

From the Editors

Russophobia and the American Politics of Russian History

Amidst the questions about archival hours in Moscow and imperial-era newspapers, the on-line discussion forum H-Russia recently featured a debate concerning the use of the term "autocracy."[\[1\]](#) The dispute was sparked by the bracing article "Against Russophobia" by Anatol Lieven. Lieven was primarily concerned with debunking the smug, ahistorical pronouncements of especially American journalists and policymakers, who perpetuate essentialist 19th-century and Cold War stereotypes about Russia.[\[2\]](#) In the spirit of Lieven's article, some commentators on H-Russia felt that "Russian autocracy" was exactly one of these misleading stereotypes. Others, however, felt that if the concept was properly modified it might have some utility in explaining what they see as essential continuities in Russian history. Not surprisingly, the two sides failed to agree.

Considered from another angle, however, the H-Russia dispute over "autocracy" is instructive insofar as it inadvertently highlighted an ethical dilemma faced by every historian, that of scholarly freedom and social responsibility. On the one hand, historians are professionally obliged to express what they regard as the historical truth. On the other hand, historians are citizens and therefore have civic obligations. What should we do when the two are in conflict? The debate on H-Russia over "autocracy" offers us a case in point.

There can be no doubt, as Lieven forcefully pointed out, that the notion of a "Russian autocratic tradition" was co-opted by politicians during the Cold War in order to promote aggressive policies against Russia. The classic example is, of course, the hard-line reading of George Kennan's famous "X" article. Kennan's subtle interpretation of the Russian roots of Soviet political behavior inadvertently became the basis of the policy of aggressive "containment" - a policy that Kennan came to reject. There is also no doubt that crude characterizations of Russia's ancient and indelible "mission" of despotism and imperialism have been misused in the public sphere. Jeffrey Tayler's recent cover article in *The Atlantic* provides an excellent case in point.[\[3\]](#) Tayler would have Americans believe that the adoption of a "suffocating" Orthodox Christianity and the invasion of the "cruel" Mongols are responsible for illiberal government in Russia. This interpretation was a favorite of Cold War historiography, and has been thoroughly discredited by early Russian historians.

Both the pro- and anti-"autocracy" historians in the H-Russia debate agreed that this sort of distortion of the record is dangerous. But, by implication, they differed sharply on what should be done about it. First, it is a question of defining proper terminology and weighing the age-old questions of continuity and change. In the current debate both sides have gravitated to either of the two extreme poles. It should by now be clear, however, that the continuity/change conundrum is not an either-or proposition. Rather, the more fruitful questions to pose are how and why there is continuity in certain spheres and change in others.

Such issues properly concern academic inquiry and merit spirited discussion. Yet the question of the public role of our specialist knowledge also raises the question of our ethical role as professional historians. Anti-"autocracy" historians protest that the continued deployment of

simplified explanations - explanations which they fault also on the grounds of their reading of the evidence - have a baleful influence on current public attitudes. Indeed, their fear is that current prejudices about Russia find a patina of academic justification in simplified versions of the continuity thesis, just as some scholars of the Balkans protested against the use of questionable historical models of "Balkan tribalism and violence" to justify official policy and frame public reporting.^[4] For the pro-"autocracy" historians, however, this debate presents precisely the dilemma of scholarly freedom and social responsibility. What should historians do if they truly believe in an interpretation, but find that its public implications have the potential to be dangerous? Should they simply speak what they regard as the truth in the name of scholarship; or should they practice a kind of self-censorship in the name of society?

Perhaps one reason the "Russophobia" exchange poses such problems is the nature of the medium in which it was conducted. As readers will have noted, the debate to which we refer took place on an internet list-serv. The list-serv clearly is not simply an academic forum - people feel free to hold forth in a more informal way than they would, for instance, in print. Yet the audience and contributors also participate as informed and knowledgeable professionals. Perhaps the dispute is as much about the nature of the medium as its message?

Historians must answer the "accursed question" (in this case, the "autocracy" question) for themselves after carefully evaluating a number of factors. How strong is the case for the interpretation? How damaging could it be if distorted? Is there any ready means to combat distortion of the interpretation in the public mind? Having weighed these considerations, we have every confidence that an interpretation at once right and responsible can be forged.

Ignorance is unmasked in the most unexpected of places. In our last column in these pages, we innocently referred to the "rise and fall of the mysteriously-named 'Bim-Bom' visible from the reading room windows of the erstwhile *sanctum sanctorum*, the Central Party Archive." Now we know: the downtown Moscow store we had in mind was quite clearly named after the prerevolutionary musical clowns Ivan Radunskii and Mechislav Stanevskii, otherwise known by the sobriquets Bim and Bom. According to one scholar who has written about Russian circus clowns as social critics, the famous pair "devised a skit for Moscow's Salamonskii Circus in which Bim, dressed as the Turkish sultan and accompanied by a monkey, sang a patriotic ditty to the sound of a hurdy-gurdy."^[5]

The articles in this special issue of *Kritika* were first presented at a conference at The Ohio State University entitled "Negotiating Cultural Upheavals: Icons, Myths, and Other Institutions of Cultural Memory in Modern Russia, 1900-2000," held in Columbus on 13-15 April 2000 and sponsored by three institutions at OSU: the Center for Slavic and East European Studies, the Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, and the Mershon Center. Galina Rylkova, now of the University of Florida, was the main inspiration behind the conference and the chair of its organizing committee, and the editors are grateful to her for her assistance and advice in the preparation of this special issue. Special appreciation also goes to Bill Wolf, Assistant Director of the OSU Slavic Center, for all his help before and after the conference. We would also like to thank Irene Masing-Delic, director of the Slavic Center, Ned Lebow, director of the Mershon Center, the faculty members from the OSU Slavic Department on the conference organizing committee, and all 30 scholars on the conference program.

[1] To read the postings, go to the H-Russia web site (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~russia/>) and check the discussion logs for "Against Russophobia" in the months of April and May 2001.

[2] Anatol Lieven, "Against Russophobia," *World Policy Journal* 17: 4 (Winter 2000/01) (<http://worldpolicy.org/journal/lieven.html>).

[3] Jeffrey Tayler, "Russia is Finished," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2001 (<http://www.TheAtlantic.com/issues/2001/05/tayler-p1.htm>).

[4] See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Mark Mazower, "Epilogue: On Violence," in *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

[5] Hurburtus Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 89.