structures: imperial imagery; military and bureaucratic structures; fiscal, trade, and industrial policies; the creation and control of social elites; rural and urban populations; religion; and cultural and intellectual life. In other words, Kollmann is making an assessment of the internal structures that helped to make Russia not only an empire but also a “great power” by 1801. The bibliographies at the end of each chapter provide a useful and extensive guide to books (mainly English-language) on the subject, although I think it is unfortunate that when Russian historians are mentioned in the text, the references are not supported by a fuller bibliographic entry in a footnote or in a bibliography.

Kollmann brings great depth and breadth of scholarship to this subject. She is the recognized expert on the Russian judicial system in the early modern period, and she provides a particularly sophisticated analysis of the ways in which the legal system was used by the tsars not only to control the population but also to deliberately maintain distinctions between different social and ethnic groups within the empire. Kollmann guides the reader through the complex evolution of administrative and institutional reforms over three centuries with enormous skill. All the topics covered in the book are, however, covered in impressive depth and with reference to recent scholarship; there is a detailed description of the acquisition of the empire from the fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth century; there is a sophisticated analysis of the social groups within the empire; the assessment of the religious life of the empire and of culture in the final section is particularly helpful. Most importantly, Kollmann establishes that there was considerable continuity within this period in the ways that tsars managed their lands and people, albeit with constant evolution of these mechanisms to reflect particular pressures on the state or the influence of Western European practice. In this analysis, the “greats”—Peter I and Catherine II—were an important part of this process but not the sole creators of the empire that had developed by 1801.

The focus of the book is specifically the Russian “empire” and not Russia or Russians. The whole of the first section covers the growth of the Russian empire. The non–ethnically Russian peoples feature in the themes explored in sections two and three; there is discussion, for example, of the assimilation of non-Russian nobles, of the payment by non-Russian peasants in the Volga regions and Siberia of tribute (iaisak) rather than Muscovite taxes and then the eighteenth-century poll tax, of the existence of separate law codes in Ukraine and the Baltic provinces, and of Russia as a multi-faith empire. There is also analysis of the ways in which central power was asserted throughout the empire, be it through the imagery of the tsars, the adoption of Russian styles of architecture in non-Russian regions, the imposition of standardized bureaucratic structures of administration and courts, or the imposition of uniform obligations.

The characterization of the “empire of difference” could, however, have been developed even further to illustrate the complexity and diversity of the Russian Empire. First, there is little on the lifestyle of non-Russians, including nomadic peoples. Second, there could be more discussion about the social and economic interactions between Russians and non-Russians in the areas where Russians settled. Third, the thematic approach in places underplays, in my view, the personal role that rulers played in policies toward non-Russians. One obvious example is the way in which the personal prejudices of Elizabeth (r. 1741–1761) determined her policies toward Jews and Muslims within the empire, which contrasted sharply with the policies followed by Catherine II (r. 1762–1796), which were influenced by Enlightenment attitudes on toleration. Policies pursued actively or aggressively by the tsars for the perceived good of the whole empire could have significant, if sometimes unintended, consequences for non-Russian peoples. For example, Peter I’s determination to make Russia a great military and naval power led to conscription, forced labor in dockyards and for the construction of St Petersburg, the poll tax, and a military-focused industrial policy, all of which had consequences for non-Russian as well as Russian subjects. Catherine II’s encouragement of German settlement in the middle Volga region was intended to improve the overall economic productivity of the empire, but it also made an already ethnically mixed region even more diverse. A fuller assessment of the contrast between the treatment of the more and the less economically and culturally developed non-Russian regions within the empire would also have supported Kollmann’s general argument. A German-speaking merchant in Riga or a Polish-speaking nobleman in Lithuanian lands had a very different experience of imperial rule than did a nomadic Muslim Kalmyk in the lower Volga or a pagan Iakut hunter in Siberia.


Gary M. Hamburg, one of the leading historians of Russian nineteenth-century political thought, has published the major book on its earlier development. The nine hundred pages of Russia’s Path toward Enlightenment provide detailed analysis of dozens of texts written over three centuries, including literary, historical, and theological ones as long as they discuss political issues or have political implications. The book also gives relevant contextual and biographical information, happily avoiding the depersonalization of intellectual history widespread among the practitioners of Begriffsgeschichte.

At the same time, this monograph is not a general survey. Hamburg ties together post-Petrine and old Muscovite intellectual histories, trying to bridge the gap between them that figures prominently in the historiography. He argues that the Russian Enlightenment of the last third of the eighteenth century is deeply rooted in national Orthodox tradition. This approach represents a rising trend in recent scholarship; one can mention here Marcus C. Levit’s The Visual Dominant in Eighteenth-Century Russia (2011) and Elise Wirtschafter’s Religion and Enlightenment.
ment in Catherinian Russia: The Teachings of Metropolitan Platon (2013). Still, the idea of “historical continuities” (19) between thinkers of medieval and early modern Russia had never before been analyzed based on material of such scope and diversity. Arguably, the results of this heroic effort do not seem entirely convincing.

