'Political hesychasm' and the Foundational Structure of the Russian State

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The expression 'political hesychasm' was coined by late Soviet historiography. It designates the contribution of the spiritual renewal initiated by Gregory Palamas to the dramatic rise of the Muscovite State between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The present paper argues that this influence runs much deeper than previously assumed. Behind what foreign visitors described as a species of oriental despotism, there is a brilliant translation of the hesychastic process of divinisation into political terms.

Despite its relative diffusion in the recent years, one is entitled to wonder whether the notion of 'political hesychasm' carries more meaning than that of a round square. It is difficult not to agree with the manner in which S. Khoruji singles out this inherent hiatus: '[Hesychasm] is a specific activity of the human subject, an activity that leads it to actually and ontologically transcend and modify the fashion of its existence. As such, this activity is characterised by an aspect of foreignness when it comes to the whole sphere of human empirical concerns, which includes social, cultural and political practices'.[1] In contrast to modes of prayer that aim at improving the material conditions of human personal and collective existence—or, to put it more theologically, at paving the road to God´s Kingdom on Earth—the hesychastic way that Palamas justified on dogmatic grounds is about accessing, through the practice of asceticism and mental prayer, a transforming reality that is fundamentally foreign to the coordinates of space and time—those that precisely define the horizon of political thinking. True, minds bent on ideological or confessional controversies will always be able to politicise the most apolitical type of human activity. Still, as Khoruji observes: 'The political sphere has an anthropology of its own, its own rigid patterns of conduct and strategies of action. These are deeply foreign to the hesy-

[1] 'Hesychasm and "Political Hesychasm": An Attempt at Defining Concepts', accessed 22 May 2016, http://pluriversum.org/~n1aTP (translation mine).

chastic world, and the moment a hesychast makes them his own and acts according to them, he is no longer a hesychast'.[2]

If turning hesychasm into a political doctrine or strategy is betraying hesychasm, so be it. But what about the other way around? What about political doctrines, strategies, even political structures being fashioned by hesychasm as a purely spiritual phenomenon? One cannot politicise what is spiritual without defiling it, but one can always hope to spiritualise the political sphere without prejudice to what should remain spiritual. I believe it is with this perspective in mind that G. M. Prokhorov spoke about 'political hesychasm' and popularised this concept within the academic world of the late Soviet Union. A scholar of ancient Russian literature, Prokhorov relentlessly emphasised the multiple connections between the monastic efflorescence of pre-Renaissance Russia, the circulation of people, literature or ideas associated with the hesychast movement and the rise of the Muscovite State between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. While taking care of not infringing on the prerogatives of the secular ruler, spiritual leaders would rely on the ideals of the hesychast movement to support the fledgeling State and instil a deeply religious dynamism into it. More recently, N. Petrunin drew on the research of Prokhorov to establish the continuity of principles and ideas between this movement and the official stance of the Russian Orthodox Church on social issues since the publication of her main document in that regard.[3] Petrunin claims that the role of the Orthodox Church both as totally independent from the State and as its guiding authority on ethical matters, is a legacy of fourteenth and fifteenth-century 'political hesychasm'.[4] While

[2] Ibid. I discern an instance of this semantical ambiguity in *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox thought: The Political Hesychasm of John S. Romanides and Christos Yannaras* a book by D. P. Payne (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011). According to its doctrine (Palamas' distinction between divine essence and energies) and practice (the repetition of the Jesus Prayer), hesychasm has absolutely nothing to do with the civilisational contrast between the Eastern-Byzantine world and the Western-Latin one. That this specific doctrine or practice is either non-existent or not officially received by Western Churches is a fact that is *interpreted* by thinkers such as Romanides and Yannaras as a proof of the superiority of the Byzantine civilisation over the Latin one, and therefore a justification of the splendid ecclesiological isolation of the former. There is a political view of hesychasm, but there is no such thing as a 'political hesychasm' because hesychasm itself has no political vision to offer. In this sense, Romanides's and Yannaras's interpretation of hesychasm as a civilisational phenomenon is certainly not a 'revival' of some ancient 'political hesychasm'. True, in the aftermath of Palamas' canonisation (1368), the defence of his doctrine turned into an intra-Byzantine confrontation between the supporters of an alliance with the Latin West and their opponents. But both parties perceived this conflict as being quintessentially religious and dogmatic in its nature at the time. The same can be said of the anti-Western stance of Mark Eugenikos at the Council of Florence (1439). From a hesychast point of view, any political consideration had to be subordinated to the *fundamentally apolitical* truth of Christian faith.

[3] *Political Hesychasm and its tradition according to the social concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,* in Russian *Политический исихазм и его традиции в социальной концепции Московского Патриархата* (Sankt-Petersburg: Aletheia, 2009). See *Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, document adopted by the Moscow Patriarchate in 2000, accessed 27 May 2018, https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts /.

[4] This concept of 'political hesychasm' is of course contrasted with the abhorrent political thinking of the Western Papacy. It is not clear, however, how it differs from the famous 'Two-Swords' doctrine that characterised the Medieval Latin Church, a doctrine that implied both the independence of the Church

these studies abundantly display the intensity and pervasive influence of hesychasm throughout the formative period of the Moscow State, they most of the time come short of describing the concrete impact of such influence on its nascent political structure. True, rather than 'political hesychasm' one should speak here of 'hesychastic (or hesychastising) politics', but this is not to minimise the importance of genuine hesychasm in this issue. On the contrary, the question is whether the doctrine and practice of hesychasm, with all their transcendent aloofness, can provide keys to understand the fundamental logic of the Muscovite regime, a logic that later became integral to Imperial Russia´s political self-awareness.

