Book Review

Istoricheskie poniatiia i politicheskie idei v Rossii, XVI-XX veka: Sbornik nauch-nykh rabot, Istochnik. Istorik. Istorii Vol. 5
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Today’s Russia, like any rapidly changing contemporary society, evokes the idea of history in bewildering, often contradictory ways. With regard, in particular, to state power and the administration of law, Russia’s post-1991 development has simultaneously revealed the extensive roots of the country’s autocratic, statist traditions before the 1917 revolutions, the considerable weight of Stalinist political structures and—despite appearances—the unmistakable and enduring vigor of the Russian people’s engagement with basic questions of governance and justice. The historical essence of Russian rulership and the practice of Russian ‘legality’ over the centuries are indeed both profoundly vexed notions, but scholarly appreciation of the complexity and historical depth of the Russian polity continues to grow.

Plumbing the nature of this polity since the sixteenth century is the central objective of this impressive volume of individually authored essays, a collaborative project of the History Department of the European University at St. Petersburg that brings together fresh, original research by diverse specialists in Russian history and politics. The volume’s title itself is intriguing and suggestive, with humanity’s ostensibly distinct historical and political ‘minds’ thematically conjoined, and every essay instructs and stimulates. The collection is dedicated to the influential and wide-ranging scholarly legacy of the great German historian Reinhard Koselleck (1923-2006), whose corpus of Begriffsgeschichte (‘the history of concepts’) has clearly begun to leave a mark among Russianists. Indeed, the project’s unifying aim is to apply Koselleck’s approach to Begriffsgeschichte across the last five centuries of Russian history. Begriffsgeschichte has sometimes been regarded as a fairly narrow sub-discipline of intellectual history and historical theory, but it is playing an important role amidst the contemporary social, cultural and linguistic turn in legal–historical studies, due in no small measure to Koselleck’s pivotal work.

The valuable introductory essay by Nikolai Evgen’evich Koposov, primarily a historian of France, is a historical survey of the principal achieve-
ments and trends in *Begriffsgeschichte*, a continental European field, and successfully establishes its bearing in current Russian historical studies. In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which is, at bottom, closer to *Ideengeschichte*, and more philosophically focused on the ideational realm as an independent historical force, in the German tradition, ‘social history’ was incorporated into *Begriffsgeschichte*, which subsequently shaped Koselleck’s intellectual formation and which he then took further in his own work.

Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*, while still essentially ideational and metaphysical (and, indeed, even meta-historical), does acknowledge an evolving society, a changing humanity and the social context’s impact on ideas and concepts. In Russia, as Koposov notes, the aforementioned discipline of *Ideengeschichte* (*istoriia ideii*) has always had a place in historical scholarship, while *Begriffsgeschichte* (*istoriia poniatii*) is establishing itself slowly, with modest success so far. Recent Russian forays into *Begriffsgeschichte* have reflected the now widespread methodologies inspired by linguistics, philology, cultural studies, critical source interpretation and more formal political philosophy.

Preceding the contributors’ individual pieces, Iurii Ivanovich Basilov’s lucid translation of Koselleck’s own foundational essay, “Social History and the History of Concepts [poniatii]” is thoughtfully provided. Koselleck’s approach to *Begriffsgeschichte* ambitiously combines elevated philosophical and linguistic investigation with thoroughly grounded social analysis. He regarded the work of the historian as nothing less than the study of human reality, and that reality is the synthesis—the continuous, complex, mutual, lubricious connection—between *rech’* and *deistvie*, speech and act. This rich linkage is between existence as verbalized, conceptualized and abstracted by humans (*rech’*) and that experienced, acted and lived by them (*deistvie*). The former is the realm of the ideational and notional, while the latter is defined by the social and empirical.

Long-term societal structures and shifts—i.e., deep historical change—can thus be grasped *only* through language, and language and terminology always refer to and *arise from* the social context of lived experience, which continuously alters language and urges it along as language constantly seeks to describe and maintain its hold on social reality. Even the term ‘Begriff’ is more appropriate than ‘Idee’ for this elusive symbiosis, because its tactile, sensory core (‘apprehension’ is perhaps the most accurate English rendering) invokes the social in a way that the more detached ‘idea’ simply does not. Ultimately, then, social history and *Begriffsgeschichte* are interdependent, and each enables the other to function effectively as a legitimate field of study.