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978-0-521-10524-8 - On the Corruption of Morals in Russia

Edited by A. Lentini

Excerpt

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SHCHERBATOV ACROSS TWO CENTURIES: A CONSPECTUS, 1768–1968

The Nobility are the true supports of Monarchy, and it is natural their interest should be more consulted . . . than that of the people.

David Hume, *Of civil liberty* (1742), quoted by
M. M. Shcherbatov, c. 1772.¹

Let us consider what changes were brought about in us by the necessary but perhaps excessive reformation wrought by Peter the Great, and how, as a result of it, vices began to creep into our hearts . . . increasing hourly from reign to reign . . . This will be a history both of reigns and of vices.

M. M. Shcherbatov, *On the corruption of
morals in Russia* (1786–7).²

Professor R. Pipes, in the foreword to his recent study of Karamzin's *Memoir on ancient and modern Russia*, points out the need for a series of monographs devoted to individual Russian conservative thinkers, their lives and work, as a preliminary to the consideration of Russian conservatism in general.³ He sets a notable example of this with his own study of Karamzin. The present book attempts another such piece of preliminary investigation, and is devoted to a study of Prince Mikhail Mikhailovich Shcherbatov (1733–90) as an ideologist of the 'Old Nobility' and as an aristocratic commentator on political and social developments in eighteenth-century Russia, with particular reference to his most celebrated work of criticism, *On the corruption of morals in Russia*. Apart from its value as an unusual example of eighteenth-century prose, and an unrivalled source of material for the social life of the entire eighteenth century in Russia, *On the corruption of morals in Russia* is significant as a unique and outstanding document of conservative

¹ M. M. Shcherbatov, *Neizdannyye sochineniya*, edited by P. G. Lyubomirov (Moscow, 1935), p. 59.

² M. M. Shcherbatov, *On the corruption of morals in Russia*, p. 135.

³ R. Pipes, *Karamzin's memoir on ancient and modern Russia. A translation and analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), pp. ix–x.

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thought, giving considerable understanding of the state of opinion current among a section of enlightened noblemen of the reign of Catherine II, and revealing wider aspects of the intellectual background to the activities of the Senatorial Party in the early 1800s. Unfortunately, however, despite the appearance of no less than eight printed versions of the work between 1858 and 1908, there are few editions which can be regarded as fully satisfactory, and which do not suffer from expurgations, misreadings and typographical inaccuracies. Secondly, as the late Professor B. H. Sumner pointed out,¹ although there exists a German translation of the work, published in 1925,² there is as yet no English translation. Thirdly, no attempt has yet been made to place the work in the history of Russian conservative thought. M. I. Semevsky looked forward in 1871 to a time when 'a future researcher' should undertake an introductory study to the work in terms of Shcherbatov's life and philosophical development.³ The present book is an attempt to remedy some of these deficiencies. The introductory study of Shcherbatov is followed by a newly revised and unabridged version of the Russian text, accompanied by its first English translation, and followed by brief explanatory notes.

Though perhaps Shcherbatov cannot justly be reckoned among the very first rank of Russian social thinkers of the eighteenth century, his importance has certainly been underestimated by Russian scholars, both liberal and marxist. His contemporaries at the Legislative Commission of 1767, while recognizing his talents as a political figure, resented his aristocratic claims made on behalf of the Russian nobility, as exaggerated, and offensive to the rising middle-classes.⁴ At the same time, his reputation as a historian suffered heavily under the witty attacks of I. N. Boltin, who submitted the early volumes of Shcherbatov's *History of Russia* to a meticulous and merciless critique, and informed the public, in two lucid and elegant tomes, that Shcherbatov was a bad writer and a

¹ B. H. Sumner, *Survey of Russian history*, 3rd ed. (London, 1961), p. 133.

² 'Über die Sittenverderbnis in Russland, von Fürst M. M. Schtscherbatow, herausgegeben von K. Stählin, aus dem Russischen übertragen und bearbeitet von Ina Friedländer unter Mitwirkung von Sergje] Jacobsohn', *Quellen und Aufsätze zur russischen Geschichte*, book 5 (Berlin, 1925).

³ *Russkaya starina* (St Petersburg, 1871), vol. III, p. 688.