At this point, I would like to relate the issue of 'political hesychasm' to the ongoing discussion, among political thinkers and historians of Russia, regarding the specific nature of the State that emerged and developed under the aegis of the Danilovich dynasty. One can easily trace the core of the problem back to Montesquieu´s *Esprit des Lois*. Unlike Aristotle (*Politics*, 1285a), Montesquieu was unwilling to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, tyranny—that is, the supreme rule of a single individual that hinges on systematic, military-enforced fear—and, on the other hand, despotism—that is, the supreme rule of an individual as voluntarily embraced by its subjects. In a philosophical framework where political progress went together with the reasonable acquisition of civil liberties, voluntarily agreeing to submit oneself to the will of a single ruler in the absence of legal guarantees and boundaries could only be ascribed to some naïve form of collective deception—and since a deception of this kind was unlikely to survive either the trial of time or the advancement of knowledge, let alone the example of other types of government, the façade of 'popular despotism' was destined to disintegrate rapidly, revealing the true nature of the regime that had always been hiding behind it; namely, tyranny. For Montesquieu, there are only three basic types of government: republican, monarchical, and despotic, the last owing its existence to its capacity of keeping the entire population in a constant state of fear.[5] While Montesquieu had primarily the Ottoman empire in mind when he forged the notion of 'oriental despotism', there is little doubt he viewed Russia as pertaining to this category.[6] The approaches to the Muscovite State of a political thinker such as R. Pipes, or historians like M. Poe and R. Hellie, are rooted in Montesquieu´s perspective, even if they sometimes attempted to qualify it.[7] In all their works, what comes to the fore are a type and degree of political submissiveness, on the part of the

from the State and its leading role in defining the fundamental values of any political and social order.

[5] *The Spirit of Laws*, chapters 1 and 9. K. Wittfogel does not conceive of the idea that oriental despotism could be even possible otherwise: 'Total terror—Total submission—Total loneliness', see *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), c.5, at 137.

[6] 'According to Mr. Perry, the Muscovites sell themselves very readily: their reason for it is evident; their liberty is not worth keeping', *The Spirit of Laws*, ed. M. J. Adler, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990), 111.

[7] R. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime*, second edition (London: Penguin books, 1993); R. Hellie, 'Why did the Muscovite elite not rebel?', *Russian History* 25 (1998): 155–62; M. Poe, *A People Born to Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

subjects of the Sovereign, that have never seen any equivalent in Western Europe. But is it true that, in the case of the Muscovite State, such submissiveness should be wholly ascribed to the fear generated by external constraint as Montesquieu argues in his considerations on 'oriental despotism'? This aspect has been called into question by a number of researchers associated with the self-styled 'Harvard School'.[8] These scholars have tried to show that the submissiveness of the Muscovite population was far from being absolute. Was not the power of the Great Prince subject to limitations from 'above' as well as from 'below'? Above him, there was God. How could the Prince have thought of challenging the ethical standards defined by the Christian tradition?[9] Below the Prince, there were the grandees, princes more or less closely related to his kin, and boyars, heirs to his forefathers' companions-in-arms (*drujiniki*). Was the Prince not to heed their advice, at least in the official settings of appointed Councils (*boyarskaja duma*) as well as reckon with their networks of political influence?[10] And far below the boyars, there were the simple people. Why did, for instance, Great Princes—already 'Tsars'—like Ivan IV 'the Terrible' insist on convoking 'assemblies of the people' (*zemskije sobory*), including representatives from all the layers of society? Should we think of 'the Terrible' himself as frightened by popular dissent? Besides, a setting of defined customs and traditions preexisted the advent of a sovereign. How could the newcomer lightly treat the holy traditions of the Land and the customs cherished by his fathers?[11]

Still, it does not take much effort to show that, as to their overwhelming majority, these sources of counter-power were informal. During the period concerned (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), the power of the Muscovite autocrat was not legally or objectively bound by anything nor anyone.[12] The question therefore reads: if the acceptance by Russian citizens of their sovereign's formally unlimited power did not draw on fear or military intimidation, as the representatives from the 'Harvard school' claim, what can explain it? What could grant to this form of government some intrinsic and immediately perceptible meaningfulness, so that simple and educated citizens alike would deliberately welcome it and eagerly become part of it? Here, I believe the scholars that are commonly associated with the 'State school' of Russian historiography, an academic lineage dominated by the impressive figure

[8] N. S. Kollmann, D. Rowland and V. Kivelson can be listed among the scholars who further developed the approach sketched out by E. I. Keenan in his 'Muscovite Political Folkways', *Russian Review* 45 (1986), 115–81.

[9] See D. Rowland, 'Did Muscovite literary ideology place any limits on the power of the Tsar?', *Russian Review* 49 (1990): 125–56.

[10] See N. S. Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System*, 1345–1547 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); *By Honour Bound, State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[11] See E. L. Keenan, 'Muscovite Political Folkways', *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 115–81; V. Kivelson, '"Citizenships": Right without Freedom', *The Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 3 (2002): 465–89.

[12] See M. Poe, 'The Truth about Muscovy', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 3 (2002): 1–14; C. Soldat, 'The Limits of Muscovite Autocracy: The Relations between the Grand Prince and the Boyars in the Light of Iosif Volotskii's *Prosvetitel*', *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 46, no. 1–2 (2005): 265–76.

of V.O. Kliuchevskii (+1911) have something to say, no matter how critically their works were received by the leading lights of the 'Harvard School'. And yet, while striving to give a factual account of the formation of the Muscovite State, these Russian historians have seldom felt the need to isolate some core logic, in terms of political theory, that would stand behind the emergence of the Muscovite regime and account for its fateful success. What is missing is the simplicity of an intuition that would unify and make sense of all the scattered elements brought forward by these historians.

In the pages that follow, I will argue that the political logic according to which the nascent Muscovite State evolved is closely connected with the inseparably theological and practical teachings that characterise hesychasm. I will first summarise a passage from Gregory Palamas' writings in order to isolate what I regard as the fundamental structure of the divinisation process. I will then proceed to briefly recall how hesychastic theory and practice spread to the Russia of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Finally, I will explain why and how the fundamental structure of the divinisation process was adjusted to the concrete political situation of early modern Russia in order to supply a new concept of political government.

