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Russian Liberalism in Theory and Practice

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Vanessa Rampton, *Liberal Ideas in Tsarist Russia: From Catherine the Great to the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ix, 229 pp.

Paul Robinson, *Russian Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2023), x, 289 pp.

The history of liberalism is always a critically important topic. But this is true especially now, when liberal values and institutions are in retreat in countries (such as the United States) where they once seemed relatively secure, and when prospects for liberal development in countries such as Russia and China seem as remote as ever. These two books focus on Russia, but both take a comparative approach that emphasizes the normative or universal claims of liberalism as political theory. What are these claims? What makes liberalism normative, and not just one ideology among others?

The essential value that constitutes liberalism and distinguishes it from its competitors is the human person and his or her liberty. The supreme liberal value is human dignity, the intrinsic worth of every person. If we accept this proposition, then there are no higher values (such as class, nation, society, or humanity) to which individual persons could be rightly sacrificed (though of course they can choose to put the good of others over themselves). The good of society consists in the good of every person in it. In Kant's famous formulation, the person is an end-in-itself, never merely a means for other ends.

Human dignity is the source of human equality. If the person has intrinsic and infinite worth, then all persons are equal in value, though obviously human beings are not equal in their individual strengths and weaknesses, in their life circumstances, in their conduct, and in a myriad of other ways. (The sources of human dignity are a matter of philosophical controversy, but one viable general source is the human potential to do good.) Human dignity is also widely regarded as the source of natural or human rights, guaranteed and enforced by the rule of law. The state and higher international institutions, as the instruments of the rule of law, ought to

embody it and their officials ought to subordinate themselves to it. In the end the rule of law rests upon civil society: citizens who have a keen consciousness (ultimately a moral one) of human dignity and rights and who engage in various forms of community and civic activity to defend them, from voting and governmental participation to (in cases of state violation of legal norms) civil disobedience and collective coercive conduct.

In sum, liberalism can be defined as a normative political philosophy of human dignity, equality, and rights, upheld through the rule of law and civil society (at local, national, and global levels). "Liberal individualism" is something of a shibboleth that distorts authentic liberalism, since the latter recognizes that persons can develop and realize their potential—that human well-being, progress, and flourishing are possible—only in community and society. But if there is broad consensus about the fundamental liberal values, there is much less agreement about how societies and economies should be organized to best serve human dignity and equality and about how best to promote human flourishing. Still, at the most general level, it can be said that liberalism is about essential human values and the best ways to build societies worthy of them. Thus understood, the importance of liberalism as a political and social philosophy is obvious.

So, too, is the specific topic of Russian liberalism, for at least three reasons. First, liberalism is an important part of Russian history, especially its intellectual history. Since Ivan the Terrible, autocracy (the conceptual opposite of the rule of law) has been the dominant feature and structure of Russia's political history. The country's oppressive political reality meant that Russian liberals had to defend their ideals and values, their hopes and dreams, with even more emphatically persuasive force and clarity. They succeeded brilliantly: The intellectual history of Russian liberalism is very rich. Thwarted in practice, Russian liberalism developed theoretically (the only way it could) and reached high levels of philosophical sophistication. Some of the best liberal theorists globally (e.g., Boris Chicherin and Pavel Novgorodtsev) are Russian. We can learn a lot from them.

Second, the political failure of Russian liberalism is a human tragedy. For centuries Russians have deepened our common humanity with their thought and culture, and for centuries they have suffered mightily at the hands of their illiberal governments (tsarist, Soviet, post-Soviet). And not only Russians have suffered, as the current war in Ukraine makes clear. This leads to the third reason why Russian liberalism matters. Russia is a nuclear power. An illiberal Russia will always pose a grave danger to international security. (Paul Robinson is a military historian and a security expert.) None of this is to deny that societies that have prided themselves on being liberal have also often miserably failed to live up to their own standards, at home and abroad, with great human costs.

