
RELIGIOUS LEGITIMATION OF MONARCHY IN 18TH CENTURY RUSSIA

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Abstract

The article examines the problem of legitimation of monarchical power in modernizing 18th century Russia in the ascension manifestoes published after the numerous palace coups. The author demonstrates that the religious legitimation, based upon the older Muscovite tradition, remained the centrepiece of 18th century political discourse. The elements of Western political thought were entangled with the older Muscovite notions, leading to the reinvention of social contract and popular election within Russian context. The latter was now seen through the prism of Muscovite tradition, where ‘people’ were conceived not as an actor making choice on certain premises, but as a translator of divine will. The former was partially incorporated into the fabric of Russian political thought, but the ‘contractual’ relations between the ruler and the ruled were understood as a benevolent promise on behalf of a God-chosen Emperor. These specifics influenced the Russian political thought as a whole.

Keywords: monarchy, social contract, Russia, divine right

1. Introduction

The political history of modernizing Russia is usually reduced – by some of the renowned researchers, like M. Raeff [1] or B. Mironov [2] – to the history of struggle around the limitations of autocratic monarchy, or – in a more general way – between the state and the society. The modernization of Russia is commonly thought to be equal to the process of secularization and subsequent limitation of monarchical power. Understandably, the analysis is frequently centred upon the use theories of political contract – for instance, the use of the ideas of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes or Jean-Jacques Rousseau notions of the social contract [3]. The social contract theory, which became a major power in European intellectual life since 16th century, had its origins in Roman law. Shortly, the most important feature of that influential school of thought is the analysis of social and political processes within the law-centred glossary of ‘social contract’, which forms the basis of society and which legitimates the power of the state over the individuals. Even though this definition is rather simplifying, I shall use it as a starting point.

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However, the relevance of these contractual notions to the Russian political *milieu* is a widely debated question. In her illuminating study of 18th century Russia C. Whittacker apparently argues in favour of the latter position, emphasizing that monarchy was ‘persuasive’ to the subjects by means of ‘justification literature’. In Whittacker’s analysis, the legitimation of royal power in 18th century Russia went through several major transformations, which were overlapping. She defines multiple layers of legitimacy: reformist, elective, legal, dynastic, as well as moral, natural and religious [4]. Whittacker argues that the legitimation models were persuasive enough to provide stable social consensus for two centuries ahead.

Surely, Whittacker’s arguments are of great importance for any scholar of Russian political culture. However, I try to show that, of all the above-mentioned legitimation strategies, the religious legitimation of royal power remained the most important, playing the central role in political discourse, while the contractual theory was relatively weak and unable to represent a significant political alternative.

2. The social contract and the right to resist

Examining the history of concepts such as popular sovereignty, Q. Skinner says that the development of a theory of resistance in Western Europe was rather complex. Augustinism was mixed with the Roman law, humanism, and religious radicalism, leading to creation of new contractual theories, legitimating – like in the case of French *monarchomachs* – the right of different magistrates to resist the king, up to the moment when it was proclaimed that a popular assembly has the power to dethrone the monarch [5].

The things were different in early modern Russia, which never experienced influence of Roman law or humanism, so Christian Orthodoxy remained dominant. Muscovite tradition of political legitimation, as G. Maniscalco Basile puts it, was “elastic ideological structure, such that it allows that the ascendant justification of power (*i. e.*: the Zemskie Sobory between the end of 16th and the beginning of 17th century) but also the descendant one (from God to *czar*) mix, expanding the (absolute) power of a *czar*, whose authority derives directly or indirectly from God” [6]. However, both ascendant and descendant justifications were thought, in a religious way, as divine blessing. Unlike the Western thought, there were no magistrates or assemblies in Russian political thought of 16th and 17th century, and so the very concepts of ‘people’ and their ‘common desire’ were functioning differently. For instance, while we analyse one of the main historical sources on the Time of Troubles (a dynastic crisis which stroke Russia in the beginning of 17th century and resulted in a severe civil war), *Vremennik* by Ivan Timofeev, the text demonstrates amazing disinterest in the judicial argumentation. Timofeev, a well-read bureaucrat, focused solely on the divine character of royal power, repeating that people cannot interfere with the Providence, for any political efforts are futile without good faith. However, Timofeev justifies the overthrow of a tyrant, the ‘False