Divinisation: Palamas on Formulating the Transcendent Principles of Hesychastic Practice

Divinisation is doubtlessly the goal of hesychastic practice. However, divinisation is not a qualitatively self-enclosed condition that would have nothing to do with the process leading to it. Rather, divinisation is this process itself. It is the gradual and transforming realisation of the action of the Holy Spirit at work in the heart of any baptised Christian. The acquisition of a new and divinised state of soul and body goes with the gradual eradication of what stands between us and the full realisation of the action of the Holy Spirit in us; that is, the damaging passions of the soul. From this point of view, spiritual intercourse with an elder is part of this divinisation process as well as the solitary practice of prayer. One cannot follow the path of divinisation alone, at least before having been thoroughly initiated into it. But in what manner can we understand or theoretically contemplate the interaction between the work of God and our own will in this divinisation process? Writing metaphysical treatises should not be a primary concern for a hesychast except when this spiritual path is being accused of falsehood and deception. Then comes the need to explain and justify this path by conceptualising what actually happens during the process of divinisation. This is how a monk called Gregory Palamas was asked by his brethren from the Holy Mountain to defend hesychastic practice against the accusations of heterodoxy levelled at it by Baarlam the Greek. In the process of answering Barlaam, as well as the few theologians that espoused his criticism of hesychasm—Gregory Akyndinos and Nikephoros Gregoras among the principal ones—Palamas came to

an increasingly clear and precise understanding of this interaction, an understanding that, according to him, echoed the most authentic tradition of the Fathers. I would like to examine the considerations that Palamas developed in a treatise on *Unity and Distinction in God against Barlaam and Akyndinos* as an example of his view on this interaction.[13] In this long passage (chapter 3 on 'Deifying Participation and Supernatural Simplicity', §1–23), Palamas refutes the notion that postulating the uncreated character of divine grace would transform all the elements of the universe, inanimate and animate alike, into 'parts of God'. Not only does this notion of divinisation rely on a mistaken understanding of participation, as the general manner in which creatures are receptive to the grace of God, but it does not do justice to the specific character of divinisation that relates to intellectual creatures. I will merely provide a summary of the content, dedicating particular attention to the connection between the thought of Palamas and that of Maximus the Confessor.

First, Palamas emphasises that being above the natural order of the created cosmos pertains to the essential character of divinisation. It involves divine grace—the very energy-activity (*energeia*) of God—that transforms the created being who receives it, raising his faculties high above the natural order (§1–2). Palamas relies here pre-eminently on Maximus the Confessor. Among other texts, he brings forth a shortened version of a passage from *Ambiguum* 7: 'So that from the same source whence we received our being, we should also long to receive being moved, like an image that has ascended to its archetype, or rather it will have become God by divinisation—experiencing far greater pleasure in transcending the things that exist and are perceived to be naturally its own. This occurs through the grace of the Spirit which has conquered it'.[14] This 'divine energy' is the Holy Spirit, writes Palamas (§3), which is ridiculous to ascribe to the created order. It is the prerogative of those intellectual creatures who partake by faith of the Spirit of Christ, as distinguished from any type of participation pertaining to the natural order of God´s creation (§4). In this process of divinisation, it is not the uncreated reality participated—that is, the divine energy of the Holy Spirit—that is multiplied in distinct parts, but it is the manner in which it is participated by the created participants that 'multiplies' the uncreated reality. While it remains unalterably One in this process, the same reality becomes greater or smaller as it is received in each participant according to its capacity (§4–6). Configuration to God cannot be understood in a purely natural or physical manner. As Palamas writes,

> Without union, configuration will not achieve divinisation. And when I speak of configuration, what I have in mind is what comes to be through

[13] *Πραγματεῖαι,* in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ συγγράμματα,* ed. P.K. Chrestou (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1966), 2:69–277. To the best of my knowledge, there is no translation into English of this text.

[14] *Ambiguum* 7, 1076C, in N. Constas, trans., *On the Difficulties of the Church Fathers*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1:91.

> the activity-energy associated with the divine commandments and that of keeping them, something which cannot be achieved through simple natural imitation but requires the power of the Holy Spirit that descends according to the sacred rebirth and ineffably settles in those who are baptized (§7).[15]

This life of the Holy Spirit that shows itself to be stronger than physical death and that the Son of God chose to impart us through baptism is not to be conceived as a communication of the essence of God but of his radiance or activity-energy. Contrary to substantial participation, energetic participation does not modify what is participated, but affects the participants in a variety of ways according to what they are. Communicating life, sensation, or even intellectual activity is a participation in the energy of God that does not exceed the natural order. But when God communicates himself to intellectual creatures as in the divinisation of the Holy Spirit, this process wholly exceeds the order of creation and the laws of nature (§8–11). Here again, Palamas heavily relies on Maximus, quoting *Ambigua* 10 regarding the 'grace without beginning' among other passages (§12–13). [16] Creatures participate in the divine activity-energy as artificial products participate in the thinking of the one who crafts them. But the relation of the saints to the creative energy of God does not only come from the fact that it created them; they 'receive' it, as finite vessels that are filled with a boundless and incomprehensible flow of life (§14–15). This is the ineffable light that the eyes of a purified heart are given to contemplate—not only participation but exchange ('*μὴ μετέχοντες μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ μεταδιδόντες*') (§16–17). The experience of divinisation is comparable to a ceramic cup thrown into the fire from which it was originally made and taken out of it again: changing colour, it retains the energy of the fire through its unnatural dryness and hotness (§18). This is about a union and an inhabitation ('*θεοῦ θείᾳ ἑνώσει τε καὶ ἐνοικήσει*'), not about the divine command of creation ('*οὐ δημιουργικῷ προστάγματι τελεῖται*') (§19). This union is the source of the radiance that transfigures Christ and the saints, as witnessed by the apostles on Mount Thabor, by Paul and Stephen, but also by Moses and Elijah according to Maximus (§20). On them have been bestowed the uncreated gifts that come from the one who espoused all the infirmities of our flesh. At this point, Palamas goes back to the passage from *Ambiguum* 7 quoted earlier, providing a few lines at the end that were previously omitted:

> This occurs through the grace of the Spirit which has conquered it, showing that it has God alone acting in it, so that through all there is only one energy, that of God and those worthy of God, or rather of God alone, who in a manner befitting his Goodness integrally interpenetrates all who are worthy (§21).[17]

[15] Translation mine.
[16] Maximos the Confessor, *On the Difficulties of the Church Fathers,* §48, 224.
[17] Ibid.

