THE "STRANGENESS" OF RUS' IN THE MONGOL ERA: PROBLEMS OF COMPARATIVE HISTORY

"'Curiouser and curiouser!'" cried Alice (she was so surprised that she forgot how to speak good English.) "Russian history is a bit like Alice hurtling through the rabbit hole, not sure what is on the other side, everything a distortion, where the past becomes filtered through the present. The Soviet totalitarian system is said to have its roots in the Russian autocratic tradition and even the current effort of reform cannot escape the autocratic past, or as Nancy Shields Kollmann has phrased it: "For those who see autocracy as despotism, Russia’s future today is doomed because it lacks the essential legal preconditions for modern liberal development."

Russian autocracy has been the prism through which Russian history has been examined. It has become the defining experience toward which medieval Rus' was in some sense destined and which gave shape to the twentieth-century totalitarian state. Whether drawn from Byzantine or Mongol models, or the result of a homegrown variety, the autocratic tradition is a common staple of the historical literature and has enabled historians to leap to and fro between centuries, and to posit a traditional political culture virtually unchanged – the deep structures of the Russian experience. Richard Pipes's discussion of the Russian patrimonial regime can not help but observe in a weighted aside how Stalin revived and embellished the seventeenth-century "legal monstrosity" of the Muscovite practice of denunciation – "word and deed" (slovo i delo gosudarev). In much the same fashion Richard Hellie sees the custom of collective responsibility (krugovaia poruka) and the massacre of families and slaves of those caught in Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina as the predecessor to Stalin's assault upon the "innocents" in the Great Purges of 1936–38. Ed-

3. Richard Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 109. Even as late as the 1880s Pipes concludes that historical change in Russia was little more than a modernization of traditional patrimonialism and carried already the unmistakable germs of totalitarianism (ibid., 24).
ward Keenan finds a thematic replaying of three political cultures – the peasantry, bureaucracy, and court – all of which play off one another and appear again reconfigured into a twentieth-century Soviet politics. The result is to posit a Russian *sonderweg*, whose social and political forms are *sui generis* to anything Western. Many are the differences. In particular Pipes arranges Russian society within a patrimonial framework; Hellie gives us a Russia whose compliant service elite class bears no resemblance to any Western aristocracy or landed gentry, whose system of slavery is unique in its ability to enslave its own kind, and whose people labored under a hypertrophic bureaucratic garrison state unfettered by any universities or intellectual traditions that might have offered an alternative political vocabulary to autocratic rule. Keenan too sees the development of extreme centralization and hypertrophy, but his is a very different political world wherein his three political cultures do not give rise to Russian despotism. Instead Russian politics utilized a screen of autocracy to mask a more oligarchic, informal, and “corporate” bureaucratic system that was grounded in boyar clan politics. Keenan leaves room for a less absolutist state and this approach deeply informs Kollmann’s important study on honor in early modern Russia, which concludes that Russia before the era of the great reforms of the 1860s “was not a totalitarian state, nor an Oriental despotism, nor even a ‘plain tyranny’ . . . .”

Much of the explanatory force of the Russian *sonderweg* rests on what Edward Keenan has aptly termed the “deprivation hypothesis.” And indeed, the list of deficiencies is impressive. They include the absence of Western feudal institutions of vassalage, Roman law, the development of private property, primogeniture, political pluralism, corporate estates, parliamentary rule, and a strong church to counterbalance state power. The failure of Rus’ to develop Western-style manufacture and trade that would have allowed for a more mature capitalism than that which economically took root in Rus’ made nearly impossible “the emergence of urban culture, a middle class, concepts of personal liberties, and other features of pre-modern European evol--