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A Qualified Optimistic Analysis of Imperial Russia

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Abstract

In his magnum opus on Russia's imperial history B.N. Mironov characterizes himself as a positivist thinker who marshals impressive amounts of statistics and other types of hard evidence, and employs economic theory, sociological paradigms to understand Russian social structures and development, political analysis, anthropology, and at times psychology to Russia over the *longue durée*. With this arsenal at hand, he argues against Russian exceptionalism and identifies Russia instead as a typical European state. In so doing, he emphasizes Imperial Russia's successes as a state, the social and economic foundations of which, he argues, did not cause revolution and attributes revolution to political causes. As he has tried to do previously, the author does not begin with the revolutions of the early twentieth century and largely does not read history backwards, but rather delineates Russia's historical development within a robust comparative European context (occasionally broadening that context to include the United States). More specifically, B.N. Mironov charts Russia's modernization through the creation of well-defined estates in the late eighteenth century and the subsequent breakdown of those estates in the post-reform period as a result of greater social mobility; gradual urbanization; industrialization; the beginnings of a demographic transformation; improvements in the standard of living; an increase in literacy; the development of a civil society; the spread of private property among all social groups; the growth of individualism; and the eventual establishment of the rule of law, all of which constitute the attributes of a modern European state. The author's largely negative perceptions of the Russian peasants' *mentalité*, however, sit uneasily with his claims about advancements in the countryside by the turn of the twentieth century. Equating peasants' collectivism with authoritarianism and conflating it with the Bolshevik project, he implicitly suggests that the peasants' darkness was a major cause of revolution in 1917. If one removes this dark lens but not the genuinely negative aspects of peasant life, the more positive developments appear in a more optimistic light.

Keywords: historiography; modernization; civil society; Russian peasants; collectivism; serfdom; moral economy; backwardness; witchcraft; Orthodoxy; secularization.

B.N. Mironov's magisterial three-volume history of Imperial Russia represents a culmination of this scholar's prodigious research and prolific writing on various aspects of the social and economic life of Russians over the course of more than two centuries¹. A significant expansion and reworking of his earlier two-volume interdisciplinary social history, which appeared in three

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¹ I purposely use the term "Russians" here, for although B.N. Mironov discusses other ethnicities within the empire and sometimes compares Russian peasants with their Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts among other ethnicities, he mainly focuses his attention on ethnic Russians of all social groupings.

editions (Mironov, 1999; Mironov, 2000a; Mironov, 2003) and an English translation (Mironov, 2000b; Mironov, 2000c), it incorporates significant materials from his 2010 comprehensive study of the standard of living in Russia over the same period (Mironov, 2010) and an English translation (Mironov, 2012). As B.N. Mironov did in each successive edition of his social history, he has made corrections as well as updated the analyses and evidence in this synthetic work to reflect and sometimes challenge the newest scholarly thinking within Russia and abroad on individual subjects. In this vein he has engaged with previous criticisms of his work and fleshed out topics, such as methodology and the nature of Russia's multinational empire, added a new chapter on Russian culture in various representations ["v kollektivnykh predstavleniiakh"], more than doubled his tables (from 152 to 356), and increased the number of photographs (from 214 to 375) (Mironov, 2014: 12). A new section analyzes some of the different historiographical concepts (Marxism, modernization theory, civilizational, world-systems, institutional, synergism, and post-modernism) that have been applied to Imperial Russian history. It will become mandatory reading for all graduate students specializing in the subject¹. In one of the several concluding sections of this massive work, B.N. Mironov comes back to these concepts to demonstrate how his "neoclassical model of historical investigation," [неоклассическая модель исторического исследования], which is predicated on the concept of modernization, macro-analyses, quantitative data, and synthesis, corrects most of these other approaches and adds to modernization studies (Mironov, 2014: 12, 68; Mironov, 2015b: 649–676) B.N. Mironov's mastery of the secondary literature on Russian history is unprecedented and his engagement with the historical literature on modern Europe and the United States impressive. Having already been anointed as the heir to the nineteenth-century historian V.O. Kliuchevskii, B.N. Mironov once again makes an immense contribution to the field (Kamenskii, 2004: 408).