Those who have received the seal of the Holy Spirit in this manner are moved toward an ineffable union with their Archetype, according to the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church (§22). However, those who call created the uncreated gift of God dangerously confuse the distinction formulated by John Damascene between created and uncreated energies, the two energies that, as argued by Maximus, jointly work in Christ, since one and the other proceed without confusion from his divine and human natures. As those people go around professing that the created is uncreated and vice-versa, they multiply what is one and treat as one that which is multiple (§23).

Throughout these considerations, Palamas defines divinisation in reference to the connection between participation in God's uncreated energies and supernatural inhabitation. By contrast to natural participation, where the infinity of God's power is kept separate from the finite realities that it brings forth, the finite being of the saints somehow becomes the receptacle of the infinite power that divinizes their being. However, this 'exchange' is not a synthetic mixture as in essential participation. An active cause does not blend with its effect according to its nature, just as a seal does not become part of the wax that it configures, or the fire part of the ceramic pot that becomes burning hot through its contact with it. What happens is that the components of the effect are so much affected by the energising cause that their own operations cease to exist according to their natural mode. Without ceasing to exist absolutely, their operations themselves are now entirely operated according to the power of the energetic cause, just as the imprint on the wax is the effect of the seal or the hotness of the pot that of the fire. This is what makes Maximus state that 'there is only one energy, that of God and those worthy of God, or rather of God alone' in the passage of *Ambiguum* 7 quoted by Palamas. Claiming, on the one hand, that the energy that interpenetrates the saints is both theirs and that of God, and, on the other hand, that this energy is that of God alone, does not imply contradiction; it only involves a distinction of points of view. The two energies, the one created and the one uncreated, are preserved without confusion *according to their nature* but the former is so much subordinated to the latter *according to its mode of existence* that it is reduced to being the channel of the latter´s divine impulse.[18] In other words, divinisation is achieved through deliberately letting the will and energy of God take the place of one´s own will and energy—this is the only way in which fragile human nature can be raised to the height of a union that totally exceeds its natural abilities. In the beginning of the passage of *Ambiguum* 7 that Palamas refers to, Maximus emphasises that such a dismissal of one's own will is a deliberate action: 'I am not

[18] In a short treatise, Maximus goes back to this passage of *Ambiguum* 7 to dismiss any…ambiguity in that regard: 'I have not suppressed the natural energy of those who are meant to experience these [divinising] effects…I have only shown the super-essential power that produces divinisation and becomes these realities for the benefit of those it divinises', *Opuscula theologica et polemica* 1 (PG 91:33A–D—translation mine).

implying the destruction of our power of self-determination (*οὐ γὰρ ἀναίρεσιν τοῦ αὐτεξουσίου γίνεσθαί φημί*), but rather affirming our fixed and unchangeable natural disposition, that is, a voluntary surrender of the will (*ἐκχώρησιν γνωμικήν*), so that from the same source whence we received our being' (here starts Palamas' quotation).[19] Graphically, one could represent the process of divinisation as an ascending spiral where the second phase (created energy of man is raised to a superior stage of power and union with God through God's uncreated energy) both reverses the first (created energy is totally taken over by God's uncreated energy) and carries it higher.

What Palamas is describing here is the illumination-transfiguration of the saints, the goal of hesychastic practice. The created will that is freely abandoned in order to be taken over by God's energy is a will that is already purified. In order to reach that point, the hesychast must learn to freely abandon a will that is not yet purified. As Palamas declares in one of his homilies, how can one reach a perfect love of the neighbour, according to the precept of Christ, without deliberately cutting off or letting go one's own will, '*ἀφιέναι τὸ οἰκεῖον θέλημα*'?[20]

There is little doubt that this teaching was a point of emphasis of the spiritual movement that Palamas defended and illustrated on theoretical grounds. At the beginning of his *Discourses against Jews*, the former *basileus* and now 'slave of Christ' John VI Cantacuzenos, Palamas' faithful ally turned into the humble monk Joasaph, contrasts the enslavement to pleasures with 'another kind of slavery (*οἶδα δ' ἔγωγε καὶ δουλείαν ἑτέραν*)', the one accomplished on behalf of 'love', an enslavement that is 'greater and more eminent than any kind of freedom' as it can lead to a 'celestial mode of existence'. It consists of 'discarding any will of one's own (*τὸ πᾶν ἑαυτοῦ θέλημα περιελεῖν*), cutting off all capacity of decision (*πᾶσάν τινα περικόψαι προαίρεσιν*), offering and submitting oneself to some divine man capable of leading to God those who will eagerly follow people of his kind.'[21]

Indeed, in hesychastic practice just as in the ascetic literature that precedes it, obedience, especially to a spiritual father, is the way through which the will is purified: doing the will of an elder instead of following one's own is the manner in which one's will can be conformed to that of God—which implies that the will of a spiritual father must be welcomed as a manifestation of God's will. Symeon the New Theologian typically writes:

> Those who…have planted their feet firmly on the rock of obedience to their spiritual father; who listen to his counsel as if it came from the mouth of God; and who with humility of soul build all this on the basis of obedience—such

[19] Maximos the Confessor, *On the Difficulties of the Church Fathers,* 90–91.

[20] *Ὁμιλία* 44, *Ιρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ ἅπαντα τὰ ἔργα*, Ἕλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, ed. P. K. Chrestou, vol. 11 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1986), s.9, l14.

[21] *Ἰωάννου Στ Καντακουζηνοῦ Κατὰ Ἰουδαίων*, Λόγοι Ἐννέα, ed. C.G. Soteropoulos (Ἀθήνα, 1990), Or.1, l.50, *Online Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: A Digital Library of Greek Literature,* www.tlg.uci.edu (translation mine).

