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Die Flucht
des Thronfolgers Aleksej

Krise in der „Balance of Power“
und den österreichisch-russischen Beziehungen
am Anfang des 18. Jahrhunderts
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Ernst D. Petritsch

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The Case of Tsarevich Aleksei in Nineteenth–Twentieth-Century Russian Historiography and Culture

Alexander Kamenskii
(Moscow)

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, for about ten years running I used to spend New Year's Eve with a group of my close friends. Besides the usual things Russians usually do on such occasions, like eating, drinking, dancing, joking, we also used to have a kind of intellectual entertainment. One of them was solving the charades that were composed specially for this occasion by the members of the group. The most witty and most tricky of the charades were those performed by Tatyana Tolstaya, who later became a well-known author and who happens to be the descendant of Peter Andreevich Tolstoy, who in his turn played the crucial role in the case of Tsarevich Aleksei. Usually it took some time to solve Tatyana's charades, but one of them started with a line that everyone knew at once. It started like this:

"The first of my syllables has drawn a father and a son on a chess-like floor".

As soon as this phrase was pronounced, everyone immediately shouted: "Ge!". And of course, it was Nikolai Ge, the painter of the famous picture "Peter I interrogates Tsarevich Aleksei at Peterhof".

There are two similar copies of this picture at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and as the previous episode shows it is one of the few pieces of Russian art that are familiar to almost all Russians, not least because it is usually reproduced in high school history textbooks.

As is well known, visual arts, fiction, TV and cinema play an important role in the construction of the public ideas of the past. Moreover, many people believe that historic events took place the very way they are depicted in pictures, movies or historical novels. As for Ge's picture, it is worth mentioning that some

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1 This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE).
2 "Мой первый слог отца и сына на шахматном поле".
art historians argue that Nikolai Ge was aware of the fact that Peter had never interrogated Aleksei at Peterhof, but by moving the scene to surroundings that were more recognizable, more familiar to the public he had tried to strengthen the idea of the picture, thus using a method that artists often use. For instance, another famous Russian artist, Vasily Surikov moved the execution of the streltsy in 1698 to Red Square, which does not reflect the reality, and thanks to his picture most Russians have no doubt that the streltsy were really executed at this very spot. Another well-known example of this kind is the story of the foundation of the city of St. Petersburg, which is believed to have happened the way Aleksandr Pushkin describes in his poem "Mednyy vsadnic". But this is not the case with Ge, as the Austrian ambassador to St. Petersburg informed his government that in May 1718 Peter the Great had left for Peterhof, that the Tsarevich had been moved there and interrogated by the Tsar in person.

Ge's picture was first exhibited in 1872 and soon became very popular. So it is not surprising that ever since it is this scene that usually comes to the mind of

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5 Nikolai Ustrialov. Istoria tsarstvovaniya Petra Velikogo 6, Sankt Peterburg 1859, 237.
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a Russian when Tsarevich Aleksei is mentioned, and that is how Russian people think of the episode. As for the painter, he wrote: “I left the influence and impact of Peter’s reforms everywhere and in everything around me. This feeling was so strong that involuntarily I got carried away with Peter, and it was under the influence of that passion that I planned my picture ‘Peter I and Tsarevich Aleksei’. I felt great sympathy for Peter but after studying many documents I saw that there was no place for sympathy. I was working my sympathies to Peter up, I was telling myself that public interest was more important for him than his feelings as a father and that this justified his cruelty but killed the ideal.”

Now, what kind of documents could Nikolai Ge study? The answer is obvious: he studied the documents published by Nikolai Ustrialov in the sixth volume of his “Istoria tsarstvovaniya Petra Velikogo” in 1859, which is still the most complete publication of the documents on the case. Until that moment there existed only one version of the events that took place in 1718, and that was the official version according to which the Tsarevich had been part of a plot, of a conspiracy against Peter, and that is why he was brought to the court, was sentenced to death but did not survive the shock and died a natural death, forgiven by his weeping father.

With Ustrialov’s publication the details of the case were revealed and became public for the first time.

Almost a hundred and fifty years later, in 1997, the American historian Paul Bushkovitch published an article in which he argues that Ustrialov falsified the case by trying to hide the fact that there had existed aristocratic opposition to Peter.” At the same time Bushkovitch admits that “the affair reveals not a tightly crafted plot, but rather an extensive and deep atmosphere of opposition to Peter and his actions”. Would that mean that Ustrialov wanted to hide the atmosphere? To my mind, the fact that the old Russian aristocracy was unhappy with Peter’s reforms is so natural and so obvious that in order to find it there was no need to study any documents at all. But to be unhappy and even to discuss the Tsar’s misdeeds with one’s associates is not the same as to be in opposition. By insisting on the existence of opposition, Bushkovitch in fact attempted to restore the official version, though not adding anything really important to our understanding of the case. In his article he described in detail Ustrialov’s relations with Nikolas I and the censors, arguing that the historian’s experience taught him that mentioning aristocratic opposition to the Russian autocracy was the wrong thing to do. Bushkovitch