Dmitry' (an adventurer, who was pretending to be of royal blood, and, soon after ascension, was killed in 1606), as being inspired directly by God, which is evident from the very fact of success [7]. In the same manner, the 'election' of young Mikhail Romanov was not made by people or any representative assembly – for people cannot interfere with the divine will – but the representative gathering of people, Zemsky Sobor, through pious and sincere prayer, is able to 'find' a monarch, whose person will be revealed by God [7, p. 333-346].

Thus, Muscovite tradition refrained from using the judicial arguments (including any concepts of contract or popular election) to legitimate the power of monarch. The ascensions that took place in 1598 and 1618 were not elections in Western – or even the Roman – sense. The official text of ascension – *Utverzhdennaia Gramota* – depicts the gathering of 'people' (which, so to say, did not constitute a representative 'body' but rather was conceived as people *in toto*) and the following common prayer. Then, God had revealed his command to the praying, so all the praying understood simultaneously that certain candidate (Boris Godunov in 1598 or Mikhail Romanov in 1613) is indeed chosen by God [8]. It is quite important that people's choice was not essentially a decision made by a public body, possessing certain authority, but a revelation of divine will; the actor here is God, but not the people. The functions and tasks of the 'people' in such political ideology were different from those of Western tradition, where *populus* was conceived as a political actor by the classical philosophy, as well as Roman law and history.

3. The age of palace coups

The radical reforms of Peter I changed Russia in a dramatic way, with secularization being among the most important consequences. The secular inclinations of the Emperor implied that now religious legitimization was giving way to the secular concepts, transferred from Europe. In addition, the dynastic instability, triggered by Peter's changes in the succession rules, led to a row of palace coups, which in turn seemed to be undermining the traditional legitimacy. However, the religious legitimization stood monolithically as the centrepiece of political discourse. To prove that, I will examine the cases of four known palace coups, that had occurred in 1725, 1730, 1741, 1762.

After the death of Peter I in the beginning of 1725, the Imperial throne was left vacant. The manifesto dated from 28 January 1725, was rather laconic in saying that Emperor's second wife, Catherine I, became new sovereign. That proclamation was breaking with the time-honoured tradition of father-to-son inheritance, and – though Peter put to death his own son from the first marriage, Alexey - Emperor's 9-years-old grandson, Petr Alexeevich, was alive. Catherine's ascension manifesto was referring to Peter's law on inheritance, which established new order of succession – the throne should be inherited by the most worthy person, who ought to be appointed as heir by Emperor. And even though the Emperor died without writing his testament, the authors of

manifesto were insisting that Catherine had in fact qualified as the most worthy heir through her remarkable 'labours'. The coronation of Catherine by her royal husband which took place in 1717 (a radical break with Russian tradition) was presented in manifesto as an act of appointment, which doesn't need any additional confirmations.

That might be seen as a purely rational argument in terms of inheritance by law or by capacity. However, Catherine's 'labours' could only be understood in religious context. Since 1711, Catherine – with the help of the leading Russian orator of that time, archbishop Feofan (Prokopovich) – was creating her own public image along the lines of image Saint Catherine, with references to the image of self-sacrificing, loving and faithful 'Christ's bride' [9]. As G. Marker shows in his recent study, the image of St. Catherine was well-known to Russian public, as the saint was considered to be a holy patron of women of ruling Romanov dynasty. And, one could add, if Peter I, in baroque manner, was seen by some of ideologists as Russia's omnipotent Demiurge [10], than Catherine might easily use the allusions with the respected saint of the same name.

