Introduction

After three hundred years Peter the Great retains his hold over the imagination of Russia as well as the rest of the world. For Russians in particular, the absorbing issue is the significance of his reign and of what are usually called his reforms. Did they really change Russia? Were they a good thing or a bad thing? Did they lead to democracy? To 1917? To the participation of Russia in European culture? To the alienation of Russia from its spiritual home in Orthodoxy? These are the questions which the story of Peter the Great will elicit in Russia and probably always has elicited, and this book will offer a direct answer to none of them.

I will offer no direct answer because it is my argument that Peter's reign has remained in large and crucial areas unknown. We cannot evaluate the significance of Peter's actions until we know what they were, and the traditional accounts have this in common that they do not tell us enough about those actions. It is my aim to rewrite the political narrative of the reign and its antecedents, using sources which have been largely bypassed or underutilized in the study of the period. The principal result of a new narrative of the politics of Peter's time will be to elucidate the informal structures of power in the Russian state.

Russian and Western historiography of Peter reflects the grand divisions of thought on the Russian past, perhaps more thoroughly than any other subject. To a large extent it breaks down into the "state" school and its opponents, including but not restricted to the Slavophiles. The state school looked at Russian history as the development of statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*), by which it meant formal bureaucratic institutions. The leading idea was the development of legal order, essentially of the *Rechtsstaat*, which would supposedly lay the foundations for representative government. Not surprisingly, the state school crystallized in the era of the Great

Reforms of Alexander II, but its way of looking at Russian history has to a large extent survived the original ideology and political subtext. Its methods and concerns are found whether the historian is largely hostile to Peter (P. N. Miliukov) or favorable (M. M. Bogoslovskii). Soviet historiography, on the rare occasions when it turned its attention from agrarian history and the class struggle, followed largely in the path of the state school, looking at formal institutions. We see its outcome in the work of E. V. Anisimov. Similarly, the Western historians who have turned their attention to Peter, most notably Reinhard Wittram, have been firmly in this tradition.[1]

There is nothing wrong with the history of formal institutions, unfashionable as it may be today. Without this sort of study, the historian could not make sense of the shifting political structure of Russia, particularly in Peter's time. The difficulty that such history presents, however, is that it does not really get at the actual levers of power and the mechanism of political action in Russia before the nineteenth century. It has had to rely on the autocratic tsar as a sort of *Deus ex machina*, whose magic wand effects all change in a society that is a vacuum and by means of a state that is merely a series of passive, if rather incompetent, instruments. The other result of the state school is that it produces a history without living people. The state is essentially an abstraction, as is the tsar-autocrat.

Naturally, no historian is entirely the prisoner of his conception. Bogoslovskii and Wittram managed to combine a fundamental allegiance to notions derived from the state school with a lively account of the culture, personalities, and much of the politics of Peter's time. Nevertheless, they did not escape far enough to examine the social groups which were crucial to Peter's success or failure, and with whom he lived and worked and often struggled against. By this group I mean the ruling elite, essentially the old

[1] Nicholas. V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, New York, 1985; S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, 15 vols., Moscow, 1960–66, vols. VII–IX (originally vols. XIII–XVIII, 1863–67); Solov'ev, *Publichnye chteniia o Petre Velikom*, Moscow, 1872; P. N. Miliukov, *Gosudarstvennoe khoziaistvo Rossii v pervoi chetverti XVIII stolietiia i reforma Petra Velikogo*, St. Petersburg, 1892; M. M. Bogoslovskii, *Oblastnaia reforma Petra Velikogo: provintsia 1719–1727 gg.*, *ChOIDR* (1902), pt. 3, 1–208; pt. 4, 209–522, appendix 1–46; E. V. Anisimov, *Gosudarstvennye preobrazovaniia i samoderzhavie Petra Velikogo*, St. Petersburg, 1997; Reinhard Wittram, *Peter I: Czar und Kaiser*, 2 vols., Göttingen, 1964; Marc Raeff, *Comprendre l'ancien régime russe*, Paris, 1982, 46–68; Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, New Haven, CT, 1998.

boyar aristocracy with the addition of the new favorites and officials of Peter's reign.