By the very nature of the topic, both of these books are largely intellectual histories of Russian liberalism. This is explicitly so in the case of Vanessa Rampton's study. Russian liberalism had two types of philosophical defenders: positivists and idealists (or neo-idealists). Her book is a study of their ideas, the historical contexts in which they worked, and their attempt to put liberal ideas into practice at the time of the 1905 revolution and the ensuing "Duma Monarchy." Russia's most famous liberal, the historian Pavel Miliukov (1859–1943), was a positivist, and he is one of the book's subjects. Another is the sociologist Maksim Kovalevskii (1851–1916). Miliukov has been extensively studied but Kovalevskii has not, and this book sheds welcome new light on him. But the neo-idealists are at the center of Rampton's attention. She regards them as the most consistently liberal, not only in their defense of liberalism's core values, but also in their recognition that while human dignity must always remain an inviolable principle, liberalism involves compromise, accommodation to complex historical realities that often resist ideals, and appreciation of the inevitable tension among competing values, especially between "negative" and "positive" liberty. This type of open-ended, "empirical," pluralistic liberalism was famously championed by Isaiah Berlin, whose perspective Rampton adopts. Yet Berlin always took a skeptical approach to Russia's neo-idealists, let alone to its religious philosophers, while she believes they were truer to his pluralistic liberalism than were the positivists. That's interesting.

Her book is a compact, inviting, and accessible study. It is synthetic and interpretive, based both on existing scholarship and primary sources, with the balance tipping more toward synthesis than original research. There is large and complex literature on Russian liberalism (not to mention liberalism more generally), the philosophical aspects of which are challenging, so interpretive synthesis is appropriate and valuable. (In the interests of fair disclosure I should note that Rampton values my own work, draws upon it, and presents it well.)

The introduction establishes the book's comparative perspective by presenting the main concepts and figures in western liberalism, with astute indications of their relevance to Russia. The discussion focuses on selfhood, freedom, liberal practices, and the tension between freedom and justice. Referring to John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Benjamin Constant, Rampton writes: "These theorists are of particular interest to us here because they eschewed abstract notions of liberalism, and articulated views of the relationship between the individual and society that justified an approach to freedom as a permanent recalibration between different values and goods, dependent on the particularities of time and place" (24). She notes that these liberals were widely read in Russia.

Chapter 1 is an expert, succinct survey of Russian intellectual history from the Enlightenment to 1900, focusing on how Russian thinkers (properly liberal or not) understood the key liberal ideas of human dignity, equality, freedom, rights, law, and human progress. Rampton identifies Aleksandr Radishchev's early importance in the intellectual history of Russian liberalism, noting that he (1749–1802) "openly questioned the legitimacy of

autocracy in the name of inalienable individual rights and humanitarian values" (43). The chapter features nineteenth-century Russia's two greatest philosophers, Boris Chicherin (1828–1904) and Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), both metaphysical idealists. Rampton appreciates that Russian socialism (Alexander Herzen, Peter Lavrov, Nikolai Mikhailovskii), in its defense of individual moral autonomy against supposed necessary laws of historical development, contributed to the distinctive ethical thrust of Russian liberalism.

Three of the book's six chapters emphasize neo-idealist liberalism: chapters 2, 4, and 5. Chapter 2 is the most general and deals with the "revolt against positivism" in various spheres of culture and thought in fin-de-siècle Europe and Russia. Neo-idealism was an important element in this critique. According to Rampton, "The fundamental premise of idealism is that the mind and its ideals are not merely epiphenomena of the brain. Ideals have their own causal power, which for philosophical idealism indicates that there is more to reality than the physical world" (68). The chapter then turns in detail to the Russian neo-idealist defense of liberalism, with particular attention to its institutional center, the Moscow Psychological Society, and to the large collective volume *Problems of Idealism* (1902).

Chapter 4 takes up another famous volume, *Vekhi (Landmarks)* (1909). Although the liberalism of its contributors was inconsistent, Rampton argues that as a whole they understood (and tried to convince their readers) that liberalism depended on the complex interplay of several factors: a free and dynamic spiritual life (and through it the inner recognition of human dignity), culture and education, civic and legal consciousness, civil society, and civic, legal, and political institutions. Chapter 5 is devoted to two major neo-idealist liberals: Bogdan Kistiakovskii (1868–1920) and Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924). Kistiakovskii was a Russian neo-Kantian (one type of neo-idealist) who believed that "lawful socialism" (i.e., socialism that respects the liberal principle of the rule of law) was the best way to realize ideals of positive liberty such as self-realization and the right to a dignified existence. Novgorodtsev was arguably the most important Russian liberal theorist after Chicherin. He championed the revival of natural law. While Kistiakovskii resisted drawing metaphysical or theistic conclusions from idealism, Novgorodtsev embraced them.

