

From the Editors

On the Narrowness of "Periods," or 1699 is not 1700

Despite the stunning diversity of historical inquiry, history as a discipline is bound together by an overriding concern with time, and hence with periodization. Even historians who frequently pilfer insights and interpretations from other disciplines tend instinctively to rebel against "ahistorical" treatments that flout basic chronological considerations. This fact of disciplinary life is unlikely to change, despite all the epistemological shifts of recent years in the human sciences. However, Russian history, like other historical fields, has often gone beyond such basic and legitimate concerns to make something of a fetish out of the historical period. There are both intellectual and institutional reasons for this, and it is rarely considered how the two are intertwined.

A fetish of the historical period? By this we mean both the deeply-ingrained reluctance to cross major chronological barriers in historical work and the division of Russianists into guilds of Muscovite, imperial, and Soviet historians. There are many important boundaries in the course of Russian history, but the two that loom the largest in our professional lives are those that divide the Muscovite from the imperial periods (1700, for convenience) and the imperial from the Soviet (1917). As Gary Marker recently noted in these pages about the first of those markers, "dating the dawn of Russian modernity with Peter and the imperial state endures because it makes so much sense ..." Not everyone, he adds, believes the Petrine revolution was a good thing, "but they all agree that the rupture took place." Marker then exclaims: "Who am I to argue with that? Certainly no new periodizations are looming, and none will be suggested here. Nevertheless, state-and-ruler-centered history, like all commanding narratives, necessarily imposes certain blinders." The division imposed by 1917, it hardly needs to be pointed out, has loomed even larger than the Petrine "revolution," in part because that 20th-century rupture from the outset revolved around far more than the advent of a new state. There have been social, economic, cultural, and intellectual rationales, in addition to the political bases, for making strong divisions between the Muscovite and the imperial as well as the imperial and the Soviet eras.

Then there are the most prosaic factors of archival organization. There was a good degree of continuity both in terms of ministerial structure and personnel over the course of 7 November 1917. This continuity is occluded in part because the Soviet state, in its insistence that it had brought forth a new world, disentangled the archival holdings of its new institutions from those of their predecessors. The archives impose an unnaturally neat and even break. While many of the same people sat at many of the same desks the day following the Bolshevik coup, you must now travel, say, to Petersburg to follow the work of the tsarist ministry of agriculture up to February 1917; to Moscow and one archival holding in GARF for its successor under the Provisional Government; and to yet another GARF holding for its Soviet successor. To trace this continuity is to swim against the neat divisions in archival structure.

To be sure, it has also been a long-standing historiographical nostrum in 17th-century studies that the Petrine innovations were not as sudden or unprepared as they have often been made out to be. In the case of 1917, there have been many important studies over the decades that have

transcended the barrier in one way or another. However, it is also fair to say that the rise of a new, post-Soviet scholarship raised the promise of many more works that would use the newly accessible material to build new paradigms and new chronological frameworks, rather than using the bounty to uphold our old ones. Yet that promise has only partially been fulfilled. Why did 1991 raise such hopes? The legacies observers could easily find in the wake of a second (admittedly very different) 20th-century state breakdown might have led them to think of revolutions more in terms of the continuities of de Tocqueville than the absolute ruptures of Marx. If not the decline of the Cold War-era tendency to make the Soviet period into something totally unique and *sui generis*, then at least the death of Soviet communism itself might have made the barriers around its birth seem less impenetrable. It also seemed likely that the ascendancy of the "new cultural history" would promote inquiry less wedded to the strictness of the old divisions.

There are, after all, many compelling reasons to transcend these chronological boundaries even if we recognize them as useful, and to abstain from the opposite extreme of dismissing 1917 as some sort of epiphenomenon. For one thing, writing historical narratives that always "lead up" to a disputed yet universally-expected end, whether it be the collapse of tsarism or Stalin's "second revolution," introduces all the problems of teleology (not to mention predictability). The continuities across such barriers are often subtler than the breaks, and hence more interesting and challenging to substantiate. A host of more concrete reasons for excursions across both sides of such milestones also exist: individual lives, groups, organizations, and patterns of thought did not all screech to a halt when a chapter of history came to a close.

Indeed, when we consider why more scholarship that breaks down the hegemony of the sub-period has not materialized we have to conclude that powerful institutional practices have reinforced intellectual habit. Teaching a traditionally-organized curriculum of Muscovite, imperial, and Soviet courses requires a certain fluency in the idioms of each period; hirings in history departments, centered largely around the traditional periodizations, are often rigidly circumscribed and make few concessions for those on the margins, those switching periods, or those able to transcend the boundaries. Specialized and sometimes narrow-minded professionals look askance when, say, an imperial historian dares to encroach on the Soviet period, or vice versa. Specialization is combined with relatively easy publishing marketability in such areas as the flourishing sub-field of "1930s Studies" -- which often ignores the 1920s and the 1940s, not to mention a wider chronological grounding, and hence discourages long-term perspectives among its adepts. Recognizing how institutional constraints hinder scholarly innovation is a first step toward abolishing the dictatorship of the period.

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