themselves, but because they didn't *want* to engage in any such philistine activity. Unfortunately, he wrote, the state remains a necessity because mankind is by definition imperfect, and will always be so. If man were, *per impossibile*, perfect, anarchy could reign without any ill effects; it would even be welcome, because autocracy is not actually desirable *in itself*. It is not sanctioned by any kind of absolute or divine authority and such authority as it does enjoy is bestowed on it by the people. But given the reality, that is the imperfection of man, the power of the state should be *unlimited* in order to save the people from having to participate in its ignoble activities and thus deprive themselves of the possibility of achieving internal, spiritual freedom.

published in a forthcoming volume of the *Russian Review* (October 2005 or January 2006). I am indebted to this article for the valuable account of Tolstoy's use of Aksakov's writings.

Eventually Aksakov arrives at a rather original double conclusion: autocracy, which in Russia means Tsardom, is the only acceptable model of political rule; but the only acceptable model for its conduct is one of *absolute non-interference* between ruler and people. The ruler rules, the people get on with saving their souls. The people, he says, have always understood and striven for this, but the tsars have notoriously failed to keep their side of the bargain. Peter the Great, for example, interfered shockingly in the inner life of his people and by doing so turned the state into an instrument of oppression.

Tolstoy's resurrection of Aksakov's somewhat idiosyncratic reasoning some fifty years later was surprising. From 1890-3 he had been writing an essay, called 'The Kingdom of God is within You', in which he reviled both autocracy and republicanism as similar but different evils. Under the former, he said, power is concentrated, and in the latter it is dispersed; but power is always and only exercised through violence. Therefore both systems are unacceptable.

By 1905, however, he had come halfway to endorsing Aksakov's view of the corrupting effect of political involvement: 'How right the Slavophiles are when they say that the Russian people turn away from power...' he wrote. '[They] are prepared to leave it to bad people rather than be sullied by it themselves.' Then he adds: 'And I think that if this is so, they are right.'⁸

The following year, in his article 'On the Significance of the Russian Revolution', his disgust for the implementation of power led him into thorough-going support for autocracy, on the grounds that it leaves less room for 'infection' than when the political rule is spread amongst many. Autocracy is essentially more desirable than democracy because it allows for the total abolition of the power of the state. Reiterating Aksakov's lament over man's imperfection, he admits that under autocracy the behaviour of people will still not be perfect, but there will be fewer transgressions of the *moral* law. By now, he added (it was 1906) it was unfortunately too late for the West, already infected by the disease of power, to take the autocratic path; but for Russia there was still time. Moreover, autocracy fitted well with Russia's other natural advantages - its rural lifestyle, for example, which Tolstoy always considered

⁸ R.F. Christian (ed. and trans.), *Tolstoy's Diaries Vol.2: 1895-1910* (London, The Athlone Press, 1985), 536.

more conducive to the moral life, and its religious faith. 'If it is true that the Russian people consists of uncivilised barbarians, then we have a future,' he wrote in staunch rebuttal of the entire Enlightenment.

He had also read the conservative theologian Dmitri Khomiakov's book on autocracy, which opposes autocracy to republicanism, and found himself in firm agreement with nearly all of it. His essay 'On the Significance of the Russian Revolution' in fact arose out a preface he was writing to Khomiakov's work. Khomiakov naturally upholds autocracy, but when he introduces the idea of *absolutism* (as distinct from autocracy), he rather surprisingly dismisses it, consigning it to the same bag as republicanism. Republicanism, he says, is found among people interested in acquiring material goods, for example the Phoenicians and Romans; but Roman rule gave rise to the Caesars, who because they were *so* absolutist, that is, too godlike to be bothered with affairs of state, allowed politics to totally permeate society.

Autocracy on the other hand appeals to nations who place the emphasis on spirituality and simply want political structures to be reduced to the bare minimum. While the country needs to be ruled and defended, the people might well not care to do this themselves; and in this case, they should empower an autocrat to do it for them, as in the case of the tribes' invitation to Riurik. Moreover, such politics as must exist should be seen as a series of obligations that should aim at the minimum. Just as poverty is a virtue to be pursued by the individual, a stripping down of power should be sought by the Christian aristocrat, who should remain personally responsible to his people. (Tolstoy underlined these words heavily.) In this all-win situation, the autocrat is actually sanctified by the sacrifice he makes in taking on the burden of solitary power.

Tolstoy also copied out in capitals Khomiakov's statement that people have no rights, only obligations, and then mused on its corollary, which would argue that if state power should ideally be avoided but cannot in reality be ignored, it might as well be left to the most morally deprived (depraved?) individuals to carry it out. Contrary to this new understanding of the role of autocracy, and hence of the call to the Varangians, in 'The Kingdom of God' he

now paraphrased the invitation: 'We the Russians do not want to partake in the sin of power. If you do not regard power as a sin, then come and rule over us.'⁹

He further attributed the failure of the 1905 revolution to his view that the people wanted to hang on to their ruler for the sake of their own inner peace. On the other hand, he conceded, it *might* be possible, if regrettable, that autocracy was becoming a thing of the past, like one's own happy childhood.

All this is beginning to sound a little quaint, or at least to bespeak an eclecticism which simply proves Isaiah Berlin's point that Tolstoy was as much fox as hedgehog. But flash forward to the present day, where surprise and incomprehension on the part of Western observers in regard to the inherently *different* attitude of many Russians towards political involvement underlines their attempts to explain it, while at the same time the *indifference* of the Russians defies analysis. Judith Devlin, in her 1999 book *Slavs and Commissars: Enemies of Democracy in Modern Russia*, divides the eponymous enemies into Neo-Stalinists and Neo-Slavophiles, accusing the second category of a nationalism more concerned with the preservation of Russia's spiritual heritage and culture than the development of material progress and democratic procedures. The English academic Donald Rayfield, reviewing in the *Guardian Weekly* the book *Putin's Russia* by Anna Politkovskaya, whom he describes as Russia's bravest surviving journalist, writes, 'Russian citizens have come to the conclusion that politics is a dirty business with which they should not contaminate themselves and is best left to moral pariahs'.

Politkovskaya herself leaves us in no doubt that Putin is an autocrat utterly derisive of the electorate.¹⁰ He refuses to debate anything with anyone, declines to expand on his policies, publicly states his view that the KGB is an excellent model for any organisation, and sees no irony in positioning himself not just as autocrat but as something even higher. During the Easter ceremonies of 2004 a service was held at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, at the start of which Putin and his offsidiers shook the Patriarch's hand instead of kissing it. But worse was to follow. The great dramatic moment of the

⁹ Quoted by Dr. Kolstø from Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie*, Vol. 36, 247.

¹⁰ Anna Politkovskaya, tr. Archie Tait, *Putin's Russia* (London, The Harvill Press, 2004). 279-280.

Orthodox Easter service occurs at midnight, when the whole congregation leaves the darkened church and the doors are shut to represent the cave where Christ's body was placed. The priests and people process around to the front of the church, where the priest normally throws open the doors of the empty church and proceeds up the aisle to light the paschal candle, whose flame represents the risen Christ. However, on this Easter Sunday, the doors were flung open to reveal Putin standing before the altar with his Prime Minister, his chief of staff and the mayor of Moscow. Politkovskaya writes with disgust, 'He profanes everything he touches'.

But in the light of the Slavophile argument, isn't the profanation, the sacrifice of his own soul, exactly what the new Tsar is there for? And as for the comparison with our own History Wars, has the bickering and infighting gone anywhere near throwing up so dedicated a saviour?