Review Article

Illiberal Russia and the Varieties of Slavophilism

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Abstract

As evidenced by the essays and articles collected in *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia’s Illiberal Path*, few scholars have more thoroughly or provocatively explored the ideological, legal, and cultural dilemmas that shaped the course of modern Russian history than Laura Engelstein. While acknowledging the importance of her contribution to this field of study, the present review seeks to demonstrate that *Slavophile Empire* commonly relies on notions about the Enlightenment and modernity that recent scholarship has shown to be contested, even untenable. Moreover, there is good historical evidence to suggest that the anti-liberal consensus that took shape in Russian public opinion in the last decades of the old regime emanated from an array of sources, not just “the Slavophile paradigm,” and that Slavophilism itself was a contingent, multivalent phenomenon that encompassed and expressed a variety of intellectual positions.

Keywords

Slavophilism, Modernity, Enlightenments, Orthodoxy, Anti-Liberalism, National Identity, Empire, Public Opinion


In the late summer of 1881, Aleksandr Ivanovich Koshelev sent a letter to Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov to refute accusations that his and S. A. Iur’ev’s engagement with Russian liberals was undermining the tenets of Slavophilism. Koshelev defended his commitment to the Slavophile project by reminding Aksakov that the two of them were in agreement on “fundamental principles,”
and he sought to bolster Iur’ev’s credentials by drawing attention to the fact that he was a “deeply believing Orthodox Christian.” Besides, Koshelev insisted, the “Westernism” (zapadnichestvo) that Aksakov thought he saw in the journals edited by Koshelev and Iur’ev (Zemstvo and Russkaia mysl’, respectively) “no longer exists.” It had been vanquished years ago thanks to the hard work of A. S. Khomiakov, I. V. Kireevskii, and K. S. Aksakov, who had succeeded in making the study of narodnost’ and “our native religious beliefs [narodnye verovaniia]” the organizing principle of contemporary scholarship (nauka). As such, Koshelev triumphantly declared, Slavophile formulations about Russia’s “religiosity” and “unique cultural identity [samobytnost’],” which were first articulated in the late 1830s among a small group of friends in private salons, now informed nearly every aspect of public opinion.  

Koshelev’s conceit about Slavophilism’s success in framing the discursive contours of educated society, as well as the direct link he made between ideological fitness and religious affiliation, broadly, if paradoxically, corresponds to the premise of Laura Engelstein’s Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia’s Illiberal Path. In that volume, which brings together two new studies of original research and five previously published articles and essays, including one that is making its fourth appearance in print, Engelstein argues that the turn-of-the-century “antiliberal consensus” about “Russia’s identity as a cultural nation at the core of an imperial state” directly emanated from “the nineteenth-century Slavophile model” (p. ix). As a result of this consensus, those “voices endorsing the Western liberal perspective” were either shouted down or thoroughly compromised, leaving public opinion with only “illiberal options” (p. ix) to address the demands placed upon it by socioeconomic dislocation, cultural fermentation, the breakdown of ascriptive legal categories, two disastrous wars, the fraying of a nascent body politic, and a series of revolutionary convulsions finally ending with the seizure of power by a radical party that proudly and violently brandished its antiliberalism. Even more difficult for Russia’s entry into the twentieth century were the many “contradictions” embedded in this illiberal current of thought: widespread disdain for the rule of law in an era of governance and statecraft commonly defined by the need for legality; the deployment of non-Russian, secular, and scientific categories to articulate and inculcate a native, sacred, and integral identity; and tensions between the universalist claims of empire and religion and the exclusivity of national and confessional particularism (pp. 7 ff.). Delineating the structural contradictions in

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1) RGALI, f. 10, op. 1, ed. khr. 182, ll. 12-14. The letter is dated 23 August 1881.
“the Slavophile paradigm” (pp. 11, 115, 126 n. 1) ultimately is meant to illuminate one of the single most persistent features in Russian “political culture”: why imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia “lacked the basic features of the Western liberal model” (p. ix).