The ruling elite of the Russian state in the early modern era has been the subject of intensive research, but largely focussing on the sixteenth century. S. B. Veselovskii, A. A. Zimin, R. G. Skrynnikov, A. P. Pavlov in Russia, and Gustave Alef, Ann Kleimola, and Nancy Kollmann have, for all their different approaches, given us a thorough and detailed picture of the composition of that elite.[2] The seventeenth century has not been so fortunate, and until recently has attracted more attention outside Russia itself. Richard Hellie's sociology of the whole landholding class as a military elite has come to rest aside Robert Crummey's prosopography of the boyars to provide two very different accounts. The present work rests for its knowledge of the boyar elite mainly on that of Crummey, supplemented by Marshall Poe, and on the studies of John LeDonne and Brenda Meehan on the eighteenth century.[3]

It is the American historians Kollmann, Crummey, and LeDonne who have posed most sharply the issues of the composition and political role of the ruling elite of Russia in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. They share a belief that the traditional picture of the tsar-autocrat is unrealistic, requiring a degree of power in his

[2] S. B. Veselovskii, *Issledovaniia po istorii klassa sluzhilykh zemlevladel'tsev*, Moscow, 1969; A. A. Zimin, "Sostav boiarskoi dumy v XV–XVI vv.," *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik za 1957 g.*, Moscow, 1958, 41–87; A. A. Zimin, *Formirovanie boiarskoi aristokratii v Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XV–pervoi treti XVI v.*, Moscow, 1988; R. G. Skrynnikov, *Nachalo Oprichniny*, Uchenye zapiski Leningradskogo gos. pedagogicheskogo instituta im. A. Gertsena 294 (Leningrad, 1966); R. G. Skrynnikov, *Oprichnyi terror*, Uchenye zapiski Leningradskogo gos. pedagogicheskogo instituta im. A. Gertsena 374, (Leningrad, 1969); Skrynnikov, *Rossiia posle Oprichniny: ocherki politicheskoi i sotsial'noi istorii*, Leningrad, 1975, 5–108; A. P. Pavlov, *Gosudarev dvor i politicheskaia bor'ba pri Borise Godunove (1584–1605 gg.)*, St. Petersburg, 1992; Gustave Alef, *The Origins of Muscovite Autocracy: the Age of Ivan III*, *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 39 (1986); Ann M. Kleimola, "The Changing Face of the Muscovite Autocracy: The Sixteenth Century: Sources of Weakness," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 25 (1977), 481–93; Kleimola, "Up Through Servitude: The Changing Condition of the Muscovite Elite in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 6/2 (1979), 210–29; Kleimola, "Patterns of Duma Recruitment 1505–1550," in Daniel Waugh, ed., *Essays in Honor of A. A. Zimin*, Columbus, OH, 1985, 130–58; Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345–1547*, Stanford, CA, 1987.

[3] Richard Hellie, *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy*, Chicago, IL, 1971; Robert O. Crummey, *Aristocrats and Servitors: The Boyar Elite in Russia 1613–1689*, Princeton, NJ, 1983; Marshall Poe, *The Consular and Ceremonial Ranks of the Russian 'Sovereign's'*, *Court 1613–1713*, Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniorna, (forthcoming); Brenda Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy and Aristocracy: The Russian Service Elite of 1730*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1982; John P. LeDonne, "Ruling Families in the Russian Political Order 1689–1825," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 28, no. 3–4 (July–December 1987), 233–322; LeDonne, *Absolutism and Ruling Class: The Formation of the Russian Political Order, 1700–1825*, New York, 1991.

hands that is not attested to in the sources. They have correctly emphasized that the boyar elite was not a transitory series of great men but a congeries of clans, some at the pinnacle of society since the fourteenth century, and who remained at that pinnacle at least until the end of the eighteenth century. This is not to say that there were no new additions, but that there was no "fall of the aristocracy" and "rise of the gentry" posited particularly by S. F. Platonov. The American school has correctly identified the actual path of promotion to and within the Duma ranks, and its dependence on ancestral position and the complex and informal rules by which such promotions occurred. It has also pointed out the absolutely central role of the marriage politics of the ruling dynasty. In the seventeenth century, neither Dolgorukii, Streshnev, Naryshkin nor Apraksin would have been great names without marriages to the tsar. Even the rejected Lopukhins managed to maintain an important position in Russia after Peter's death.

