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JOHN P. LE DONNE

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIAN NOBILITY:

Bureaucracy or ruling class?

Let me say by way of introduction that my discovery of a ruling class in Russia resulted from a long-standing dissatisfaction with the traditional model of an Empire run by an autocrat and a bureaucracy. Both terms remain undefined and are taken for granted, yet the study of Russian politics and administration can no longer move on without some agreement on the meaning of certain fundamental concepts bandied about indiscriminately in scholarly discussions. In his book on Russian imperialism, Dietrich Geyer refers to the recent development in Germany of a new kind of research called "historical social science" that seeks to introduce into historiography "explicit and consistent conceptual and categorical systems."[1] That may very well be what is called in English an interdisciplinary approach to history. Certainly, we cannot study political or economic history without some familiarity with concepts accepted as working tools in political science and economics. The concept of Russian bureaucracy requires some knowledge of what a bureaucracy is and what it is not. Dominic Lieven asks very pertinent questions about the nature of that bureaucracy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Richard Pipes in his book on the Revolution describes a bureaucracy that, in fact, may not be one at all.[2] Similar questions need to be asked about the eighteenth century.

To save time, I shall limit myself here to a few *punkty*, as it was customary to do in reports and instructions at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Punkt n° 1. Was there a Russian bureaucracy in the eighteenth century?

A striking fact is the use of the term in historical literature to designate various categories of people that do not belong together. A Rumiantsev, a Golitsyn, or a Viazemskii is a bureaucrat; a favorite like Menshikov, Potemkim or Zubov is a bureaucrat; Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov, the son of a merchant or priest, is a bureaucrat; and even individuals not engaged in office work have been called bureaucrats or officials. I think we must be more discriminating.

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I would assume there must be a certain degree of social homogeneity in a bureaucracy, and this is not the case if we use the term in the loose traditional manner. Too wide a social spectrum denies its members equal chance for promotion in an organization distinguished by its obedience to impersonal regulations. There must also be well established rules of promotion, and although some did exist, they did not apply to all the social categories subsumed under the term bureaucracy. Bureaucrats must be paid a regular salary. The principle was accepted, but practice was little in accord with it. Budgetary chaos left officers and civilians unpaid for months, if paid at all. The first effective measures to guarantee a regular source of revenue to pay for salaries had to wait until the 1760's, and they were probably not carried out until after the Treasury reforms of the 1780's. Last, and perhaps most important, rules and regulations must shield bureaucrats against political interference. It is difficult to find evidence of such insulation in what is usually called the Russian bureaucracy. There was no protection against dismissal, and criminal proceedings remained little different from disciplinary proceedings. Some students of bureaucracy, notably Reinhard Bendix, deny its existence precisely on this ground: the constant threat of political interference by the arbitrary power of superiors makes the development of a bureaucratic system impossible.[3]

One may object that such a definition of bureaucracy is too rigid, that it more properly belongs to an "ideal" bureaucracy, and that there is no such thing in real life. Granted that human beings in social organizations are not molecules that can be neatly combined in equations and formulas. Nevertheless, I still think the term bureaucracy is too specific to be applied to the social heterogeneity it is made to encompass. It should be replaced by terms that are closer to the phenomena they define, or perhaps disregarded altogether.

Punkt n° 2. If I deny, or at least question, the existence of a bureaucracy, what was there instead?

One can easily differentiate five social categories conventionally lumped together under the term bureaucracy: (1) clerks of various denominations who were not included in the Table of Ranks (2) civilians in positions graded 14 to 9 (3) subaltern officers in ranks 14 to 9 (4) civilians in positions graded 8 to 5 comparable to the field-grade officers *(shtab-ofitsery)* in the army and (5) the *generalitet*, civilian and military, in grades 4 to 1.

Let us first take the clerks. They were not of noble origin in Russia - that was a major difference with the Ukraine on both banks of the Dniepr and the polonized provinces of Lithuania and Bielorussia - and their clerkship did not give them noble status. They were sons of clerks, sons of priests, sons of merchants and merchants themselves, even peasants, in general, members of socially despised categories that made up what I call the dependent population. We would call them today Xerox machine operators: they copied and recopied documents. Their pay, their promotion, and their personal security depended on the arbitrary will of their superiors. Even though their activities, as Borivoj Plavsic has shown for the seventeeth century,[4] betrayed signs of bureaucratic organization, the very fact that the Table of Ranks did not recognize them shows that their service was of an auxiliary kind, essential perhaps, but distinctly inferior.