> people will succeed immediately. They will achieve that great and primary task of denying themselves. *For to fulfil the will of another and not one's own* entails not only the denial of one's own soul but also mortification towards the whole world.[22]

To summarise, the role of a spiritual father in the education of the one who starts walking on the path toward holiness is analogous to the role of God in the divinisation of those who have somehow reached the end of the path: his will takes over the will of the one who has deliberately surrendered his own will in order to raise this foreign and fragile will to a higher level of communion with God. But since the will of the novice is not yet purified, this process has a therapeutic rather than a deifying character. The purification of the will is liberation from the passions that damage the soul and prevent it from accessing higher stages of divinisation. In his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a main reference of the hesychastic tradition, John Climacus emphasises that the recovery of genuine freedom is the counterpart of the mortification of one's own will:

> So you have decided to strip for the race of spiritual profession, to take Christ's yoke on your neck, to lay your own burden on the shoulders of another, *to pledge your willing surrender to slavery* (*ὅσοι τὰς ἑαυτῶν ὠνὰς γράψαι ἑκουσίως σπεύδετε*, literally: 'to deliberately sell yourself by contract'). And for this you want it in writing that *you get freedom in return* (*ἀντ' ἐκείνων ἐλευθερίαν γραφῆναι ὑμῖν βούλεσθε*) even when you swim across this great sea borne up on the hands of others? Very well, then. But you had better recognise that you have undertaken to travel by a short and rough road, along which there is only one false turning, which they *call self-direction and if that is avoided*—even in matters seemingly good, spiritual, and pleasing to God—then straightaway one has reached journey's end. For the fact is *that obedience is self-mistrust up to one's dying day*, in every matter, even the good (*Ὑπακοὴ γάρ ἐστιν ἀπιστία ἑαυτῷ ἐν τοῖς καλοῖς ἅπασι μέχρι τέλους ζωῆς*).[23]

[22] *One Hundred and Fifty-Three Practical and Theological Texts* 44, in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Kindle Edition, ed. R.P. Pryne (Philadelphia, PA, 2015) 17603–4 (emphasis is mine). This ascetic tradition goes back to the desert fathers. Thus, Cassian evokes the teaching of Abba Moses in his treatise on *The Holy Fathers of Sketi*s: 'True discrimination comes to us only as a result of true humility, and this in turn is shown by our revealing to our spiritual fathers not only what we do but also what we think, *by never trusting our own thoughts*, and by following in all things the words of our elders, regarding as good what they have judged to be so', *Philokalia,* Kindle edition, 1339–41. Obedience to a spiritual father goes with the dismissal of one's own will: '42. Do not judge the actions of your spiritual father but obey his commands…. 43. A monk who disobeys the commands of his spiritual father transgresses the special vows of his profession. But he who has embraced obedience and *slain his own will with the sword of humility* has indeed fulfilled the promise that he made to Christ in the presence of many witnesses', ibid., 5799–804.

[23] *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 92.

Since the novice has totally surrendered his will to his spiritual father, the spiritual father becomes responsible for the path of the novice toward salvation: 'A corpse does not contradict or debate the good or whatever seems bad, and the spiritual father who has devoutly put the disciple's soul to death will answer for everything'.[24]

Undoubtedly, the dialectic between the deliberate surrendering of one's will and a union with God's will that coincides with one's maximal state of freedom, lies at the core of hesychastic practice, just as it is at the core of Palamas' understanding of divinisation. But to what extent does this scheme account for what we defined as 'political hesychasm'? Is the connection between this spiritual-metaphysical scheme and the constitution of the Russian State in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries a pure chimaera? After developing a few considerations on the religious and political situation of Russia in that period, I would like to show how the scheme we brought forward sheds a decisive light on the emergence of the Muscovite principality as a national and world power.

Hesychasm in Russia and the Western Perception of 'Oriental Despotism'

If the type of hesychasm originating from Byzantium exerted such a thorough influence on Russian culture, it is certainly because it coincided with a genuine revival of monastic spirituality stemming from the depth of Russia itself. The spiritual friendship and political alliance between St Sergius of Radonezh (+1392) and Metropolitan Cyprian (+1407), sent to Russia by Constantinople's Patriarch Philoteos Kokkinos, Palamas' early and faithful companion-in-arms, epitomises this historic encounter.[25] The initial difficulties to understand Palamas' ideas were quick to dissipate, and these were officially received by the Russian Church already by the end of the fourteenth century.[26] However, as most historians observe, this hesychast influence in Russia proved to be more of a spiritual than of a conceptual kind. Translations from the great authors of the *Philokalia*—John Climacus (sixth century), Isaac the Syrian and Abba Dorothee (seventh century), Symeon the New Theologian and Nikitas Stetathos (eleventh century), Gregory the Sinaite (fourteenth century) among others, not to mention Gregory Palamas himself—are abundantly produced and widely circulated during this period. After the Lavra of St Sergius at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the monastery of

[24] Ibid.

[25] It is Philotheos that asks Sergius to reform his monastery according to the Athonite standards of coenobitism in 1354.

[26] In his 'Epistle on Heavens' (1347), Fiodor, Bishop of Novgorod, refutes the possibility of a direct contemplation of divine realities in this life. Regarding the *Tshin Pravoslavia*, the old-Slavonic text that contains the essential dogmatic claims of Palamism, see F. I. Uspenskii, *Synodikon for the Week of Orthodoxy,* in Russian, *Синодик в Неделю Православия*, (Odessa, 1893). On all these matters, see G.M. Prokhorov, 'Hesychasm and Social Thinking in 14th c. Eastern Europe', in Russian, 'Исихазм и общественная мысль в Восточной Европе в XIV в', *Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoj Literatury* 23 (1968): 86–108.