Reading Slavophile Empire in sequential and thus chronological order is to revisit several recent historiographical developments in the study of modern Russian history. The three lead chapters, which were delivered as papers in the early and mid 1990s and first published sometime thereafter, take us back to a central scholarly concern of the immediate post-glasnost’ era: the presence or absence of civil society in the late-imperial period. Engelstein’s contribution to this field of research is important and manifold. She examines the variety of obstacles encountered and sometimes generated by Russian moderates who sought to institutionalize their vision of a liberal Russia in a political and legal culture that, whether in its autocratic or radical orientation, recoiled from designs to create a rights-based society of citizens and a governing apparatus subject to constitutional limits and the rule of law. She also highlights those exact historical moments and psychological conditions—the Polish rebellion of 1863, the Populist trials of the 1870s, and the ambivalence and frustration felt by members of educated society when the results they expected from reform legislation failed to materialize, just to name a few—that eventually narrowed the choice fields available for public discourse and political action to either revolution or reaction. And building off the innovative research in The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia (Ithaca, NY, 1992), Engelstein uses her exploration of Russia’s liberal professionals in Slavophile Empire to bring questions about law, discipline, and sexual norms to the forefront of scholarship about liberalizm, while simultaneously demonstrating just how untenable some Foucauldian schemes and judgments are to understanding the course of Russian history.

The focus on the relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and Russian national identity in chapters four and five, which originally appeared in print in 2001 and 2004, demarcates another vital shift in the historiography of imperial Russia, this time toward matters of religious experience and consciousness. Having helped to pioneer the cultural history of popular piety with Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale (Ithaca, NY, 1999), Engelstein uses case studies of conservative religious thought and practice in Slavophile Empire to explore a variety of paradoxes embedded in Russia’s religious resistance to the “Westernizing urge” (p. 9) of enlightened bureaucrats and liberal professionals. In “Holy Russia in Modern Times: The Slavophile Quest for the Lost Faith,” for example, Engelstein privileges
a current in Russian intellectual history, personified in the volume’s introduction by Aleksei Khomiakov, that sought to renovate Russia’s dominant confession in accordance with the methods of German Romanticism so that she can unpack the incongruities of an elite type of Eastern Christianity which deployed foreign sources to invent an indigenous tradition of faith. She similarly interrogates Ivan Kireevskii’s diary to reveal the “modern flavor” (p. 150) of his personal struggle to replace (in a formulation that would have pleased Iu. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii) his old “Western-style” self (p. 149) with a new Orthodox self derived from the neo-hesychasm practiced at Optina hermitage. For Engelstein, it is the very fact that these early Slavophiles were willfully archaic in their application of religion to solve historiosophical and psychological dilemmas that made them not only “in tune with their times” (p. 10) but also *dramatis personae* in the discursive act of creating an antiliberal Russia.

The final two chapters of *Slavophile Empire* return to the historiographical currents and historical topics of the previous five chapters. In an exercise in *Rezeptionsgeschichte* that stretches from the mid nineteenth century to the present day, Engelstein explores the ways in which successive generations of public commentators and cultural critics have appropriated A. A. Ivanov’s famous painting *Appearance of Christ to the People*, as well as his so-called biblical sketches, to promote an array of political programs and goals. In doing so, Engelstein once again captures the principal antagonisms that have shaped various efforts to make faith and folk anew, namely the on-going conflict to determine whether Russia’s mission in the world is universal or particular, imperial or national, mystical or historical, traditional or modern, and the perennial question as to whether Russia belongs to the spiritual landscape of East or West. Engelstein concentrates this expansive line of inquiry into a much more compact timeframe—the years immediately surrounding the outbreak of the Great War—in “The Old Slavophile Steed: Failed Nationalism and the Philosophers’ Jewish Problem.” In their attempts to help mobilize the war effort against the Central Powers, which necessitated loyalty and sacrifice from a unified “political nation” (p. 232) that could defend the integrity of the imperial state, moderate religious thinkers stumbled into a series of philosophical cul-de-sacs engendered by their conceptualization of Jews and Poles as cultural-confessional nations distinct from the Russian *narod*. As military and then ideological violence flared across the western borderlands, those who opposed the politics of reaction and revolution found that that their long-held assumptions about national identity could no longer generate, much less sustain, “civic tolerance” (p. 232) toward the empire’s
minority populations. The result of this failure was disastrous not only for the war effort. It also proved to be a disaster for those peoples, cast as alien, predatory, and traitorous in the antiliberal consensus, who could never belong to a Russian core defined by ethnicity, language, culture, religion, and increasingly race and class.