Other parts of the book deal with positivist liberalism: specifically the last section of chapter 2 and chapter 6 (Miliukov and Kovalevskii). Rampton's analysis presents the neo-idealists as both better philosophers and better liberals. The positivists tended to pin their hopes for a liberal Russia on their (non-empirical) belief in progress as a necessary historical law and on their environmentalist approach to human nature, which conceived "the transformation of the individual personality as the by-product of institutional and social change" (81). Chapter 3 is the most historical in the book. It concerns Russia's main liberal party, the Kadets ("Kadet" was short for "Constitutional Democrat"), in the run-up to and aftermath of the 1905 Revolution. The chapter is informed by the author's sympathetic understanding of the dilemmas faced by a liberal party in a thoroughly illiberal polity.

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Rampton is most interested in how Russian liberals understood their values (which, in the absence of any reigning examples from their native land, they took to be universal human ones) in particular historical circumstances. She attends to their attempts to apply these values to improve their own society (especially in the period 1900–1914), and to how their efforts altered their (and our) understanding of liberalism. She deems the neo-idealists to have been the better liberals both in theory and practice, not only because they understood the permanent tension between liberal ideals and historical realities, but because they were more likely to embrace this tension as dynamic, creative, and indeed truly progressive. The positivists, by contrast, were more likely to resist it, preferring to collapse it under one or another scheme of historical inevitability or necessity. The neo-idealists were not utopians. They conceived progress as a moral task to be accomplished by human beings driven by ideals and working to realize them *as much as possible* in specific historical circumstances. The positivists, by contrast, generally conceived progress as a historical law somehow unfolding of its own accord and leading inevitably to a perfect human society.

In the conclusion to her book, Vanessa Rampton returns to the comparative, even global perspective with which she began: How can liberalism, with its universal claims to cherishing human dignity, defending human rights, and promoting human flourishing, at the same time be specific and relevant to local human communities and cultures? Her book leaves little doubt that Russian liberals, especially the neo-idealists among them, thought deeply about that question and can offer even our own bewildered age some valuable approaches to it.

The main question raised in Paul Robinson's book is the inevitable one, "Why has liberalism failed to take root in Russia?" He does not take a deterministic view of the failure of Russian liberalism: there were periods (Catherine II and Alexander I, the Great Reforms, the "Duma Monarchy," perestroika) when Russian liberalism might have become, if not the dominant principle, at least an important political factor in the country's development. Explaining why that never happened is the author's task, and he carries it out well. The short answer is that despite the long and rich history of liberal ideas among Russian intellectuals, Russian autocracy has always stifled the development of a strong civil society—the ultimate social condition of liberalism. The short answer is made long by the 260 years from the beginning of Catherine II's reign to today.

While there are many studies of Russian liberalism, Robinson's is the only one which examines Russian liberalism as a whole from its origins in the late eighteenth century through the Soviet era to post-soviet Russia, including also the inter-war Russian emigration. That alone commends the book. Most of the existing literature on Russian liberalism focuses on the tsarist period and on the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Chapters 2–6 of the book cover this long period. These chapters are based mainly on existing scholarship and offer a good introduction. Chapters 7–11 cover Russian liberalism in emigration, in the Soviet period, during perestroika, under Yeltsin, and under Putin. These five chapters are the best

in the book and the most valuable, since much less work has been done on Russian liberalism in the period from 1922 to 2022. Here Robinson draws extensively and effectively on sources published in Russian since about 1990. His account of Russian liberalism over the past century is an important contribution to the literature.

