

The Foundations of Russian Culture and Art*

By Souren Melikian

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Politicians who sometimes wonder about the deeper motivations of Russian diplomacy should pay a long visit to the most remarkable show of art from Russia ever staged anywhere.

On view at the Louvre, “Holy Russia” offers much more than a fascinating display of works of art from far-flung institutions inside and outside Russia.

The exhibition book, edited by Jannic Durand of the Louvre and Tamara Igumnova of the Moscow Historic State Museum, effectively puts together the material evidence illustrating the conflicting components that went into the making of Russian culture from its inception. The Kingdom of Rus, as it was originally known, came about as a synthesis of human groups and cultural characteristics that seemed as fit to go together as fire and water. It was founded in the ninth century by marauding Scandinavians pouring from present-day Sweden into lands largely populated by Finns mixing with Slavs who were slowly arriving from territories west of present-day Russia.

The earliest surviving Russian chronicle, “An Account of Ancient Times,” tells of the alliance forged by the Slavs and the Finns against the “Variagi,” as Russians call the ancient invaders. Their feats extended as far as France where the “Varègues” or “Varenges” left their name to the town of Varengeville in Normandy—a detail ignored in the exhibition book. A chieftain called Rurik became the ruler of the new kingdom. Thus came into existence the Rurikid dynasty, the first in Russia that owes its name to the land of the Rus, known alike to the Latin chroniclers of medieval Europe and to Iranian geographers using Arabic, the international language of the Muslim East.

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How deep the Scandinavian imprint was can be gauged from the weapons and jewels recovered from tombs on territories stretching from the north of modern Russia to the south of present-day Ukraine. The 10th-century fibulae excavated from a funerary chamber in the northern town of Pskov and another discovered in Kiev, now the capital of Ukraine, are no different from costume jewels of this type found in Scandinavia.

The rise of Christianity was the unifying factor that laid the foundation of Russian culture. As early as 959 a Princess Olga sent an embassy to the Germanic emperor Otto requesting the dispatch of a bishop, partly in the hope of raising the status of the kingdom of the Rus. To no avail. It was only in 987 that her grandson Vladimir, keen to obtain the hand of the Byzantine emperor's sister, Princess Anne, agreed in exchange to adhere to Christianity. Byzantium, shaken by uprisings in its non-Greek possessions, desperately needed to recruit Variagi mercenaries. The deal was concluded. As good as his word, Vladimir ordered in 988 the conversion of the entire population of Kiev, which became the historical birthplace of Russian culture.

Acceptance of the new religion was not immediate. In the struggle for the throne of Kiev that followed Vladimir's death, his younger sons Boris and Gleb, who had converted to Christianity, were slain by their brother Sviatopolk. Their memory as saintly martyrs was henceforth perpetuated in icons, the Russian word borrowed from Byzantine Greek for holy "images."

A 14th-century icon from the monastery of Zverin in Novgorod shows the two brothers wearing an attire that reveals a third component in the complex mix of Russian art—the Middle Eastern element. While their swords reproduce the Western model, the pearl-studded leather strips hanging from their belts and their armlets are royal costume fittings worn by the emperors of Sasanian Iran and their early Islamic successors.

The multiple strands, North European, Byzantine and Middle Eastern, kept recurring through much of Russian history, occasionally interweaving in astonishing fashion.

A magnificent limestone capital from the Church of Nativity erected between 1192 and 1196 in the town of Vladimir has the shape of a Romanesque capital, but its formal ornament is carved in a style reminiscent of the repertoire of Islamic Iran with its distant Hellenistic legacy. A pillar from the same church associates five-lobed palmettes common in 10th- and 11th-century Iran with knotted motifs reminiscent of Viking ornament.

