

Rezension: Richard Pipes: Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der TU Dresden

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Autalipov, A. (2008). Rezension: Richard Pipes: Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture. [Review of the book *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture*, by R. Pipes]. *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*, 5(1), 139-141. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-352630>

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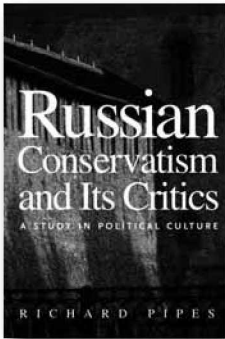
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tive historical method. However, the book is valuable due to the wealth of raw information, vivid description and the potential it offers for further research. Its biggest merit, summing up, is that it raises questions and opens the floor for further enquiries and answers. This personal stance on recent Ukrainian history helps the reader to understand the forces and mechanisms that drove a successful revolution in the post-Communist world.

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Richard Pipes, Russian Conservatism and Its Critics. A Study in Political Culture, New Haven, Conn. 2006 (Yale University Press), 240 S.

In 1991 when the Soviet Union disintegrated, expectations were high in the West that Russia would take a solid pro-Western path democratizing its political system and giving its people their civil and political rights. Since then it has become clear that such expectations were rather naïve and that neither Russian people nor the current leadership are interested in democratic governance or civil rights. Why do Russians not share democratic and liberal values? Is it solely a legacy of Soviet political culture and upbringing or are there deeper cultural and intellectual reasons for it? For Richard Pipes, professor of Russian history at Harvard, the latter is the case.

In his concise and timely volume “Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture” Pipes masterly traces Russian conservative political thought from the rise of medieval Muscovy in the fifteenth century to the First World War. In the Western context being conservative usually implies favoring less government but Pipes calls conservative those Russian thinkers and statesman that justified and supported an autocratic form of government. Their critics are liberal intellectuals in opposition to the status quo. As the author notes in the introduction, the study of Russian political thought traditionally concentrates on the radicals Bakunin, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Herzen, Lenin, Trotsky, and Plekhanov, but overlooks conservatives and liberals. It is the discourse of often overlooked conservatives, liberals and Slavophiles, in and out of government, that Richard Pipes thoroughly examines.

Unlike Western Europe Russia inherited Byzantine, East Roman rather than Roman culture which meant that it did not benefit from Roman law and Catholic theology. Roman law as inherited by the West had emphasized the importance of private property. The sanctity of private property became a maxim of European political thought with even Jean Bodin, the theorist of royal absolutism, denying

kings the right to infringe upon it. The existence of private property was an effective barrier against royal absolutism as it obligated kings to turn to their subjects for financial support and consequently to concede to them a share of political power. In Russia, explains Richard Pipes, the concept of private property did not develop in the medieval period and the crown was able to claim title to all Russia's soil, which meant that the country lacked an independent nobility and middle class.

Another institution that could have played a role in limiting the authority of the Russian czars was the Orthodox Church. In the West, the Catholic Church insisted that the kings must rule justly and in accordance with the precepts of the Holy Scriptures. In Russia, however, a dispute in the early sixteenth century over church lands, between so-called 'possessors', and 'non-possessors' had strengthened an autocratic tendency as it led the Church to give its full support to the crown in return for a right to retain its land holdings. In 1503, the leading 'possessor', Joseph of Volokalamsk, wrote that to obey the sovereign was equivalent to obeying God.

The net effect of these conditions was that the early development of the Russian state led to the emergence of an especially strong form of autocracy. Over the next centuries autocracy was justified on various grounds. From about the era of Peter the Great onwards, a conviction emerged that if autocracy is not the best form of government in general, it is the most appropriate for Russia. Some of the thinkers that helped legitimize autocratic government and whose ideas Pipes examines include V. N. Tatishchev (1686–1750), Nikolai Novikov (1744–1818), Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826), Iury Krizhanich (1618–1683), Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Konstantin Kavelin (1818–1885), Iury Samarin (1819–1876), Konstantin Leontiev (1831–1891), Dmitry Shipov (1851–1920) and Peter Struve (1870–1944). Pipes also examines a liberal criticism of autocracy: Dmitry Golitsyn's attempt to introduce a constitutionalism in 1730, Count Nikita Panin (1718–1783), an aristocrat who sought influence for the nobility, and Mikhail Speransky (1772–1839), a minister seeking to create a government that was accountable to law. Russia's two pre-revolutionary statesmen, Witte and Stolypin as well as Fyodor Dostoevsky are also thoroughly discussed.

Overall, Richard Pipes combines materialistic and ideological factors to explain Russia's autocratic and patrimonial tradition. The author, however, defends the autonomy of ideas pointing out that ideas themselves can become autonomous social forces. As he puts it "socialism ... did not grow out of socio-economic conditions of the age of high capitalism, but emerged as an idea in the heads of a few individuals ..." Conservative political ideas too, although a product of their social, political, and historical conditions, took on a life of their own. These ideas did not help to cultivate conception of society as an entity separate from the state and, as Pipes emphasizes, Russia failed to develop a tradition of partnership between the state and society. Russia's rulers, in the czarist tradition, continue to view the state as their property.

This volume is not merely an exercise in intellectual history of forgotten Russian political thinkers but as Pipes notes an “intellectual history relevant to reality”. It provides a revealing outline of Russian conservative thought with political ideas integrated with historical events. The principle of autocracy remains a very influential idea in Russian political history. *Russian Conservatism and its Critics* is not only a significant contribution to our understanding of Russia’s past but also the ideas that are shaping Russian political culture today and offers plenty of food for thought on contemporary events.

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