The Dissident

Richard Pipes
Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger
Yale, 2003,
264 pages,
and
Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture
Yale, 2005,
216 pages.

Reviewed by Marshall Poe

As World War II came to a bloody close, Americans suddenly realized that they knew remarkably little about the Soviet Union, their erstwhile ally and soon-to-be adversary in the approaching Cold War. Other than the fact that the USSR had a very large and robust army which had devastated Nazi Germany at enormous human and material cost, American perceptions of the Soviet Union were limited to clichés about long-suffering, mystical Slavs and hot-headed, communist fanatics. So, in typical American fashion, the United States began to train experts whose job would be to tell "us" about "them."

One of the first products of this effort to understand the Russians was Richard Pipes. Academic, historian, and public servant, Pipes has stood at the center of the Russian studies establishment in the United States since the very beginning of the cold war. For fifty years, as a Harvard University historian in the post-World War II years, as a critic of détente in the 1970s, as a member of the Reagan administration in the 1980s, and as a conservative intellectual in the 1990s, Pipes has shaped American opinion of and policy toward Russia. His half-century-long attempt to come to grips with Russia, its people, its culture, and especially its politics reflects America's collective attempt to do the same. The appearance of his memoir *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger*, and a new history, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*, offers us a long-overdue opportunity to review and assess Pipes' remarkable career.

Though Pipes has enjoyed a long and enviable life, his beginnings were far from propitious. He had the singular misfortune of being born into exactly the wrong tradition in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. To begin one's life as a Polish Jew in 1923 usually meant dying twenty years later at the hands of the Nazis. Pipes avoided this fate thanks to a father who was blessed with both foresight and resourcefulness. Pipes tells the tale of his family's flight from Poland to the United States with characteristic understatement in *Vixi*. It is, nonetheless, a breathtaking tale. Alas, many of Pipes' kin did not survive the ideologically-inspired mass murder of the late 1930s and early 1940s. By the time his family fled in 1940, Pipes' maternal uncle, Herman, a resident of Leningrad, had already been killed by Stalin's henchmen. During the few short years that followed, many more of Pipes' relatives would be slaughtered by the Nazi extermination machine. For the young Pipes, these traumatic experiences taught him a clear and unambiguous lesson: Whether communist or fascist, ideological fanaticism is uniformly murderous. This view would influence all of his later scholarship.

Upon arriving in the United States, Pipes, who had already shown bookish inclinations, promptly availed himself of that great American engine of immigrant advancement—higher education. The story of how he came to be accepted into college is a testament to both the virtues of the American educational system and Pipes' own—apparently inherited—moxie. With not a little daring, Pipes simply wrote postcards to a number of American colleges asking if they might find a way for him to attend, though his English was imperfect and he had no money. Amazingly, four of the addressed institutions accepted him. He chose Muskingum College in Ohio. It was a fortunate selection, because it was there, in the trusting embrace of a small, Midwestern campus, that he was gently eased into American life and letters. He would never really leave.

The speed with which Pipes "Americanized" is suggested by the fact that, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he attempted to enlist in the army, only to be told that as a foreigner he could not do so. He did not, however, have to wait too long to serve his new country, and in January 1942 he was drafted into the Army Air Corps. Pipes' career in the military was short and undistinguished, but it turned out to be crucial to his later work. For it was in the military, oddly enough, that he embarked on his lifelong study of Russian history.

Realizing that he could best serve the war effort with his intellect rather than by carrying a gun, Pipes was accepted to a Cornell University program which taught Russian to army personnel. It was the humble beginning of the American drive to produce experts capable of dealing directly with the USSR. Being a native Polish speaker, Pipes learned Russian quickly. It was his first encounter with Russia and the Russians, and the relationship would prove to be a lasting one.

Nonetheless, it was not immediately rewarding. Characteristically, the army couldn't figure out exactly what to do with Pipes, so it shuttled its newly minted Russia expert from one mundane assignment to another. Happily, this gave Pipes time to read, and what he read would prove just as significant to his newfound career path as his formal education: François Guizot's *History of Civilization in Europe*. It is possible that Pipes felt a certain kinship with the nineteenth-century French historian. Like Pipes, Guizot had suffered the murderous rage of fanatical ideologies. Young Guizot's father was executed by French revolutionaries, just as the young Pipes' relatives had fallen victim to the lethal policies of the communist and Nazi regimes. Guizot and Pipes understood, in a way that many who have not undergone the same traumas cannot, that ideas can be deadly.