The fascination with Northern Europe, more particularly Germanic lands, was lasting. An armilla, or shoulder application, depicting the resurrection of Jesus in champlevé enamels on gilt copper, made in the late 12th century somewhere between the Rhine and the Meuse, was listed in the Cathedral of the Dormition treasury in Vladimir by the 17th century. The head of a man from the town of Old Riazan would not surprise in Romanesque sculpture from Burgundy.

By then a profoundly original figural art was blossoming, most of it known mainly from fragments. The head of a man painted in the late 12th century on the

walls of the now vanished first cathedral in Smolensk is remarkable for its expressiveness.

An apex was reached in the first third of the 13th century. The twin influences of Ottonian Germany and Byzantine Greece blend in its ultimate masterpiece, the golden doors of the Cathedral of the Nativity in the town of Suzdal. The scenes painted in gold on the dark metallic ground are Byzantine in inspiration without really resembling Greek medieval art, while the lion masks are based on German prototypes. These too have a distinctive expressiveness.

Somehow, the mid-13th-century Mongol invasion followed by devastation and 200 years of occupation did not stop artistic creation.

Russian manuscript painting, unknown outside its homeland, produced stunning masterpieces. On a vellum leaf from "Simon's Psalter" illuminated in Novgorod, Jesus stands in a stylized landscape, giving the viewer the searching look of a man intentionally alive.

Drastically opposite trends thrived simultaneously. The icon of Saints George, Climachus and Blaise, painted in Novgorod around the same time, is stylized in a rigid manner based on early Byzantine tradition. The elongated Climachus, about three times the size of George and Blaise, stands against an erstwhile emerald green and intense red ground, revealing a taste for contrasted colors that would be revived in avant-garde painting of the 20th century.

Western influence continued to creep in. Admirable frescoes have been revealed by fragments excavated in Pskov, where the Church of the Nativity and other ecclesiastical constructions demolished by Peter the Great stood until the 18th century. Two female figures in long veils, presumed to be saints, owe as much to awareness of Gothic art from 14th-century Germany in the handling of their smiling faces, as they do to the Byzantine Renaissance for the folds of their drapes.

The attraction to West European art persisted well into the 15th century. The silver-gilt and gilt copper panaghiarion signed in 1435 by Master Ivan Arip offers spectacular evidence of the admiration felt for German goldsmiths. The polylobed base and the raised stand with elaborate fleur-de-lis are in the best tradition of flamboyant Gothic monstrances. Curiously, the four lions and the kneeling angels supporting the paten and cover used in the Orthodox ritual send back echoes to much earlier German art.

The multiplicity of strands from East and West never dried up in Russia. When a steel helmet with gold overlay was commissioned for Ivan the Terrible who ruled from 1533 to 1547, the work was entrusted to a Muslim armorer, apparently called in from the lands of the Mongol-Turkic Golden Horde in southern Ukraine, if not from further south. This is shown by the characteristic Turkish shape of the helmet as well as the Iranian-derived arabesques associated with a large border of stylized Arabic script.

To the Russians themselves, the twin attraction to East and West never felt contradictory. Sergei Shchukin, one of the greatest collectors of French Impressionism, also had an outstanding collection of Iranian manuscript painting. In ballet,

that supreme Russian achievement in Western-type performing arts, the Eastern touch is evident—as shown by Leon Bakst’s designs.

Nothing has changed. Early art and its ancient roots tell you why.

Peter I, Czar of Russia*

Peter I or Peter the Great, 1672–1725, Czar of Russia (1682–1725), Major Figure in the Development of Imperial Russia

Excerpted from *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 2007

EARLY LIFE

Peter was the youngest child of Czar Alexis, by Alexis's second wife, Natalya Naryshkin. From Alexis's first marriage (with Maria Miloslavsky) were born Feodor III, Sophia Alekseyevna, and the semi-imbecile Ivan. On Feodor III's death (1682), a struggle broke out for the succession between the Naryshkin and Miloslavsky factions. The Naryshkins at first succeeded in setting Ivan aside in favor of 10-year-old Peter. Shortly afterward, however, the Miloslavsky party incited the *strel'tsi* (semi-military formations in Moscow) to rebellion. In the bloody disorder that followed, Peter witnessed the murders of many of his supporters. As a result of the rebellion Ivan, as Ivan V, was made (1682) joint czar with Peter, under the regency of Sophia Alekseyevna.