The American studies of the ruling elite posit, however, a relationship of the great clans to politics which is not sustained in all aspects by the investigation of actual political action. Kollmann, Crummey, and LeDonne all see kinship relations as absolutely crucial to the political role of the great families. Yet the great families were not necessarily united within themselves. In the 1680s two first cousins, Princes Boris Alekseevich and Vasilii Vasil′evich Golitsyn, battled for predominance in the Russian state. V. V. Golitsyn paid for his failure with a twenty-five-year exile in the Russian north. Yet his victorious cousin Boris tried hard to prevent a worse fate, acting largely from family solidarity. In the course of Peter's reign there were many other families which split along political lines. The sense of kinship and solidarity was real, attested to many times, but it was not enough to allow the historian to infer similar political goals and feelings. The American school also assumes that the aim of the great families was their maintenance at the peak of power and control of the progression of their relatives and others up the ranks. Yet the political life of Peter's time was not a naked struggle for power, position, and access to the treasury. To a large part it was about the character of the informal structure of power, about concrete issues such as foreign policy, and occasionally about the larger political and cultural direction of the country. The issues were not the same in every decade or every case.

The study and elucidation of the composition of the ruling elite

runs the risk of substituting sociological abstraction for institutional abstraction. The belief that the great clans really ran Russia in conjunction with the tsar, not as his passive instruments, cannot really be sustained without the examination of the political events of the time. It is there that we shall see or not the action of the great families. Hence to really understand the functioning of the state, that is, the tsar, the ruling elite, and the institutions of state, we need to write the political narrative of the time. In the case of Peter, this means largely to rewrite the narrative, for the one we have is seriously lacking.

There are many problems with the existing narrative. The most dramatic is that of simple falsification, primarily in the case of events for which historians have relied on the work of N. G. Ustrialov. His falsification and omission of crucial documents from the affair of Tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich has misled historians for a century and a half.[4] There are the many legends about Peter and his reign, deriving from sources which are unreliable, late, or both, such as de Neuville, Matveev, Kurakin, and the collections of real and spurious anecdotes about Peter from the late eighteenth century. The largely worthless biographies of Peter manufactured in the West soon after his death circulated in Russia, often with spurious documents, and influenced the early historians of Peter such as I. I. Golikov. From Golikov and other sources these legends entered the history of Peter and are very hard, if not impossible, to expel. E. Shmurlo tried to do this at the turn of the century, but much of his work has been forgotten. Thus the romantic story of the encounter of Tsar Aleksei and Natalia Naryshkina at the house of Artamon Matveev is still alive a hundred years after Shmurlo proved it untenable.[5]

The legendary history of Peter is not merely an annoyance for the historian or a goldmine for the popular biographer. As I will show later, the romantic story of Natal′ia and Aleksei, attested to only a half century after the events, fundamentally distorts the history of the political career of Artamon Matveev, of the evolution of the Naryshkin faction, and thus of the origins of the political crises of the

[4] N. G. Ustrialov, *Istoriia tsarstvovaniia Petra Velikogo*, vols. I–IV and VI, St. Petersburg, 1858–63 (esp. vol. VI); Paul Bushkovitch, "Power and the Historian: The Case of Tsarevich Aleksei 1716–1718 and N. G. Ustrialov 1845–1859," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141, no. 3 (June, 1997), 177–212; and Bushkovitch, "Istorik i vlast′: delo tsarevicha Alekseia (1716–1718) i N. G. Ustrialov (1845–1859)," in Michael David-Fox, ed., *Amerikanskaia rusistika*, Samara, 2000, 80–120.

