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THE CONCEPTION OF THE TSAR'S DIVINE
AUTHORITY IN MUSCOVIAN HISTORICAL TEXTS
ON THE TIME OF TROUBLES

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Russian state had to face a deep and severe crisis which is known in historiography as the Time of Troubles or the Troubles (1598–1613). Without any doubt, this crisis, sometimes defined as Russia's first civil war,¹ has had a strong and long-lasting influence on all Russian history since that point up to the present day. The Russian Time of Troubles has been of permanent interest to historians who have studied it from very different points of view. The constant interest in the subject results not only from the numerous mysteries, still hidden over the centuries, but from many other reasons as well. The crisis of the Time of Troubles nearly destroyed the country, having stricken almost all spheres of Russian medieval social life – from the economy to the mentality. It led to the deformation of the social and power hierarchy, the destruction of traditional political order and to social disintegration.

The problem of the national mentality crisis resulting from the political events of the Time of Troubles deserves particular attention as it marks an important step towards the destruction of the old system of religious and philosophical concepts, successfully used in Muscovite Russia for centuries. This system, finally formed by the beginning of the seventeenth century, possessed quite a stable and well-organized structure based on the persuasion of a unique mission of Muscovite Russia to preserve authentic Christianity. This doctrine, provided with a strong religious connotation, penetrated the practices of the Muscovite state and was progressively argued in contemporary literature by means of various historical analogies and biblical allusions, giving more or less appropriate foundation for the idea of Muscovian

¹ Dunning, Ch. S. L., *Russia's First Civil War. The Time of Troubles and the Founding of the Romanov Dynasty*, Pennsylvania 2001.

religious distinctiveness. On the basis of providentialism as a belief that God's will determines all earthly occurrences and applies to all social and historical processes, a Muscovian author assumed the holy role of Muscovy as a necessary continuation of Biblical history. Not surprisingly, such an ambitious conception had a major influence not only on the formation process of the national identity, but also on the state political system and the international relations of Muscovite Russia. It would be no exaggeration to say that the myth of the Muscovite ruler² as the main fighter for the preservation of the Orthodox faith had an important impact on the apology of Russian spiritual dominance in the world, as well as on Muscovian political ambitions, derived from the presumptive right to inherit Byzantine ascendancy.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the perception of the tsar's power in Muscovian texts dating back to the first half of the 17th century in the context of Russian traditional thought. The main question we will try to answer is whether the new social and political reality produced any noticeable effect on Muscovian political thought; and if so, what kind of transformation it underwent. We will also attempt to generalize the perception of the tsar's authority as reflected in contemporary historical works by Ivan Timofeev, Avraamij Palytsin, Ivan Khvorostinin and Ivan Katyrev-Rostovsky.

By the beginning of the Time of Troubles, Muscovite historical thought had successfully developed the idea of Orthodox tsardom, ruled by the Orthodox tsar who was regarded as the essential protector of the authentic Christian faith in the world. The tsar's power possessed uncontestable authority as presumably granted to the ruler directly by God. Due to the fact that the Muscovian ruler, as supposed, executed God's will on earth, his authority could not be questioned, alienated or expropriated in any way and did not allow for any active disobedience. Furthermore, the tsar, being responsible only to God, was subject neither to the will of his people, nor to the will of the aristocracy. Granted by God, the tsar's power achieved an innate and hereditary character. The ruling Rurik dynasty was viewed as god-blessed, which was proved by the fact of its long-lasting and uninterrupted reign. Even though the very idea of the monarch's power divinity does not originate from Russia,³ within Muscovian political context it played a key role without ever being thoroughly

² For the purpose of the present paper, we will use the term "tsar" as the most appropriate. However, the title of tsar was not introduced into official practice until 1547, assumed by Ivan IV (1533–1584). The new title replaced the former "Grand Prince of Moscow".