There is no doubt, however, that the *kind* of history Guizot penned fired Pipes' imagination. Guizot wrote what modern historians disparagingly call "speculative history." In Guizot's time it was called "philosophical history." It was based on the assumption that historical entities were organic in nature, that is, evolving and growing like organisms, each unique to its origins and conditions. The methods of philosophical history were sympathetic: The historian's primary tool was believed to be an emotive identification with his subject. The ultimate goal of this method was spiritual understanding. The philosophical historian sought not merely to chronicle events but to uncover the *geist*, or spirit, of a time and place. In Guizot and his method, Pipes found an intellectual model. Indeed, the question central to all of Pipes' future scholarship—what is the spirit of Russian civilization?—and the method by which he sought to answer it (the historical analysis of Russia's organic development over time) were quintessentially philosophical.

Pipes' philosophical history of Russia would yield rich results and inform American understanding of the USSR at the highest levels of

government. But Pipes would pay a price for his adherence to the principles of philosophical history. To many modern historians—including his fellow Russia experts—Pipes' dogged faithfulness to "speculative history," as they called it, was incomprehensible. Nations, it was asserted, are not organisms, sympathy is not a method, and national character is a pernicious myth. These criticisms only grew louder as American historiography became increasingly positivist and empiricist in its orientation. Pipes, however, was no "social scientist," concentrating on statistical minutiae and collating data, and this fact would always place him on the fringes of his profession. He has never seemed to mind it there.

But this was all in the future. Demobilized in 1946, Pipes entered graduate school at Harvard University, then one of the few places in the United States where one could study Russian history. Harvard's Russian program was expanding in response to the new international political situation, and his fellow graduate students—Leopold Haimson, Martin Malia, Marc Raeff, Nicholas Riasonovsky, and Donald Treadgold—would go on to train a good portion of the Russian studies establishment during the cold war. As his dissertation topic, Pipes selected Bolshevik nationalities theory. The choice reflected his desire to look beyond appearances and discover the essential spirit of his subject. Pipes knew that Marxists believed nationalism was a bourgeois ideology designed to impede class struggle and oppress the proletariat. How was it, then, that the USSR was composed of national republics, and Russian nationalism in particular was all the rage under Stalin? The Bolsheviks were supposed to be transcending nations, but instead they were creating and championing them. What, Pipes wanted to know, was *really* going on?

The answer he proposed in his doctoral dissertation and subsequent book *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* was this: The current state of the USSR was the result not of Bolshevik ideology, but of forces deeply rooted in Russian history. Over the course of five hundred years the Russians had created a massive, multi-national empire, largely by force of arms. The Russo-centric Bolsheviks, despite their anti-imperialist and anti-nationalist rhetoric, had recreated that empire after the Revolution of 1917, again through the use of state violence. As a result, the USSR remained what the Russian empire had always been, the "prison house of nations," despite existing in an era dominated by the idea of national sovereignty. The implication of Pipes' analysis was clear: The

Soviet Union, as an empire in a world of nation-states, was a house of cards. Things had fallen apart once, and they would again. Pipes would repeat this prediction many times in the coming decades, and in the end he would be vindicated.

This interpretation, however, resting as it did on the assumption of historical continuity between the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, was out of step with the mainstream of American Sovietology. In the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of "systems" dominated American academic discourse. Envying the sciences and trusting the principles of quantification, American scholars took for granted that all social phenomena could be reduced to a set of laws similar to those of physics or chemistry. Taken together, these laws constituted internally consistent social systems which were comprehensible and predictable. The aim of Sovietology, therefore, was to discover the specific laws governing the Soviet social system. Needless to say, Pipes did not share this worldview. In his mind, nations were not systems, but weather-beaten, time-worn, *sui generis* historical communities. Nations were governed not by logical rules but by profoundly idiosyncratic, often unconscious, and immensely powerful traditions of thought and behavior. This being so, he argued, the only way to understand a nation's present condition—especially a centuries-old nation like Russia—was to study its organic historical development.