[5] See below, chapter 2.

later seventeenth century. This incident also points to another issue, the excision of Peter's "private life" from the mainstream of historical debate. Inattention to Peter's private life is a basic methodological error. Neither Russian tsars nor any other monarchs of the pre-modern world had a private life in the modern sense. Every bit of their lives, whether minor household appointments, journeys, forms of recreation, mistresses, or places of habitation, had some political overtones. Peter's affair with Anna Mons, his divorce, and his attachment to Ekaterina and his subsequent marriage to her were all in large part political acts. Unfortunately, the female households of the Romanov dynasty as well as the mistresses are largely unknown, and worse yet, the domain of unreliable semi-journalistic history, particularly that of M. I. Semevskii from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Semevskii was the last to write about most of the women of Peter's time, and his works mix legend, fantasy, and solid information in a manner that is at times impossible to disentangle. As he was looking at "private life" as he understood it, he at least wrote about the women in Peter's life, though from a point of view which marginalized their political role. No one has looked at the household and inner structure of the court since the antiquarian I. E. Zabelin, who in any case stopped at 1700.[6]

To rewrite the political narrative of Peter's time it is necessary to integrate what is now known of the family and clan structure of the elite, the so-called "private life" of Peter, and the institutional history which the state school and its offshoots have left us. The narrative of politics will allow us to reconstruct the informal structure of power, but to tell the story we need sources that make it possible. Writing the narrative of seventeenth-century Western European politics (or history) is not all that difficult: there is a multitude of diaries, correspondence, and memoirs that allow us to get behind the façade. For Peter's Russia there is no Madame de Sevigné or Duke de Saint-Simon to tell us what we want to know.[7] Surviving correspondence is extremely rare, and much of it is very formal, the ritualized exchange of greetings more common among European noblemen of the sixteenth century. Peter's own letters, collected in the *Pis'ma i bumagi Petra Velikogo*, ongoing since 1887, goes only up to the middle

[6] I. E. Zabelin, *Domashnii byt russkogo naroda v XVI i XVII stoletiiakh*, 2 vols., Moscow, 1862–69; M. I. Semevskii, *Tsaritsa Praskov'ia 1664–1723*, St. Petersburg, 1883; Semevskii, *Tsaritsa Katerina Alekseevna, Anna i Villim Mons 1692–1724*, St. Petersburg, 1884.

[7] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Saint-Simon ou le système de la Cour*, Paris, 1997.

of 1713 and in any case contains relatively little of either personal correspondence or letters and memoranda setting out Peter's motivations. In most of the letters he gives orders to subordinates, passes news to the favorite Aleksandr Menshikov or other major figures, commands the army, and exchanges diplomatic messages with other sovereigns. He does not tell us about the factional struggles at court, or give us private thoughts on Menshikov or Field Marshal Sheremetev. Only Menshikov himself, Sheremetev, Prince B. I. Kurakin, and a few others left substantial bodies of correspondence but it too is largely devoted to administrative, diplomatic, or military matters.

The one large body of source material to illuminate the political life of the Russian court continuously and in detail is the dispatches of the many foreign diplomats at the Russian court. Since the time of Leopold von Ranke historians of Western Europe have regarded diplomatic reports as crucial documents for the study of court politics, as well as for diplomacy. Russian historians, in contrast, have largely ignored these sources or used them opportunistically to write the history of Peter's time, though they have been used widely for later periods. Perhaps the problem has been that many of them are unpublished, and also that many of them are unknown. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century the Russian Imperial Historical Society began to publish (mostly excerpted) the reports on Russia from England, France, Prussia, and Austria for the eighteenth century, but only those from England and France covered Peter's time. Their value varied. England did not have an ambassador in Russia for much of Peter's reign, and Charles Whitworth, an accomplished diplomat who represented Queen Anne in 1704–10 spent more time on negotiations than on collecting information. France had no permanent presence until 1715, when the French commercial agent, Henri Lavie, arrived, only to spend much of his time drinking and repeat what was generally known in the diplomatic community.[8]

