

# Russian History and Soviet Politics

by Edward L. Keenan

ALEXANDER YANOV. *The Origins of Autocracy: Ivan the Terrible in Russian History*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1981.

EVERY SERIOUS work of history reveals something about the period or process it describes, as well as something about its author and his time. As a rule, those works contribute most whose authors treat the past primarily in terms of its own concerns and categories, and restrain the intrusion of personal or contemporary preoccupations. But since the writing of history (as opposed, at times, to certain forms of historical analysis) is essentially a humanistic undertaking, it is impossible—and perhaps even undesirable—that an author's personal concerns and convictions not be revealed at all. The manner in which personal beliefs color the writing of history is varied. One encounters authors who artfully employ the disciplined conventions of "objective" history as camouflage for polemical messages. There are

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also those who quite openly use the past as a club with which to beat the present. In the resultant battering it is usually the club, and not the target, whose shape is more significantly changed.

Russia's past is much battered. The paucity of sources and the insufficiency of scholarly methods make it particularly vulnerable to such abuse. However, there are more important institutional, cultural, and historical causes: the control of scholarship for centuries by the state and by the church; the sense of social ineffectiveness and political impotence that has been characteristic of the Russian educated classes; the recurring catastrophes and painful political afflictions that have so often been visited upon Russian society. It is not too much to say that for many Russians there is really only one question about their history: Why?

Alexander Yanov's book avowedly belongs to the "subjective" end of our spectrum. In many respects it lies squarely within this Russian historiographic tradition. Indeed, in order fully to appreciate its merits we must, as Sidney Monas hints in his Introduction to the book, treat it not as a monograph about Ivan the Terrible, but rather as a passionate statement about recent Soviet political and cultural history by a victim/participant.

Yet there is a conundrum here. Yanov insists that his interpretation

of Ivan's time provides a key to understanding *all* of later Russian history, especially that of recent decades. If, however, as appears to be the case, Yanov is wrong about Ivan and his time, are we then to conclude that what he says about the present and the recent past is also totally misguided? Not really. What we have before us is not a systematic analysis of recent Soviet history, but rather a valuable document of intellectual history—a primary source—for understanding how some educated Russians, both establishment and oppositionist, perceive the "meaning" of Russian history.

*ORIGINS* is divided into three sections whose declared purposes are different, but whose arguments interlock and spill across their boundaries. The first, "The Adversities of Theory," deals with what Yanov calls "the science of despotology"—that is, with selected theories of despotism and absolutism—a recent Soviet debate on absolutism, and some very general theories of history. It consists, for the most part, of a murky analysis of terminologies and taxonomies, developed on the basis of Western historical experience, that have little demonstrable explanatory power in the Russian case. I suspect that even readers strongly interested in Russia, in history, or in despotism will find

themselves skipping large parts of this section.

Two parts of this first section, however, deserve closer reading. The one that Yanov, with characteristic lexical abandon, entitles "The Serf Historians" provides a well-informed interpretation of the debate about absolutism that occupied the pages of Soviet historical publications roughly between 1968 and 1971. Yanov's exposition of the views of the participants reveals an understanding of their tactics and travail that few outsiders can achieve, and—unwittingly—shows how distant most of the participants, of whatever stripe, were from any inkling of how modern social scientists in the West treat such subjects.

The second noteworthy part of this first section is called "The Political Spiral." Here Yanov compares, in parallel columns, what he takes to be the characteristics of the times of Ivan IV and of Stalin. To say that such comparisons are forced is to be generous. The events and processes that Yanov talks about simply cannot be seriously discussed in the manner he proposes, nor in the vocabulary he employs, whatever one's objectives might be. What, to take only one example, does "halting the process of Europeanization of the country" mean in the context of Ivan's time? Was there some "process of Europeanization" afoot in Muscovy in 1560 that was "halted" in 1565? No. Was anyone consciously and as a matter of policy either "Europeanizing" or resisting such a process? No. What, indeed, did "Europe" mean to Muscovites at the time? What did "Russia" mean? Can any helpful understanding emerge from the juxtaposition of this "Russia" with Stalin's Soviet Union? Perhaps, but only after one has established some carefully articulated conceptual and

terminological qualifications—and this Yanov does not do. This list of allegedly shared features is, in fact, an indictment of Stalin. Ivan, whatever his faults may have been, should be left out of it.