In this broad sweep of Russia's imperial history at the macro-level, the author characterizes himself as a positivist thinker who marshals impressive amounts of statistics and other types of hard evidence, and employs economic theory, sociological paradigms to understand Russian social structures and development, political analysis, anthropology, and at times psychology to Russia over the *longue durée*. With this arsenal at hand, B.N. Mironov argues against Russian exceptionalism and the Marxist-Leninist representation of the imperial period as a series of disaster. He identifies Russia instead as a typical European state, "в истории которой трагедий, драм и противоречий нисколько не больше, чем в истории любого другого европейского государства" (Mironov, 2014: 13). In so doing, he emphasizes Imperial Russia's successes as a state, the social and economic foundations of which, he argues, did not cause revolution and attributes revolution to political causes. As he has tried to do previously, the author does not begin with the revolutions of the early twentieth century and largely does not read history backwards, but rather delineates Russia's historical development, this time within a much more robust comparative European context (occasionally broadening that context to include the United States).

More specifically, B.N. Mironov charts Russia's modernization through the creation of well-defined estates in the late eighteenth century and the subsequent breakdown of those estates in the post-reform period as a result of greater social mobility; gradual urbanization; industrialization; the beginnings of a demographic transformation; improvements in the standard of living; an increase in literacy; the development of a civil society; the spread of private property among all social groups; the growth of individualism; and the eventual establishment of the rule of law, all of which constitute the attributes of a modern European state. He might have added to this list the fact that in the late stages of the empire the women's movement was actually quite successful in spite of the smaller number of women he notes participated in the Russian suffrage movement compared to the numbers of their counterparts in the United States and Denmark (Mironov, 2014:

¹ B.N. Mironov also sets out future research agendas for graduate students and specialists. Among these are excellent suggestions for specific types of demographic studies, which the author feels are urgent if historians are to obtain a better grasp of demographic patterns in Imperial Russia, as well as a recommendation that extensive content analyses of the voluminous reports written by hundreds of local correspondents solicited by the Tenishev Ethnographic Bureau in the 1890s be conducted (Mironov, 2014: 620–621; Mironov, 2015a: 203–204). I would add that critical analyses of the bureau's goals and the questionnaire it sent to its correspondents are also required. A prosopographical study of the correspondents, along the lines of I.K. Gerasimov's group biography of graduates of the Moscow Agricultural Institute who became rural professionals in the early twentieth century, would illuminate their social origins, age, and gender, among other things, in identifying what constituted a an important civil group. Some of the correspondents may have had peasant origins (Gerasimov, 2004; Gerasimov, 2009).

754). The Grand Duchy of Finland granted suffrage to women as early as 1906, while the Provisional Government extended suffrage in July 1917 (before the United States, Britain, France, and Italy).

In making these claims for Russia's modernization, B.N. Mironov is careful to note that these developments were uneven. Different tempos of development affected individual social groups, with Russian peasants lagging behind other social groups (which was not unusual in other European states). This meant that by the eve of World War I some of the changes were more substantial than others but the potential was there for further advancement. And while progress was made in urbanization, industrialization, and demographic factors in the twentieth century, B.N. Mironov bemoans that fact that the socialist revolution halted the transformation of society from collectivism to individualism and returned to collectivism, this time through violence, and almost destroyed civil society. In this respect the depeasantization of the countryside, in his opinion, had not advanced sufficiently to ward off the reinvigoration of collectivism.

In a larger historiographical context, Mironov's optimistic assessment of Russia on the eve of World War I fits the prerevolutionary Liberal interpretation championed by P.N. Milyukov and Russian émigré historians. It is also one that emerges from many studies of the development of civil society in Russia and two recent books, one by W. Dowler and the other by C. Evtuhov (Bradley, 2009; Dowler, 2010; Evtuhov, 2011)¹. According to W. Dowler, by 1913 "a vibrant public space" in Russia had emerged. "A host of voluntary associations, a lively and relatively free press, the rise of progressive municipal governments, the growth of legal consciousness, the advance of market relations and new concepts of property tenure in the countryside, and the spread of literacy were transforming Russian society" (Dowler, 2010, jacket cover). In a different type of work that champions the intensive study of Russian provincial life in all of its various manifestations, in this case, Nizhnii Novgorod, C. Evtuhov paints "a world where the future was full of possibilities, to be shattered a few years later." She further remarks that "when we stop defining Russia by its exceptionalism, we will find a place recognizable to any historian of nineteenth-century Europe." She defines that place as being dynamic, fluid, and progressive (Evtuhov, 2011, back cover). I quote these passages from these historians' works here to highlight the fact that B.N. Mironov is not working in a vacuum and that they mirror his own conclusions.