Kirilo-Belozersk becomes the centre of diffusion of this 'literature from the cells' (G.M. Prokhorov) from the last third of the fifteenth century onwards.[27] Indeed, the remarkable expansion of monasticism is the agent of Byzantine Hesychasm's influence on Russian culture throughout this period. While ninety monasteries were founded between the eleventh and the beginning fourteenth centuries on the territory of Russia, the fourteenth century witnessed the establishment of eighty new monasteries merely in its northern part alone.[28] It is the same revival of Russia's ascetic tradition that gave rise to the most celebrated expressions of Russian iconography with Theofan the Greek (+1410), Andrei Rublev (+1428), and their disciples. Unsurprisingly, Russia's 'literature from the cells' emphasises the deliberate renunciation to one's private will that characterises hesychastic practice and underlies Palamas' understanding of divinisation. One of these widely circulated texts invokes the authority of St Basil the Great as it gives the following advice to the one who has found a worthy spiritual father: 'Give yourself to him completely, reject your will entirely and throw it away, so that you be found to be a pure vessel, preserving the good things stored in you for your own praise and glory'[29]. Nil Sorskii (+1508), probably the perfect instance of Russian hesychasm and a dedicated translator of the corresponding type of literature himself, insists on the need to submit to a spiritual father in order to overcome the passions that enslave our will: 'We have witnessed this style of life on the holy Mt. Athos and also in and around Constantinople, and in many other places, namely, a starets or elder living with one or two disciples or sometimes even three if there were a need'.[30] St Kornel Kormelskii (+1537), his disciple, repeatedly emphasises that condition to enter the monastery he founded is to 'not have one's own will, *своея воли не имети*'.[31]

Assuming that the influence of the fourteenth-century ascetic revival on Russia's—more widely than Muscovite—civil society was limited to monastic circles would be a mistake. As 'Manhood in the didactic literature of ancient Russia', V. P. Adrianova-Peretz's seminal study showed, monastic ideals were translated into a language accessible to the widest public possible at a time when reading skills were scarce.[32] Collections of passages mostly related to moral themes from the Fathers of the Church and various authors of the ascetic tradition, such as the late four-

[27] G. M. Prokhorov, 'The Hesychastic literature from the cells in Ancient Russia—The Transfer to the North', in *Ancient Russian as an Historical and Cultural Phenomenon,* in Russian *Древняя Русь как историко-культурный феномен* (Sankt-Petersburg: Olega Albyshko, 2010), 210–11.

[28] See Prokhorov, 'Hesychasm and Social Thinking', 106.

[29] *Sermon* 11 (PG 31:632), see B. Maslov, '*Oikeiôsis pros Theon*: Gregory of Nazianzus and the Heteronomous Subject of Eastern Christian Penance', *Journal of Ancient Christianity* 16, no. 2 (2012): 309–41, at 339.

[30] *The Complete Writings,* ed. G. A. Maloney & B. McGinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 113. Relying on the reading of Sacred Scriptures comes second only when the guidance of a spiritual father is not available, see Rule (*Ustav*), 'Importance of a Spiritual Guide', ibid., 48.

[31] Rule (*Ustav*), 29 December 2017, www.sedmitza.ru/text/443481.

[32] 'Man in the Didactic Literature of Ancient Rus´', in Russian, 'Человек в учительной литературе древней Руси', *Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoj Literatury* 27 (1972): 3–68.

teenth-century *Izmaragd* (*the Pearl*), were soon to be systematised and popularised in works such as the fifteenth-century *Domostroi* (*Household manual*), a book that will remain the archetype of elementary culture in Russia for centuries onwards.[33] There we are instructed to 'respect our spiritual fathers and to obey to them' (chapter fourteen):

> Respect your spiritual father, obey him in everything, repent before him with tears, confessing your sins without scruple or shame, and follow his instructions…Bow deeply (*bej chelom*) before him, come in his presence with feelings of fear and gratitude.…[To our spiritual fathers] is entrusted the care of our souls and they will answer about us on the day of Judgment.[34]

The same era—from the second part of the fourteenth century to the first half of the sixteenth century—witnesses the historic rise of the Muscovite Principality. Until the battle of Kulikovo (1380), the Princes of Moscow, a minor *udel* (apanage) inherited by Daniel in 1283, had been vying with their peers, mainly those of Tver, for leadership, and striving to obtain the favour of the Khan to that effect. The situation turned definitively to the advantage of Moscow from the moment Dmitri Donskoy challenged the Tatars' political supremacy at Kulikovo. After the battle, nothing would stop the rise and expansion of Moscow to the detriment of its neighbours, including the sovereign Republic of Novgorod. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Muscovite principality had become one of the richest and most powerful States on the Old Continent.

There is much reason to assume that the monastic efflorescence in Russia and the extraordinary emergence of Moscow during the same period are not two unconnected phenomena. According to the early hagiography of Sergius of Radonezh, Kulikovo seals some paradigmatic alliance between the Danilovichi and the monastic world, as the holy monk blesses the Prince and his armies before the battle. But the first signs of such an implicit alliance are already manifest before Kulikovo. Dmitri, Ivan Kalita (+1340), the son of Daniel and the real initiator of Moscow´s political ascension, ended his days at St Saviour Monastery, a monastery that he erected, eventually taking religious vows. Simon the Proud, his son (+1353), and Basil III (+1533) followed his example, receiving the monastic schema on their deathbeds. The figure that is most known for his passionate relationship to monastic tradition is undeniably the last Tsar to come out of the dynasty, Ivan IV, the so-called 'Terrible', in the sixteenth century (+1584). 'The light of monks are angels; the light of laypeople are monks'—Ivan places this saying, which he falsely ascribes to the 'Sacred Scriptures', at the beginning of his *Epistle to the monks of the Kirilo-Belozerskij Monastery* (1573), a letter where he tells about the steps he already took in order to take monastic vows:

[33] See *Domostroi,* ed. D.V. Kolesov, Introduction and Comments (Moscow: Nauka, 1994).
[34] Ibid., 141 (translation mine).