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6) Ioana, Sto velikyih kartin.
gives a list of aristocratic names involved in the case, all of which could be easily found in Ustrialov’s book. Moreover, Ustrialov even published a letter to Aleksei from A. Bestujev-Riumin that had not been mentioned at the investigation. Also, the American historian somehow missed the fact that the sixth volume of Ustrialov’s book was published several years after Nikolas’s I death, when the situation in the country was completely different and Ustrialov, as a very accurate historian, used the opportunity to publish as much as was possible.

Ustrialov’s publication was not at all in favor of the Russian autocracy. While the first volumes of his “History” were kind of a panegyric to Peter the Great, the last one appeared to be very different. As Alexander Hertsen, the most severe critic of the Russian monarchy of the time, observed, “The Golden times of Petrine Russia have passed. Ustrialov himself has imposed a heavy hand of his on the reformer whom he previously worshiped”. Even the Soviet historian Natan Eidel’man, in his article published in 1971, wrote that “Ustrialov (was) a very well-meaning and loyal subject, but a zealous and scrupulous scholar. While it was still the reign of Nikolai I, Ustrialov was in fact publishing a documentary panegyric to the great grandfather of his emperor, but when Nikolai was no more and the emancipation of the peasants was beginning, when the air became warmer and more liberal […] Ustrialov made his mind up and published a whole volume on the case of Tsarevich Aleksei”.

The documents published by Ustrialov made a sensation. They revealed that there really had existed a number of people who were not happy with Peter’s policies, who hoped that Aleksei could be a better tsar for them, but also that there had been no actual plot, no conspiracy. Ustrialov gave a minimum of commentaries of his own and his readers could not but come to the conclusion that in fact the case of Tsarevich Aleksei had been mostly a personal conflict between a father and a son and that the former had actually murdered the latter. Ustrialov even listed all the existing versions of Aleksei’s death, including the rumors of Peter killing his son in person with a sword. Though Paul Bushkovitch considers Ustrialov’s book very dull, it was read not only by his colleagues but also by the wider public and relations between Peter and Aleksei as well as the fate of the Tsarevich immedi-

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9 See also Andrei Bachmyn, Sovremennoye spory o “Istoriia Petra Velikogo” N. G. Ustrialova, in: Istoricheskie, 10:chennyia pamiati professoora Viktora Aleksandrovicha Muravieva: Sbornik statei 1, Moskva 2013, 328–346.
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cately became a topic of public discussion. Reviews of the book appeared in the most well-known and influential literary journals and magazines and as Mikhail Pogodin mentioned "On reading the book by Mr. Ustrialov Russian society became full of indignation [...] One may hear bitter reproaches, most hard words of blame, heavy stones have been thrown [...]". Indeed, the Russian public was horrified by the description of torture and its indignation and reproaches were directed at Peter the Great.

Pogodin, who was a convinced adherent of Peter's reforms, trembled at the very idea that "the Emperor Peter the Great was asked to give a report on his actions" and he felt it his duty to defend the Tsar. Thus he wrote a lengthy speech he delivered at the meeting of the Academy of Sciences and published in the "Russkaya beseda" journal in 1860.

Pogodin realized that an attempt to rehabilitate Peter in Russian public opinion by just giving a list of well-known Peter's virtues was useless. Instead he tried to explain his deeds. He did not deny Peter's cruelty not only to Aleksei but also to his mother. But in trying to learn the origins of this cruelty, Pogodin tried to study Peter's psychology, he made an attempt to understand him as a person. In his speech Pogodin showed how Peter's attitude towards his son had been gradually turning into hostility under the influence of many factors, including the intrigues of Menshikov and Catherine, and how the Tsar had gradually come to realize the need to get Aleksei out of the way. When during the investigation Peter found what he considered to be a real plot against himself, he could not but be frightened for the destiny of his deeds. "What should Peter have felt," - asked Pogodin, "when with every new testimony he learned that no one, not even among those who had been closest to him, felt any sympathy for him, that he couldn't trust even those most devoted to him, that he was absolutely alone and that the huge construction that he had built with such effort, such success and such happiness could be destroyed in the very first minute after his death [...] And at that moment Peter felt such torment harder than that of his victims tortured by the executioners". That, then, Pogodin argued, was when Peter first came upon the idea that Aleksey should be executed as if it was in the state's interests, while in fact Peter was wrong when he feared for the firmness of his constructions. "Russia, which had been pushed by Peter into a certain direction physically, could not change its route way". In other words, according to Pogodin Peter executed his son, confident that by doing

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13 Ibid., 453, 459.
so he was saving his deeds, but in fact his confidence was false, as there had been no real danger to his legacy. Pogodin also felt a kind of sympathy towards Aleksei, depicting him and his father as two victims of history while the case of Tsarevich had been kind of peace offering. A nineteenth-century historian called his readers to pray for the absolution of Peter’s sins and the salvation of his soul.