Historians will find issues in B.N. Mironov's work to champion and others to dispute. As an historian of the Russian peasantry, Russian women, and lived Orthodoxy (or Orthodoxy as practiced and experienced) in the imperial era, I will focus the remainder of my remarks on these subjects, although space precludes me from tackling all of the facets of these subjects that B.N. Mironov raises.

With regard to Russian peasants a paradox emerges in the author's presentation. While pointing to indices of good agricultural productivity under serfdom and increasing agricultural and proto-industrial productivity after emancipation, the integration of peasants in regional and national markets, increasing prosperity in the villages after emancipation, rising literacy rates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the appearance of smaller families (if not yet dominant), and the beginnings of the breakdown of communal life, B.N. Mironov ascribes these peasants with little agency. There are some exceptions to the rule: He concedes that the peasants as a whole were making good choices over fertility and pregnancy (but not abortion) and credits a younger generation of peasants in the post-reform period with having an independent spirit by splitting off from the patriarchal household to set up separate households, buying land, and after 1906 embracing the Stolypin reforms and leaving the commune (Mironov 1985). B.N. Mironov also points to peasants rebelling, although he suggests that they benightedly protested laws that were supposedly good for them. By and large however, the peasants in the study appear as objects to be acted upon by either nobles or the state. Under serfdom this means that, in B.N. Mironov's analysis, peasants were most productive if they were beaten (although beating them too much would have been self-defeating) and continued to be most productive after 1861 in those areas where they continued to work for landlords after the period of temporary obligations had lapsed. The state comes across as the main arbiter of progressive change, especially with emancipation and other post-1861 reforms, which brought advancement and enlightenment to the countryside. It made huge infusions of capital during the 1891–92 famine, provided a constitution, and finally introduced the Stolypin reforms that sought to break down the peasant commune. Although all these reforms, the ways in which peasants interacted

¹ For other works on civil society in Imperial Russia, see J. Bradley's bibliography (Bradley, 2009).

with them and shaped them with their own interests in mind and mitigated some of the negative features are missing from the narrative¹.

The problem is twofold. It stems in part from B.N. Mironov's methodological emphasis on socio-economic processes and massive aggregate data sets that ignore the individual. It also originates from both his dismissal of post-structural analysis and his acceptance of the paternalistic and anachronistic portrayals of educated contemporary observers, both native and foreign, of Russian peasants². Unfortunately, B.N. Mironov repeats the tropes of the dark, primitive, childlike, irrational, weak, mythological, and ignorant peasant, although he suggests that at one and the same time the peasants were happy in their childlike innocence and emotional (Mironov, 2015b: 522–523). Here the author is on much surer footing when he argues that they did not consume alcohol significantly more than European peasants (Mironov, 2015a: 187–188). For some reason, most of the features of this negative portrayal are expanded upon in the lengthy concluding sections of the third volume rather than in the introduction or chapters on the countryside in the first and second volumes, even though the negativity casts a shadow on those chapters. The fuller explanations do provide necessary context for B.N. Mironov's negative statements such as the one in volume two "что закрепощение крестьянства, господство передельной общины и обязательного для всех способа земледелия компенсировали отсутствие у крестьянства инициативы, предприимчивости, желания (а, разумеется, не способности) добиваться максимально возможных экономических результатов" (Mironov, 2015a: 74).

Similarly, an ahistorical representation of nineteenth century Russian peasants as being stuck in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, which B.N. Mironov accepts as reality, appears in the conclusion. This time the representation comes from not only contemporary observers' remarks about Russian peasants, but also an outdated and colonial anthropological concept of primitive peoples (Mironov, 2015b: 618–619). It was only after reading this observation that I understood why a sixteenth-century painting of a peasant wedding by the Flemish P. Breughel the Elder appeared without explanation in an earlier volume (Mironov, 2015a: 300)³. Similar types of representations of supposedly traditional and unchanging peasants trapped in a mythological historical past were common throughout nineteenth century Europe. Acceptance of them as indicative of reality, however, perpetuates the myth of backward and benign peasants. That myth has unfortunately had more staying power in the Russian case, as demonstrated in this three-volume work that paradoxically argues for a more dynamic and progressive Russia.