'And it seems to me, o unfortunate, that I am already half of a monk, even if I have not yet completely forsaken worldly vanities; I already carry with me the blessing that pertains to the monastic way of life'.[35]

If the Great Princes of Moscow, those who increasingly start calling themselves 'Tsars', cultivate a particular fondness and reverence for the monastic tradition, the opposite also holds true.[36] Most voices that exalt the position of the Tsar and the holy fear that it should inspire originate from the monastic world. In an old-Slavonic addition to the Russian *Nomokanon* (*Kormtshaja Kniga* or collection of Church laws), going back to the fourteenth century, one already reads 'Who blames the Tsar or a Prince regarding a matter of justice will be punished, who starts a fight [with him] will be expelled, who lies [to him] will be excommunicated'.[37] The main theoretician of the rising autocracy is none other than Joseph Volotskii, the powerful abbot of Volokolamsk (+1515). It is Joseph who inserts the famous—and implicit—quotation from Agapetos' sixth-century *Ekthesis* in his *Enlightener* (*Prosvetitel´*): 'For in body the king is like unto all men, but in power he is like unto God almighty'.[38] Metropolitan Daniel, Joseph's disciple, writes that earthly powers are established to remind people of the fear God should inspire in them—'actually, those who fear earthly rulers will not devour one another like fish do'.[39]

Reflecting on the concomitance between the diffusion of hesychasm and the rise of the Moscow Principality, one is lead to conjecture that there might be more to the notion of 'political hesychasm' than religious companionship and a crucial convergence of political interests between the monastic world and the rulers of Moscow. Indeed, the political regime associated with the Danilovichi that emerges in the fourteenth century is not simply a more politically skilful and historically fortunate version of the neighbouring regimes in Russia—neither is it a copy of the Byzantine political order, even if it purposefully presented itself as its heir. There was no attempt at importing the heavy legal apparatus of Byzantine civil society, fruit of a bimillennial evolution, to the nascent Russian State. The new regime was essentially a reconfiguration of the previous local order—prince and his *drujini-*

[35] *Послание в Кирилло-Белозерский монастырь*, ed. E. I.Vaneeva (Moscow: Russian Acad. Of Sciences, 2006–2011), 6 January 2018, http://lib.pushkinskijdom.ru (translation mine). Ivan's parody of conventual life with his *oprichniki*, the members of his secret guard, at the Alexandra Sloboda, is an additional illustration of Ivan's obsession with monasticism.

[36] The Byzantine world has known of a few emperors becoming monks. I mentioned John Cantacuzenos. The unfortunate John IV Laskaris (+1261) is another example. But never did a Byzantine dynasty of *basileis* as such develope a type of closeness to the monastic world similar to that of the Danilovichi.

[37] Canon 69 ascribed to Basil the Great/apostolic rule 84. See M. Diakonov, *The Power of Muscovite Sovereigns*, in Russian, *Власть московских государей* (Sankt-Petersburg, 1889), 169 (translation mine).

[38] '*царь оубо естеством подобен человеку, властию же подобен есть вышнему Богу*', in *The Enlightener*, in Russian *Просветитель* (Kazan: Dukhovnaja Akademia, 1896), 547.

[39] See V.E. Valdenberg, *Russian Medieval Teaching on the Limits of the Tsars´ Power*, in Russian *Древнерусские учения о пределах царской власти* (Moscow: Territoria budushevo, 2006), 186, n 92. The bloody row between Ivan IV and Metropolitan Philip, rebelling against the multifarious abuses of the Tsar, indicates the first crack in what had hitherto been an indefectible alliance between the Danilovichi and the so-called 'black clergy'.

ki-boyars, hereditary estates (*vochiny*), contractual relations with the peasantry, etc.—that increasingly relied on the religious legitimacy of the Byzantine emperor to impose itself. Starting with the transfer of the Metropolitan see to Moscow in 1325 down to the marriage of Ivan III with Sophia Palaiologina in 1472, via the unilateral rejection of the Union with Rome in 1439 and the mythopoetical speculations on the 'Third Rome' that followed the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the lineage between Byzantium and Moscow was deliberately established along the lines of divine foresight, not of political imitation. The Third Rome was intrinsically different from the Second, and this is the reason why it would never replicate its fall.

The newness and radical originality of the Moscow regime notoriously struck foreign observers. It did so in such a negative manner that one can trace the notion of 'oriental despotism' to their written accounts that began to circulate in Western Europe from the early sixteenth century onwards. The most often cited passage comes from Herberstein's, a diplomat of the Holy Roman Empire to the court of Basil III's *Notes on Muscovite Affairs*:

> [The Prince] uses his authority as much over ecclesiastics as laymen, and holds unlimited control over the lives and property of all his subjects: not one of his counsellors has sufficient authority to dare to oppose him, or even differ from him, on any subject. They openly confess that the will of the prince is the will of God, and that whatever the prince does he does by the will of God; on this account they call him God's key-bearer and chamberlain, and in short they believe that he is the executor of the divine will. Thus if at any time petitions are presented on behalf of any captive, or with reference to any important business, the prince himself is accustomed to reply, 'when God commands, he shall be liberated'. In like manner also, if anyone enquires respecting some doubtful and uncertain matter, the common answer is, 'God and the great prince know'.[40]

Ascribing to the diffusion of hesychast spirituality the origin of 'oriental despotism' as an original type of political regime, sounds very much like a Western provocation aimed at belittling the positive contribution of Byzantine tradition to the formation of Modern Russia. But one forgets too easily that the notion of 'oriental despotism' in itself betrays how difficult it is for foreign minds to understand the real nature and inner logic of the regime they came to be confronted with. The implicitly negative value judgment contained in the observations of Herberstein and his peers might be due to their inability to appreciate the positive intuition that lay behind the new political order established by the Danilovichi. In this context, 'positive intuition' does not imply a value judgement regarding the nature of this

[40] Vol.1 (London, 1851), 32.

regime; nor does it involve polemical innuendos against Western political tradition. What I have in mind is an intuition that, just as the guiding political insight associated with the Western type of democratic regime, is efficient because it has the capacity of bringing together the greatest number of citizens, with the purpose of having them willingly contribute to the welfare of the State as a whole. The question therefore reads: To what extent does the diffusion of hesychasm in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Russia help us to fathom what precisely eludes—and still mostly eludes—Western minds that grapple with the emergent Muscovite order; namely, the genius of the political intuition that presided over its creation and development?

