ARTICLES

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KOTOSHIKHIN: AN EVALUATION
AND INTERPRETATION*

INTRODUCTION

In 1664 a clerk in the Ambassadorial Chancellery, the tsar's foreign office, fled Russia. Grigorii Karpovich Kotoshikhin was eventually enrolled in the service of the Swedish crown, for whom he wrote a description of Muscovy, both state and society. Known throughout subsequent history as On Russia in the Reign of Aleksei Mikhailovich (O Rossii v tsarstvovanie Alekseia Mikhailovicha),1 this work offers the only account by an insider of how the pre-Petrine government operated. It is therefore a historical source of potentially immense value, but one whose significance has not been fully appreciated. In fact, its objectivity has often been disputed, and it is yet to receive a modern evaluation.

On Russia was neglected as a source until the nineteenth-century, when it became enmeshed in the struggle between the Slavophiles and Westernizers. The former regarded Kotoshikhin as unreliable and biased because he was a traitor to Russia and idolizer of the West. The latter portrayed him as a man like themselves who understood the need for reform and Westernization. These

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1. The manuscript is located in the library of the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Pre-revolutionary editions are 1st (St. Petersburg, 1840), 2nd (SPg: Arkheograficheskaia Kommissiia,Tip. E. Pratsa, 1859), 3rd (SPg: Arkheograficheskaia Kommissiia, Tip. Ministerstva Vnutrenuykh del, 1884) and 4th (SPg: Izd. Imp. Arkheograficheskoi Kommissii, 1906). Modern editions are Benjamin J. Uroff, Grigorii Karpovich Kotoshikhin, "On Russia in the Reign of Alexis Mikhailovich: An Annotated Translation," unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1970 and Grigorij Kotoshikin, O Rossii v carsivovanie Alekseja Mixajloviça, commentary by A. E. Pennington (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980). Quotations from On Russia in this article will generally follow Uroff's fine translation (except where necessary to conform his spelling or translation to that used elsewhere in this article). For convenience in referring to any edition of Kotoshikhin, the references to On Russia will be by Roman numerals for chapter and arabic numerals for article (for reference to the pre-revolutionary editions), followed by page references to the Pennington edition.
interpretations, which both characterized *On Russia* as an indictment of Muscovite society, were of course highly colored with ideology.2

Solov'ev and Kliuchevskii were the first historians to appreciate Kotoshikhin as a source on the basic nature of the Muscovite government, but they came to different conclusions. Kliuchevskii used one passage (quoted in full below) from Kotoshikhin as one of the principal pieces of evidence to support his argument that the tsar's power was subject to certain constitutional limitations. Elsewhere, however, Kliuchevskii portrayed Kotoshikhin as sharply and unfairly critical of Russia.3 Solov'ev, on the other hand, relied on another passage in Kotoshikhin (also quoted in full below) to support his thesis that the government of seventeenth-century Russia had evolved to virtual "absolutism" by mid-century.4

While one fairly balanced and comprehensive assessment of Kotoshikhin's life and work, by Markevich, appeared in 1895,5 Kotoshikhin was often vilified as a traitor during the Soviet period.6 Other Soviet evaluations have portrayed him as detailed and accurate.7 Two modern Western scholars, Uroff and Pennington, have provided extensive commentaries to the text.8 Uroff analyzed its reliability by comparing it with other primary sources and, along with Markevich, regards *On Russia* as a valuable and, by and large, objective compendium of information on seventeenth-century Moscow. Pennington's analysis is primarily philological.

The important questions of interpretation, however, remain. What does Kotoshikhin tell us about the nature and operation of the tsar's government? Where did he believe power resided and how did he think it was exercised? How did he think important decisions were made and implemented? Did he conceive of the tsardom as an absolute monarchy, an oligarchy or something else? What did he believe were the sources of its legitimacy? What were Kotoshikhin's own values and attitudes as an insider to the system? Does he have or does the system, as he describes it, embody some ideology, political philosophy, political culture or constitutional theory of government? To what extent did he believe the system in which he worked was arbitrary and capricious or rational and subject to law and constitutional limitations?

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2. Uroff, 5-10. See this work for a more comprehensive historiography of later periods as well.
8. Uroff and Pennington.