This is precisely what Pipes decided to do after finishing *The Formation of the Soviet Union*. He began with the observation that the Soviet Union was not nearly as revolutionary as many pundits, politicians, and political scientists thought. To be sure, the men who ruled the Russian empire were communists. They wanted to build socialism and spread communism around the world—by repression and force of arms, if necessary. But *these* communists were also Russian (or Russianized) and behaved accordingly. Pipes believed that, behind the veneer of ideological bluster, the parallels between Russia's *ancien régime* and the new communist order were obvious. The Czar ruled alone, with absolute power, and so did the party. The Czar owned all the nation's property, and so did the party. The Czar controlled public discourse and suppressed dissent, and so did the party. The Czar ruled a multi-national empire, and now, so did the party. Other Sovietologists ignored these parallels because they were committed to the idea—which originated in the Soviet government's own propaganda—that the Bolsheviks were constructing a brand new social system based on the abstract principles of Marxism. The Sovietologists believed that

communism was transforming Russia, while Pipes sensed that Russia was transforming communism.

Searching for the historical foundations of modern, "communist" Russia, Pipes began to study earlier periods in Russian history. Today such a shift in research agendas would constitute career suicide for an untenured lecturer on early Soviet history, but the historical profession of the mid-1950s had yet to be divided into today's hyper-specialized and vigilantly defended fiefdoms. As a result, Pipes was permitted to follow his instincts into the neglected fields of medieval, early modern, and Imperial Russian history. We can be grateful that he did, because the results of his investigations into the distant Russian past immeasurably deepened American understanding of the Soviet Union. Pipes' work on the evolution of Russian political culture proves that sometimes it takes an outsider to see what the specialists cannot.

Pipes' research was driven by a question he formulated in a memorandum dated 1956: "How and for what reasons (real or alleged) has Russia retained its autocratic system of government even after this system had been abolished in Europe?" Westernizing reformers had come to Russia one after another over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries: Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander I, Alexander II, Nicholas II, the Provisional Government, and finally the Bolsheviks themselves. Yet none of them had been able to curb the rise of autocracy and move Russia onto the path toward limited government. Pipes saw that autocracy enjoyed a mysterious hold over Russia. Why?

He initiated his investigation with a study of Nikolai Karamzin, perhaps the most sophisticated apologist for autocracy Russia has ever produced. Karamzin was the greatest Russian historian of the early nineteenth century and a counselor to the reform-minded Czar Alexander I. Against his own mildly republican tendencies, the Westernized Karamzin had concluded, on the basis of his historical research, that autocracy was the only form of government fit for Russia. Others might be "better" in some abstract sense, but they were unsuited to Russian conditions. Karamzin made his case to Alexander in a brief which Pipes translated and published in 1957 as *Memoirs on Ancient and Modern Russia*. Karamzin held that:

> Autocracy has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in her political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to her perdition, for she consists of very many diverse parts, each of which has its own civic needs; what save

> unlimited monarchy can produce in such a machine the required unity of action? If Alexander… should lift a pen and prescribe himself laws other than those of God and of his conscience, then the true, virtuous citizen of Russia would presume to stop his hand, and to say: "Sire! You have exceeded the limits of your authority."

This is a classic statement of the "natural" argument for the maintenance of autocracy, appealing to such impersonal forces as geography and demographics. The theory behind it is simple: Russia is enormous, diverse, and conflicted; such countries *by their nature* require a concentrated, uniform, and united government in order to prosper. Russia, therefore, requires autocracy. To this general theory, Karamzin added historical proofs. He pointed out that when autocratic power collapsed, as in the early-seventeenth-century "Time of Troubles," the Russian people suffered social instability, invasion, revolt, and war. Similarly, when Western-minded rulers attempted to import European-style political institutions to Russia, as Catherine the Great did in the eighteenth century, they always failed. In short, without autocracy, there was no Russia.