Several years later, when Nikolai Ge’s picture appeared, another Russian historian, Nikolai Kostomarov, who knew the artist personally, wrote his commentaries to it. He did not add much to the interpretation of the case, but in contrast to Pogodin he felt no sympathy for Aleksei: “The artist has painted this Tsarevich masterfully. One can see stupidity, petty cowardice, intellectual and body laziness, bestiality in his features stricken by grief and depression. But his grief is not of the kind that may arouse the compassion which usually goes hand in hand with respect. Look attentively at these features and you will see in them something unkind, false and cunning. This is a kind of a person that at first sight looks very kind but will immediately show a different side to himself as soon as you get into serious business with him [...]. With his intellectual poverty he is inclined to superstitions but not capable of real faith.”

Ustrilov’s publication, Ge’s picture and the articles by Pogodin and Kostomarov have made the case of Tsarevich Aleksei part of Russian historical memory. Naturally enough Aleksei’s story could not but find his way into literary fiction. The first work to appear was a novel by Petr Polejaev, now an almost forgotten author. His novel Tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich appeared in 1885 and was based exclusively on Ustrialov’s publication. It was not a work of a genius, but was quite accurate in telling the story. Twenty years later Dmitry Merejkovskiy, a much more gifted author, published his Peter and Aleksei as part of his trilogy The Christ and the Antichrist. At first sight, according to Merejkovskiy, the opposition of the son and the father is the opposition of Christianity and the Antichrist. But reading the novel attentively one finds that it is not so straightforward. A couple of years later in his book The Sick Russia Merejkovskiy wrote about three faces of the Antichrist, one of which is Russian autocracy. Peter the Great, as the founder of the autocracy, may thus be interpreted as one of the faces of the Antichrist and its tool. But in the novel Peter was shown as suffering greatly as he realized that to forgive Aleksei would mean to ruin Russia, while to execute him would mean to ruin himself. Merejkovskiy interpreted the relations between the father and the son through biblical images. Moreover, in his novel Peter “as if for the first time

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realized what he had heard from his childhood but never fully understood – what it means – The Son and The Father”.

Merejkovskiy’s novel became very popular with readers and in 1919 a film was based on it. We do not know what kind of film it was, as it hasn’t survived, but on the Internet one can find a picture that is believed to be an episode from it.
Alexander Kamenskii

What is known very well is another film based on the novel by Aleksei Tolstoy, shot in 1937. By the time the Soviet audience saw the film Nikolai Ge’s picture was already so popular that the producer could do nothing but reproduce it. Otherwise nobody would have found the film convincing.

One can easily see that in the film Aleksei, played by Nikolai Cherkasov, is even more humble than in Ge’s picture. But it is obvious that both Ge and the producer of the film used the well-known portrait of Aleksei by Johann Gottfried Tannauer.

http://www.matrony.ru/panayatki-ashedshaj-epoch/
Vera Mukhina, “Worker and Kolkhoz Woman”,
http://dlc.academic.ru/pictures/srcn_pictures/1174.jpg

I have mentioned that the film was shot in 1937, which is a symbolic date in Russian history associated with the Stalinist terror. But the phenomenon of the year of 1937 cannot be fully understood without keeping in mind that several more symbols of the Soviet epoch appeared in the very same year, like for instance “The Girl with an Oar” by Nikolai Shadr, which was later reproduced in all parks and
gardens around the country, “Moscow in Spring” by Yuri Pimenov and the famous “Worker and Kolkhoz Woman” by Vera Mukhina.


Also it was the year when several more films that later became Soviet cinema classics, like “The Return of Maximi” and “Treasure Island” after the novel by Robert L. Stevenson appeared. All of these visual symbols were full of optimism and were to prove the victory of the New over the Old. The appearance of the film “Peter I” in 1937 was surely part of the scheme, as for Stalin, at least at that time, Peter was a model statesman.