Suppose if we replaced the irrational and ignorant peasant with one of the rational peasant as portrayed in cultural anthropology and provided the Russian peasants with agency, how would B.N. Mironov's analyses change (Popkin, 1979)? For one, they would complicate and problematize the narrative considerably. There is not sufficient space here to point out all aspects of changing peasant life in the nineteenth century. All I can do here is to provide some leading and illustrative questions about Russian serfdom. B.N. Mironov does refer to the importance of the communal structure on the noblemen's estate. This means that besides adjudicating internal peasant matters, the patriarchs in the commune regularly negotiated with their landlords and bailiffs, some of the latter of whom were peasants. What was the nature of the negotiations? Were there times when serfs ignored or modified their owners' demands? Did serfs regularly engage in everyday types of resistance such as footdragging, poaching game, and illegally felling timber in the nobles' and state forests? Did "naïve" monarchism really amount to peasants' conservatism and faith in authoritarianism, or did it involve peasants' manipulation of authorities and some understanding of the law? Did the increasing appearance of serfowners' charters delineating rules on large estates necessarily reflect greater intrusion of the nobles into their serfs' lives or did it they also reflect serf

¹ J. Pallot's in-depth archival study of the Stolypin Reforms, which was a social-engineering project, brilliantly illustrates the multifaceted ways in which peasants reacted to the reforms and modified their outcomes (Pallot, 1999).

² By challenging contemporary observers' representations, myth-making, and value judgments, I am not suggesting that historians discount everything they reported about Russian peasants. Critical analysis and consultation of different types of sources are nonetheless necessary to collaborate or refute evidence.

³ Paintings and photographs are also representations of artists' imagination. We tend to think of photographs as being closer to reality, but they too are staged. If another edition of B.N. Mironov's magnum opus were to appear, I would strongly suggest that the author provide a brief explanatory section in the introduction about the images he selected, the rationale for his selection, and how readers might best evaluate these very rich illustrations. The author does analyze some images in the course of the work and cannot be expected to do more of that type of analysis. Nevertheless, some of the illustrations could use short explanatory comments.

practices? Were household serfs serving in functions such as bailiffs, wet nurses, nannies, actresses, musicians, playmates and companions for the nobles' children, and gardeners in the manors' hot houses changed by those functions, the skills (including literacy) some of them attained, and daily interactions with landlords? Might those changes have affected non-household serfs? Did those same interactions have any impact on landlords? Did not serfowners learn healing techniques and remedies as well as practical knowledge about the soil, plants, and agricultural practices from their serfs? How do we access serfs who became skilled craftsmen, artists, and managers of factories as well as those who bought their freedom and changed their social ranking?

These and other questions have been asked and partly answered by the micro-studies of individual serfowner estates that B.N. Mironov cites in his magnum opus and broader works. Furthermore, a few detailed studies do demonstrate that peasants' economic opportunities on large *obrok* estates were greater and more diverse than those on the estates where *barshchina* prevailed and that the serfs were resourceful (Dennison, 2011; Melton, 1987; Melton, 1999). Precisely because the archival evidence challenges the universality of the moral economy in peasant serf communes, they need to be taken seriously and not dismissed. In the more dynamic micro-studies of estates and broader works the serfs become historical actors with names and even in some cases, when the sources are sufficiently rich, have biographies (Smith A., 2014; Smith, 2008; Schuler, 2009; Stites, 2005)¹. Clearly, more micro-studies and comparative studies of serfowners' estates based on archival records that provide not only quantitative but essential qualitative evidence are required.

In evoking the notion of the rational peasant and the questions I posed above, I purposely have avoided the other component of contemporary observers' representations of the backward and dark Russian peasants, which has pervaded the historiography – and that is the peasants' spirituality as being a separate culture full of pagan elements and superstitions, devoid of any associations with, or influences, from elite and official cultures. In an odd version of this thinking B.N. Mironov posits that until the beginning of the eighteenth century all groups in Russian society shared a similar religious culture that evinced a poor grasp of the fundamentals of Orthodoxy and among other things “распространенность суеверий и предрассудков (почитание икон, хождение на поклон к святым местам, посты и т. п.)” (Mironov, 2015b: 617). After the early eighteenth century, he continues, the peasants retained this older form of religiosity, which was full of magic and mythology, until the beginning twentieth century, whereas the elites did not. I am assuming that B.N. Mironov is referring here to the secularization of the elites that supposedly appeared immediately upon the heels of Peter I's reforms. In fact, secularization was far slower and much more incomplete than B.N. Mironov suggests. In terms of beliefs in witchcraft, which he also mentions, elite members of society did not abandon beliefs in witches and sorcerers until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The increased persecution of witches and sorcerers in the first half of the eighteenth century and Catherine II's incomplete decriminalization of witchcraft guaranteed that such beliefs would linger (Lavrov, 2000; Smilianskaia, 2003; Worobec, 2016). More importantly, most noblemen and women continued to participate in icon processions, venerate icons, observe fasts (particularly Great Lent), go on pilgrimages, and were recipients of miracle cures until the end of the regime (Kenworthy, 2010; Robson, 2007; Worobec, 2007: 29; Worobec 2014/2015). Such religious practices were central to the tenets of Eastern Orthodoxy. The strictures against some of these practices in the 1721 Spiritual Regulation (which served as a reformation-type decree, and was not the first of its kind) pertained to false miracles attributed to unverified icons and miracles attributed to wells and springs; the veneration of uncorrupted bodies that had not been sanctioned officially as saints; and *klikushi* or demon possessed women.