Despite the many strengths of the articles and essays collected in *Slavophile Empire*, not least of which is their significant contribution to the long-term reassessment of Russian political and legal culture, some of the analytic categories and historical constructs that undergird this volume have lost much of their innocence since Engelstein first made her forays into the study of Russian antiliberalism some twenty years ago. Modernity in particular is a concept that has come under close scrutiny for problems of taxonomy that mainly emanate from its normative claims and Eurocentric historicism, as well as for its close association with the so-called secularization thesis. Scholars of European history, including that of modern Russia, have also questioned the analytic capability of such a ubiquitous, protean term, which has compelled them in some cases to limit its meaning to a subjectivist historicity that is not wedded to any particular time or place. Although she acknowledges in passing that the concept of modernity is in need of revision (p. 123), Engelstein seems unaware that some of the difficulties she finds in the term are related to the fact that she generally grounds the conditions and representations of modernity in the supposedly secular, scientific, and disenchanted world of the fin de siècle. Nor is Engelstein concerned about the disparate, sometimes willy-nilly, ways in which she deploys the word. Readers of *Slavophile Empire* will find an “illusory modernity” (p. 32), a “civic modernity” (p. 32), an “incomplete modernity” (p. 70), a “cultural modernity” (pp. 119, 123), a “secular modernity” (p. 226), even a “modernity,” cryptically placed in quotation marks (p. 103). Further complications arise as Engelstein often juxtaposes modernity, however defined,
to “backwardness” (p. 34), “tradition” (pp. 63, 102), and “religion” (pp. 101, 111). But this is not always the case. She occasionally identifies moments in historical time when modernity was joined “with the past” (p. 163) and reconciled “with the sacred tradition” (p. 164). And in a contradiction that almost renders the term meaningless, Engelstein simultaneously historicizes the origins of Russian modernity in the reign of Peter I and de-historicizes it by equating the causes of Russian modernity to such perennial phenomena as technological innovation and cultural transformation (pp. 102-3).

Another term innocently deployed throughout Slavophile Empire is “the Enlightenment,” an historical construct that Engelstein understands to represent the philosophe Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Paris. In this rendition, the only type of Enlightenment operable in the European theater of thought and action is one that seeks through a policy of “social and cultural engineering” to establish a “secular public sphere within a state governed by principles of reason” (p. 3) so as to overcome the last vestiges of “tradition” (p. 101), the “past” (p. 102), and “religion” (p. 159). Such a conceptualization of a single “the Enlightenment,” as well as a single Romanticism that acts as its ideological alternative, is crucial to Engelstein’s overall argument about “Russian contradictions” (p. 7). It allows her to set up a series of interactive, but contradictory, categories—reason and instinct, modern and primitive, secular and religious, etc.—that propel her narrative about the discursive triumph of antiliberalism in Russian public opinion. Thus we have Russian monarchs who, in an act of “ambivalence” that had long-term negative consequences for the practice of governance, embraced and recoiled from “the rational principles of the Enlightenment” (p. 2); the use of ideas derived from “the Enlightenment” to formulate a “language of legitimacy as well as opposition” (p. 39); Russian thinkers who “defended the legacy of the Enlightenment” against those who promoted “the Romantic vision of a harmonious, spiritually saturated culture” and “rejected the values of personal autonomy” (pp. 6, 156); the association of “the Age of Enlightenment” with “the onset of the modern age” (p. 154); and a “division between Enlightenment and spirituality” that “bisected individual souls” (p. 107). For this scheme to work, however, Engelstein must elide more than three decades’ worth of scholarship in modern European intellectual history, which has fractured the “unitary Enlightenment,” to borrow David Sorkin’s phrase, 5 into a multiplicity of

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national and confessional Enlightenments, most of which were not atheist and radical, but rather faith-based and conservative.\(^6\) Incorporating these studies into *Slavophile Empire* would complicate its storyline by delineating how theological enlighteners thought together (*zusammen denken*), to use Kant’s terminology,\(^7\) such supposed antonyms as transcendence and immanence, freedom and order, faith and reason, and by flattening out the paradoxes generated by Engelstein’s appropriation of a unified Enlightenment. More broadly, this opening up of the discursive choice fields in Catherinian and Alexandrian Russia (ca. 1762–1825) from one Enlightenment to many Enlightenments would reveal a variety of conceptual and linguistic contexts that Russian liberals and Slavophiles drew upon and responded to during the reigns of Nicholas I (1825–55) and Alexander II (1855–81), making the ideological topography of late imperial Russia more multivalent and contingent than Engelstein allows.\(^8\)

With its focus on the coalescence of an antiliberal consensus in educated society, *Slavophile Empire* also would have greatly benefitted from exploring the other sources of that consensus. More than forty years ago, Leopold Haimson demarcated and traced out a variety of anti-constitutional strands in Russian public opinion and government that shaped “political attitudes” in

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\(^6\) Here I have in mind the works of Roy Porter, Alan Charles Kors, Joachim Whaley, T. C. W. Blanning, J. G. A. Pocock, Jonathan Sheehan, Toshimasa Yasukata, Jeffrey D. Burson, Thomas Ahnert, and Dale Van Kley.


the last few years of the Romanov dynasty. The Slavophile emphasis on cultural and spiritual development, as opposed to public participation in the political process, was certainly one of these strands. But so was the utopian socialist current of Westernism, which repudiated the struggle for constitutionalism, representative government, and the rule of law on the grounds that the state would be swept aside in the coming revolution; as were the statist formulations of gosudarstvenniki and the so-called state school of history and jurisprudence, which understood autocratic authority as the only force that could overcome the centrifugal demands of petty factionalism and thus bring about a just society.  