The second section of the book contains Yanov's declared main hypothesis: Muscovy, before Ivan's reign and the Oprichnina system he initiated in 1565, was developing quite happily: trouncing the Tatars in what Yanov calls a "reconquista"; establishing a rudimentary "parliament" and conducting "progressive" internal reforms; forming a "proto-bourgeoisie," and in general carrying out "a normal European process of intensification and rationalization of the economy." Ivan, however, for reasons that Yanov never explains, ruined everything. He turned the aggressive thrust of his foreign policy away from Tatars and against—*horribile dictu!*—Europeans by getting involved in the Livonian wars. He formed the Oprichnina, which Yanov sees in traditional fashion as a kind of "state within a state," more tyrannical and absolutist than the previous government. He permitted his cronies in the Oprichnina to ravage the economy, destroy the independent peasantry, decimate the enlightened boyars, and ultimately to create conditions in which the rise of serfdom and Muscovite absolutism became inevitable.

Most of the notions that have been combined in this interpretation are not new. As Yanov points out, Soviet historians have recently made a number of interesting observations about Muscovy's socioeconomic and political development in the latter part of the 16th century, and have even talked about "crossroads" and "different paths of development." But by exaggerating some of these findings, misconstruing others, and

accepting still others that are doubtful, Yanov has, in my view, produced a most perverse interpretation of the Oprichnina and its effects, an interpretation that goes far beyond the work of his predecessors—and the facts. He makes far too much of the modest economic growth, and particularly of the activities of "free" peasants, in the middle of the 16th century. He wrongly construes the foreign policy choices of the Muscovites as options involving "East" and "West." He exaggerates, even more than the most enthusiastic Soviet establishment historians, the role and institutional maturity of the "council of the land." Finally, he draws far too direct a connection between the policies (if such there were!) and depredations of the Oprichnina, on the one hand, and the subsequent development of serfdom, on the other. In general, Yanov, who appears to have done a good deal of rather oddly-directed reading in the technical literature, seems not to appreciate the problems specialists have with the limited and often dubious sources at their disposal.

This failure is the most significant, but by no means the only, reason why his third section, "Ivaniada," is less successful than it might have been. This section purports to be an "analysis of the evolution of ideas." In fact, it is an omnibus indictment of historians who have written about Ivan and his time over the last few centuries. The charges are either that historians (Yanov limits himself to Russians) have been apologists for Ivan (and, by implication, for his tyranny) or timid dupes of such official apologists, or else that they knew just how awful Ivan was but, out of cowardice or ambition, failed to follow where logic and honesty led—i.e., to Yanov's position.

I should not leave the impression

that this section is without redeeming merits. Yanov does provide some interesting observations about both prerevolutionary and Soviet historians. It is really quite shocking, even to a specialist, to read again what some unfortunate Soviet historians were willing to say about Ivan during Stalin's time. But Yanov's "despotological" categories, his inquisitional tone, his failure to acknowledge the sheer difficulty historians have in forming any mental image of Ivan, and his insistence upon seeing *all* matters in terms of the concerns and concepts of his own quite *sui generis* Khrushchevian generation make this section ultimately unsuccessful.

One sometimes gets the impression that Yanov goes out of his way to juxtapose sense and nonsense. For example, he writes quite penetratingly:

*The "myth of the state" arose in the epoch of Ivan the Terrible; and . . . the argument over Tsar Ivan . . . is the form in which it has developed. (p. 261)*

Now one may not necessarily agree with this statement, but it does contain the germ of an interesting idea. Instead of developing that idea, however, Yanov wants to say something sweeping about Russia. He goes on:

*But in its hypnotic and almost mystical power, the myth goes far beyond the limits of this argument, and influences the Russian world-view itself. (p. 261)*

Very well, there is something to be said about the role of the notion of the all-powerful state in the formation of the Russians' self-image and in the origin of their low estimation of their ability to take the management of their public affairs

into their own hands. One expects Yanov, after telling us a bit about the myth itself, to discuss these things. Instead, he takes us abruptly into that diachronic dimension where past and present intersect:

*In no other area, perhaps, does this dictatorship of the myth manifest itself so vividly as in attitudes toward the political opposition as a whole and political emigration in particular. This is the test for freedom of thought; here lies the bad conscience of all of Russian historiography. (pp. 261–62).*

Well. We started with a sober notion about dispelling myths, got distracted by their hypnotic and almost mystical power, suddenly came upon the "dictatorship" of the myth, and ended with the "test for freedom" and the "bad conscience" of Russian historiography. All in four sentences, each of which contains arguable but not necessarily demonstrable propositions—implicit or declared—of considerable complexity. The result is what Russians call *kasha*—a jumble.