A virtual exile, Peter spent most of his childhood in a suburb of Moscow, surrounded by playmates drawn both from the nobility and from the roughest social elements. His talent for leadership soon became apparent when he organized military games that became regular maneuvers in siegecraft. In addition, Peter began to experiment with shipbuilding on Lake Pereyaslavl (now Lake Pleshcheyevo). Peter learned the rudiments of Western military science from the European soldiers and adventurers who lived in a foreign settlement near Moscow. His most influential foreign friends, Patrick Gordon of Scotland, François Lefort of Geneva, and Franz Timmermann of Holland, came from this colony. In 1689, Sophia Alekseyevna attempted a coup against Peter; this time, however, aided by the loyal

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part of the *streltsi*, he overthrew the regent. For several years, until Peter assumed personal rule, the Naryshkins ran the government. Ivan V, whose death in 1696 left Peter sole czar, took no part in the government.

SOLE RULER

Foreign Policy

Russia was almost continuously at war during Peter's reign. In the 16th and early 17th cent. the country had fought periodically in the northwest against Sweden, in an attempt to gain access to the Baltic Sea, and in the south against the Ottoman Empire.

While continuing the policy of his predecessors, Peter drew Russia into European affairs and helped to make it a great power. His earliest venture was the conquest of Azov from the Ottomans in 1696, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1695. Peter then embarked on a European tour (1697–98), traveling partly incognito, to form a grand alliance against the Ottoman Empire and to acquire the Western techniques necessary to modernize Russia's armed forces. He failed to form an anti-Ottoman alliance, but his conversations with the Polish king and others led eventually (1699) to a coalition against Sweden.

Peter also gained considerable knowledge of European industrial techniques (he even spent some time working as a ship's carpenter in Holland) and hired many European artisans for service in Russia. In 1698 he returned to Russia, began to modernize the armed forces, and launched domestic reforms. After concluding (1700) peace with the Ottomans, Peter, in alliance with Denmark and the combined Saxony-Poland, began the Northern War (1700–1721) against Charles XII of Sweden. Although disastrously defeated at first, he routed Charles at Poltava in 1709 and by the Treaty of Nystad (1721) retained his conquests of Ingermanland, Karelia, and Livonia.

Peter's conquests in the south were less permanent. Azov was restored to the Ottoman Empire in 1711; Derbent, Baku, and the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, conquered in a war (1722–23) with Persia, were soon lost again. In the east, Russia extended its control over part of Siberia but failed to subjugate either Khiva or Bokhara. Peter's first diplomatic missions to China were unsuccessful but his efforts led to the Treaty of Kyakhta (1727), which fixed the Russo-Chinese border and established commercial relations. Peter's interest in imperial expansion led to the financing of the first voyage of Vitus Bering.

Domestic Policy

Peter had returned to Russia in 1698 at the news of a military revolt allegedly instigated by Sophia Alekseyevna. He took drastic vengeance on his opponents and forced Sophia into a convent. On the day after his return, Peter personally cut off the beards of his nobles and shortly thereafter ordered them to replace their long robes and conical hats with Western dress. This attack on the symbols

of old Muscovy marked the beginning of Peter's attempt to force Russia to adopt European appearance and other features of Western culture. Most of Peter's reforms followed his predecessors' tentative steps, but his demonic pace and brutal methods created an impression of revolutionary change.

