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Autocracy and Sovereignty*

I

Students of Russian history have often been struck by the difficulty inherent in translating the terminology of Russian social and political life into Western languages with any degree of precision. The difficulty stems in part from the substance, from the nature of Russian social and political institutions. In part it stems from the form, namely from semantic problems.

To take the matter of substance first: in the Kievan period there were many similarities between Russian and Western, above all Germanic, political institutions, similarities which survived even the growing divergence between the Greek East and the Latin West. But the Mongol Conquest drove Russia and Europe further apart. Either as a result of borrowings from Byzantium, or from the Mongols, or in reaction against them, the Russians developed a number of political and social institutions that had no counterparts in the Western world. To name but a few, there are no exact parallels, hence no exact translations, for such concepts as krugovaia poruka; mestnichestvo; or indeed for that vital term boiar, which has a number of different meanings: it came to signify both a personal, non-hereditary rank to which the tsar appoints, and a descriptive term applicable to ancient, untitled families or clans from among whom the tsar was expected—but not bound—to select those he appointed to the personal rank of boiar. In the same way, the various non-hereditary Muscovite ranks of military servitors such as okol'ni chi, stol'ni ki, striapchie, moskovskie dvoriane, or zhil'tsy, in no way corresponded in political or social significance with the hereditary dukes, counts, and barons of the West and the non-hereditary knights. No one has ever satisfactorily explained, or translated, the term oprichnina, let alone tiaglo.

The semantic difficulty derived from the gulf between Old Church Slavic with its roots in Byzantine terminology, and Latin. The use of Latin as the written language of administration in much of Western Europe gave a basic

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unity to the political terminology in use in the West, down to the Latinized forms of Greek words, e.g., monarquia, aristocracia, etc.\(^1\)

Of course the use of a common descriptive Latin word sometimes obscured vital differences between institutions—parliamentum is an example. But this was nothing to the semantic gulf which opened up between the political language of the West and that of Russia. The case of the title tsar’ illustrates the point.

Marc Szeftel has provided an exhaustive account of the development of the title of tsar’ in a recent issue of this journal,\(^2\) and he notes that though the derivation from Caesar was accepted,\(^3\) the title tended to be applied to independent monarchs who did not have in Russian a specific traditional appellation, such as “king” or “prince” (korol’, kniaz’). Hence it was applied in Russian to the kingdoms of Siberia, Kazan’ and Astrakhan’, whether in Russian or Tartar hands, and indeed to all Eastern potentates, before it was formally claimed as part of the title of the ruler of Muscovy. This claim was first put forward in international relations by Ivan III, and in Muscovite political thought it stood for the assertion of Muscovite independence and equality of status with the Holy Roman Emperor.\(^4\) The rulers of Muscovy sought

1. An example of the way Latin was used in the West is surely the imaginative leap whereby the Latin rex was used for Germanic konung. Rex was originally a functional title, associated with regere, “to steer, direct or rule,” borne by those who carried out the function; konung was a personal title describing all the members of a leading kin group. The form kniaz’ was borrowed very early by the Russians with the meaning of “noble,” suggests M. Hellmann, “Slawisches, insbesondere Ostslawischen Herrscherum des Mittelalters,” in Das Königum. Seine geistigen und rechtlichen Grundlagen (Mainau Vorträge, Institut für geschichtliche Landesforschung des Bodensee Gebietes, Vol. 3) (Lindau; Thorbecke, 1958), pp. 266-77. In Saxon England “king” was a title used by all members of a ruling family, while the overlord was the Bretwalda. But while Germanic koning, “king” eventually was identified with Latin rex, in Slavic it seems not to have acquired the association with ruling implied in rex but to have maintained its connection with the personal leadership of a kin group. It was eventually the Germanic Karl through Korol’ which became identified with the rex as ruler.