⁴ *Sbornik*, vols. 5, 8, 14, 36 (St Petersburg, 1869–82).

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worse historian.¹ A. L. Schlözer concurred with this, finding the *History* ‘indigestible’,² while the Empress Catherine herself described it as ‘fort ennuyeuse’.³ By 1800, according to Count P. V. Zavadovsky, Shcherbatov was virtually unread.⁴

The *History* was overshadowed still further by the appearance between 1818 and 1826 of Karamzin’s *History of the Russian State*. Karamzin, though relying heavily and consistently on Shcherbatov’s researches—a fact which he did not always trouble to make clear—wrote in a style more calculated to please the taste of a public nurtured on the literature of the Romantic Movement;⁵ and those who examined Shcherbatov’s *History* in the first half of the nineteenth century generally agreed with A. V. Starchevsky that it was little more than a ‘huge collection of extracts from different authors and documents’.⁶

With the rise of the ‘scientific’ school of history in the mid-nineteenth century, however, a critical reaction set in. Historians such as M. T. Kachenovsky and N. Strelkov turned a more discerning and sympathetic eye upon ‘a work forgotten by the public’,⁷ and saw in its author a man of intelligence and penetration.⁸ The most objective and lucid protagonist of this approach was S. M. Solov’yov, who, in 1854, first restored the balance in favour of Shcherbatov by pointing out the surprisingly large extent of Karamzin’s unacknowledged debt to Shcherbatov.⁹

¹ I. N. Boltin, *Kriticheskie primechaniya na pervy tom istorii Knyazyza Shcherbatova* (St Petersburg, 1793); *Kriticheskie primechaniya na vtoroy tom istorii Knyazyza Shcherbatova* (St Petersburg, 1794).

² *Obshchestvennaya i chastnaya zhizn’ A. L. Shletsera, im samim opisannaya. Perevod s nemetskogo V. Kenevichem*, (St Petersburg, 1876), p. 106.

³ *Sbornik*, vol. XLII (St Petersburg, 1885), p. 187.

⁴ Quoted in *Über die Sittenverderbnis in Russland von Fürst M. M. Schtcherbatow*, ed. by K. Stählin (Berlin, 1925), p. xxxviii.

⁵ P. N. Milyukov, *Glavnye techeniya russkoi istoricheskoi mysli* (Moscow, 1898), vol. I, pp. 160, 163.

⁶ A. V. Starchevsky, *Ocherk literatury russkoi istorii do Karamzina* (St Petersburg, 1845), p. 157.

⁷ *Biografichesky slovar’ professorov i prepodavatelei moskovskogo universiteta*, part I (Moscow, 1855), pp. 399–400.

⁸ *Ibid.*; N. Strelkov, ‘O sochinenii Boltina’, *Uchonye zapiski imperatorskogo moskovskogo universiteta* (Moscow, 1835), part VIII, pp. 301–19, 467–81.

⁹ S. M. Solov’yov, ‘N. M. Karamzin i ego “Istoriya Gosudarstva Rossiiskogo”’, *Sobranie sochinenii*, izdanie ‘Obshchestvennaya Pol’za’ (St Petersburg), pp. 1389–1540; ‘Pisateli russkoi istorii XVIII v’, *Arkhiv istoriko-yuridicheskikh svedenii*, ed. by N. Kalachov (Moscow, 1855), vol. II, part 3, pp. 49–63.

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Shcherbatov, he underlined, was frequently more accurate in his historical judgement than his more celebrated successor. ‘Shcherbatov’s *History*’, he says, ‘deserves a place of honour in the historical literature of Russia.’¹ He points out that Shcherbatov was an intelligent, conscientious writer, steeped in the historical literature of western Europe. While admitting his failure to grasp the basic peculiarities of the Russian historical process, and pointing out his tendentious, didactic approach, characterized by his exaggerated notion of the role of the nobility, Solov’yov commended the originality of his attempts to elucidate the causes of particular historical events. In this rationalizing process, says Solov’yov, Shcherbatov correctly saw the true task of the scientific historian.