The Empress was, of course, fully dependent on the powerful statesmen and military leaders, who formed the Supreme Privy Council. This governmental body was *de facto* the collective ruler, while formally all the power was in Empress' hands. However, neither radical breaks with the traditional legitimation, nor obvious inability of reigning Empress to rule without her powerful advisors were able to stop the elites from drawing from the well of religious legitimacy.

The case of 1730 is quite illuminating. Young Emperor Peter II, who ruled in 1727–1730, died untimely, and the Supreme Privy Council – dominated at that time by the powerful aristocratic clans of Dolgorukys and Golytzyns – was left in charge of the realm. The decision was made to invite past emperor's cousin-aunt, Anna Ioannovna. She was offered to sign the 'Conditions', a short document imposing severe limitations upon her power and empowering Supreme Privy Council as collective sovereign *de facto*. From the first sight, 'Conditions' might be interpreted as a contract, and thus be put at the starting point of Russian secular, contractual tradition.

The manifesto issued by Supreme Privy Council on 4 February 1730, informed the Russians that Anna Ioannovna was 'chosen' for the crown by "common desire and agreement of all people" [11]. However, the text of 'Conditions' was started in a traditional way, stating that Anna was chosen "by the will of almighty God and the common desire of Russian people". According to 'Conditions', the Empress was voluntarily limiting herself, searching for the common good and the good advice from the Supreme Privy Council. The limitations indeed were severe, but the contractual character only appeared in the very end of the text, in one final phrase: "Should I break and not hold on to these conditions, may I be deprived of the Russian crown" [11, p. 120]. This phrase surely could be seen as a contractual obligation. Russian scholar S. Polskoy points out that prince D.M. Golytzin, the intellectual leader of the Supreme Privy Council, could have read the treatises of John Locke (these were presented in

Golytzin's vast library), and on that basis makes a conclusion about the contractual nature of 'Conditions' [3].

But I cannot agree with such conclusion. Even though 'Conditions' evoked contractual language, it failed to indicate the second side of an agreement. The second side was never mentioned in 'Conditions'; the only actors mentioned in 'Conditions' were God, Empress, and the Supreme Privy Council, to whom the Empress entrusted lots of political tasks and privileges. Of these three actors, only Supreme Privy Council might be seen as the second side of a contract. If it so, than whom does the Council represent and who gave it power to enter the contract? These questions were never clarified. I suppose that, while the members of the Supreme Privy Council indeed wanted to limit the autocratic power by the kind of 'condition', they hardly conceived it as a contract between the ruler and the ruled. That, in turn, could be explained by the influence of Muscovite tradition, which was lacking the definition of 'ruled' as autonomous political actor. Thus, 'Conditions' cannot be seen as the starting point of Russian contractual tradition, for it was more of a *promise* than of a *contract*.

The subsequent events prove that conclusion: when Anna arrived to Moscow, she annulled the 'Conditions' by tearing the signed text. However, the manifesto which followed on 20 February 1730, did not denounce the previous acts, confirming the 'election' by God and by 'common desire' of people, while adding on behalf of Anna that "all our subjects unanimously pleaded us to retain the Autocracy, as our ancestors did" [11, p. 147]. The annulation of 'Conditions' was done with the same conceptual reference to the 'unanimous desire' of 'all people'. Here, again, the 'voice of people' was understood as 'the voice of God', and the reason to break the royal promise. The fictional 'election' didn't presuppose the limitations of power. The references to the people's 'desire' served to support both limiting 'Conditions' and their absolutist annulation.