Now for the civilians in positions graded 14 to 9. Note that the Table of Ranks describes most of these positions as secretarial: provincial secretary in grade 13,

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guberniia secretary in grade 12, college secretary in grade 10. Until the great reforms of 1775-1785, these titles often coincided with actual positions of secretaries in the provinces, *gubernii* and colleges. After the reforms, they increasingly applied to lower level positions graded for the sake of convenience as secretarial positions, such as post office personnel, land surveyors, and accountants, among others. Moreover, these people were not noble before 1785 and were only life nobles after that date, i.e., did not transmit their status to their children. I think these civilians and the clerks can be combined into what I call the secretarial and clerical staff, a term that fairly accurately conveys the nature of their activities.[5]

Did these people constitute a bureaucracy? I doubt it. One the one hand, they were supposed to receive a salary, and promotions presumably followed the rules of 1765 and 1790, even though the chief intent of these rules was to regulate and restrict access by clerks to positions in grade 14 and by the secretarial staff to positions in grade 8. On the other hand, and despite the provisions of the table of organization of December 1763, salaries, at least those of the clerks, seem to have been paid from a lump sum assigned to each agency, leaving considerable discretion to the president of the college or the governor, who also controlled the original appointment. A social chasm separated these people from the hereditary nobles and left them at their mercy in every agency. They were banished by administrative order until the 1780's, and although the reforms required at least the "secretaries" to be tried in the criminal chamber, its proceedings were subject to the governor's confirmation. And they were not immune from corporal punishment, that social stigma of the unprivileged.

All these features point to a pervasive politization of the secretarial and clerical staff, one that reflected the hierarchical nature of Russian society, and a crucial feature that to my mind denies the existence of a true bureaucracy. That is why I call this staff the collective household staff of the ruling class. Its relationship with its political superiors was marked, to use Robert Berdahl's terminology for Prussia, by a recognition of *Herrschaft*, with its connotation of personal loyalty and dependence, that had not yet turned into *Obrigkeit*, implying abstract loyalty to the system as a whole.[6] And if there was no true, but only an embryonic, bureaucracy, there was no true Russian state either, because state and bureaucracy are inseparable. These views are not very far from those of Speranskii, who had every opportunity to analyze the system at close hand. And one of his biographers did not hesitate to write there was no bureaucracy in Russia before Speranskii, but a political apparatus indistinguishable from the landed nobility.[7]

So much then for these two social categories, clerks and "secretaries." Everyone else, all officers and all civilians in grades 8 to 1 were hereditary nobles and constituted what I call the ruling class of the Empire.

Punkt n° 3. What was the internal composition of the ruling class?

It comprised two overlapping groups. Officers and civilians in office (often, we know, former officers) made up what I call the *political apparatus*. Those not in office or command positions who lived in the capitals or the provinces, made up what I call the *political infrastructure*.[8]

I distinguish three strata in the political apparatus. The first and higher level was the *ruling elite* consisting of a ruling group of 15-20 people and a larger group including all individuals in grades 3 to 1, perhaps some 200-250 people. I call this larger group the unofficial grand council of the Empire, because it was at this level,

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I believe, that a consensus had to be reached on domestic and foreign policy, without which the autocrat's freedom of effective action would be severely circumscribed. Note that the Table of Ranks assigns hardly any positions to grades 2 and 3: people in them formed a pool of "advisers" *(sovetniki)*, from which senators and other high ranking individuals were appointed as circumstances required.[9]

This ruling elite had a social basis in the political infrastructure, i.e., among the larger landowners who owned more than 100 souls. I agree there is something artificial in this quantitative threshold, but it is commonly used to identify the top layer among the landowners. If we combine these people to form the ruling elite in the broader sense, we discover a political formation of some 8,500 nobles in the 1770's, or about 16% of the 54,000 male noblemen.

The second stratum comprised the managers of the system. I call them "managers" because it was they who ran agencies, administered justice, collected and spent revenue, in essence, those who carried out the orders of the ruling elite (or decided not to carry them out). These managerial positions were graded 4 down to 8. I include among them major generals, although they remained officially part of the *generalitet*, because I perceive a gradual devaluation of grade 4 positions in the course of the eighteenth century. The job titles are typical of managerial positions: brigade, regimental, and battalion commanders in the army; in the civilian apparatus, presidents and members of colleges, governors and provincial *voevody* after the reforms of 1775 and 1802, chairmen and members of provincial chambers, *uezd* judges, chiefs and members of ministerial departments.

They too had a social base in the political infrastructure. I place at this level the landowners owning between 20 and 100 souls. Granted again that there is something arbitrary in such a criterion, but I only follow the classical division of the landed nobility. There is room for argument here. What is certain, however, is that these owners of 20-100 souls, together with their brethren in the elite, "managed" the overwhelming majority of privately-held serfs, while governors and *voevody* before 1775 and Treasury chambers after that date managed the Treasury-held serfs.