Russian peasant religiosity was more firmly planted in Orthodox practices as well. Historians and ethnographers have been trying to reconstruct the spiritual life and practices of Russian peasants (as well as other social groups) in the early modern and modern periods by questioning the myths of *dvoeverie* and what has been (but no longer is) the dominant paradigm of secularization theory. That questioning and the mining of previously untapped primary sources have resulted in the reChristianization of popular culture and the narrowing of the cultural gap between the social classes in the modern period (Gromyko, Buganov, 2000; Lavrov, 2000; Smilianskaia, 2003; Kivelson, Greene, 2003; Greene, 2010; Shevzov, 2004). Much more work

¹ A. Smith's book on social estates in Imperial Russia appeared very recently in 2014, after B.N. Mironov completed his manuscript. I am citing here simply to inform readers of its existence (Smith A., 2014).

obviously needs to be done in this area. However the conclusions reached thus far suggest that the existence of a great spiritual chasm between peasants and elites is much exaggerated.

The reason that I have spent time on delineating B.N. Mironov's largely negative perceptions of the Russian peasants' *mentalité* is that they sit uneasily with his claims about advancements in the countryside by the turn of the twentieth century. In this instance he is reading history backwards and unfortunately equating peasants' collectivism with authoritarianism and the Bolshevik project. Peasants' darkness thus implicitly emerges as a major cause of revolution in 1917. If one removes this dark lens but not the genuinely negative aspects of peasant life, the more positive developments appear in a more optimistic light.

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Компетентный и оптимистичный анализ истории имперской РоссииКристина Воробец^{а, *}^а Университет Северного Иллинойса, США

Аннотация. В своем magnum opus по истории Российской империи Б.Н. Миронов предстает позитивистски мыслящим исследователем, мобилизовавшим внушительный объем массовых статистических данных и других надежных сведений, а также экономическую теорию и социологические концепции, политический анализ, антропологию и психологию, чтобы понять российские социальные структуры и их развитие в течение продолжительного времени (*longue durée*). Вооруженный таким значительным арсеналом интеллектуальных средств, он выдвигает аргументы против российской исключительности и идентифицирует Россию как нормальное европейское государство. Автор подчеркивает успехи империи, утверждает, что в стране отсутствовали социально-экономические предпосылки для революций начала XX в. и что они произошли по политическим причинам. Поскольку Б.Н. Миронов изучал проблему революции в своих прежних работах, он начинает книгу не с революций и отталкивается не от них, а исследует историческое развитие России в европейском контексте (иногда включая Соединенные Штаты). Говоря более конкретно, автор показывает, что модернизация России проявлялась в трансформации сословий, сформировавшихся в конце XVIII в., в классы благодаря высокой социальной мобильности в пореформенный период; в урбанизации; в индустриализации; в начавшемся демографическом переходе; в повышении уровня жизни; в росте грамотности; в развитии гражданского общества; в распространении частной собственности среди всех социальных групп населения; в росте индивидуализма; в утверждении власти закона. В ходе модернизации российское общество приобретало все признаки современного европейского государства. Во многом негативное представление менталитета (*mentalité*) российских крестьян плохо согласуется с утверждениями автора о прогрессе деревни на рубеже XX в. Отождествляя коллективизм крестьян с авторитаризмом и соединяя коллективизм с большевистским проектом, автор имплицитно наводит на мысль, что главной причиной революции 1917 г. послужило невежество крестьян. Если снять черные очки, но не закрывать глаза на действительно отрицательные аспекты крестьянской жизни, то изменения в деревне предстанут в более оптимистическом свете.

Ключевые слова: историография; модернизация; гражданское общество; русские крестьяне; коллективизм; крепостное право; моральная экономика; отсталость; колдовство; православие; секуляризация.

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