

## *Russia's Moral Rearmament*

"Looking at the present condition of my country. . . . I cannot but wonder at the short time in which morals in Russia have everywhere become corrupt." Prince M. M. Shcherbatov, an aristocrat during the reign of Catherine the Great, made this observation in a 1786 treatise, *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia*. But his assessment might just as well have been voiced today by any number of journalists writing about Russia's current predicament.

Money laundering, corruption, filthy electoral campaigns—these are the catch phrases in Western media coverage of things Russian. According to critics, business and politics in Russia are driven by greed and seething with criminal activity. After succeeding Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin himself announced that "the revival of people's morals" would be the cornerstone of his program.

In the decades following the death of Peter the Great in 1725, Russia wrestled with a similar moral crisis brought about by the introduction of new economic, social, and political standards. Peter the Great, like Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, was the product of a conservative and cumbersome administrative culture that he first modified and later destroyed. Indeed, it is tempting to draw up a modest list of cognates between Peter on the one hand and a melding of Mikhail and Boris on the other—from Harvard University economist Jeffrey Sachs, the modern counterpart to Peter's adviser, German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz, to Peter's famed Westernization during the early 18th century.

The Western-style customs and standards Peter introduced along with his "technology transfer" from Europe directly affected only the privileged. Succeeding generations of elites, in a process at once gradual and fitful, moved away from being subjects of a Westernization initially imposed from above—commanded by a formidable and terrifying monarch who cut off the sleeves of the boyars' kaftans with his own shears, forced the recalcitrant nobles among them to build houses on the swamp that was only beginning to take shape as St. Petersburg, and required aristocratic men and women to wear Western dress and mingle at social gatherings. Many members of the elite were eventually transmogrified into eager recipients of Western-style luxuries and adornments. Prince Shcherbatov thought their passion for Western "voluptuousness" had led to moral collapse. But by the time of Alexander Pushkin, early in the second quarter of the 19th century, many of these nobles had evolved into educated and worldly gentlemen and ladies imbued with the very spirit of Western refinement. The moral crisis that so alarmed Prince Shcherbatov had passed.

In Russia today, Vladimir Putin is right in his insistence on the need for moral regeneration. According to what precepts does he imagine such a revival ought to take place? Surely not the homely, stolid, and prudish conventional morality characteristic of so many hardworking drones of the high Brezhnev period, nor the inner-directed, conscience-driven teachings of that paragon of bourgeois virtue, Benjamin Franklin.

It may be that a campaign to change popular morals will take the form of vaguely Christian pontifications, hand in hand with punitive anticorruption measures, since Putin, like Boris Yeltsin before him, has allied himself closely with the Russian Orthodox Church and its obscurantist patriarch, Aleksy II. Indeed, Putin says he was secretly baptized as a baby and is an observant Christian.

More than 70 percent of Russians are Orthodox Christians. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews each account for less than one percent of the population, and estimates of the size of the Muslim segment vary widely. Baptist and Pentecostal evangelicals are among the fastest growing religious groups in the country. If the promised revival of morals takes the form only of theopolitical utterances represent-

ing one of the many faith traditions currently very much alive in the Russian Federation, then the prospect of moral renewal from above remains troubling. In Russia's long and turbulent history, many rulers have attempted to meddle with popular morals. Emperor Nicholas I's 1826 edict established a particularly pernicious form of morality-based censorship, and he personally supervised the editing and rewriting of poetry he deemed impious or unseemly, all in the name of saving the souls of his unwitting subjects. In the autocratic



*Peter the Great*

political culture of old Russia, with which Stalin self-consciously allied himself (that is why he took such a personal interest in Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic masterpiece of the 1940s, *Ivan the Terrible*), the monarch assumed staggering responsibility but also reserved the unique right to bestow privilege as he saw fit. Both the caprice and the totality of the ruler's authority found expression in Moussorgsky's famous "Song of the Flea," in which a king bestows upon a favorite flea a velvet kaftan, and also "complete freedom."

Putin seems neither capricious nor (as yet) autocratic. He realizes that any genuine moral change needs to come from the people themselves. In an open letter to Russian voters at the end of February, he spoke about the need for a core set of moral values: "For a Russian citizen, what is important are the moral principles which he first acquires in the family and which form the very core of patriotism. This is the main thing. Without it, it is impossible to agree on anything; without it, Russia would have had to forget about national dignity, even about national sovereignty. This is our starting point."

But Putin also shares with the Romanov emperors a passion for the military. He used war (and genocide) to achieve nonmilitary goals such as social unity and civil accord. The war in Chechnya and the demolition of its capital, Grozny, were purportedly launched to fight terrorism. It seems natural for Putin to turn to the military in his campaign to revive popular morals. Not long ago, he reintroduced into Russian schools the teaching of "military preparedness," which in the Soviet era was a salient feature of a "military-patriotic upbringing."

Patriotism, respect for the armed forces, and a government-sponsored Orthodox Church—these are the three likely sources of Vladimir Putin's program to combat "the corruption of morals in Russia" today and in the months to come. They have a solid grounding in Russia's past, and might indeed provide a kind of stability that the country needs. A Russian moral revival is not necessarily good news for the West.

—Nina Tumarkin

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