How were these management positions filled? The answer clearly shows a division of responsibilities between the ruler and the ruling group. Positions in the elite were filled by the ruler from among what I call the ruling families and favorites. Upper management positions in grades 4 to 6 were also filled by the ruler, but on the recommendation of the Senate's First Department or the College of War, and after 1802, of individual ministers, i.e., the ruling group. Lower management positions in grades 7 and 8 were filled by the Senate or the College of War, and after 1802, by individual ministers with Senate confirmation, i.e., again by the ruling group.

Finally, I place in the third stratum landowners with less than 20 souls and the subaltern officers (*ober-ofitsery* - from ensign to captain) - company and squad commanders. These officers often transferred to the secretarial staff when they retired with promotion to the next higher rank, and thus contributed to the transformation of the secretarial staff into an intermediate layer between the ruling class and the dependent population.[10] Appointments to these ranks were made by upper management people with the ruling group's confirmation. Thus it appears that appointments in their totality were made at three different levels and confirmed at the next higher level, and it is quite obvious that the autocrat appointed only a fraction of the political apparatus.

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Punkt n° 4. Why do I call this apparatus and infrastructure a ruling class?

The term causes some misgivings, and it is important that I offer a definition. I do not define the Russian ruling class by its control over the means of production - a Marxist definition - although the extent of such control in the eighteenth century is a question well worth investigating. I define it by its control of management positions from which it received various forms of income, statutory as well as derivative. Power gave access to "wealth," not the other way round.

A ruling class in general has a function to perform, and it is to rule; it possessed privileges which it transmits to its offspring and that sharply differentiate it from the remainder of the population; it is conscious of its leadership role; and it de-emphasizes professionalism and occupational separateness in favor of internal unity vis-à-vis the outside world. Did the Russian ruling class meet this definition?

1. It did monopolize the political function. In order to fill a managerial post and to participate in the management of the country, one had to be a nobleman. Except in the case of promotions to grade 8 (14 in the army) positions, one had to be a nobleman *before* the appointment was made. It is true that merchants of the first two guilds were associated with noblemen in the administration of justice after 1775, but the positions to which they were elected gave them managerial status only so long as they remained in those positions, and their responsibilities were limited to the trial of their peers. We do find those merchants on a permanent basis in the judicial chambers after 1802, but we must not forget that of all the social categories that of merchant was the most unstable, since status depended on the size of assets that fluctuated from one year to the next. With these few exceptions, it is a fact that managerial positions were recruited exclusively from the hereditary nobility, or 0.5% of the population.

2. The nobility had three other privileges: a monopoly on the ownership of human beings, a near-monopoly on the ownership of land until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and a monopoly of the production of vodka - an important source of cash - after 1754. The consciousness of its dominant role found its clearest expression in "Westernization," or the assimilation of European patterns in fashion, speech, and literary activities, as assimilation that created and gradually broadened the gulf separating nobility from dependent population, among which the merchants remained the representatives of old Muscovy.

I have heard the objection that it is impossible to speak of a collective consciousness of the hereditary nobility because of the disparity of income, status, and way of life between a *vel'mozha* and an insignificant provincial noble. But do we not find the same contrast in Poland, for example, between the magnate and the insignificant *shliakhtich*, who was often no better than a servant in the household of a magnate? Yet, neither would have denied he formed part of a single socio-political formation. Indeed, they both called themselves the Polish nation, as if there were no one else. We might say the same about the Prussian nobility of the trans-Elbian provinces. The essential point is that, whatever differences existed among them, these nobles had a collective consciousness of being different from outsiders, from the dependent population, indiscriminately dismissed in Russia as *muzhiki*.

3. Russian society was a command structure. The exclusion of society outside the ruling class from the management of the country kept it in a state of dependence.

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That is why I call it the dependent population. The ruling class itself was a command structure, the tsar as commander-in-chief as Kliuchevskii himself put it, everyone else having his place over someone, and under someone to whom he owed unconditional obedience. To say, as it is traditional to do, that the nobility was a service class is to define it as a political class, and to say that it had no rights vis-à-vis the sovereign must not blind us to the fact that it enjoyed full power over the dependent population. The pervasiveness of arbitrary power gave those in positions of authority an unchallengeable claim to demand unconditional obedience from their subordinates and, above all, from their social inferiors.