³ This political and religious doctrine asserting that a monarch is not subject to any earthly authority and is responsible only to God was well-known and quite wide-spread all over medieval Europe (see *the divine right of kings*).

contested or doubted. However, one cannot categorically assume that Russian tradition adopted the idea of absolute power with no limits. The issue of a ruler's power limitations had provoked vivid interest in thinkers since the earliest period of Russian history.⁴ Despite the fact that the political thought of Muscovian Russia did not leave any distinctive political theory, it is possible to reveal a range of questions related to political issues which were of interest for Muscovian thought. The most frequent of them were the question of the "tsar's advisers" and the question of the correlation between secular authority and the Church.⁵ Russia had successfully adopted the Byzantine model of relations between the Church and the ruler, where the latter acted as the main upholder of the Orthodoxy and disposed of the specific spiritual authority in elites and ordinary people. Despite the fact that the Muscovian ruler was not the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, the practice of them interfering with Church affairs was quite wide-spread in medieval Muscovy.⁶ In this context, it would be significant to mention that, for instance, the metropolitan as the head of the Muscovian Orthodox Church could be applied or deposed only with the consent of the Muscovian ruler. The idea of the divine character of the tsar's power was combined with the religious dogma of obedience and resignation, forming a specific providential and relatively passive attitude towards the political system, typical for Russian society. Submission to a sovereign in a wider sense of the word, became one of the required conditions for righteous life. In some way, Muscovian secular and clerical elites had an idea about the symbolic symphony between the Church and political authority, based upon their common mission to preserve the authentic Christian faith.

Thus, by the beginning of the 17th century Muscovite Russia possessed its own "political philosophy", which provided a rather logical and coherent (or at least satisfactory for contemporary Muscovians) explanation of Muscovy predominance in the religious and, consequently, political sphere as the Russian state was predestined to fight for pure Christianity – Orthodoxy – against heretics. The Muscovite tsar – "tsar of all Christians"⁷ – had to play a major role in this holy mission.

⁴ See: Вальденберг, В., *Древнерусские учения о пределах царской власти*, Москва 2006.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ As a really spectacular example, one could mention the case of the Russian metropolitan Isidor (1385–1463) who supported the reunion at the time of the Council of Florence, but when he arrived in Moscow (1441) and proclaimed the union, Vasily II deposed him. Thus, the reunion was eventually rejected by Muscovy.

⁷ Послание монаха псковского Елеазарова монастыря Филофея дьяку М. Г. Мисюрю Мунехину, in: *Третий Рим. Истоки и эволюция русской средневековой концепции*, Н. В Синицына, Москва 1998, 339–348.

The Time of Troubles, triggered by the extinction of the Muscovian Rurik dynasty in 1598, gave birth to a range of phenomena that were contradictory to the established system of historical and political thought and needed badly a relevant explanation. The election of tsars as a completely new phenomenon of political life conflicted with the idea of the tsar's innateness. Let us recall that Boris Godunov, who was elected to the throne by Zemsky sobor,⁸ had to face the accusation of killing Dmitry, the youngest son of Ivan IV. The tsar could be dethroned even if he was a member of the Rurik dynasty as it was in the case of Vasili Shuysky,⁹ deposed in 1610 by his former adherents. Another new factor was the repeated appearance of imposters, the most successful of whom – False Dmitry I – managed to capture the throne and remained the Tsar of Russia for almost a year (1605–1606). Furthermore, during the Time of Troubles, Muscovy experienced a political agreement that limited the tsar's power in different ways and determined his obligations, which can be regarded as an attempt to regulate the tsar's power in a legal way.¹⁰

Surprisingly, these crucial changes in state practice and the political reality provoked neither a revolutionary transformation of political consciousness, nor a considerable shift of the tsar's power perception, which would have been explicitly recorded in literary texts. As the conducted analysis has shown, nearly all the contemporary authors, who reflected the Troubles in their works, attempt to adopt the old tsar's power conception to the actual historical situation, instead of working out an alternative approach to the problem. Basically, they only make new conclusions out of old ideas, answering questions that did not exist before.¹¹

The first, and probably the most important problem the contemporary authors had to resolve, derives from the extinction of the Rurik dynasty and the ensuing power vacuum, which resulted in new forms of ascension to the throne. The authors raise the problem of the tsar's power legitimacy regarding the rulers who occupied the Russian throne after the Rurik dynasty died out. Nevertheless, they do not offer any unique approach and analyze every single example separately (Godunov, False Dmitry, Shujsky) and mostly in terms of illegal power usurpation.

