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State, Society
and the Eighteenth-Century Russian Nobility


Although the extraordinary expansion of Russian studies in the West over the past quarter-century has greatly increased our overall knowledge, it has also been somewhat uneven and ill-balanced. Certain themes (most notably those involving the nineteenth-century intelligentsia and the revolutionary movement) have received intense attention; others have remained very much in the shadows. How can we explain this? Obviously, the lack of access until recently to Russian archives blocked serious research into many questions. By contrast, the easy availability of the collected works of this or that *intelligent* encouraged intellectual history. The search for relevance, too, has had its costs: a study of, say, the Empress Anna Ivanovna hardly seemed very vital during the heyday of the Cold War. Scholars often reproduce themselves intellectually, and the interest shown by the Karpovichs and Vernadskys in the intelligentsia from which they sprang, their desire to explain the victory in 1917 of totalitarianism over liberal values, spurred their Western pupils along similar paths. Finally, most historians identify with reason, progress, and modernity, the growth of democracy and the decline of caste rule. Hence their concern for Witte, even Lenin, has inevitably been greater than it has for such representatives of a now-dead nobility as Biron, Potemkin, or the Empress Elizabeth.
It would clearly be mistaken to assert that the scholarly tide has turned. The publication of these two books by Messrs. Dukes and Raefl nevertheless hints at a certain shift of interest, the first stirring of curiosity in a topic long neglected. Moreover, both authors have tackled their subject in a sympathetic and fruitful way. Though Dukes follows the traditional monographic model, while Raefl offers sweeping social and psychological interpretations of the entire nobility at the zenith of its existence, they are united in shedding stereotypes, in regarding the gentry not simply as selfish exploiters of the serfs, but as a complex, heterogeneous class which sought personal security and self-fulfillment while wrestling with a variety of disturbing social, intellectual and political questions. Both implicitly reject the easy label of “golden age of the nobility” so often applied to the late eighteenth century; both show that there was much more than meets the eye to the decree of 1762 “ending” obligatory state service by the nobles; and both tacitly disavow the casual interpretation of Catherine the Great as a hypocrite who spoke of humanism while extending serfdom. Could it be that eighteenth-century Russia will henceforth be evaluated in the context of its own day, rather than by the standards of a later era? And that the moral condemnation which many historians, even in Tsarist Russia, felt for this period of court intrigues, palace coups, aristocratic immorality, and personal favorites will give way to a dispassionate quest for understanding?

Let us move from the general to the particular. In Catherine the Great and the Russian Nobility, Mr. Dukes (of the University of Aberdeen) has plunged into the 148 volumes (long available in the West) of the deliberations of the Legislative Commission of 1767-1768 to assemble a succinct synthesis of the views of the nobility of that era on a whole spectrum of national problems. This is clearly not an investigation of the Commission per se (there are only scattered references to the opinions voiced by other social classes at its meetings), but various peripheral issues are nevertheless occasionally allowed to creep in. While these intrusions somewhat broaden the study, they also diffuse its focus; with interpretation being pared to a minimum (this was originally a Ph.D. dissertation), there are relatively few signposts to indicate the author’s course. Since the style also tends to be diffuse and somewhat leaden, the reader may find himself plodding from issue to issue, their intrinsic drama and tension gently smothered under a wordy blanket: this is hardly history in the grand manner.

It is nevertheless most valuable. Public opinion is difficult enough to measure even today; the task was immensely greater before a modern press and communications network reached Russia. Fortunately, the nobility was not hesitant about asserting its opinions