Such a command structure could not admit the existence of autonomous elites, defined by professional separateness, although we must also recognize that eighteenth-century Russian society had not yet reached a stage in its evolution beyond which emerging elites begin to claim autonomy. There was no merchant elite, no cultural elite existed outside the nobility, and the official Church had been degraded to the status of an instrument of the ruling class. We can thus speak of a unified ruling elite, the core of the ruling class. And a unified elite, Raymond Aron told us long ago, makes freedom impossible.[11]

Punkt n° 5. If there was a ruling class, why did it not limit the ruler's power?

One cannot answer the question without keeping in mind the indissoluble bond between Russian absolutism and serfdom. It has been said that serfdom applied only to privately-held peasants, or roughly half of the peasant population. The so-called state or Treasury-held peasants presumably belonged to a different social order. I very much like Arcadius Kahan's use of the term "serf" for both kinds of peasants: serfs of landowners, serfs of the Treasury.[12] Granted that both categories labored under different disabilities, but should we not agree that legal distinctions counted for little in a system marked by the constant resort to arbitrary power? Serfs were the property of individual landowners who very often had never visited their estates. Peasants of the Treasury were at the mercy of the local *voevoda* and, later, the "director of economy." The entire peasantry was *de facto* the collective property of the political apparatus and political infrastructure: the imposition of the capitation on the entire peasantry and the apportionment of the *obrok* among private and state serfs clearly support such a claim.

Such a state of affairs suggests the existence between roughly 1650 and 1850 of a compact of domination between the ruling class and the Romanov house, according to which the ruling class accepted the autocracy of the new dynasty - it is too often overlooked that *someone* had to give that family the necessary legitimacy without which it could not function - in return for the Romanovs' recognizing the ruling class's right to enforce its dominion over the peasantry. The *magna carta* embodying the compact was the *Ulozhenie* of 1649. Students of comparative history will note that the Brandenburg Recess of 1653 was a similar compromise in which the Hohenzollerns granted the nobility complete power over their serfs in exchange for the nobility's granting the Elector a free hand in central administration.[13] The command position of the dynasty was always stronger in Russia, but it rested likewise on a compromise and a commonality of interests.

Any serious attempt to limit the ruler's power had to presuppose a divergence of interests, the development of an opposition capable of finding a social base in the dependent population. This did not and could not take place in Russia before the

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1860's, so long as the compact of domination continued to prevail. The emancipation of the serfs was the result of such a divergence of interests and of the disappearance of the old consensus within the ruling class. It destroyed the legitimacy of the political infrastructure and left the ruling elite without a social base. I agree with Dietrich Geyer that "once the right to hold serfs was abolished, the nobility's days as the ruling class were numbered."[14] Much of the political history of Russia after 1861 was an attempt to recreate such a social base and to regain the lost legitimacy - an attempt that failed and made a revolution inevitable. And moving beyond the revolution, cannot we say that Soviet absolutism was likewise based on the new enserfment of the peasantry represented by collectivization for the benefit of a new ruling class represented by the Party?

Now by way of conclusion. This model of the Russian political-administrative system differs from the traditional one, and I offer it as a topic for discussion. We have not advanced very far in Russian political and administrative history beyond the great legacy of pre-revolutionary scholars. Meanwhile, a great many topics, such as the concept of elites, ruling class, and bureaucracy, the nature of political power, the operations of patronage networks, have been discussed in French, British, and German historiography, but largely ignored in Russian historiography. Robert Crummey pointed this out some twenty years ago, and it is still true today.[15]

If we disagree with this model, one will have to show, first, what an autocrat was. The process of decision-making in the Russian government remains a mystery, and all we can do is to follow the hints given us by isolated pieces of information. To take one example: Prince Viazemskii, Catherine II's procurator general, is one of the greatest figures in Russian administrative history. When the empress let him retire when he was already so sick that he had only three months left to live, she said he had done the work of four men - and Prince Viazemskii was responsible only for most of domestic administration. One would assume that the President of the College of War, if he was hard-working, was also doing the work of four men. This means that at the very highest level of the Imperial government it required eight men to carry out the basic responsibilities of the autocrat, and that did not include foreign affairs, which took a great deal of the ruler's time. We also know that these men belonged to established patronage networks forming a constellation of power around the ruler and restricting the pool of advisers.[16]

In such a system, networks were bound to constantly compete with one another for the ruler's ear and final decision. This is to say that the Russian government was an autocracy because it served the common interest of ruler and patronage networks constituting the ruling elite. There probably existed, with few but notable exceptions, less a personal autocracy than a collective one in which the autocracy of the ruling group needed the autocracy of the ruler to justify its own, one in which the will of the ruler was the essence of a consensus. Catherine II herself recognized this much.[17] Once expressed, however - and this is crucial - it was final and unchallengeable. This was the basic fact of life of the Russian autocracy, one that Catherine II and Alexander I had to learn and Paul failed to learn. Mikhail Safonov's recent book provides some telling examples of how Alexander remained on the defensive until his views on the peasant question - on the compact of domination - began to coalesce with those of the ruling elite.[18] Why should the ruling elite have wanted to limit the ruler's power if it managed the system in its own interest and derived so many benefits from it?