The Russian Historical Society missed the most interesting diplomatic series for Peter's time and immediately before. Beginning after the treaty of Andrusovo (1667), Russia began to attract the increased

[8] A more positive view of Lavie is found in Samuel Baron, "Henri Lavie and the Failed Campaign to Expand Franco-Russian Commercial Relations (1712–1723)," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 50 (1995), 29–50.

attention of European powers. Until that moment the only state to maintain a regular resident in Russia had been Sweden. The reports of Swedish agents begin in 1630 and continue until the outbreak of the Northern War in 1700, forming one of the most important sources and one of the least known for Russian history in those years. After 1667, the Swedes began to acquire colleagues. A Danish ambassador arrived in 1673, and a Dutch ambassador in 1676. Both countries had more or less permanent representation from that time.[9] The Holy Roman Empire was also aware of the rising power to the east, and sent more and more frequent envoys to Moscow. In 1692 the Imperial embassy left behind one Otto Pleyer, a young man with high-ranking relations in the Vienna bureaucracy and court, to learn Russian and observe the country. In the wake of the 1697–98 Imperial embassy Pleyer became the recognized Imperial representative and from then on provided monthly or even weekly reports for twenty years. At the outbreak of the Northern War, Pleyer was joined by ambassadors from Prussia and Peter's temperamental ally, Augustus II of Poland-Saxony. As the Polish constitution did not allow the king to maintain a permanent diplomatic staff abroad, Augustus used the Saxon Electorate to provide such emissaries, and their voluminous reports remain in Dresden today, unread by Russian historians since the 1880s. Similarly, only fragments of the Prussian reports from Peter's reign, extensive and highly informative, made it into print. It is all these reports that form a solid basis to construct the continuing thread of political life at the Russian court, yet only small fragments have been published.

Diplomatic sources are not terribly fashionable today, perhaps because of the misapprehension that they exclusively concern diplomatic negotiations. Many of the powers in question had no important business with Russia for years on end, or when they did, sent high-ranking extraordinary ambassadors. The residents and agents remained, sending out endless reports of Russian happenings, some of which were then pirated, legally or not, and often rewritten for

[9] G. V. Forsten, "Datskie diplomaty pri moskovskom dvore vo vtoroi polovine XVII veka (1648–1700)," *Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia* 355–56 (September 1904); and Forsten, "Snosheniia Shvetsii s Rossiei vo vtoroi polovine XVII veka (1648–1700)," *ibid.*, 315–17 (1898), 323 (1899), 325 (1899); Heinz Ellersieck, "Russia under Aleksei Mikhailovich and Feodor Alekseevich 1645–1682: The Scandinavian Sources," Ph.D. University of California at Los Angeles, 1955; Thomas Eekman, "Muscovy's International Relations in the Late Seventeenth Century: Johan van Keller's Observations," *California Slavic Studies* 14 (1992), 44–67.

the emerging newspaper market.[10] The diplomats were not merely rumor-mongers. They took considerable care to indicate when they knew something firsthand, from observation or from direct conversation with the principals, when they knew it from trusted sources, when something was the general talk, and when it was plain rumor. Obviously their firsthand conversations with Peter or Menshikov are more trustworthy than other sources, but their network of sources was not trivial.[11] Reading the dispatches year after year allows the historian to reconstruct the network of the diplomat, to see where he got his information and thus to infer the climate of feeling among certain of the courtiers or officials. Pleyer is a prime example, for his dispatches in the years 1700–09 reveal his contacts with the Sheremetev family, and later on with some of those implicated in the case of Tsarevich Aleksei, Avram Lopukhin and Vasilii Alekseevich, the Siberian tsarevich. These were all oppositional circles, while the Danish ambassadors first allied with the Naryshkin faction in the 1680s and later had more contact with Peter and Menshikov than with the discontented grandees whom Pleyer cultivated. All the diplomats had good access to the Russian court and government offices, most startlingly on the occasions when they reported in detail on supposedly secret investigations of political crimes.

