In Russia, as everywhere else in Europe, the nineteenth century was the great century of historiography. During the relatively liberal reign of Alexander II (1855–81), the emancipator tsar, even the censor stood back briefly and let a hundred schools of thought contend. Well, three, at any rate. The main contenders were:

1. the old school of dynastic historians, established by Ivan Karamzin (1766–1826), the “Official Historiographer” appointed by Alexander I, whose monumental *History of the Russian State* appeared in twelve volumes beginning in 1818 (the last published posthumously) and lay the foundations for the Official Nationalism proclaimed in 1835 on behalf of Alexander’s younger brother and successor, Nikolai I, according to which nationhood (*narodnost’*) rested on the twin pillars of orthodoxy (*pravoslaviye*) and autocracy (*samoderzhaviye*);²

2. a neo-Hegelian “statist” school, most prominently represented by Sergey Solovyov (1820–79), whose unfinished 29-volume *History of Russia from the Earliest Times*, the most comprehensive history of Russia ever attempted by a single author and a deliberate attempt to supersede Karamzin, began appearing in 1851 and had reached the year 1774 when it was interrupted by the author’s death; its view of historical agency was as top-down as that of dynastic historians, but it was also rigorously teleological, a strong and centralized state being the goal toward which all progressive action tended, the “great man … always and everywhere satisf[ying] the needs of the nation in a certain time”;³

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¹ My title pays tribute to an earlier article—A. Tsuker’s “Narod pokorniy i narod buntuyushchiy,” *Sovetskaya mužika* (1972.3), 105–9—which first alerted me to the historiographical ramifications of the old “versions” problem surrounding “Boris Godunov,” Musorgsky’s one completed opera.


3. a short-lived “populist” school, which could only exist for the duration of the little window Alexander II’s relaxed censorship had suffered to open, which promulgated a bottom-up theory of historical agency, and whose primary exponent was Nikolai Kostomarov (1817–85), who is known to all scholars of Russian music for having declared of Musorgsky’s opera “Boris Godunov” (1874) that it was an authentic “page of history.”

The historian’s interest in contemporary opera was symptomatic of the time. Musorgsky’s “Boris Godunov,” based on a play by Pushkin that had until 1870 been banned from the stage (though not from publication), was also a product of that little window. The composer was an enthusiastic student of history, and in his next (unfinished) historical opera, “Khovanshchina,” took the unprecedented step of fashioning a libretto directly from primary documentary sources rather than availing himself of a pre-existing literary treatment. In that positivistic and optimistic moment in Russian intellectual history, operas could be taken quite seriously by the theatergoing public and its intellectual preceptors as contributions to historiography. The very first issue of the European Courier, one of the thickest of the famous Russian “thick journals” of historiography and liberal opinion, contained a learned exchange between Kostomarov and the arts publicist Vladimir Stasov (a professional librarian) on the historical verisimilitude of an operatic production, that of “Rogneda,” an opera by Alexander Serov that was set in tenth-century Kiev. The editor of the journal, Mikhaïl Stasyulevich, gave their colloquy an introduction that could stand atop this chapter as an epigraph:

Perhaps a few of our readers will be surprised that in our “Historical Chronicle” section we speak of the theater and of scenic productions, even though the journal is devoted specifically to historical scholarship. But such doubts will not visit those who, like us, think of the theater not as an idle amusement but accord it a high significance among the organs that motivate and develop the intellectual life of man, and, consequently, have an influence on the history of societies.  

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4 The remark appears twice in the writings of Vladimir Stasov, who overheard (or, possibly, elicited) it: first, in Stasov’s 1881 obituary for Musorgsky (see Vladimir Vasil’yevich Stasov, Izbrannye sochineniya, vol. 3 [Moscow, 1952], p. 199), and, somewhat differently worded in “Pamyati Musorgskogo,” an essay marking the fifth anniversary of the composer’s death (Stasov, Izbrannye sochineniya, p. 34).

5 Vestnik Yevropii, vol. 1, n. 1 (1866), 84.