Chester Dunning (College Station, TX, USA)
Norman S. Smith (Ann Arbor, MI, USA)

Moving Beyond Absolutism: Was Early Modern Russia a "Fiscal-Military" State?*

In an article published in Comparative Studies in Society and History in 2002, Donald Ostrowski suggested that scholarship concerning early modern European absolutism "may be in the throes of a paradigm shift but without a new paradigm crystallizing sufficiently for a fresh consensus to form around it." Ostrowski's observation was certainly correct when he made it, but it now appears that a new paradigm is indeed in the process of formation. A growing number of historians interested in the military modernization of early modern European states have rejected the venerable concept of "absolutism" as a framework for studying the development of the absolute monarchies of the ancien régime in favor of a new, more precise and useful term: the "fiscal-military" state. This recent trend in scholarship is still not well known, and the word absolutism continues to be widely (even indiscriminately) used as if it still had a settled meaning and the explanatory power ascribed to it a century ago. The number of books and articles with titles containing the term absolutism has actually increased in the last decade. Curiously, the recent shift in favor of the concept of the fiscal-military state has also not received much attention from historians of early modern Russia even though that country was profoundly affected by the "military revolution" and research on Russia's military modernization focuses on many of the same issues that are leading scholars of early modern Europe to discard absolutism as a useless and misleading label. Over the past several decades, research on Russia in the age of the military revolution has made great progress and has significantly deepened our understanding of Russian political, military, social,

* We wish to thank the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research at Texas A&M University for its generous support of this research project.


2. For the ten-year period 1994-2003, the On-Line Catalogue of the Library of Congress (OCLC FirstSearch WorldCat) lists 82 books with "absolutism" in the title; during the same period, OCLC FirstSearch ArticleFirst lists 119 journal articles with "absolutism" in the title. By contrast, WorldCat lists 64 such books for the period 1984-93, and ArticleFirst lists 48 such articles for the period 1984-93.
and institutional history. Nevertheless, outdated ideas related to absolutism persist in scholarship on Russia's emergence as a major military power, and that in turn has adversely affected research on the military revolution itself. To attempt to overcome these interrelated problems, this article will first review absolutism's fatal flaws and the birth of the concept of the fiscal-military state; then it will examine scholarship related to the myth (or facade) of Russian absolutism and outline how the new paradigm might apply to early modern Russia.

During the decades since Michael Roberts famously asserted in 1955 that a "military revolution" had occurred during the early modern period (a revolution in military technology, tactics and strategy, the size of armies, and the cost of war), the concept of the military revolution "has been thoroughly integrated into the canon of early modern European history." Scholars quickly moved beyond