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POWER AND STATE – RECONSIDERED (A REVIEW)¹

This review aims to introduce a newly published volume in Russian historical research. The monograph by Endre Sashalmi, entitled *Russian Notions of Power and State in a European Perspective, 1462–1725 – Assessing the Significance of Peter’s Reign*, was published only a year ago and has already earned the recognition of scholars of Russian studies both in Hungary and abroad. The book sheds new light on the development of early modern Russian political thought, its specific characteristics and its significance in the European context. Drawing on a diverse source base and a wide range of theoretical knowledge, the author’s conceptual approach rethinks the framework for interpreting the early modern forms of Russian state and power.

Keywords: Russian state, power, idea of politics, Peter the Great, Early Modern Age

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The place and role of Russia in Europe is a question that has been of interest for centuries, not only to Russian historians but also to historians abroad. There are many theories and concepts in the traditional East–West debate and in the interpretation of the direction of the history of Russian development. One of the main questions is whether Russia can be interpreted as a great power in Eastern Europe trying to catch up with Western tendencies, or rather as an expansionist empire tending towards Asia. This dilemma has its roots in old traditions and has determined the evolution of Russian ideas and political history. The Petrine reforms and the need to build an empire were fundamentally concerned with catching up culturally with European society. It is another question how Peter was able to apply the traditions and cultural values and even political concepts typical of Europe to an authentic Russian milieu that was averse to any radical change. Understanding this transformation, perceiving the subtle changes in the periods preceding the Petrine Era and comprehending their significance – this is the basis of a modern approach to history. For this very reason, a political-historical approach to the study of the early modern Russian state is no longer sufficient; the inclusion of other fields such as the history of ideas is also required.

Bearing all this in mind, research into political thought and the history of ideas is perhaps one of the most dynamically developing trends in recent Russian studies. In the last few decades, a number of volumes have been published that have laid new foundations for the history of political thought in early modern Russia, such as the works of Gary M. Hamburg,² Maureen Perrie,³ Daniel B. Rowland⁴ or Gyula Szvák⁵ to name but a few (without claiming to be exhaustive). Endre Sashalmi, whose latest monograph boldly sheds new light on the turning points of early modern Russian political thinking and its ideological background fits neatly into this list. His book, published by Academic Studies Press at the end of 2022, quickly won the recognition of the professional community, and Endre Sashalmi became the first Hungarian researcher to win the Eighteenth-

2 GARY M. HAMBURG, *Russia's Path toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500–1801* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

3 MAUREEN PERRIE, "Popular Monarchism: The Myth of the Ruler from Ivan the Terrible to Stalin", in *Reinterpreting Russia*, ed. GEOFFREY HOSKING (London: Arnold, 1999), 156–169.

4 DANIEL B. ROWLAND, *God, Tsar, and People: The Political Culture of Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

5 GYULA SZVÁK, *Russskaia paradigma. Rusofobskie zapiski rusofila* (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2010).

Century Russian Studies Association’s Marc Raeff Book Prize in 2023. The great international interest this book has attracted is no coincidence, as Endre Sashalmi’s work explores a complex topic with great thoroughness and extensive knowledge of sources, the comprehensive and cross-period analysis of which few have undertaken. This volume can therefore rightly be regarded as a pioneering endeavour.

Endre Sashalmi is a professor at the Institute of History at the University of Pécs, head of the Research Workshop on the History of Russia at the University of Public Service, a member of the Russian–Hungarian Joint Committee and of the editorial board of the journal “RussianStudiesHu”. His research is concerned with the historical development of Russian statehood, the transformation of the concept of the Russian state and its historical interpretation, and this is the core subject of his latest monograph. This book has two very important historiographical antecedents. The first is the author’s work *From the Human Body to the Clockwork: Metaphors of State and Changes in the Nature of the State in Western Christendom, 1300–1800*, published in 2015; the second is entitled *The Problematics of Power and State in Russia between 1462–1725 from a European Perspective*, which came out in 2020.⁶ Both books, published in Hungarian, are precursors of this new monograph from different aspects. The former focused on conceptual-philological analyses related to the concept of the early modern state, primarily based on the Western European context. At the same time, this volume was a very important foundational work, as it provided the definitional and conceptual background from which Sashalmi could continue his research. In his next work, he examined not only the meanings of the concept of the state, but also how these meanings could be interpreted in Europe and beyond in the Russian context. In addition, Sashalmi’s in-depth analysis focuses on Russian autocracy, more precisely the emergence of autocracy as a political system, and the interpretation of so-called “*proprietary dynasticism*.”⁷ *Russian Notions of Power* can be seen as the third stage in this organic process of research and creation, not only combining these two subfields, but also introducing many new elements, analytical aspects and a much broader vision of Russian political thought.