The authors maintain the old idea of the tsar's power divinity, however, at the same time, they have to deal with an awkward question of whether the power is

⁸ Russian form of parliament of the feudal Estates type, which could be summoned by the tsar, patriarch or the Boyar Duma and was used on an irregular basis in the 16th and 17th centuries. The term can be roughly translated as the "assembly of the land".

⁹ Vasili Ivanovich Shuysky (1552–1612) was the Tsar of Russia in 1606–1610, representing the Suzdal branch of the Rurik dynasty.

¹⁰ See: Ключевский, В. О., *Курс русской истории*, т. III, Петроград 1918, 61.

¹¹ Вальденберг, В., *Древнерусские учения о пределах царской власти*, Москва 2006, 294.

granted by God to any ruler or if it is true only for tsars from the Rurik dynasty. Trying to overcome an evident disharmony between the holy nature of the tsar's power (as a concept) and the fact the throne is occupied by "dishonorable" people, Muscovian authors finally offer a specific idea of "innate and false tsars".¹² Even though the relevant texts do not provide us with a full and coherent explanation, the present conception can be shortly, but not exhaustively, presented in the following way: the innate tsars are the rulers from the Muscovian Rurik dynasty, and they remained lawful even in case of living a sinful life;¹³ unlawful tsars are all who reigned between Fyodor's death and the coronation of Michael Romanov in 1613. Then, this simple binary conception, based on a pure hereditary factor, was supplemented with the idea of the tsar's legal election. According to Ivan Timofeev, a lawful tsar, if elected, shall be elected by all the country. This is why he accuses Vasili Shuysky of being elected "without the consent of the entire land",¹⁴ and consequently ascribes him as an unlawful tsar despite his noble Rurikid origin.

In addition, Ivan Timofeev draws a distinction between the tsar's power as a political institute and its specific implementation in the hand of a ruler. The author suggests that the tsar's crown keeps its purity and divine status even in case of an unworthy and sinful reign.¹⁵ This approach helps the author to deal with the very unpleasant problem of the destruction of the tsar's power prestige in people of all social layers which resulted from the dynastic crisis, incoherent changing of rulers and general political imbalance.¹⁶

Besides, Timofeev raises the question of people's reaction to false tsars usurping the throne. He calls it "speechlessness" referring to the reaction of the nobility and ordinary people to ongoing crimes, and first of all – the killing of Dmitry, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible, who was supposed to be knifed on Godunov's order in 1591.¹⁷ It is necessary to say here that contemporary authors tend to interpret the Time of Troubles as a punishment for numerous sins committed by rulers and ordinary people. Moreover, this providentialistic approach leads them to assume that the only solution to the crisis – to deserve God's forgiveness – can be achieved solely

¹² *Временник Ивана Тимофеева*, Москва – Ленинград 1951, 276.

¹³ As it was in case of Ivan IV the Terrible. See: *Ibidem*, 281.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 389.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 281.

¹⁶ *Словеса дней, и царей, и святителей московских*, in: *ПЛДР (Конец XVI – начало XVII веков)*. Москва, 1987, 440.

¹⁷ *Временник Ивана Тимофеева*, Москва – Ленинград 1951, 263.

by means of praying and penitence. Avraamy Palitsyn uses a similar term of “insane silence”¹⁸ talking about people's reaction to Godunov's actions.

