

Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia

Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient
and Modern Russia

A Translation and Analysis

Richard Pipes

New Edition

Featuring a New Introduction by the Author

The University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor

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אִשָּׁת חַיִּל מִי יִמְצָא
וְדַחֵק מִפְּנֵינִים מְקַרְהָ:

INTRODUCTION

Karamzin's *Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia* was my second book: it was published in 1959, shortly after I had been promoted to a professorship of history at Harvard. I had intended it as one of several studies of Russian conservatism, a tradition which has dominated Russian politics since the foundation of the Muscovite state in the fifteenth century.

In the years immediately following World War II, the Harvard history department was primarily concerned with intellectual history, that is, the study of ideas that had influenced public opinion and public behavior. Many of the department's stars specialized in this subject, among them Crane Brinton, Bernard Bailyn, Stuart Hughes, and Benjamin Schwartz. Interest in it was not confined to the history department, for it also engaged scholars in government (Carl Friedrich, Adam Ulam, Louis Hartz) and economics (Alexander Gershenkron).

My teacher, Michael Karpovich, also showed keen interest in intellectual history, offering a pioneering course on it and encouraging his doctoral students to write their theses on this topic. So did Isaiah Berlin, who came to Harvard in the 1940s and 1950s from Oxford as a visiting professor. By "intellectual history" both of these scholars meant what before the revolution had been called *obshchestvennoe dvizhenie*, that is, opinion hostile to tsarism. Although they paid some attention to the Slavophiles and conservatives like Dostoevsky, they concentrated their attention on such radicals as Radishchev, the Decembrists, Belinsky, Herzen, Bakunin, Chernyshevsky, and the Marxists.

It seemed to me even then that this was too narrow a definition of Russian intellectual history since there were in Russia individuals who thought deeply about the country's problems and tried to find ways of resolving them without violence, within the system, as it were. Indeed, many Russians believed that autocracy was the only regime capable of providing the country with stability and assuring it of great power status: any alternative to it spelled chaos.

Such conservatives and conservative liberals were largely ignored by the academic canon. I decided to redress the imbalance by focusing on them in order to understand better why Russia's rulers had for so long and so successfully resisted political change.

My interest in this subject was further prompted by the feeling that the Soviet regime, then in power, had much more in common with that of tsarist conservatism than with that of the radical Left. True, it published the works of Belinsky, Herzen, and Chernyshevsky and endless monographs on them, but its own political practice resembled rather that of Uvarov or Pobedonostsev, whom it dismissed as reactionary has-beens.

Karamzin was my first choice for two reasons. One, he was an enlightened cosmopolitan, pro-Western, and at the same time an ardent Russian patriot. In this respect he compared favorably to the conservatives of the late imperial period, most of them chauvinists and anti-Semites. Second, he was a prominent historian, the first in Russia to reach a wide reading public. His political views rested on a profound knowledge of his country's past and thus had a solidity that much of both earlier and later conservative thought lacked. The *Memoir*, which he wrote for Alexander I in 1810–11 to discourage him from proceeding with his liberal reforms, was a pithy document that ably summarized conservative opinion dominant since the accession of Catherine II half a century earlier.

It is a puzzling fact that tsarist Russia had so consistently resisted democratization and refused to grant its subjects civil rights. As I formulated the problem in the foreword to my *Russia under the Old Regime*, published fifteen years later, the question was "why in Russia—unlike the rest of Europe to which Russia belongs by virtue of her location, race and religion—society has proven unable to impose on political authority any kind of effective restraints." The answer turned out to be a complex one. In *Russia under the Old Regime* I sought to provide it in institutional terms by stressing the development of a "patrimonial" regime under which Muscovite tsars both ruled and owned their realm. But there is also another aspect to this problem, namely, a conservative ideology which claimed that autocracy was not only an unalterable fact of Russian history but also its ideal.

In studies carried out subsequent to Karamzin's *Memoir* I have identified a dozen or so justifications of autocracy. (This is the sub-

ject of my forthcoming book, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*, to be published by Yale University Press in the fall of 2005.) The earliest, advanced by clergymen in the sixteenth century, asserted that tsars were God's vicars on earth and, as such, had to be obeyed unquestioningly. The secular argument emerged first in the reign of Peter I and under his immediate successors. Its early advocate, the historian V. N. Tatishchev, defended unlimited monarchy for Russia on the grounds that the country was too vast and its population too unenlightened to be ruled in any other way. Catherine the Great advocated absolutism with arguments taken from Montesquieu, which again stressed the immensity of Russia and the difficulty of administering it by democratic means. Pushkin, Karamzin's younger contemporary, thought that autocracy alone could promote enlightenment in Russia and liberate the serfs. Later in the nineteenth century, conservatives such as the Slavophile Iurii Samarin rejected constitution and parliament on the grounds that in Russia, where the vast majority of the population consisted of illiterate peasants, they would vest power in the nobility, not to the population at large.

Karamzin's argument was purely pragmatic: history has shown that Russia thrived under autocracy and declined whenever the country departed from it. Proof of this contention he found in the collapse of the Kievan state and the resultant conquest of Russia by the Mongols, as well as in the so-called Time of Troubles of the early seventeenth century when the country disintegrated following the expiration of the Rurik dynasty. As he says in the *Memoir*:

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 and very different parts, each of which has its own civic needs; what save unlimited monarchy can produce in such a machine the required unity of action?

And he adds:

If Alexander, inspired by generous hatred of the abuses of autocracy, should lift a pen and prescribe himself laws other than those of God and of his own conscience, then the true, virtuous citizen

of Russia would presume to stop his hand, and to say: "Sire! you exceed the limits of your authority. Russia, taught by long disasters, vested before the holy altar the power of autocracy in your ancestor, asking him to rule her supremely, indivisibly. This covenant is the foundation of your authority, you have no other. You may do everything, but you may not limit your authority by law!"

It was an argument that would resound time and again in Russian political discussions.

But it must be noted that Karamzin understood autocracy to mean unlimited authority only in what he conceived as the proper sphere of government activity, that is, national policy. As is evident from his criticism of Peter the Great, the crown had no right to interfere with the "innocent inclinations and tastes of our domestic life." In other words, autocracy was unlimited only in a narrow sphere of high politics: it could not legitimately deprive its subjects of their freedoms. This definition anticipated the argument advanced in the next generation by the Slavophiles.

The Communist authorities had no use for Karamzin's historical or political writings and republished neither. As far as I am aware, my edition, both in the original Russian and in English translation, was completely ignored by Soviet scholars. The earliest republication of the *Memoir* occurred in the Gorbachev period in an obscure journal, *Literaturnaia Ucheba* (no. 4, 1988), with an insipid introduction by the literary critic Iu. M. Lotman. It came out again in 1991 as a book edited by Iu. S. Pivovarov, accompanied by a commentary that incorrectly claimed the *Memoir* was the "earliest attempt [in Russia] at philosophical-historical and political self-consciousness."

Karamzin's essay and the conservative tradition of which it is a part acquire renewed relevance today, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when, following a brief democratic interlude, Russia once again finds itself drifting toward authoritarianism. Although written at a different time and under very different circumstances, the *Memoir* reflects a mentality that makes Russians perennially wary of political freedom and seeking security in autocracy.

Richard Pipes
July 2004