Michael Confino (1926–2010) was a prolific historian of Russia in a number of areas who published in a number of languages. His important monographs on agrarian history came out early, in the 1960s, but they were followed by an enormous number of articles written for the learned press. This is a selection from them made by the author shortly before his death, plus a few newer ones; and, as the subtitle indicates, they touch on the many themes that drew his attention. They are divided here into three sections: ideas, social groups and historiographical issues. As the subjects vary so much, so do the contributions of the author.

One matter he goes back to on several occasions is whether or not Russian history should be viewed within a European context, which he decidedly does, arguing that while England, France, Germany and Italy have commonalities they also have differences between themselves no less than those that Russia has with the lot of them. However, to maintain that the Russian dvorianstvo (usually translated as “nobility” or “gentry”) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not different from their West European equivalents simply because the menial services rendered to the powerful lay farther back in the ancestral past in the west whereas they were brand-new and continually reinforced by the continuing obligation of service in Russia does not eliminate their distinctiveness.

A Pushkin or Prince Shcherbatov might sneer at the upstart nature of their Romanov masters, as Bismarck pretended to be surprised that the Hohenzollerns were his divinely ordained lords, but the former were isolated individuals whereas Bismarck’s haughtiness derived from a well-entrenched class of Junkers, proud of its independence, past humiliations forgotten and replaced with an assertive confidence.

Conversely, Confino details all the ways in which Russian “serfdom” (krepostnoe pravo) makes comparisons to slavery in the United States impossible, but downplays the fundamental fact that both were forms of coerced labor in which people were treated as property. And when discussing Peter the Great in terms reminiscent of “permanent revolution,” he talks about everything except serfdom, which is relegated to a footnote, while Peter, among other things, made serfdom the nigh universal social condition of his new Empire, and the basis for everything else.

Another over-riding theme is the contingency of history, so that the nineteenth century in Russia should not be seen entirely and exclusively as leading
inexorably to 1917 – anymore than the actions of Sofia Alekseevna were nothing but a prelude to the great deeds of her brother Peter. Historical figures are engaged in their own immediate affairs, not some teleological goal, or “Radiant Future,” that lies outside them. On the other hand, the nineteenth century was indeed followed by 1917; and 1917 did have deep causal roots and far-reaching consequences, which it is the duty of the historian to explicate and not just to deplore. Counter-factual history is too often an alluring exercise in wish fulfillment.

Confino presents a persuasive case against the notion of the nihilists being raznochintsy as a distinct sociological category in the 1860s, making the perfectly reasonable point that the intelligentsia were as much composed primarily of the dvorianstvo in the 1860s as it was in the 1840s, the 1870s and into the 1880s. The nihilists were naught but gentry offspring being rude to their parents. To that extent Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons was correct, but not in any perceived social contradiction between them. Yet the coarsening of dialogue and manners in the 1860s, associated with Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov, who were not nihilists, and with Pisarev, who was, really did happen, and comprised a distinct phase in the evolution of the Russian intelligentsia. And, again, Confino’s argument that most of the intelligentsia were most of the time respectable, conforming subjects of the realm is reasonable, but only if the intelligentsia are identified with the educated public at large rather than being the group of the educated and privileged elite who by their very definition were in opposition to the autocratic regime, as offered by such disparate types as Ovsianniko-Kulikovsky or Martin Malia. Confino also sees the Decembrists as direct, simple soldiers rather than ratiocinat ing, critical would-be citizens, as clever and critical as the American revolutionaries a generation earlier, and the begetters of such authentic intelligenty as Herzen. Perhaps the near hagiography of Natan Eidel’man on the Decembrists has spoiled me, but I cannot see the Decembrists as exclusively military rebels.

Confino always, and quite properly, stressed the autonomous nature of Russian peasant social life and organization. That the success of the Stolypin reforms was exceedingly precarious and hence dubious as social engineering was demonstrated by the way they were immediately and spontaneously flushed away in 1917 and 1918 by the reassertion of the commune through peasant revolution. And while it is salutary to be reminded that the existence of the commune was facilitated by its convenience to the authorities, it is also important to remember that the commune was a popular response to the collective responsibility of the poll tax as an aspect of serfdom imposed and enforced by Peter, not a misguide exercise in bureaucratic authority.