6 ENDRE SASHALMI, *Az emberi testtől az óraműig. Az állam metaforái és formaváltozásai a nyugati keresztény kultúrkörben 1300–1800* (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2015).

7 ENDRE SASHALMI, *A hatalom és az állam problematikája Oroszországban 1462–1725 között európai perspektívából* (Budapest: Dialóg Campus, 2020).

The book is divided into five major sections: an introductory treatise, three main chapters forming separate thematic units and an epilogue which draws parallels with the present. Regarding this division, it is worth noting that although the first and last parts are not specifically highlighted in the volume – as the book focuses on the three major central units – they are, in my opinion, at least as important as the main chapters because they provide a coherent interpretation for the main thrust of the volume. The first part – *“Introduction: Explanation of Aims, Genre and Terminology”* – is an introductory section, which clearly sets out the points of analysis that define the themes and formal characteristics of the volume. As Sashalmi himself openly states, he did not set out to write a history of Russian political thought. His main aim was to present the trends of political thought in a transitional period, when the Russian political vocabulary was being transformed by European influences and specific Russian features. In terms of methodology, Sashalmi explores the shifts in the notions of Russian political thinking with almost philological thoroughness, organising them around conceptual and terminological issues.

The three main chapters elaborate the concepts of state and power and how these changed from the 15th century to the time of Peter the Great, partly building on each other and partly running in parallel. In the first section, entitled *“Russia and Europe: Clarification of Terms and the Problem of State,”* Sashalmi focuses on laying down the theoretical foundations and establishing the definitions on which he later builds the language of his whole argument. And it is precisely one of the greatest merits of this volume that the author takes the time to explain the concepts and interpret the European (and especially Western European) terms in an authentic Russian context. This is particularly important since, as Sashalmi points out, these terms – transposed into a specific Russian environment – have different or rather more nuanced meanings than those traditionally used in European circumstances. The integration of the notions of state and power into Russian political thought and culture was part of a complex process, and Sashalmi’s presentation of this process also highlights the ideological background in which these terms acquired their own special meaning. The importance of the mythical and real ancestors of the ruling dynasty, i.e., the descent from Emperor Augustus (augmented by the story of the Monomakh regalia), Ivan III’s marriage to the niece of the last Byzantine emperor respectively, and the relationship between the ruler and God – the strong presence of the Tsar as the earthly vicegerent of God

– are also presented as crucial elements in the development of Russian political thought.

Sashalmi examines simultaneously the main elements of early modern Russian political thinking while reflecting on changes in the organization and the structural modifications of the European states of the period. The author's reflection on the differences between the political systems of Russia and the European states is particularly interesting, as he sheds light on the dynamics of political thinking as well as on diplomatic events. Russia gradually became integrated into the changing inter-state relations that followed the Thirty Years' War, although the process of catching up was more intense during the Petrine Era. Sashalmi points out the importance of two major international treaties, the treaties of Westphalia and Utrecht, and shows their impact on international law. By analysing Shafirov's treatise (1717), written to justify the Russian position on the causes of the Great Northern War and consequently to achieve recognition of Russia as a European state, he proves that Russia adapted well to the standards of the age in the field of inter-state relations.

The second section of the book focuses on state and power. In this chapter, Sashalmi first rethinks the interpretation of "*proprietary dynasticism*," taking as his starting point Richard Pipes' book *Russia under the Old Regime* and bringing a new perspective to the question of the succession of power. In his argument, he consistently uses the term "*proprietary dynasticism*" in the sense that (public) power in Russia is held by the dynasty and that the Russian Tsar essentially regards the state as his own property. The author understands the Russian ideology of power and political structure as a patrimonial system, in which the tsars establish their possession of power on the basis of divine right, and thus the phenomenon of the Russian ruler as the owner of the country.

At this point it is worth noting that Sashalmi distinguishes between different kinds of rulership based on proprietary, office, and divine right principles. Another decisive aspect is the transformation of the notion of *gosudarstvo* in the 16th and 17th centuries, which, although it takes on a new meaning, is not entirely free from the meanings determined by the *Moskovskoe gosudarstvo* in the previous centuries. In the 17th century, however, the concept had already advanced considerably, a claim which the author supports with contemporary source material and documents, one example being the Law Code of 1649. An extremely important finding that features in the book regarding the Russian–Western comparison is that not only *state and power* show a regionally changing picture in political

thinking, but also the concept of “*common good and commonwealth*” – or more precisely its existence (in Western Europe) or non-existence (in Russia). In this respect, Sashalmi clearly argues that in Russia the “*common*” approach was barely present, and that the concept of commonwealth only became established in Russian political thinking in the second half of the 18th century, during the reign of Catherine II.