Finally, Solov’yov stressed that Shcherbatov was the first Russian historian to attempt to deal with questions of social history. Solov’yov’s approach and conclusions were accepted as final and authoritative by all liberal historians, notably K. N. Bestuzhev-Ryumin,² A. S. Lappo-Danilevsky,³ V. O. Klyuchevsky⁴ and P. N. Milyukov.⁵ Soviet scholars, such as L. V. Cherepnin,⁶ N. L. Rubinshtein⁷ and S. L. Peshtich⁸ also agree that Solov’yov had the last word with regard to Shcherbatov as a historian. Individual aspects of Shcherbatov’s *History* were examined more fully by P. V. Znamensky, who discussed Shcherbatov’s Gibbonian attitude to Church history;⁹ and by N. K. Mikhailovsky, who commended Shcherbatov’s depiction of Ivan IV.¹⁰

¹ *Ibid.* p. 50.

² K. N. Bestuzhev-Ryumin, *Russkaya istoriya* (St Petersburg, 1872), vol. 1, pp. 215–16; *Biografi i kharakteristiki* (St Petersburg, 1882), pp. 213–15.

³ A. S. Lappo-Danilevsky, *Lektsii po russkoi istorii, chitannye v imperatorskom istoriko-filologicheskom institute v 1890–1891 g.* (St Petersburg, 1895), p. 107.

⁴ V. O. Klyuchevsky, *Sochineniya* (Moscow, 1959), vol. VIII, pp. 424–6.

⁵ P. N. Milyukov, *Glavnye techeniya russkoi istoricheskoi mysli*, part 1 (Moscow, 1898), *passim*.

⁶ L. V. Cherepnin, *Russkaya istoriografiya do XIX v.* (Moscow, 1957), pp. 218–35.

⁷ N. L. Rubinshtein, *Russkaya istoriografiya* (Gospolizdat, 1941), pp. 116–37.

⁸ S. L. Peshtich, ‘Obshchestvenno-politicheskie vozzreniya M. M. Shcherbatova i ego istoricheskie vzglyady’, chapter 8 (in typescript) of *Russkaya istoriografiya XVIII veka*, pp. 456–518 (in the editor’s possession).

⁹ P. V. Znamensky, ‘Istoricheskie trudy Shcherbatova i Boltina v otnoshenii k russkoi tserkovnoi istorii’, *Trudy kievskoi dukhovnoi akademii* (1862), vol. 1, pp. 1–79.

¹⁰ N. K. Mikhailovsky, *Kriticheskie opyty. Ivan Grozny v russkoi literature* (St Petersburg, 1894), p. 20.

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With the publication of many of his political, social and philosophical works in the second half of the nineteenth century, Shcherbatov emerged as a far more prolific and noteworthy writer than had previously been realized. Scholars took a fresh look at his work, and attempted to redefine his position in the political and intellectual life of the eighteenth century. S. V. Eshevsky, in his examination of *On the corruption of morals in Russia*, underlined Shcherbatov's importance as a social historian, at the same time stressing his adherence to western constitutional theory.¹ A. I. Herzen, on the other hand, publishing *On the corruption of morals in Russia* together with Radishchev's *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* (London, 1858), contrasted the two authors in somewhat exaggerated terms, classifying Shcherbatov as a devotee of the ideals of pre-petrine Muscovy and a precursor of the Slavophiles.² Herzen's views were upheld by A. A. Dubovitsky.³ Meanwhile, a general biographical outline of Shcherbatov was given by A. N. Pypin,⁴ while A. G. Brückner examined Shcherbatov's role at the Legislative Commission of 1767.⁵

The publication in two volumes of *Sochineniya Knyazya Shcherbatova* at the turn of the present century⁶ stimulated a fresh crop of articles devoted to Shcherbatov's social and political outlook. V. O. Klyuchevsky drew a valid comparison between *On the corruption of morals in Russia* and Radishchev's *Journey*;⁷ V. Val'denberg outlined Shcherbatov's critical attitude to Peter I.⁸ V. A. Myakotin outlined the many questions with which Shcher-

¹ S. V. Eshevsky, 'O povrezhdenii npravov v Rossii (Sochinenie kn. M. M. Shcherbatova)', *Sochineniya po russkoi istorii* (Moscow, 1900), pp. 269–90.

² A. I. Gertsen, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1958), vol. XIII, pp. 272–4; vol. XIV, p. 52.