The palace coups of 1741 and 1762 followed almost the same conceptual pattern, as seen from their respective legitimization manifestoes. In 1741, Elizabeth, daughter of Peter I and Catherine I, overthrew the child-Czar Ioann VI, grand-nephew of Anna Ioannovna. Elizabeth's coronation manifesto was using religious legitimization, cleverly entangling it with references to the 'common desire' of subjects and to her right to the throne by force of her mother's testament. As I had demonstrated above, these references to the 'common desire' could be seen as part of old Muscovite tradition, where God speaks through the people, rather than Western conceptual innovation evoking the language of nation's supremacy over the monarch. Consequently, Elizabeth's legitimization has much in common with that of Boris Godunov, Michael Romanov and his son, Alexey Mikhailovich. The special feature, which allows me to put Elizabeth's case into this continuity line, is the reference to 'common desire' of people without mentioning any representative bodies. This reference could only be explained in the context of religious legitimization, so characteristic for Muscovite Russia: the 'common desire' represents not the act of election, where one agency (people) empowers the other (monarch), but the way to

discover the will of God, which manifests itself through the unanimous actions of the Orthodox community. Thus, legitimation of 1741 coup combined religious and dynastic arguments, but didn't employ the contractual rhetoric, while its presumably election rhetoric was in fact deeply rooted in the same religious tradition [12].

In 1762, Empress Catherine overthrew her husband, Emperor Peter III, who was grandson of Peter I. Catherine usurped the crown, and the authors of her legitimation manifesto (presumably, oberhofmeister N.I. Panin and secretary G.N. Teplov) were put into difficult position. In the end, they produced a rhetorical masterpiece, trying each and every way to deprive Peter III of his (doubtless) legitimation and to dissolve any doubts in Catherine's rights to crown. The strategies, used by the authors of manifesto, are quite illuminative.

First of all, the manifesto was accusing Peter III of numerous misdeeds and of a general incapacity to rule, at the same time stressing wonderful qualities of his wife, which made her divine predisposition apparent. Peter III was intended to kill or imprison his wife and son – and there the motif of sacrifice, known from the time of Catherine I, enters the scene. Catherine II was ready to suffer for the Fatherland, and even loyal and faithful Russian subjects were so chocked by these atrocities of tyrant, that they were even ready to shed his blood. However, the God's will overcome the tyrant, staging a peaceful palace coup. In addition, the help of simple wordplay, Catherine was named as 'granddaughter' of Peter I and 'nephew' of Elizabeth, symbolically appropriating the dynastic legitimation, which she never had in fact. Finally, Peter III abdicated after the coup, and the full text of abdication was published in the manifesto [13].

The legitimation of Catherine II thus was defined through a number of arguments: the divine will, the supreme qualities, the common desire of people, the dynastic inheritance, and the abdication of previous monarch. This excessive construction shows how the authors of manifesto were trying every mean to make Catherine's ascension look more or less legitimate. The task was hard, for Catherine II totally lacked any kind of legitimacy – unlike her predecessor, Catherine I, whose sacrificial image full of religious allusion was carefully built over a dozen of years. And, in this desperate situation, the old remedy served well: the concept of divine will, the Providence, which, through common desire of people, enthroned the true monarch and crushed the tyrant, remained centrepiece in the manifesto. That reflected in the court poetry and celebrations that took place after the 'revolution' of 1762: Catherine's ascension was seen by poets and artists as a transcendent miracle, which had to improve the life of Russians in every aspect. For instance, the court poets – like A.P. Sumarokov – were hailing Catherine as 'Pallada' and 'Astrea', who came from Heaven to bring new Golden Age [14]. The idea culminated in Catherine's coronation celebration – a public masquerade entitled 'Triumphant Minerva', which took place in the streets of Moscow in 1763. The actors were dressed in costumes representing vices and virtues, and in the final the arrival of Astrea's chariot was manifesting the dawn of new era [15]. Subsequently, imagery of Catherine II as

the wise and prudent legislator – which had enchanted the foremost European intellectuals, like Voltaire or Denis Diderot – owed much to the religious glossary, which was frequently used for the legitimization of 1762 coup.