THUS YANOV's treatment of the historiography is, like his central thesis, overstated, flawed, and highly questionable. But even if one were to take a more positive view of his treatment of the facts of Ivan's reign, there would remain serious doubt about the long-range historical importance Yanov attributes to the Oprichnina. Almost all historians would agree, I think, that the Oprichnina was short-lived, that it affected only a part of "Russia," left no institutional traces, and, aside from its largely random destructiveness, had little lasting impact upon existing social, economic, cultural, or political institutions or ideas. (Yanov's own

book is sufficient evidence that the *myth* of the Oprichnina has had a lasting and deleterious effect upon Russian historiography—but that is a different matter.) Yanov, however, is convinced that the Oprichnina was, for Russians, a kind of national childhood trauma from which they never recovered and with which they never came to terms. Essential to this conviction are his assumptions apparent throughout the book that the Muscovite state and Russian "nation" (an anachronistic notion for the 16th century) of 1565 were the antecedents and ancestors of today's Soviet Union and today's Russians, and were, in some unspecified yet profound way, in fact the very same entities we know today—"younger," perhaps, but clearly recognizable and understandable by anyone who knows modern Russia.

Now the notion of a historical national identity that evolves but, in some immanent sense, never changes has a noble historiographic lineage, but it is of limited utility for the modern historian. Even when it can be applied, it requires very careful definition and qualification. These Yanov does not provide, and in adopting this view without modification, despite his professions of originality and rebelliousness, he lapses into the cliché-ridden lexicon of traditional Russian historiography. He uses the terms "Russia," "nation," and the like so anachronistically and carelessly as to deprive them of any real sense, leaving the reader with only the most nebulous and Slavophile interpretation of such terms as a guide to his meaning. He falls, moreover, into the outmoded contradistinction of "Europe" and "Asia," which imparts to many of his arguments an apparently unintended overtone of naive Eurocentrism (or, more precisely,

"Eurocentripetalism"). Finally, he transmutes farfetched parallels (Ivan and Stalin) into metaphors—and, ultimately, into identifications—with such recklessness as to foreclose meaningful discussion.

Yanov anticipates criticism on this last point by asking, "Why are historians so afraid of naive questions?" He answers that "conventional history avoids diachronic inquiry that overlaps the bounds of established specialization." In contrast to such timorous specialists, Yanov says, he seeks "to analyze not artificially separated events in Russian history, but Russian history as a whole—a totality in which *all* events are not only interconnected, but also influence each other in the most fundamental way—whether they happened in the sixteenth century or in the twentieth century" (p. 19).

Leaving aside some logical problems (how 20th-century Russia could influence 16th-century Russia), I find this a most engagingly extravagant statement, one that makes me ask just what it is that Yanov is attempting to do with, and to, his nation's history. Elsewhere he answers that question:

*This is no mere scholastic exercise. For the Russian opposition it is a matter of life and death. The conundrum of Russia's absolutist century is bound up with the problems of its present: do the current oppositionists have national roots, for example, or are their ideas imported into this garrison state from the West along with Coca-Cola and modern technology? Is it possible for this country to have a decent European future?* (p. 20)

HERE, and in numerous other equally revelatory passages, Yanov offers what is, for me, the chief reason why this passionate, au-

thentic, and likably wrong-headed book should be of interest to Westerners who care about Russia. For it is not a book about Ivan the Terrible at all, but a document that reveals how Yanov, and many Soviet intellectuals of his generation, attempt to construe the historical determinants of their lamentable present. It reveals, first, their pathetic isolation from most of what has taken place in Western social-science thinking in this century. Anyone who knows Yanov will agree with Sidney Monas that he is "serious, erudite, thoughtful, well-informed, witty and intelligent." All of these traits, however, plus an advanced degree in history from Moscow State University, have not saved him from innocence about how modern historians conduct analysis, description, generalization, and argument. In this failing, of course, Yanov is not alone—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Medvedevs, and others share it. It is sad indeed to have to say that many of the Soviet establishment historians whom Yanov criticizes—pusillanimous, brave but muzzled, tragic, or bootlicking as they may be—write better history, and can tell us more about Ivan the Terrible.

But not, perhaps, about Russia. Even in the liberal years that Yanov describes so well, Soviet censors, fearful of "uncontrollable allusions," did not allow historians or anyone else to speculate freely upon Russia's "fate." That is, they did not allow the printing of what educated people, including censors, wanted to read and were eager to discuss in the bibulous bonhomie of the "evenings" Russian intellectuals love so much. It is as a specimen of this kind of historical vernacular culture that Yanov's book is most valuable, for it reproduces quite authentically, in all its characteristic excessive detail and

theoretical confusion, the kind of monologue that can be generated when Russians fall into spontaneous speculations about their country's historical experience. This seemingly eternal monologue deals with questions intellectuals ask but cannot answer, questions that, because of the sadness of their condition, they pose not as cool, "how" questions, but as passionate, "why" questions: Why has Russia gone wrong? Why is there no hope? Why is there no real political option for Russia and no real "opposition"? Why does the mass of the population tolerate—even support—the present system? Why do Russians fear chaos more than slavery? Why aren't they really like other "Europeans"? Why did all of this happen to them?