³ A. A. Dubovitsky, *Knyaz' Mikhail Mikhailovich Shcherbatov. Istoriko-literaturny ocherk*. Unpublished MS in Gosudarstvenny Istorichesky Muzei (Moscow (*Otdel pis'mennykh pamyatnikov*, F.268)).

⁴ A. N. Pypin, 'Poluzabyty pisatel' XVIII veka. M. M. Shcherbatov', *Vestnik Evropy* (St Petersburg, November, 1896), pp. 264–305.

⁵ A. G. Brückner, 'Knyaz' M. M. Shcherbatov, kak chlen Bol'shoi Komissii 1767 g', *Istorichesky vestnik* (St Petersburg), vol. VI (October 1881), pp. 217–49.

⁶ *Sochineniya Knyazya M. M. Shcherbatova*, izdanie Knyazya B. S. Shcherbatova, pod redaktsiei I. P. Khrushcheva i A. G. Voronova (St Petersburg, 1896–8), vols. I–II.

⁷ V. O. Klyuchevsky, *Sochineniya* (Moscow, 1958), vol. V, p. 312.

⁸ V. Val'denberg, *Shcherbatov o Petre Velikom* (St Petersburg, 1903).

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batov attempted to deal,¹ while M. A. D'yakonov pointed out his debt to Montesquieu and his interest in the British constitutional system.² N. D. Chechulin and A. A. Kizevetter discussed his utopian *Journey to the land of Ophir*.³ The varying conclusions of these scholars were summarized by B. I. Syromyatnikov, who, indicating some of the apparent paradoxes and contradictions in Shcherbatov's outlook, concluded, perhaps with some exaggeration, that 'to clarify Shcherbatov's historical and, in particular, his political philosophy, is not so easy'. Shcherbatov, according to Syromyatnikov, lacked a properly developed and crystallized outlook.⁴

Soviet critics have tended to stress the negative aspects of Shcherbatov's philosophy, dismissing him out of hand as a representative of the reactionary fringe of the nobility, and the most extreme apologist of serfdom. V. S. Pokrovsky condemned Shcherbatov's motives as dictated solely by self-interest, and considered his critique of the régime of Catherine II to be 'false and insincere'.⁵ In the *History of Russian economic thought* (1955), we are told that Shcherbatov's views 'most clearly express the reactionary ideology of the ruling class, against which the best people of the time were struggling'.⁶

A more balanced interest in Shcherbatov has, however, been reviving of late, both in the Soviet Union and in the West. At Columbia, Professor Marc Raeff has produced a cogent summary of Shcherbatov's views, explaining their significance against the background of the sociological analyses of Max Weber;⁷ while going to

¹ V. A. Myakotin, 'Dvoryansky publitsist ekaterininskoi epokhi', *Iz istorii russkogo obshchestva* (St Petersburg, 1902), pp. 112–83.

² M. A. D'yakonov, 'Vydayushchiysya russky publitsist', *Vestnik prava* (St Petersburg, 1904), no. 7, pp. 1–27.

³ N. D. Chechulin, 'Russky Sotsial'ny Roman XVIII veka', *Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniya* (St Petersburg), January 1900. Also in separate edition: A. A. Kizevetter, 'Russkaya utopiya XVIII stoletiya', *Istoricheskie ocherki* (Moscow, 1912), pp. 29–56.

⁴ B. I. Syromyatnikov, *Traditsionnaya teoriya russkogo istoricheskogo razvitiya*. Unpublished proofs in Saltykov-Shchedrin Library, Leningrad (*Sobranie edinichnykh postuplenii, Syromyatnikov*).

⁵ V. S. Pokrovsky, *Istoriya russkoi politicheskoi mysli*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1952), p. 39.

⁶ *Istoriya russkoi ekonomicheskoi mysli* (Moscow, 1955), vol. 1, p. 465.

⁷ M. Raeff, 'State and nobility in the ideology of M. M. Shcherbatov', *The American Slavic and East European Review* (October 1960), pp. 363–79.