David McDonald’s recent examination of “the languages and practices of Russian statehood” similarly reveals just how important the “absolutist tradition” of interventionist governance, with its imperative to unify, transform, guide, and civilize the empire’s disparate social, confessional, and ethnic groups, has been to the formation of Russia’s modern political and legal culture.  

And recent studies by Olga Maiorova and Andreas Renner demonstrate that the exclusivist nationalist discourse that came to dominate public opinion in the imperial period cannot be traced back solely to the Slavophiles. Rather, the aggressive, martial tenor of modern Russian nationalism was organized around “war memories” and other foundational myths first articulated in the Great Reforms era by fiction writers, journalists, and popular historians. These included M. M. Katkov, F. I. Tiutchev, F. M. Dostoevskii, M. P. Pogodin, S. A. Gedeonov, as well as Ivan Aksakov, who on their own terms broadly understood empire to be an expression of some essential characteristic of the Russian nation; located the source of imperial stability not in the autocracy but in the Russian nation, which was charged with protecting the empire from internal enemies; cast that same nation as the agent of the empire’s historical development; and made public opinion, i.e. the conscious expression of national sentiment, a vital component in the politics of imperial rule.

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11) See the series of articles by Maiorova published between 2000 and 2006 in *Ab Imperio, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, Kritika*, and *Russian Literature*, which now appear in revised and expanded form in idem, *From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855–1870* (Madison, WI, 2010); Andreas Renner, *Russischer Nationalismus und Öffentlichkeit*
The fact that Russia’s “illiberal path” was forged by a variety of discourses and actions raises a final question: why does the term Slavophile, e.g. “the Slavophile legacy” (p. 6), “the Slavophile idiom” (p. 166), “the Slavophile model” (p. 188), “the Slavophile tradition” (p. 206), “the Slavophile scheme” (p. 213), and “the Slavophile ideal” (pp. 6, 121, 130, 163), assume such a prominent descriptive and analytical role in Engelstein’s work? This question is most evident if one considers the narrative arc of Slavophile Empire, in which most Slavophiles, namely Khomiakov, Konstantin Aksakov, Ivan Aksakov, Aleksandr Koshelev, Iu. F. Giliarov-Platonov, Prince V. A. Cherkasskii, D. A. Valuev, and A. F. Gil’ferding, appear either infrequently or not at all. For example, although Engelstein privileges Khomiakov in her introduction (p. 10) as the representative par excellence of Slavophilism’s many contradictions (cosmopolitan and introverted, alien and native, archaic and modern), his appearance in the relevant chapter (chapter four) is essentially limited to just four pages out of a total of twenty-six. The rest of the Slavophiles, with the exception of Kireevskii, fare much worse in a story that Engelstein argues was of their own making. It seems that the paucity of actual Slavophiles in Slavophile Empire partly has been made up by changing the original subtitle of “Holy Russia in Modern Times” from “An Essay on Orthodoxy and Cultural Change” to “The Slavophile Quest for the Lost Faith,” and by inserting a photograph of Khomiakov in the text (p. 112), the only such portrait to appear in the book. The application of the term “the Slavophile paradigm” and its variations to frame the source of Russian antiliberalism, especially the unitary way in which Engelstein deploys them, is further complicated if we return to the letter that began this review. Having just completed reading Konstantin Aksakov’s posthumously published memorandum to Alexander II on the “internal state of Russia” (1855), Koshelev made it known to Ivan Aksakov that he could not accept his older brother’s depiction of “Russians or Slavs as entirely un-political peoples,” nor did he agree with Konstantin Sergeevich’s “distinction between land and state” as the proper embodiment of Russia’s body politic. This disagreement between two early Slavophiles over such fundamental issues as the political nature of the russkii narod and the relationship between subjects and sovereign suggests that there
was not a single Slavophilism but, as Richard Wortman noted almost fifty years ago, a variety of Slavophilisms, including a multifaceted “liberal” one that, whatever its “fate,” encompassed rule-of-law autocracy, democratic populism, and gentry constitutionalism.  