Hamburg searches for a sort of middle ground between Orthodox enlightenment mediated through the church, on the one hand, and modern enlightenment as ethically grounded rationality (21) achieved by autonomous individuals guided by their own reason, on the other. He starts his narrative with The Enlightener by the theologian Iosif Volotskii (1439 or 1440–1515), an ardent defender of the close relations between secular and religious authorities and an advocate of repressions against heretics that seemed excessive even to many of his less enlightened coreligionists. The historian bases his reading of the cleric’s theology on Iosif’s assertion that the faithful have a right and a duty of passive resistance to ungodly rulers. Still, this argument, made much more strongly by the so-called non-possessors who opposed Volotskii and monastic land-holding, was by no means new. For centuries it inspired thousands of martyrs of all religions and denominations, and can hardly serve as a precursor of modern enlightenment.

The first part of the book, dealing with the religious moralists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ends with an analysis of the theology of Sil’vestr Medvedev (1641–1691), where, according to Hamburg, “the Orthodox conception of enlightenment as spiritual illumination crossed into a conception of enlightenment as erudition” (212). However, this learned and politically active monk not only was beheaded at the command of Peter I, but, probably more importantly in this context, was totally ignored as a thinker through the whole eighteenth century. Moreover, Medvedev himself was a scion of Catholic Polish baroque, intellectually isolated and alien both to the traditionalists and to the new Protestant-leaning tsar and his followers.

Hamburg writes that such thinkers of the Petrine and immediate post-Petrine period analyzed in the second part of the book as “Feofan [Prokopovich], [Ivan] Pososhkov, [Vasili] Tatischev and [Mikhail] Lomonosov, employed a vocabulary of virtues that fit both Christian and eighteenth-century philosophical contexts, because the latter vocabulary of virtue-talk had been derived from the former” (374). This is, of course, true, but “Christian” here is not equal to Orthodox. Feofan Prokopovich was profoundly influenced by Halle Pietism, Vasili Tatischev explicitly rejected the possibility of basing future Russian education on the legacy of learned Orthodox scholars, and Mikhail Lomonosov in his synthesis of religion and science followed Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff. The latter taught Lomonosov in Marburg. Lomonosov even tried to defend church books by claiming that their language was beneficial for literature in the same way that the vernacular Bible in Protestant German lands provided fecund soil for poetry. He remained wholly indifferent to their religious content.

Even more strikingly, following Hamburg’s analysis of the thinkers of the Russian Enlightenment of the time of Catherine the Great that comprises the third and by far the biggest part of the monograph, one would struggle to delineate real intellectual continuity between them and the rationalists of the first half of the eighteenth century. Semyon Desnitskii, Denis Fonvizin, and Alexander Radischev were no more interested in Feofan and Tatischev than the latter was in Sil’vestr Medvedev or Iosif Volotskii. Instead, they preferred to refer to Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Adam Smith. Already in the early nineteenth century, the time of obsession with history, Moscow metropolitan Platon (Levshin) in his Short History of the Russian Orthodox Church (1805) chose to discuss how his predecessors disseminated faith, built churches and monasteries, dealt with the rulers, and so forth, but not how they thought.

There is no doubt that the absolute majority of Russian eighteenth-century noble elites were practicing Orthodox believers. Religious rituals gave them a sense of national identity, of community with their peasants and their ancestors. Still, in spiritual or intellectual questions, the official church was not to be consulted. In his Pure-Hearted Confession of My Deeds and Thoughts, written in the late 1780s at the end of his life, Russian satirist Denis Fonvizin recalled his early religious awakening. Senator and philosopher Grigorii Teplov managed to heal Fonvizin’s doubts by advising him to read Samuel Clarke’s refutation of materialism (A Demonstration on the Being and Attributes of God [1705]). Thus, these two educated Russian thinkers (both of whom figure prominently in Hamburg’s book) needed in order to come to God the helping hand of a British rationalist, Anglican priest, and ardent Newtonian, one who was later accused by a convocation of the Church of England of anti-Trinitarian beliefs.

Likewise, freemason Ivan Lopukhin (1756–1816), arguably the only Russian eighteenth-century philosopher who acquired European celebrity, was saved from the influence of French materialism by reading Johann Arndt’s Four Books on True Christianity (1605–1609) (20). Later he told Emperor Paul I that the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church “could not be considered truly spiritual” (75). Russian mystics no less than rationalists were directed in their religious quest by Protestant, or much more rarely Catholic, philosophers and moralists.

To conclude, Gary Hamburg’s monumental volume is a work of incredible erudition and breadth that will be beneficial for generations of students of Russian intellectual history. To what extent the author succeeded in tracing “Russia’s path toward Enlightenment” is a different question.

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Vera Kaplan’s well-researched and highly readable study Historians and Historical Societies in the Public Life of Imperial Russia broadly engages both Western and recent