As Pipes demonstrates in his most recent book, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*, Karamzin did not invent the natural argument for autocracy. Russian conservatives borrowed it from early modern European political philosophers. Iuri Krizhanich and Feofan Prokopovich, both intimately familiar with Western political theory, outlined the natural argument during the seventeenth century. Vasilii Tatishchev and Catherine the Great herself, also versed in European thought, elaborated on it in the eighteenth century. By the time Karamzin had presented it to Alexander I in the early nineteenth century, the natural argument had become old hat, or what we might more charitably call "tradition." Pipes points out that later conservative thinkers—Count Sergei Uvarov, the Slavophiles, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Mikhail Katkov, Konstantin Leontiev, Sergei Witte, and Petr Stolypin, among others—would advance additional arguments in favor of autocracy: that it was an engine of progress, that it was ethically superior to "European" government, that it could stave off the ravages of a potential revolution. None of these positions, however, had the strength or endurance of the natural argument, because none was as empirically satisfying. Sometimes autocracy *was* the engine of progress, ethically superior to Western regimes, and a bulwark against revolution. Sometimes it wasn't. But Russia was, is, and—so long as it remained Russia—always would be enormous, diverse, and

conflicted, and as such it needed the strong hand of the autocrat in order to remain intact. Supporters of the current Russian regime make much the same argument today.

After completing his translation of Karamzin, Pipes' intention was to write a complete history of Russian conservative thought, but he found himself drawn to the life of Petr Struve, a brilliant radical turned conservative critic of the Russian revolutionary left. Having received tenure at Harvard in 1957, Pipes was free to pursue whatever project he liked. He put his history of Russian conservatism aside and decided to write Struve's biography. He believed the project would take two years. It took twenty.

While working on his study of Struve, Pipes was still thinking about the deeper roots of the Russian autocratic tradition. The natural argument for the preservation of autocracy was clear enough, but it raised another question: If autocracy fit Russia "naturally," as the conservatives said, how had it come to do so? While it was true, in theory, that "natural" factors—size, diversity, internal tension—might condition a state to a certain kind of rule, Russia had not always been large, mixed, and conflicted. In fact, the Russian state began as a small, homogeneous, and harmonious country. Somehow, it had become very large, heterogeneous, and troublesome. How had this happened, and what did it mean for the evolution of autocracy itself? Having completed the first volume of his Struve biography in 1970, Pipes took a break from it to address this question. His answer came in the form of a contribution to the book series called, *à la* Guizot, *History of Civilization*. The result was perhaps Pipes' most significant contribution to Russian studies, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, published in 1974.

At the time *Russia Under the Old Regime* appeared, early Russian history was in a sorry state. Soviet historians cynically repeated the same Marxist talking points about the feudal crisis in Muscovy, dutifully citing Lenin throughout. Most American historians of Russia simply ignored the country's early history, favoring micro-studies of rebellious factories and impossibly elaborate biographies of obscure participants in the October Revolution. The professional Sovietologists also ignored early Russia—their specialty was macro-studies of the Soviet social system. In truth, from the 1950s to the 1970s, very little good history on the subject of early Russia was written anywhere, with the exceptions only proving the rule.

Pipes, however, was undaunted. He knew that the basic mechanics of Russian historical evolution from the earliest times to the present had already been worked out by a remarkable group of nineteenth-century Russian scholars: the Russian state-school historians—Konstantin Kavalin, Sergei Soloviev, Boris Chicherin, and the greatest Russian historian of his generation, Vasilii Kliuchevskii. They were little read in the 1970s, the Soviets officially repudiated them as instruments of bourgeois rule, and most American historians of Russia saw them as "background" for their studies of the all-important revolution. The Sovietologists, of course, did not know they existed. But Pipes read them, and he realized that their work held the key to understanding the rise of autocracy in Russia and, ultimately, its four-hundred-year reign over the country.

That key, he argued, was private property, or rather its absence. The state-school historians pointed out that the early Russian state evolved out of a prior institution: the patrimonial estate (*votchina*), controlled by a despotic prince. On these estates there was no distinction between private and public rights: the prince owned the land and the people on it, and he had the right to administer both as he saw fit. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Muscovite principality—the kernel of the Russian and Soviet Empires—expanded its patrimony to include all of Russia. In other words, the Muscovite Czar quite literally *owned* the Russian Empire—every piece of land, every subject, and every aspect of political power. Although Muscovite patrimonial rule would be tempered by Western reforms during the imperial era, the essence of Russian autocracy would remain the same. The Czar was the despotic owner of an estate that had become an empire.