Chapter 1 takes up some of the main general problems of Russian liberalism, including its origins, periodization, and national peculiarities—what was specifically Russian about it? Robinson begins the history of Russian liberalism with the reign of Catherine II (1762–1796), though many historians have dated its origins much later, from the mid-nineteenth century or even further in the future. Robinson's approach is defensible, based mainly on the intellectual origins of Russian liberalism during the late Enlightenment. He introduces a theme that runs throughout the book: whether liberalism in Russia is mainly a Western import or artifice or whether there is an authentically Russian liberalism, a Russian national tradition of liberalism. This is an important issue that transcends Russia: Can universal values (liberal values such as human rights) take national forms and be strengthened in the process? Opponents of liberalism (in Russia and elsewhere) attack it as "western" or "foreign." This has become a basic and crude tactic of Putinism ("liberalism is gay").

The book's subsequent chapters follow the same structure. They begin with a basic historical overview of the period in question and then consider the development of Russian liberalism across three categories: cultural liberalism, political liberalism, and socio-economic liberalism. This tripartite structure has its organizational virtues, but it doesn't work equally well in each of the chapters and the distinctions among the three types can at times seem artificial. Logically, cultural liberalism deals with liberal intellectuals (cultural elites) and their ideas; political liberalism with the realization or implementation of these ideas, with its pragmatics and with liberal political movements and parties; and socio-economic liberalism with the social-economic conditions and results of liberalism. But there is some overlap among the three categories, and at times they all operate at the level of ideas: cultural ideas, political ideas, and socio-economic ideas.

Across the chapters, "cultural liberalism" presents the leading Russian liberal thinkers and their ideas, from Alexander Radishchev to Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989) and Sergei Kovalyov (1930–2021), together with variations of the two main philosophical theories of Russian liberalism (positivism and idealism). Robinson mentions (even if briefly) virtually every significant Russian liberal thinker and gives attention to some of their major writings. Under the category of political liberalism, the book spans Catherine II's *Instruction* to the Imperial Legislative Commission, Alexander I's constitutional plans, the Great Reforms, the history of the liberation movement that led to the Revolution of 1905, the Duma Monarchy, the history of the Kadet party from 1905 to the emigration, the human rights movement in the Soviet period, perestroika, "shock therapy" under Yeltsin, and the extinguishing of liberalism under Putin. The chapter sections on socio-economic liberalism consider such topics as the Russian peasant commune and the Stolypin agrarian reforms, capitalism and

industrialization, the "right to a dignified human existence" championed by Vladimir Soloviev, and Soviet socialism and post-Soviet privatization, emphasizing throughout the overall weak socio-economic foundations of liberalism in Russia.

As mentioned above, the best part of the book is on Russian liberalism over the past century. In 1922 Lenin deported scores of Russian philosophers; many other Russian liberals also fled the country. In Chapter 7 Robinson demonstrates that the history of émigré liberalism is an essential part of the history of Russian liberalism as a whole. He explores both the fate of the Kadet party in exile and the intellectual legacy of émigré philosophers and economists. That legacy includes a Christian conception of human dignity and personhood that philosophers such as Nikolai Berdiaev advanced against Western liberalism, which was taken to be agnostic or atheistic and therefore destructive of spiritual freedom. This type of religious critique of Western liberalism (and of human rights) has gained traction today, not only in the Russian Orthodox Church but also among some Western Christian thinkers (e.g., John Millbank, William Cavanaugh, and Vigen Guroian). It is distorted, neglects the religious origins of human rights, and is in general fraught with risks.

The Soviet project was inimical to liberalism. "Miraculously, though, pockets of liberalism survived," Robinson writes (117). In Chapter 8 he presents a very good account of Soviet liberalism, generally following Mikhail Epstein's view that, "Liberalism was the major intellectual force of the entire dissident movement" (120). Dissident discourse focused on human rights and the rule of law, as Robinson shows in detail. In many respects the liberal ideas of the dissident movement triumphed with perestroika (Chapter 9). In 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev resolved that the Soviet Union should be a state under the rule of law (*pravovoe gosudarstvo*). This liberal ideal has remained elusive in the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Indeed, Putinism has all but destroyed it. For good reason does Robinson both begin and end his study with the grim observation that today Russian liberalism is in an extremely "parlous state" (2, 203).



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