Russia’s cultural elite before the revolution

By Glenn C. Altschuler

Globe Correspondent / March 10, 2011

The Romanovs, who ruled Russia for 300 years, valued “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.” Hoping to use culture as an instrument of political control, they patronized the arts, conferring on some writers, composers, painters, and performers ranks equal to civil servants. It seemed to work — for a time.


Volkov can be informative and charming. Although it was largely ignored by the tsars, he indicates, Mussorgsky’s opera “Khovanshchina,” which was completed by Rimsky-Korsakov and released soon after Mussorgsky died in 1881, is “perhaps the greatest political opera of all time.” Tchaikovsky — and Fabergé eggs — Volkov adds, gave Alexander III “enormous pleasure,” but expressionist compositions like Mussorgsky’s, “gave him indigestion.”

“Romanov Riches,” however, is more anecdotal than analytical. In a society where laws were “applied or ignored depending on the position and wishes of the authorities,” Volkov tells us, artists “could hardly be described as ‘happy’ people.” Perhaps, although it’s not all that clear that they were less happy than their counterparts in less autocratic societies.

In any event, Volkov doesn’t adequately sort out the impact of state patronage on ardent monarchists like Dostoevsky, or on writers, like Pushkin, who sometimes curried favor with the regime. He doesn’t explain why tsars continued to support artists, like Tolstoy, who endorsed liberal (or radical) causes. Nor does he make a compelling case for his claim that the failure of Nicholas II, the last Russian tsar, to modernize the cultural policies of his predecessors was “one of the essential causes” of the collapse of the monarchy.

Volkov, alas, often steps on his own narrative. He’s a name-dropper. After speculating that Turgenev, following dinners in Paris with Gustave Flaubert, Emile Zola, Alfonse Daudet, and Edmond Goncourt, imagined himself “on the literary Olympus,” he adds, “I saw similar emotions on the face of Joseph Brodsky when he appeared in New York in the company of Czeslaw Milosz, Octavio Paz, and Derek Walcott (four Nobel laureates!).”

Despite his claim that he has tried to be free of ideological constraints, Volkov also makes gratuitous comparisons to leaders of the Soviet Union. Like Catherine II, he writes, Boris Yeltsin secured his hold on power by giving money to loyal oligarchs. Catherine’s ability “to create a quiet life for her new elite,” however, makes her long reign more “comparable to the Brezhnev years.” Under Vladimir Putin, Volkov opines, “Russian Orthodoxy was returned, autocracy became paternalistic rule, and nationality persisted as nationalism.”

“Romanov Riches” ends with the Revolution of 1917. Influenced by his reading of “War and Peace,” Volkov suggests, Nicholas II remained convinced that the Russian people and soldiers would never embrace the ideas of revolutionary “devils.” Vladimir Ulyanov Lenin, who “did not confuse the literary characters with actual people,” also read Tolstoy’s epic novel, saw in it hatred, anger, and determination, and drew the opposite conclusion.

Literature may have that kind of power. And a “rift between the monarchy and literature” may have ended Romanov rule, as “[l]iterally, God spat and blew out the candle.” But there are good reasons to be skeptical.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University. He can be reached at gcal@cornell.edu.

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.