Then, Ivan Timofeev talks about the possibility of criticizing the tsar, connecting this problem to the question of the tsar's legitimacy. He assumes that lawful tsars should not be criticized in any way, and one should keep a respectful silence about their sins. For this reason, Timofeev does not provide any “dark” details about Ivan the Terrible's reign. Unlawful tsars who usurped the throne, vice versa, deserve critics and their acts should be openly criticized. However, as for the eventual judgment of tsars, Timofeev does not seem to differentiate between lawful and unlawful tsars – they could not be judged by any earthly authority or deprived of the throne because any crowned person is responsible only to God. In this context, it is necessary to mention the general attitude to False Dimitri who, though having been crowned, was never regarded as a tsar by contemporary authors. Moreover, his image in the texts stands out for its permanent eschatological connotation, connected to the coming of the antichrist. In contrast to the perception of the other unlawful rulers, namely Boris Godunov and Vasili Shuysky, whose characteristics are often quite ambiguous, the image of False Dimitri is consistently negative.¹⁹ However, it is rather notable that the main accusation addressed to him arises from his betrayal of the Orthodox monkhood and conversion to Catholicism.

As mentioned above, contemporary authors' attitude towards the “unlawful” tsars often reveals a certain ambiguity. Among the anti-heroes of the Troubles in the texts of the first half of the 17th century, Boris Godunov stands out as one of the most complex and controversial characters. The first “unlawful” tsar and his incredible political career seems to have been fascinating ordinary people and historians so far. His unusual personality was already attracting extraordinary attention in the 17th century, as reflected by the fact that almost all the authors writing historical texts on the Time of Troubles mention Godunov as one of the key personage who played a major role in the crisis. Godunov was generally viewed as an evil tyrant who had illegally usurped the Muscovite throne and had been largely responsible for the Troubles. Despite the fact that the authors mostly condemn him,²⁰ the texts reflect quite clearly expressed ambivalence.²¹ Timofeev, Palitsyn, Khvorostinin and

¹⁸ *Сказание Авраамия Палицына*, Москва – Ленинград 1955.

¹⁹ *Временник Ивана Тимофеева*, Москва – Ленинград 1951, 83.

²⁰ However, this negative perception can also be partly explained by the period when the mentioned texts were written, as well as, by the common apologia of the new Romanov's dynasty.

²¹ Ivan Khvorostinin characterizes Godunov in the following way: “Although he was treacherous and power-hungry, he was very pious at the same time, he built many churches, he filled the towns with the beauty of splendor, he stopped bride-takers, he eradicated the arrogant ones, he was

Katyrev-Rostovsky show certain dynamics in the development of Godunov's image and emphasize some of his positive qualities, primarily as a brilliant statesman.²² Nevertheless, all these features are finally thrown into the background by the sin of pride and enormous power ambition. I. M. Katyrev-Rostovsky, for instance, describes Boris Godunov as a reasonable man, pious and merciful, who "[...] surpassed the others in his image and actions" and did a lot of good things to make the Russian state prosperous in the days of his reign.²³ However, Katyrev-Rostovsky repeats the idea that after his accession to the throne, Boris grew proud and merely insane, destroying his image of the wise ruler.

Being very critical to "unlawful" tsars and often reluctant to describe the improper actions of "lawful" ones, the authors of the Troubles convey the contemporary ideal of the Orthodox tsar, personalized by Fyodor Ivanovich, whose main advantage was an incredible devotion and piety. The tsar Fyodor spent all his life praying and fasting, having left behind all state obligations.²⁴ According to the medieval authors' opinion, Fyodor was regarded as an ideal Orthodox tsar whose behavior is very close to that of a monk.²⁵ Katyrev-Rostovsky, who provided us with a rather talented description of the outward appearance of historical personages, portrayed Fyodor as a short man, "[...] who's wearing the image of resignation and fasting, praying all the time and who cares solely about saving his soul with no regard to earthly matters".²⁶ For Fyodor's piety, God remunerates Muscovy and gives it years of peaceful and abundant life, with no bloodshed, conflicts or natural disasters.²⁷ It is

feared by foreign countries, and, like a gentle giant, he was full of wisdom in his earthly life, having got the honour and glory from the tsars, but he exasperated his people, and he set son against his father and father against his son, and he filled their homes with hostility, and he inspired the slaves with hatred and them with hatred and treachery, and he roused the dependent against the free, and he humiliated the noblesse in power, and he brought temptation into the world, and he gave birth to hatred, [...] and he grew extremely proud, and made the other treat him as God." See: *Словеса дней, и царей, и святителей московских*, in: *ПЛДР (Конец XVI – начало XVII веков)*, Москва 1987, 435–437.