To the state-school historians, and Pipes with them, the difference between European and Russian historical development could not have been clearer. In the Europe that took shape after the fall of the Roman Empire, various forces—the crown, the nobility, churches, municipalities—competed for power in a legal system that clearly distinguished between private and public rights. The ultimate result was a tradition of limited monarchy and the rule of law. In Russia, by contrast, despotic princes had fought one another for the rule of all Russia in a system that recognized little distinction between private and public rights. The result was unlimited monarchy and rule by caprice. Once this system had been imposed over a huge Eurasian landmass, autocracy proved almost impossible to moderate, because it systematically

removed or subjugated all potential agents of change and thus any threat to the Czar's absolute ownership of the state. The Russian nobility was bound to Czarist service, the Russian church became an instrument of the state, Russian towns were sources of royal revenue, and the bulk of the population was held in a state of semi-slavery, bound to the nobility, which in turn was bound, ultimately, to the Czar himself.

Pipes' conclusions were of enormous importance to our understanding of conservative thought in Russia, namely, that it rested—and rests today—on a self-serving conceit. Russian conservatives taught that autocracy was "natural" for Russia, and that it was the only form of government that could rule an empire of such enormity, but this was, and is, false. Certainly Russia's size, diversity, and tendency toward internal conflict made it naturally difficult to govern, but any number of regimes could *potentially* have managed the task. Even as Karamzin was formulating his theories in the nineteenth century, the United States—another large, diverse, and conflicted country—was managing rather well under republican rule. The truth was that autocracy did not magically emerge out of the Russian soil as the only possible form of Russian rule. Rather, it was imposed on Russia by a group of Muscovite princes whose successors and their confederates did almost everything they could to ensure that their autocratic power would remain undiminished. After they had eliminated all potential "intermediary bodies," their job was not difficult, because they alone held the commanding heights of political, economic, and cultural power. By Karamzin's time, autocracy probably did seem "natural" to Russia, but, as Pipes shows, this was an illusion. Autocracy was, in fact, a historical artifact, an invention become tradition, a contingent creation become a necessary fact.

After Pipes completed *Russia Under the Old Regime*, his long-promised history of Russian conservatism was again postponed as he returned to his biography of Struve, the second volume of which appeared in 1980. It was then postponed once again as Pipes—already well known as an outspoken critic of *détente*—was asked by the Reagan administration to join the National Security Administration (NSA) as an advisor on Soviet and Eastern European affairs.

During Pipes' tenure in government, his anti-communist stance made him a controversial figure, particularly in academic circles. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Soviet studies establishment was in the grips of the theory of "convergence." This

concept held that after the "break" in 1917 and the distortions of "good" Leninism by "bad" Stalinism, the USSR was now modernizing and becoming progressively more like the European country it had been all along. Capitalism and communism were, so it was said, converging. Pipes didn't buy any of it and said so publicly. To him, the entire convergence argument rested on a demonstrably false premise, because Russia was not really a European country in any important sense. True, its elite had adopted the patina of European civilization, but its patrimonial mode of evolution was *sui generis*. There was, said Pipes, no "break" in 1917. The continuity of Russian autocracy was clear to anyone who cared to look. Leninism and Stalinism—heirs to the Czarist tradition—were new only in that they were both exercises in totalitarian social engineering quite like Nazism in their means if not in their final goals. Capitalism and communism were not converging. The two systems were antithetical to one another, one being based on private property and limited government, and the other on collective ownership and absolute, unlimited rule. This led Pipes to his most daring thesis: Capitalism, he claimed, was destined to prosper, while communism, particularly in the Soviet case, was fated to collapse under the weight of its own political hypocrisy, economic stagnation, and policies of national oppression.

To the politically liberal American academic establishment, such views were plainly "Russophobic," a charge Pipes fought throughout the latter part of his career. While it is true that Pipes had, and has, some rather direct, critical things to say about various aspects of Russian and Soviet history, the accusation is unfounded. Pipes holds no deep-seated, irrational hostility toward the Russians, but he is keenly aware of the difference between Russian and, later, Soviet propaganda and reality. Russian elites in particular—the beneficiaries of autocratic power—have a long history of willful, self-serving, carefully crafted disinformation. Since reality was not as they wanted it to be, they created an alternative one intended for foreigners and for their own subjects, not dissimilar to the famous Potemkin villages. Over time, they had presented Russia to the West as the True Christian Empire, the True Enlightened Monarchy, and the True Workers' Paradise. Ultimately, however, there was little truth in any of these. Pipes' sin, in the eyes of America's academic establishment, was to continually, forcefully, and publicly point out this uncomfortable fact. One can argue that Pipes' blunt approach was ill-considered given the

delicate and dangerous international situation in the 1980s, but to call him a bigot made and makes no sense. Sometimes the truth is hard.