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One will have to show, too, that the ruler governed with the help of a bureaucracy providing him or her with an alternative source of support to the nobility - and I think it is impossible until the 1830's at the earliest. At the risk of oversimplifying, I see in the political history of Western Europe the development of a triangle formed by monarchy, town, and countryside; king, townsman, nobleman. Some of the greatest officers of the state were of urban origin - Colbert is the most famous example - not to mention the bishops and archbishops. Town and Church provided an alternative social base, an alternative source of legitimacy to the nobility. Those who headed the great offices of state in eighteenth-century Russia all came from the nobility - Menshikov being the exception that confirms the rule. They came from what I have called the ruling families, and headed patronage networks cutting across apparatus and infrastructure. If the essence of politics is to determine who gets what, when, and how, these networks allocated the spoils of office, making a mockery of neat administrative hierarchies and hindering the development of a state idea. Those who did the paperwork came from the despised dependent population, and lived in a world apart.

The official world of eighteenth-century Russia was thus a mirror image of Russian society, in which the political apparatus, characterized by very fluid relationships that maintained a climate of constant insecurity, governed the country with the help of secretaries and clerks. It is this very insecurity of official life that must compel a re-examination of our view of the Russian government as a bureaucratic system. It was instead a political order, operating without any sense of the common good, for the selfish purpose of maintaining its privileges and maximizing military power. I think you will agree that was not characteristic of the eighteenth century alone.

Cambridge, Mass., 1992.

1. D. Geyer, *Russian imperialism. The interaction of domestic and foreign policy, 1860-1914* (New Haven, 1987): 2.
2. D. Lieven, *Russia's rulers under the old regime* (New Haven, 1989): 21-22, 289-290, 295; R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1990): 61-65.
3. R. Bendix, "Bureaucracy," in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (1968) II: 206-219, esp. 212, 217.
4. B. Plavsic, "Seventeenth-century chanceries and their staffs," in W. Pintner and D. Rowney, eds, *Russian officialdom. The bureaucratization of Russian society from the seventeenth to the twentieth century* (Chapel Hill, 1980): 19-45.
5. I admit the real secretaries pose a problem. They alone among the "secretaries" seem to have been hereditary nobles. In addition, officers who transferred to the civilian apparatus were already noblemen. The "secretarial staff" thus consisted of people, some of whom were noble while others were not. See J. Le Donne, *Absolutism and ruling class. The formation of the Russian political order, 1700-1825* (New York, 1991): 54-60.
6. R. Berdahl, *The politics of the Prussian nobility. The development of a conservative ideology, 1770-1848* (Princeton, 1988): 11.
7. S. Seredonin, "Speranskii, M.," *Russkii biograficheskii slovar'* (1909) 19: 193-240i, here 240z.
8. J. Le Donne, *op. cit.*: 4.
9. The Table of Ranks is in *Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiiskoi imperii* (hereafter *PSZ*) 1722, n° 3890.
10. *PSZ*, 1762, n° 11444; 1766, n° 12552; 1790, n° 16930; 1816, n° 26255.

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11. R. Aron, "Social structure and the ruling class," *The British Journal of Sociology*, I (1950): 1-16, 126-143, here 143.

12. A. Kahan, *The plow, the hammer and the knout. An economic history of eighteenth-century Russia* (Chicago, 1985): 23.

13. R. Berdahl, *op. cit.*: 21.

14. D. Geyer, *op. cit.*: 24.

15. R. Crummey, "The reconstitution of the boyar aristocracy, 1613-1685," *Forschungen zur Osteuropäischen Geschichte*, 18 (1973): 187-220, here 187.

16. J. Le Donne, "Ruling families in the Russian political order 1689-1825," *CMRS*, XXVIII, 3-4 (1987): 233-322.

17. Catherine II to her secretary V. Popov, quoted in J. Le Donne, *Ruling Russia. Politics and administration in the age of absolutism, 1762-1796* (Princeton, 1984): 2.

18. M. Safonov, *Problema reform v pravitel'stvennoi politike Rossii na rubezhe XVIII-XIX vekov* (Leningrad, 1988): 97-106.

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