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press, we note that at Harvard, Joan Afferica has completed a doctoral dissertation on ‘The Political and Social Thought of Prince M. M. Shcherbatov’ (1967). At Leningrad, Professor P. N. Berkov and his pupil, Z. Rustam-Zade, have turned their attention to Shcherbatov as an opponent of Catherine II’s foreign policy.¹ Shcherbatov’s political satires, says Berkov, show ‘the extremely negative attitude of a certain section of Russian society to Catherine’s foreign policy’.² Z. Rustam-Zade is currently completing a doctoral thesis devoted to Shcherbatov’s political thought. She also discusses *On the corruption of morals in Russia* as a political pamphlet, in an article to be published in the near future.³ Her contributions in this field are eagerly awaited in the West.

The latest Soviet contribution to the studies of Shcherbatov, which appeared while this book was in the course of publication, is an excellent monograph by I. A. Fedosov.⁴ This analyses in detail the many questions with which Shcherbatov attempted to deal, correctly concluding that ‘whatever the question that arose, as far as Shcherbatov was concerned, it always boiled down to the one problem that forever vexed him—the problem of the nobility’.⁵

It is to be hoped that these recent studies herald a renaissance of interest in Shcherbatov, and that the Soviet Academy of Sciences, on the completion of its revised and scholarly edition of Tatischev’s *History*, will turn its attention to Shcherbatov’s no less deserving works. Unfortunately, apart from an article of twenty pages by I. Fursenko in the Russian Biographical Dictionary (1912),⁶ there is as yet no detailed biography of Shcherbatov. Furthermore, despite the appearance of many hitherto unknown works in

¹ P. N. Berkov, “‘Umnoy razgovor’ M. M. Shcherbatova. Iz istorii russkoi politicheskoi satiry kontsa XVIII veka’, *Russkaya literatura* (1966), no. 3, pp. 79–81; Z. Rustam-Zade, “‘Umnoy razgovor’ M. M. Shcherbatova v svete ego sotsial’no-politicheskikh vzglyadov’, *Russkaya literatura* (1966), no. 3, pp. 76–9.

² P. N. Berkov, *loc. cit.* p. 81.

³ “‘O povrezhdenii nravov v Rossii’ M. M. Shcherbatova—pamflet XVIII veka’, *Uchonye zapiski azerbaidzhanskogo pedagogicheskogo instituta yazykov i literatury imeni M. F. Akhundova*.

⁴ A. Fedosov, *Iz istorii russkoi obshchestvennoi mysli XVIII stoletiya: M. M. Shcherbatov* (Moscow University Press, 1967).

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 255.

⁶ *Russky biografichesky slovar’*, ‘Shchapov-Yushnevsky’ (St Petersburg, 1912), pp. 104–24.

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Neizdannnye sochineniya M. M. Shcherbatova, edited by P. G. Lyubomirov (Moscow) in 1935, there is no full bibliography of Shcherbatov's works, many of which, indeed, remain dispersed among various Soviet archives, unprinted and even uncatalogued.¹ The bibliography at the end of this book includes the fullest index of Shcherbatov's works yet attempted.

While critics of Shcherbatov have paid lip-service to his championship of the old noble families and his concern that they should play a more positive role in Russian politics, no consistent and thorough study has yet been made of this aspect of his ideology, a strange omission in view of the central and salient position which the aristocratic principle occupies in it. S. O. Shmidt, for example, writing in 1964, dismisses Shcherbatov's ideas as the 'impotent fulminations' of the representative of a small and insignificant coterie of reactionaries.² The aim of this study is to indicate the nature and scope of the aristocratic ideal in Shcherbatov's philosophy, to trace its development against the background of his personal development and that of the eighteenth-century Russian nobility, to indicate the influence on it of the school of Natural Law and the philosophies of Montesquieu, Hume and Holbach; to examine Shcherbatov's view of the traditional status of the nobility as seen in his *History of Russia* and his other writings, and to analyse the final crystallization of his views as expressed in *On the corruption of morals in Russia*.

¹ The largest collection of Shcherbatov's MSS is in the Saltykov–Shchedrin Library, Leningrad. See *Katalog russkikh rukopisei ermitazhnogo sobraniya*, compiled by D. N. Al'shits and E. G. Shapot, Leningrad, 1960. Other MSS are to be found in the Historical Museum, Moscow (*Otdelenie pis'mennykh istochnikov*, F.268); the Central State Archives, Moscow (*Portfeli Millera*); the Lenin Library, Moscow (F.270), and the Library of the Academy of Sciences, Leningrad (*LOI AN SSSR*).