Comparing Ge’s picture with the film episode, one can easily see that the film makers strengthened the opposition between the Tsar and the Tsarevich by adding to the table books and a globe as symbols of progress and education brought to Russia with Peter’s reforms. Twenty years later, in 1957, when the Soviet people were celebrating the 40th anniversary of everything, a kind of anthology of Soviet cinematography was published featuring short descriptions of almost all the films.
that had been shot in the forty-year period. For Peter I, could the entry read that “both the novel by Aleksei Tolstoy and the film could be created only under the conditions of the new Soviet reality, when in the battle with the vulgar sociology, the new historical point of view has been affirmed”. A special passage was devoted to Tsarevich Aleksei: “Aleksei is the main ideological rival of Peter. There existed a tradition which used to describe the relations between Peter and Aleksei, placing the accent on the family conflict. There is no difficulty in realizing that such a narrowing of this theme may only lead to the distortion of Peter’s image [...]. The tragedy of Peter, who hands over his son, the traitor, to justice is still in the film. But this is not the end of the conflict. A personal conflict grows here into a social one. The father and the son appear to be the representatives of the antagonistic forces of the epoch – of progress and reaction. At the moment of Aleksei’s execution Peter is not a cruel and petty tyrant but a manful fighter whose personal tragedy symbolizes the sense of the fight that had taken place in that epoch”.

These words are in fact the essence of the interpretation of the case of Tsarevich Aleksei in the Soviet historiography that was repeated again and again in

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numerous text books and scholarly works, like for instance Peter the Great's biographies by Nikolai Pavlenko. But also there was something else.

Soon after the end of World War II there appeared a poem titled “Peter and Aleksei”. Here are a couple of final lines in which the author addresses the famous monument to Peter in St. Petersburg:

The genius of the state is silently galloping
Across the land, from one side to another
The dim nimbus of his sufferings,
Is his Imperial crown

The poem was written by a young Soviet poet, Yaroslav Smeljakov and dated 1945–1949. But why would he choose such a topic for his poem? To my mind one of the explanations is that during the war Stalin in fact repeated Peter’s deed of sacrificing his son to the country. Stalin’s elder son Yakov was taken prisoner by the Nazis and perished as his father refused to exchange him for field marshal Friedrich Paulus. As is well known, Stalin proclaimed all Soviet prisoners of war to be traitors. While he associated himself with Peter I and Ivan the Terrible, he considered Yakov to be a defector from both the country and from his father

16 Молча скачет державный гений
по земле – из конца в конец,
Тусклый венчик его мучений,
императорский твой венец
similar to Tsarevich Aleksei. But Smel'jakov had also been taken prisoner during the war, been sent to the GULAG when the war was over and wrote his poem while a GULAG prisoner. Thus it seems he was trying to explain himself his own fate. Later Smel'jakov once mentioned that he respected Stalin but didn’t love him. He first published his “Peter and Aleksei” poem in the late 1950s and some contemporary neo-Stalinists argue that it was his answer to Nikita Khrushchev’s disclosure of Stalin’s crimes.

Forty years later, in 1985 Friedrich Gorenstein, a Soviet émigré author in Germany, wrote the play An Infanticide. Gorenstein studied all the published documents on the case and the historiography but could not escape interpreting it through his own experience. He came to the conclusion that it was “a tragic struggle between the national and the imperial” and that “Tsarevich Aleksei was in favor of national roots but against the Empire”. Gorenstein argued that it had been absurd to accept the Empire and reject the Petrine reforms at the same time, which had been characteristic for the Slavophils and modern Russian nationalists. Still in the play he tried to “reconstruct the epoch made of not imperishable brass but
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perishable flesh." Gorenstein’s play was staged in several Russian theatres in the 1990s (sometimes the title was changed to the more familiar Peter and Aleksei), including the Vakhtangov theatre in Moscow, where it was staged by Petr Fomenko, one of the most gifted Russian theatre producers of the post-Soviet period. The role of Aleksei was played by Sergei Makovetskiy, also one of the most gifted contemporary Russian actors.


New versions of the Tsarevich Aleksei case also appeared in Russia in the post-Soviet period. Yakov Gordin, a well-known author of several books on eighteenth and nineteenth Russia, though not a professional historian, argued that Aleksei’s supporters were opposing not Peter’s reforms but his despotism and autocracy and thus were a kind of democratic opposition.18 Published in early 1990s, his book was part of a liberal trend that attempted to prove that the struggle for freedom was characteristic for all periods of Russian history, but this interpretation was not supported by any professional historians.

A new film about Aleksei, again based on Merejkovskiy’s novel, was also shot. The new movie version suggests that Aleksei was ashamed of his father and

18 Yakov Gordin, Mej rabsvom i svobodi, Sankt Peterburg 1994.
“What shall we do with the monument?” – Peter asks Sergei Sobyanin, the new Mayor of Moscow. http://www.anekdot.ru/an/an1108/e110808.html#5

“Where are my other peas?” – V. Putin asks D. Medvedev as he again takes the office of the President of Russia. http://cs442.vk.me/n5491957805616420/x_a59f592.jpg
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The combination of Nikolai Ge’s picture and Ilya Repin’s “Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan”
http://www.lgplus.ru/img4zc/sverilmn/OcI_deti.jpg