The author discusses the different interpretations and manifestations of “*Divine Right*” in Russia and Europe in a separate sub-chapter, again based on the differences between East and West. At this stage of the analysis, Sashalmi also seeks to reinforce these distinctions by using different terminology (*Divine Right of Kings* - *Divine Right of Tsars*). The ideology of power in early modern Russia was monolithic, and there were no diverse and multifaceted concepts as in the West. Sashalmi believes that this analysis must take into account not only the origin of power, but also its purpose and the question of its inheritance. One of the most important differences between divine right as it pertained to tsars as opposed to kings is precisely the way in which power was transmitted. While in Western Christianity the order of succession was fixed, in Muscovy it was completely different. According to custom, the eldest surviving sons were preferred to succeed to the throne, but there were occasions when this tradition seemed to be overturned and suitability for the throne was given greater weight (for example after 1682). A more significant change in the succession of power came with the the tsar’s statute in 1722, which both formalized and loosened the succession. It declared that the ruler had the right to name a candidate for the throne, but the candidate no longer had to be a grand prince or another immediate family member, and therefore dynastic descent as a whole was not a requirement any longer.

The third major unit of the book revolves around a key figure in Russian political thought, Feofan Prokopovich. The career of this monk is presented in detail, and the portrait seems to deviate from the scheme of the history of ideas pursued by Sashalmi, but this deviation also has a well thought-out function: the changes in Feofan Prokopovich’s personality and career had a strong impact on his literary activity and political thinking. Sashalmi presents the relationship between state and power through analysing the writings of Prokopovich. Before examining the Prokopovich texts, however, Sashalmi summarizes in a separate subsection aspects essential to the study of his works, thus helping readers to understand a language that deviated from the usual, even in Prokopovich’s own time. The “*language acts*” used by Prokopovich were intended to change and adapt

to the demands of Peter the Great as well as to the new cultural politics. Moving slightly away from the Prokopovich analysis, but also within the same chapter, we encounter the ways in which the notion of the Russian state appeared in visual and written sources in the 18th century. A new image of power emerged through the works of Prokopovich, and this was gradually reflected in symbolic representations through the allegorical personification of Russia as a female figure. This was also reflected in the period after 1725, when the Russian Empire was led predominantly by female rulers.

The final section of the volume is a curiosity for the whole monograph. Moving from the early modern period to the modern era, it shows how the concepts of state and power are manifested. The aim of the author in this epilogue was to create a kind of *longue durée* interpretation of the notions of state and power. Sashalmi draws on two sets of sources for his analysis: the Russian Constitution of 1993 and Vladimir Putin's speeches. Examining the use of terms in the preamble of the Constitution, Sashalmi concludes that there is an overlap between the rhetorical elements that became crucial under Peter the Great and the terms used in the text (*gosudarstvo*, *Rossia*, *otechestvo* for instance), and that this shows a strong continuity in the use of terms related to the state and power across historical periods. As far as Vladimir Putin's texts are concerned, his Millennium Manifesto and his later speeches also establish a characteristic link with the Petrine Era.

This monograph draws on a considerable body of literature and provides valuable guidance for researchers interested in the subject. Mention should also be made of the large number of contemporary sources used, of which Martin Schmeizel's Latin-language work from 1722 is very interesting, since it was written to justify Peter the Great's imperial title. Given that this source is less known in professional circles, its introduction into the historical canon is also an important merit of the book. In addition to all of this there are many other aspects of the work of Endre Sashalmi (among them the parallel use of visual and written sources) that deserve to be described and highlighted, but we will refrain from doing so here. Firstly, because a book review simply cannot reflect the complexity of this work, in which Sashalmi's arguments are presented in a convincing and effortless manner and his comprehensive knowledge is evident. Secondly, for the very reasons outlined above, this volume also covers fields of research that are distant from each other, giving it, therefore, a wide range of uses. On the whole, I believe that this new

book by Endre Sashalmi is a worthy culmination of the author's research activities in recent years and will be an essential read for both young and experienced scholars of Russian Studies.

ENDRE SASHALMI, *Russian Notions of Power and State in a European Perspective, 1462–1725 – Assessing the Significance of Peter's Reign*. (Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2022), p. 508.

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