As a result of these controversies, Pipes fought the Russian studies and Sovietological establishment throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The battlefield was the history of the Russian Revolution itself. On one side stood Pipes, who insisted that the revolution was no revolution at all, but a *coup d'état*; that the Bolsheviks were violent fanatics, and that the Soviet Union was essentially a criminal enterprise. On the other side stood the "revisionists"—American scholars who, ironically, Pipes and his colleagues had trained—who held that the revolution was a popular uprising, that the Bolsheviks (with the exception, of course, of Stalin) were socialist reformers, and that the Soviet Union was an experiment in modernization. In reality, Pipes' battle with the revisionists was more of a perpetual stalemate than an actual war. Pipes ignored revisionist scholarship, saying (unfairly) that if he wanted the Soviet view of things he could read it in Soviet journals. In turn, the revisionists ignored Pipes, which was not difficult, since he had published little on the revolutionary era after *The Formation of the Soviet Union* in 1954.

Once he left the NSA in 1983, Pipes set about changing that. His answer to the revisionists would be his own revisionist project, a comprehensive history of the Russian Revolution and its immediate aftermath. Putting off, once again, his history of Russian conservatism, Pipes worked feverishly on what would become *The Russian Revolution* (1990) and *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime* (1994). In these books, Pipes passionately and sometimes angrily made the case that the Bolsheviks—and Lenin in particular—were power-hungry, bloody-minded utopians who hijacked the Russian autocratic state and used its awesome power to forge a totalitarian system that slaughtered millions of its own subjects. To Pipes, the late imperial regime was bad, but the Bolshevik regime was infinitely worse. It was, he concluded, nothing short of a catastrophic disaster for the Russian people.

Needless to say, Pipes' Burkean reflection on the Russian Revolution was not favorably received by the academy, particularly by the revisionists themselves. The major American journal in the field refused to review either volume. But the popular reception was very positive, largely, one suspects, because of Pipes' impeccable timing: The Soviet Union had fallen. The revisionists, who had argued that the Bolsheviks were legitimate modernizers, and the Sovietologists, who had argued that the Soviet Union

was a bastion of stability, had been suddenly silenced by history. Convergence had proved to be a myth, and Richard Pipes had just published two books that explained, by implication, everything that had just happened. The Soviet Union, he had claimed, began as an exercise in tyranny and, like all tyrannies, it would collapse. And it did. Having set out to explain the rise of the Soviet Empire, Pipes had inadvertently written its epitaph.

Perhaps satisfied with his vindication, and disenchanted with the current state of academia, Pipes retired from Harvard in 1996. As he notes in *Vixi*, the world of scholarship and higher education had changed radically since he first entered the historical profession. History departments had grown very large and yet extremely narrow. Every scholar had his or her particular bailiwick upon which others were not to trespass. Slim monographs on obscure subjects were the order of the day. Pipes' beloved "philosophical history" was practiced no more. And though he could take some solace in his apparent victory over the revisionists, it proved—at least in the academy—to be temporary. In May 1995 Harvard refused to grant tenure to Vladimir Brovkin, a well-published and outspoken scholar of early Soviet Russia whom Pipes viewed as his successor. With the revisionists firmly established at the top of the historical hierarchy in all the major universities, and Harvard worried about its reputation, it was not to be. Brovkin was out, and so was Pipes.