In parallel, Catherine was insisting that she was brought to the throne by her own prominent personal capacities, combined with her husband's lack of similar virtues; in other words, she deserved crown. While such legitimization might see secular and even elective, in fact it reproduces the same approach, borrowed from the legitimization arguments of Catherine I. Divine virtues plus divine miracles – Catherine II's ascension was no mere occasion or election, but rather the manifestation of the Providence.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of four palace 'revolutions' which took place in 18th century Russia – namely, coups of 1725, 1730, 1741, 1762 – shows us that religious legitimization of regal power remained the centrepiece of political discourse. While the palace coups could be expected to bring about the new modes of legitimization, in fact it never happened. Instead, these palace 'revolutions' were reinforcing the time-tested rhetoric of Godly power. The manifesto of 1762 came closest to the open denunciation of Godly right to rule. The cases of 1721, 1730, 1741, and 1762 were quite different in terms of actors and scenarios, but in all these cases the religious legitimization was used to proclaim that the power of new Monarch is granted by God.

Such sustainability of the religious legitimization has to be taken into account in the analysis of Russian political thought. It cannot be dismissed as a mere rhetoric trick: the rhetorical force of the religious arguments was quite persuasive, and its influence survived even in the secularized post-Petrine Russia. Therefore, I cannot agree with C. Whittacker's conclusion about the existence of 'elective' legitimization in 18th century Russia [4, p. 56-90]. Neither elective, nor contractual arguments were popular within the official political discourse. Instead, Russian elite preferred to talk of politics in terms of God-given power.

This problem with the contractual and elective language could be considered as definitive for the history of Russian political thought as a whole. The 18th century Russians were able to grasp and use the notion of social contract, and they believed that monarchical power has to be striving for the common good and be based upon people's consent. This is evident from the ascension manifestoes of Elizabeth and Catherine II, which were blaming the overthrown predecessors in bad governance. The subsequent poetry, dramaturgy, and even some of the political writings of the supreme Imperial officials were widely using these notions – like, for example, A.P. Sumarokov's drama '*Dimitry Samozvanets*' or N.I. Panin's treatise '*Rassuzhdenie o Nepremennih Gosudarstvennih Zakonah*'.

Nonetheless, it was impossible for these Russian elites to determine the second side of a social contract – namely, the people (as an active participant of the political process), so such inability was typically disguised in ambiguous terms like ‘all subjects’. The reference to ‘all subjects’ was a rhetoric figure, which in fact referred to no one in particular. In the absence of any formal entity that was able to participate in the social contract, there was no way to discover the people’s consent other than proclaim it retrospectively. In other words, the only way to discover people’s consent was to dethrone the monarch, and – *after* the coup – redefine the overthrown prince as unpopular and illegitimate tyrant, whom ‘all subjects’ shunned. Here I find the crucial difference from the contractual argument. In Locke’s writings, the ‘people’ are establishing new political configuration after the revolution; in Russian case, the people never act as a political ‘person’, and the popular unrest was seen as the manifestation of God’s will to punish a tyrant. Yet a Hobbesian version of a social contract also does not work, since the legitimating source of the monarchical power was God (and not the contract of any kind).

The ease with which the authors of manifestoes were operating with the notion of ‘common desire of the people’ shows us the development of older Muscovite formula, where ‘common desire of people’ was merely revealing the mysterious divine will. The legitimation could only be done *post factum*, that is, *after* the successful coup. The study of legitimation strategies does not allow us to explain the mechanics of palace coups. In all cases, the stereotypic legitimation, referring to the divine will manifested through the people, was fixed – with the help of rhetoric figure of ‘all subjects’.

Thus, historians have to be quite careful with the rhetoric trap. But it is quite easy to fall into the rhetoric trap, treating the lamentations and accusations of manifestoes as reality. The basic idea of Muscovite political ideology, the sovereignty which ‘comes through the people from God’ [6], remained strong during the 18th century. Even the essentially republican attempt of the Supreme Privy Council to limit the monarch by means of contractual obligation failed to use the language of social contract or election. Thus, one could pose a question: to what extent our recent markers of modernization / archaism could be taken seriously?

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