ROBERT O. CRUMMEY

Peter and the Boiar Aristocracy, 1689-1700

No one disputes the fact that the social composition and style of life of the Russian nobility changed significantly during the reign of Peter. Once we move beyond this sweeping generalization, however, we enter a realm of uncertainty and debate. To cite but one example, it is not clear to what extent the composition of the service elite changed in Peter's time. How successful were the descendants of the traditional aristocracy in maintaining their power in spite of Peter's reforms? Did Peter's policies and his style of governing allow many talented parvenues to rise to power? What was the balance of traditional insiders and outsiders in Peter's administration? Answering questions such as these is necessary in examining the impact of the Petrine reforms on the Russian nobility.

In her recent work on the Generalitet of 1730, Ms. Meehan-Waters has made a useful and stimulating beginning in the study of these questions. I hope to complement her admirable work by attacking the same targets from the opposite chronological direction. This paper is a study of Peter's leading servitors in the years 1689-1700. I have chosen this particular period for two reasons, one practical and one theoretical. On a practical plane, this paper is part of a larger study of the boiar aristocracy in the seventeenth century. At the same time, the period is significant because Peter's treatment of individuals in the first years of his personal rule illustrates his attitudes toward the traditional service elite and his instinctive assumptions about its role in the governing of the realm.

Most previous historians have presented a clear and simple description of Peter's treatment of the great families of the realm. Their judgements come ultimately from Boris Kurakin, one of the tsar's contemporaries. In his history of the early years of Peter's reign, Kurakin pithily characterized the composition of the government in the early 1690's and its policy toward the traditional aristocracy. Four men—Lev Naryshkin, Tikhon Streshnev, Gavriil Golovkin and Prince B. A. Golitsyn—dominated the government. The other boiars of great family, he admitted, did serve as military commanders or heads of bureaucratic chanceries, but they had no power and were only spectators at the government's deliberations. Moreover, under this government began the decline of the first families of the realm, especially those that bore the title of prince—a designation hated by Peter and his leading advisors, themselves men of humble origin. From his early years, Kurakin argued, these low-born courtiers had imbued...
the tsar with hatred for the distinguished families of the realm.\footnote{Arkhiiv kniaziia F. A. Kurakina, 8 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1890-1899), I, 63-64.}

The attractiveness of Kurakin's incisive views is undeniable. In this passage, however, there are signs that counsel caution. Two of the four men to whom Kurakin pointed qualify as parvenues only by a considerable stretch of the imagination. Golitsyn was the scion of an ancient princely family of the highest distinction. Streshnev's origins were humble; his ancestors had first made their appearance in the Boiar Duma during the Time of Troubles and cemented their claim to power by their marriage ties with the new Romanov dynasty.\footnote{N. I. Novikov, ed., Drevniaia rossiiskaia vivliofika [hereafter Derv], 20 vols. (Moscow, 1788-1791), XX, 88. I. F. Streshnev is listed as a dumnyi dvorianin who died in 1613.} From 1630, there was always at least one Streshnev in the Duma and Tikhon Nikitich represented the fourth generation of the family to place at least one member in that august body.\footnote{P. Dolgorukov, Rossiskaia rodoslovnaia kniga, 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1854-1857), IV, 411-413.} By Peter's time, moreover, the Streshnevs had made marriage alliances not only with the ruling dynasty, but with several of the most illustrious old families of the realm—the Troekurovs, the Vorotynskiis, the Lykovs, and the Saltykovs.\footnote{Ibid., p. 413.; A. B. Lobanov-Rostovskii, Russkaia rodoslovnaia kniga, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1895), I, 119, 339; II, 295.} By any reasonable standard, the Streshnevs had arrived. In comparison to them, the Naryshkins were indeed newcomers to the inner circle.

Kurakin's curt dismissal of the Streshnevs betrays a second inconsistency in his argument. In social distinction and length of service, his family rivalled their distant cousins, the Golitsyns, and far outranked all of the families that rose to power in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, his illustrious princely origins did not stand in the way of a distinguished career in diplomacy, and Peter's alleged suspicion of the grand old families did not keep him from appointing Kurakin to positions of trust. If Peter's government followed an anti-aristocratic policy in the early years, the results of that policy cannot be seen in Kurakin's biography.

Before we go on to discuss the questions that Kurakin's statements raise, however, we should define the terms we are to use. At first glance, the phrase “the boiar aristocracy” used in the title seems to embody a contradiction. A boiar was a member of the upper rank of the Boiar Duma, which advised the tsar, supervised the administration of the realm, and served as the highest judicial instance. Although often used loosely, the term ultimately designates the holder of a particular rank or office. The word “aristocracy” implies a social elite whose membership is determined largely by birth into the right family. The juxtaposition of these seemingly anomalous terms, however, effectively summarizes the policies of successive rulers of the Muscovite state. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the tsars filled the ranks of the Duma with the most trusted and capable representatives of well-established and distinguished noble families. These clans fell into two groups, the descendants of once-independent rulers who bore the title 'prince' and the non-titled boiars. Nevertheless, whatever their genealogy, the wealth and power of both types of family ultimately depended on the length and quality of their service to the crown. A non-princely family achieved social distinction precisely because its members had served with distinction over the course