Freed by retirement from the politics of academia, Pipes turned, at last, to his long-neglected history of Russian conservatism. The result, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*, is something of a summation of his life's work on Russian political culture. It begins with a sketch of the patrimonial theory of Russian historical evolution, which Pipes laid out at length in *Russia Under the Old Regime*. To my mind, these brief pages are the best in the book, for they teach Pipes' essential lesson: Russian historical development can be understood only *in contrast* to European historical development. The early Russian Empire (the princedoms of Kievan Rus' and Muscovy) took shape in distant northern Eurasia, a region with poor soil, indefensible borders, and no access to the sea. In contrast, the European states evolved in a well-traveled area blessed with fertile land, good natural defenses, and extensive coastlines. Proto-Imperial Russia was born into an equally difficult cultural climate, for no classical civilization had ever inhabited the Rus' region of northern Eurasia. In contrast, early European states were constructed on the firm foundations of Greco-Roman

culture. As a result, classical legal concepts such as limited rule and private property were largely absent in early Russia, whereas they were common currency in medieval and early modern Europe. To be sure, early Russia absorbed a measure of classical culture from Constantinople, but the legacy of the Byzantine Empire was neither very rich outside the liturgical realm nor—from a political point of view—very challenging. The Muscovites read the few Byzantine political texts they received through the lens of their own patrimonial theory of rulership. And, of course, there were the nomads of the Eurasian steppes. The Mongols had ruled Russia for two centuries, and their descendants were a thorn in her side for long after that. Outside of the eastern and southern marches, most European states were safe from nomadic predation. To Pipes, these early differences—geographic, cultural, and military—explain the separate political cultures they created: autocracy in Russia and limited government in Europe.

Having set the historical stage, Pipes then introduces his actors—the major Russian conservative thinkers of the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries. The chapter on political thought in early Muscovy is not terribly satisfying, but the Muscovites did not write much about politics, so Pipes doesn't have much to work with in the first place. Indeed, one might argue that the very absence of Muscovite political texts tells us something about early Russian political thinking, namely, that patrimonial ideology was already firmly established at a very early stage.

The real story begins with Peter the Great. Peter was the first Czar who consciously attempted a program of Westernization. He knew that—from the European political perspective, at least—there was something slightly embarrassing about Russian governance. The Czar was too powerful, and his subjects too servile. So Peter—and after him Catherine II, Alexander I, Alexander II, and Nicholas II, *inter alia*—tried to reform the Russian system along Western lines. They all failed. There are, of course, many reasons for this, but the one emphasized by Pipes in *Russian Conservatism* is ideological: Russian reformers could not succeed because most Russians—and certainly the conservative thinkers Pipes discusses—did not want reform. As hard as it may be for Westerners to imagine, Russians truly *believed* in autocracy. Prokopovich, Tatishchev, Karamzin, Uvarov, Pobedonosev, Katkov, and other conservative figures sincerely felt that autocracy was the best form of government for Russia, and that without it Russia would perish. Autocracy and simple Russian patriotism were, to them,

indistinguishable. Although Pipes does not venture into the realm of popular political opinion, it is not outrageous to suggest that the beliefs of the literate Russian conservatives were by and large shared by the great mass of Russian subjects. For them, the Czar's rule was a natural and necessary fact of life: natural because the Czar was ordained by God, and therefore, without a Czar, Russia would fall into sin and depravity. They could imagine no other possibility.

The question, of course, is whether Russians today can imagine another possibility. Alas, Pipes does not address this question directly, and his book ends with the Revolution of 1917. But Pipes is, ultimately, a firm believer in the power of culture. Political movements, parties, and even entire regimes may come and go, but cultures stay. Looking at Pipes' life's work, we can conclude, sadly, that autocracy will remain an important element of Russian culture, just as it has been for centuries. At every historical moment in which Russia appeared to be charting a new course—1613, 1730, 1767, 1809, 1825, 1861, 1905, 1917, and so forth—she returned to autocracy. Given the current popularity of the Putin regime and its continuing policy of concentrating more and more power in the hands of the head of state, Russia appears to be doing the same today.

Richard Pipes calls himself a "non-belonger." It is an apt description. Over the course of his rich career, he has refused to join the many fashionable and transient academic cliques of the moment, and, it must be said, he has been rejected by as many more. Such isolation can be painful, and though Pipes stoically refuses to acknowledge it, I have no doubt that it was hurtful on occasion. Yet he has persevered. Despite it all, Pipes has never stopped trying to explain "them" to "us"—even when we wouldn't listen, even when we rejected what he had to say, and even when we called him a paranoid, war-mongering bigot. Having experienced tyranny firsthand, he knew that we needed to hear his message and that, eventually, we would. We should thank him for his determination. Whether he likes it or not, he is no longer alone—today we are all non-belongers.

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