² S. O. Shmidt, 'Mestnichestvo i absolyutizm', *Absolyutizm v Rossii: Sbornik statei k semidesyatiletiiyu... B. B. Kafengauza* (Moscow, 1964), p. 203.

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THE RUSSIAN NOBILITY IN THE FIRST THIRD OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The Russian nobility, as distinct from its western counterparts, was a primarily political institution, brought into being and developing in accordance with political exigencies and aims, and changing as these changed. Though aristocratic elements did exist in Russia as elsewhere, when a small minority attempted to raise itself above the mass of the population and to form an exclusive caste of the 'best' men, this process did not in Russia come about of its own accord, but at the demand of and under dynamic pressure from the state. It was the state which ordained the shape and progress of the nobility, the state which dictated its political role at a given moment. Herein lies the basic and radical distinction between the Russian concept of nobility, based on ideas of service and subordination to the state, and the western concept of a feudal, land-owning aristocracy of birth, linked to the monarch by a form of social contract.¹

In Muscovite Russia, the aim of national unity led to the creation of a local service-gentry, equipped by the state with lands, and serving the state through the local serf-militias, which it organized in time of war. Under Peter I this serving-gentry was reformed and revitalized in a new, semi-european shape, the 'shlyakhta' or 'dvoryanstvo'. Despite appearances, however, Peter was basically following traditional Russian practice. The national aim at the end of the seventeenth century, namely the europeanization of Russia, demanded the formation of a skilled and educated class of soldiers and administrators. Instead of relying on the local gentry to levy small-scale militias, the state now called on the nobility to perform personal, lifelong service in the army or bureaucracy, and to acquire at least the rudiments of western education. As before, the monarch gave the lead, and the nobility was compelled to follow. It was the monarch who defined the social,

¹ A. Romanovich-Slavatinsky, *Dvoryanstvo v Rossii ot nachala XVIII veka do otmeny krepostnogo prava*, 2nd ed. (Kiev, 1912), foreword, p. i.

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political and economic status of the nobility, and ensured its predominance as a privileged class. Lands formerly granted to individuals ('pomest'ya') were converted into hereditary family estates ('votchinnyy'), and the serfs on these estates were placed under the power of the noble landowners. The nobles were exempted from the payment of taxation. The entail system was introduced, with the aim of ensuring that estates should pass intact from father to son.¹

Two basic and contradictory elements are to be distinguished in Peter's policy towards the nobility. First, following the pattern of the western aristocracies, he introduced the hereditary titles of count and baron to Russia, together with heraldic coats-of-arms and the entail system, with the aim of promoting the principle of an aristocracy of noble families, noble by virtue of birth; secondly, following the historic Russian tradition, he made the granting of noble titles conditional upon personal service; he laid it down that a born nobleman who lacked an official rank in the army or administration, must yield pride of place to a man of officer's rank, albeit a commoner by birth.² The result of this twofold policy was to graft the European concept of an aristocracy of birth upon the old Russian concept of a service-gentry. The history of the post-Petrine Russian nobility in the eighteenth century is the history of the re-emergence of the traditional concept at the expense of the European and the displacement of the aristocratic ideal by the bureaucratic.

A concept of nobility certainly developed in Muscovite Russia; but this concept was not based on the fact that the nobles belonged to the same social group and shared a community of interests. On the contrary, it was a concept of family and clan, a concept based on the prestige accruing to individual families possessing a long record of service to the state.³ The history of the Russian nobility before Peter I is the history of individual families, not of a corporate institution. There was constant rivalry between these families, fostered by the growth of 'mestnichestvo', the name given to the custom of awarding official positions not in return for personal service or individual merit, but in accordance with the

¹ S. Knyaz'kov, 'Dvoryanstvo vremyon Petra Velikogo', *Ocherki iz istorii Petra Velikogo i ego vremeni* (St Petersburg, 1909), pp. 376–7.

² *P.S.Z.* no. 2467.

³ S. M. Solov'yov, *Istoriya Rossii* (Moscow, 1962), vol. vii, pp. 60–4.