The reforms were sporadic and uncoordinated; many of them grew out of the needs of Peter's almost continuous warfare. He introduced conscription on a territorial basis, enlarged and modernized the army, founded and expanded the navy, and established technical schools to train men for military service. To finance this huge military establishment, he created state monopolies, introduced the first poll tax, and placed levies on every conceivable item. Peter encouraged and subsidized private industry and established state mines and factories to provide adequate supplies of war materials. Peter reformed the administrative machinery of the state. He introduced a supervisory senate and a new system of central administration and tried to reform provincial and local government.

Peter also attempted to subordinate all classes of Russian society to the needs of the state. He enlarged the service nobility (the body of nobles who owed service to the state), imposed further duties on it, and forced the sons of nobles to attend technical schools. To control the nobles he introduced the Table of Ranks, which established a bureaucratic hierarchy in which promotion was based on merit rather than on birth. The nobility's economic position was strengthened by changes in the laws of land tenure. The serfs (who paid the bulk of taxes and made up most of the soldiery) were bound more securely to their masters and to the land. Peter subordinated the church to the state by replacing the patriarchate with a holy synod, headed by a lay procurator appointed by the czar.

Peter introduced changes in manners and mores. The ban on beards and Muscovite dress was extended to the entire male population, women were released from their servile position, and attempts were made to improve the manners of the court and administration. Peter sent many Russians to be schooled in the West and was responsible for the foundation (1725) of the Academy of Sciences. He reformed the calendar and simplified the alphabet. The transfer of the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg, built on the swamps of Ingermanland at tremendous human cost, was a dramatic symbol of Peter's reforms. Although Peter sought to enforce all his reforms with equal severity, he was unable to eradicate the traditional corruption of officials or to impose Western ways on the peasantry.

His reforms were often considered whimsical and sacrilegious and met widespread opposition. The conservatives among the clergy accused him of being the antichrist. The discontented looked to Peter's son, Alexis, who was eventually tried for treason on flimsy evidence and was tortured to death (1718). In 1721, Peter had himself proclaimed "emperor of all Russia." In 1722 he declared the choice of a successor to be dependent on the sovereign's will; this decree (valid until the reign of Paul I) preceded the coronation (1724) of his second wife as Empress Catherine I. She was a Livonian peasant girl whom Peter had made his mistress, then his wife (1712) after repudiating his first consort. Her accession on Peter's death was largely engineered by Peter's chief lieutenant and favorite, A. D. Men-

shikov. Although many of Peter's innovations were too hasty and arbitrary to be successful, his reign was decisive in the long process of transforming medieval Muscovy into modern Russia.

PERSONALITY AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Peter's personal traits ranged from bestial cruelty and vice to the most selfless devotion to Russia; his order to his troops at Poltava read, "Remember that you are fighting not for Peter but for the state."

Despite the convulsive fits that plagued him, he had a bearlike constitution, was of gigantic stature, and possessed herculean physical prowess. He drank himself into stupors and indulged in all conceivable vices but could rouse himself at a moment's notice, and he was willing to undergo all the physical exertions and privations that he exacted from his subjects.

Peter subordinated the lives and liberties of his subjects to his own conception of the welfare of the state. Like many of his successors, he concluded that ruthless reform was necessary to overcome Russia's backwardness. Peter remains one of the most controversial figures in Russian history. Those who regard Russia as essentially European praise him for his policy of Westernization, and others who consider Russia a unique civilization attack him for turning Russia from its special path of development. Those impressed by imperial expansion and state and social reforms tend to regard Peter's arbitrary and brutal methods as necessary, while others appalled by his disregard of human life conclude that the cost outweighed any gains.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Moscow on the Seine*

By Jennifer Siegel

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Early in the evening of March 29, 1814, the Russian army glimpsed the spires of Napoleon's capital for the first time. An officer, Alexander Mikhailovsky-Danilevsky, later recalled a general cry of "Paris! Paris! . . . Forgotten in a moment were the fatigues of the campaign, wounds, fallen friends and brothers: overwhelmed with joy, we stood on the hill from which Paris was barely visible in the distance." The soldiers' enthusiasm was not unwarranted. After two years of nearly continuous fighting against Napoleon in the longest campaign in European history—a campaign that had marched the Russian army from Vilna in the west, eastward to Moscow, then all the way to Paris—the end to the conflict seemed for the first time to be as close at hand as the city rising on the horizon.