To be sure, the diplomats had their agenda. Issues of no importance to their sovereigns they ignored. Thus the church and the cultural changes going on in the church almost never figure in diplomatic reports. The church appears only on the rare occasions where it impinged on high politics or on foreign relations. There are cultural blind spots, but on the whole the diplomats do not present

[10] In the seventeenth century the Swedish reports were regularly purchased and appeared, with frequent changes, in the German newsletters: Martin Welke, "Rußland in der deutschen Publizistik des 17. Jahrhunderts (1613–1689)," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 23, (1976), 105–276. The same occurred even more often in Peter's time. The most often cited and plagiarized history of the tsar was that of Jean Rousset, a French protestant *émigré*, who published in Amsterdam in 1728–26 his *Mémoires du règne de Pierre le Grand* under the name of Iwan Iwanowitz Nestesuranoi. The work was a compilation of public and diplomatic sources. His account of the affair of Tsarevitch Aleksei, for example, is a combination of the official Russian manifesto and the dispatches of the Dutch resident, Jacob de Bie. See vol. IV, p. 33, where the description of the ceremony of abdication of the tsarevich is a fairly exact translation of de Bie's report for 6/17 February 1718 in ARSG Rusland 7368, 1718. Rousset, like the earlier German journalists, evidently did not have access to the encoded portions of the despatches. On Rousset and the plagiarism of his work, see R. Minzloff, *Pierre le Grand dans la littérature étrangère*, St. Petersburg, 1873, 40–3.

[11] On some of the methods and terminology of the diplomat's reports see Paul Bushkovitch, "Aristocratic Faction and the Opposition to Peter the Great: The 1690s," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 50, (1995), 80–120.

an exotic story of wild orgies and barbaric cruelties such as dot the pages of many of the published accounts of Russia in the early modern era. The diplomats were in Russia to conduct business. They needed to know how the country worked, who was powerful, who was on the rise and the opposite, what was Peter like and what did he want. They did not find the Russian court impenetrably alien or incomprehensible. In the 1670s and 1680s they certainly realized that it did not run on European lines and that its culture was different, but they saw it less as alien or foreign than primitive. The Russians lacked the culture assumed in Europe since the Renaissance and so naturally (they thought) its customs were backward and ignorant. The diplomats did not have any trouble understanding the political structure. Unlike many later historians who have agonized over the exact nature of the Russian elite, for the European diplomats of Aleksei's time or Peter's, it was clearly a nobility: *Adel* or *noblesse*. Within it they identified "the great" (*die grossen*, *les grands*), the favorites, both from great families and from lesser, and the various factions. They saw the women of the ruling house and some others engaged in political life, and reported it without shock or surprise. As Russian culture, particularly at court, became more European, the diplomats' understanding of Russian politics began to match that of the Russian elite, who abandoned the religious terminology of earlier centuries.

Russian sources naturally form the core of the study of Russian history, though they cannot by their nature answer all questions. The mass of documents of the *Razriad*, with its year by year recording of promotions to Duma and court ranks, combined with the records of appointments to head the various chancelleries, allows a precise tracking of the official positions of the elite for the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, no similar body of data exists for the eighteenth century, but in recompense the historian has the letter collections of Menshikov and a few other grandees. Mostly bureaucratic correspondence and formal greetings, they nevertheless contain crucial nuggets of information. I have scarcely been able to exploit their varied uses. Among the most valuable records are those of the investigation and trials of various opponents of Peter within the elite, particularly the Tsykler–Sokovnin case and the investigation of Tsarevich Aleksei. Ustrialov's very selective publication of the records of the case of Aleksei has required a reexamination of the archival originals. Finally, the huge mass of bureaucratic docu-