Yanov speaks of the "enigma" of Russia's history when describing his lifelong efforts—of which the present book is only a part—to unravel it. In addition to representing the thoughts and yearnings of his fellow intellectuals, he is, in viewing Russia's history as a riddle, honoring an ancient historiographic tradition—one that, like the myth of Ivan he criticizes, has obscured understanding, lured historians into foolish postures, and confused large numbers of Russians about themselves. Why, after all, should Russia's history be thought more "enigmatic" than that, say, of China, Ethiopia, or Ireland? One reason, it seems, is that anyone who has any sympathy for Russians—or for fellow-beings in general—must conclude, after even a superficial study, that Russians somehow deserve better than they got. But then so do the citizens of Belfast, Ramallah, or the South Bronx. Is Russia's history "enigmatic," or just unfortunate?

The real reason, I would suggest, why Russia's intellectuals search, like characters in a fairy tale, for



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the liberating answer to a riddle they cannot even express lies in that preoccupation with the European experience that is so much a part of Yanov's interpretation of Russian history. Russians—especially Russian intellectuals—are “Europeans,” by most measures. In the centuries since Ivan's time they have done all the correct “European” things: they have developed a nation-state, industrialized and urbanized it, got the bomb, learned to dance on

their toes, sing in Italian, and write novels. And yet, they still question whether they can have—or are worthy of—“a decent European future.” How, if not by postulating the existence of some unique enigma, can one explain this paradox?

But the spirit of the steamy, congenial soirées of which I have spoken is drawing me in and taking me, too, behind the looking glass. I cannot explain, or even frame, the paradox. Neither, it appears, can Yanov. What he *does* do is to pro-

vide, in *The Origins of Autocracy*, a peculiarly valuable testimony of a plucky and imaginative man's struggle with the demon of history who seems, to many Russians, to have cast an inexorable curse upon their unfortunate nation. His book also testifies to how distant their efforts to explain their present travail are from the methods of modern social science. As such, it is to be recommended to those who hope to understand how Russians understand Russia.

# Chasing China's Shadows

by Karel Kovanda

ROGER GARSIDE. *Coming Alive: China After Mao*. New York, NY, McGraw-Hill, 1981.

RICHARD BERNSTEIN. *From the Center of the Earth: The Search for the Truth about China*. Boston, MA, Little, Brown & Co., 1982.

FOX BUTTERFIELD. *China: Alive in a Bitter Sea*. New York, NY, Times Books, 1982.

LIANG HENG and JUDITH SHAPIRO. *Son of the Revolution*. New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

EDOARDA MASI. *China Winter: Workers, Mandarins, and the Purge of the Gang of Four*. New York, NY, E.P. Dutton, 1982.

YAO MING-LE. *The Conspiracy and Death of Lin Biao*. New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

OF THE PILE of books reviewed here, most were authored by foreign visitors to China: one diplo-

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mat, two journalists, two "foreign experts." Most are impressionistic accounts of events that took place during the authors' sojourn there, and one can arrange them chronologically. Roger Garside, a first secretary in the British embassy, arrived in Beijing in January 1976 and stayed through winter 1978-79. Overlapping his stay was that of Edoarda Masi, who taught at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute for a year beginning in the summer of 1976. Fox Butterfield, of *The New York Times*, arrived three years later, in June 1979, and stayed until February 1981. And Richard Bernstein, of *Time* magazine, began his stay in April 1980.

I arrived in China just as Masi was leaving, and left soon after Butterfield arrived. For two years, I worked as a foreign expert, a language specialist for the overseas broadcasts of Radio Beijing. I had arrived in Beijing full of curiosity. After a few months, I had the country figured out; I was even ready to write a book about it. But that period of blissful certainty passed; by the time I left, one thing was clear: the reality of China was *always* far more complicated than whatever initial impressions one may have formed.

A key episode that unhinged my cocky self-confidence occurred in the fall of 1978 during a visit to

Guilin in Guangxi Province. Although renowned for its natural beauty, Guilin is one of China's poorer cities. While the superficial observer may think that all Chinese dress alike, important differences are detectable. In the south, for example, clothing is visibly shabbier, more washed out, more patched up, with larger patches. Guilin is visibly poor.

Instead of taking *xiuxi*, the obligatory after-lunch siesta, I went for a walk. Upriver from the hotel, I ran across a free market. This was still a novelty in China: markets used to be considered "tails of capitalism," in Lenin's words, and had been banned for years. The more exotic items for sale included shallots, minnows, herbs, even an owl. There were more onlookers than buyers. The market had a relaxed though businesslike atmosphere about it.

One or two men were wandering about the marketplace, picking up orange peels. This was another sign of sure poverty: for a thrifty peasant to throw something away, it had to be quite worthless; for another to pick it up, he had to be quite desperate.

An old man shuffled down the street, in a black coat that was not merely old but old-fashioned, with cotton buttons, peasant-style. A small bundle was slung over his shoulder, and he carried a cane in