²² "The tsar Boris took great care in godliness and all state affairs, he cared for the poor and the beggarly and he was very kind to them." See: *Сказание Авраамия Палицына*, Москва – Ленинград 1955, 104.

²³ *Повесть князя Ивана Михайловича Катырева-Ростовского*, in: *РИБ*, т. XIII. Памятники древней русской письменности, относящиеся к Смутному времени, Санкт-Петербург 1891, 563.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 563.

²⁵ *Временник Ивана Тимофеева*, Москва – Ленинград 1951, 189.

²⁶ *Повесть князя Ивана Михайловича Катырева-Ростовского*, in: *РИБ*, т. XIII. Памятники древней русской письменности, относящиеся к Смутному времени, Санкт-Петербург 1891, 620.

²⁷ *Сказание Авраамия Палицына*, Москва – Ленинград 1955, 101.

also very significant that Muscovian authors take piety and godliness as a prerequisite of the tsar's power legacy as it reflects the religious focus of Muscovian political thought.

On the basis of the conducted analysis, we can conclude that, despite all the considerable political and social changes of the Time of Troubles, Muscovian political thought remained relatively conservative and did not undergo any notable transformation, which would have resulted in a structural shift towards a broad new comprehension of the tsar's authority. Contemporary authors used old concepts consistently, applying them, more or less successfully, to a new political reality. The divinity of the Russian throne and the tsar's authority, based on dominant religiously motivated ideas, remained nearly unaffected by crucial changes in the procedure of throne accession. Moreover, the contemporary authors developed traditional political motives by means of expounding certain Biblical connotations (such as "a new Rome" or "a new Israel") or affirming the ancient origin of Russian tsars dating back to Byzantine and Rome emperors. These motives form a conceptual background for new subjects, originated from the social and political crisis of the Troubles.

The relative inattention to political aspects of the Troubles in contemporary authors can be explained to a considerable degree as a logic consequence of the general rigidity of Muscovian political thought. Obviously, its excessive religiousness presented a serious obstacle to the progressive evolution of political views and attitudes, especially in the matter of the tsar's power limits. On the other hand, the very occurrences of the Troubles gave a real dimension to certain concepts of Muscovian thought, and primarily, to its crucial idea of Russian religious predominance as the last defender of genuine Christianity, based on the idea of spiritual opposition to the Western Church. The Time of Troubles (especially in the context of False Dmitry's reign and foreign military intervention) was seen by many authors as a sort of holy war against Catholic "heretics", who aimed to annihilate the Orthodoxy. Ironically, the largest crisis ever in Muscovian history, which brought to light all the weakness of the traditional Russian state system, contributed in the short-term perspective to the conservation of traditional Muscovian thought, which proved to be rather inert and stagnant on the level achieved by the beginning of the 17th century.

ABSTRACT

**The Conception of the Tsar's Divine Authority
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The paper focuses on the evolution of Muscovian political thought, especially the comprehension of tsar's authority with regard to political and social changes of the Time of Troubles. The text emphasizes the key motives which characterize historical and political thought in Muscovite Russia (such as the idea of Russian religious predominance as the last defender of genuine Christianity, the belief in a special mission of Russia etc.); it analyzes the reasons for its conservatism and stability under adverse political circumstances and the effect which it produced on subsequent Russian history.

Key words: Russia, Time of Troubles, Tsar, Muscovite, Muscovy, Russian Thought, Tsar's Authority, Limit for Power.

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