Dominic Lieven relates the tale of this campaign with masterly skill in "Russia Against Napoleon." It is a story that students of European history and admirers of Russian literary classics think they know well: Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812 and stayed too long; was trapped by the Russian winter and stymied by the nationalistic heroism of the Russian people; destroyed his Grande Armée in an ill-timed retreat across the snow-covered, war-ravaged fields; and was slowly pushed back to Paris by the reformed and newly invigorated coalition of Great Powers (Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia). In 1814, as every schoolchild once knew, Napoleon was dispatched to Elba, leaving open the possibility that Russia would dominate the recently liberated Continent.

Mr. Lieven, a professor of Russian history at the London School of Economics, paints a far more textured picture of Russia's crucial role in halting Napoleon's advance and containing France within its historic borders. "Russia Against Napoleon" is informed by Russian sources and focuses not only on Russia's oft-praised people but also on the country's oft-underappreciated leadership in the early 19th century.

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Along the way, Mr. Lieven debunks various myths that play down the achievements of Russia's military. As he notes, France itself—but also Russia's allies and even Russia's great nationalist writer, Leo Tolstoy—preferred to portray Russia's victory as the triumph of a hardy, resistant people and the vagaries of circumstance. Mr. Lieven insists on restoring credit to Russia's military forces, as well as to its leaders. Among the book's many virtues, it explains in engaging detail how Russia managed to mount first a defense against the greatest military mind of the day and then a successful offensive, culminating with the Cossack Life Guard “in their scarlet tunics and darkblue baggy trousers” parading down the Champs Elysées.

In Mr. Lieven's eyes, this story has two great heroes, and neither is Mikhail Kutuzov, the Russian general lionized by Tolstoy and, later, Stalin. Mr. Lieven praises Kutuzov, the commander in chief of the Russian forces, for his courage, skillful soldiering and mastery of public relations, but the author does not consider him the military genius that tradition has trained us to see. Rather it is the czar, Alexander I, and the historically undervalued Mikhail Barclay de Tolly, minister of war and the commander of the Russian forces before and after Kutuzov, who inspire Mr. Lieven's admiration.

Barclay de Tolly was responsible for Russia's successful strategy of “deep retreat,” which he had recommended as early as 1810. The idea was to lure the French far into Russia's heartland, stretching out their supply lines and making a potential French retreat crippling and costly. He was under constant criticism in his day for abandoning Russian ground to the French in 1812 without any real resistance, and he was under perpetual suspicion from the “Old Russian” camp at court and in the army because of his “foreign origins”—even though his family, of Scottish descent, had lived in the Russian Empire since the mid-17th century. In Mr. Lieven's hands, Barclay de Tolly comes across as tireless, dedicated, brave and strategically sound.

And Czar Alexander, often portrayed as unpredictable and ungrounded, frequently shows good leadership and diplomatic finesse in Mr. Lieven's telling. The seemingly all-powerful monarch struggled against the constraints imposed by his empire's enormous size, scattered population, inefficient communications, brutal weather and inept bureaucracy. Those challenges were magnified by a landowning aristocracy that effectively had the power of the purse; Alexander had to rely on the nobility for raising manpower and tax revenues.

Despite these constraints, Alexander proved an effective wartime leader, particularly after 1812, when the conflict moved out of Russia and diplomacy became paramount. He recognized that only a peace signed in Paris could guarantee the restoration of order in Europe and the security of Russia; but he also saw that Russia alone could never defeat the French forces. A victory over Napoleon was possible only because Alexander managed to form a grand alliance and keep it intact. This coalition-building, Mr. Lieven argues, was the czar's greatest achievement.