The New Muscovite State: A 'Hesychastic' Social Contract

I wrote in the beginning that true hesychasts could hardly be politicians, but that the opposite formula was conceivable: Politicians may well find inspiration in the hesychast tradition. This is about transposing the dynamics of a disciple's path to God to the sphere of politics, integrating the process that leads to divinisation into the relationship between the ruler and its subjects, the mechanisms of legal commands and civic obedience. As we saw, the central insight of hesychast practice is the notion that the condition for welcoming the transforming will-energy of God is the surrendering of one's own private will-energy. This is a deliberate surrender of the will since it is done for the sake of achieving a higher degree of freedom—the sort of freedom that only union with God can bring forth. In Herberstein's account, all the citizens of Russia surrender their individual wills as they conform themselves to the will of the ruler. This is because the will of the ruler is taken to convey the will of God himself: 'They openly confess that the will of the prince is the will of God, and that whatever the prince does he does by the will of God'. In the realm of social organization, the private will of citizens does not only concern what they do but what they own. Citizens have private properties. But in a state where the ruler is 'God's key-bearer and chamberlain', as Heberstein writes, he is also the ultimate possessor of everything citizens possess, so that they may not entirely use their own property according to their private will—they know that their properties can be reclaimed by the ruler at anytime. Finally, citizens are not the ultimate owners of their very material existence itself—they surrender their fundamental urge to protect their lives, the very principle of a human being's private will, to the will of the ruler as to the will of God: '[The Prince]…holds unlimited control over the lives and property of all his subjects'.

From a material point of view, the condition of these citizens is not different from that of slaves, a category of people who are legally deprived of liberty of action, private possession, and mastery over their own existence, even if they are allowed to enjoy all of these privileges according to the revocable will of their masters. All historians of Medieval Russia observe that the advent of the new Muscovite regime

went with the use of the term *kholop* or *smerd*, i.e., peasant-slave, to designate all categories of citizens, from simple soldiers to boyars, whenever they interacted with the Great Prince.[41] This linguistic custom did but gradually become a rule that would not tolerate exception. A grandee like Prince Kholsmkii could still call himself a 'servant (*slug*) of the Tsar' in his dealings with Ivan III (+1505) but he already applies the term '*kholop*' to himself when addressing Basil III, Ivan III's successor, Basil III (+1533). That these formulas were not pure rhetoric is witnessed by the behaviour of the same Basil III, whose manner of government was depicted by Herberstein. It is recorded that Basil once violently dismissed one of his closest boyars that had tried to express an opinion different than his, with the following words: 'Away, slave (*smerd*), I have no need of you!'. The contrast with Basil's great ancestor, Dmitri Donskoy, is striking when one recalls how the victor of Kulikovo addressed his boyars on his death-bed: 'With you I have reigned, with you I have preserved the land of Russia….I do not call you boyars but Princes over my land'.[42]

There is no denying that the dismissal of the citizens' personal will or dominion over their lives and properties, their reduction to the condition of 'slaves' of the Tsar, characterise the fundamental change brought about by the enduring efforts of the Danilovichi to reform the traditional organisation of feudal Russia. The question is whether Russian private citizens *deliberately* submitted their will to that of their rulers. For the Western followers of Montesquieu, conscious and deliberate abandonment of one's freedom is almost impossible to conceive. R. Hellie, for instance, listed a few reasons that could explain this change without implying such a mindset. One of them is military coercion exerted over civil society. However, according to the same author, it appears that there was little of it at the time, just as there was little sign of rebellion, on the side of the powerful, against State violence deprived of legitimacy.[43] On the contrary, the primary reason for the rise of the Muscovite Principality was its considerable power of attraction that made independent princes rally to it in large numbers. Another reason stated by Hellie, along with R. Pipes, has to do with the patrimonial regime promoted by the Muscovite principality. In a State where almost all land properties ultimately belonged to the ruler and where the elites received all their assignments, as well as their material benefits, from his benevolence, it was more difficult to rebel. But this explanation rests on a confusion between cause and consequence. The question reads: Why did the elites accept to give up their private hereditary properties, *votshiny*, in the first place, being granted instead a *pomestie*, a land estate that they were supposed to take care of on behalf of

[41] I will not attempt to specify the notions of '*kholop*' or '*smerd*' from a sociological point of view. As will be said later, I take these notions to have a metaphorical meaning that loses sight of their origin in the diverse and ever-changing context of Medieval Russian social organisation.

[42] Regarding these episodes, see for instance N. L. Pavlov-Silvanskii, *Feudalism in Russia,* in Russian *Феодализм в России* (Sankt-Petersburg, 1907), 119.

[43] Precisely, Hellie asks why *elites* did not rebel? See 'Why Did the Muscovite Elite Not Rebel?', *Russian History* 25, no. 1–2 (1998): 155–62.

a State conceived as one large, all-inclusive and personal *votshina* or *otshina*? Why did members of the elite accept their *de facto* metamorphosis into civil servants at a time when they still could have avoided it? The third reason stated by Hellie is the aura of a ruler that, with the support of the Church hierarchy, claimed to be the voice of God. True, believing such doctrine might be a deception, but clinging to a deceptive belief remains a conscious and deliberate act on the part of those who believe; in no way is it a coerced form of behaviour.[44] Other scholars, such as M. Poe, have argued that the 'Master-Slave' system of interaction between the Muscovite ruler and his subjects, while originating in the patrimonial type of policy promoted by the Danilovichi, rapidly tended to become a purely ceremonial habit deprived of substance.[45] The truth, according to Poe, is that, contrary to real slaves, Russian citizens did enjoy private property and a considerable liberty of action. However, the difference between, on the one hand, those whose legal status was that of slave—either permanent or temporary, either as a result of violence or out of their own initiatives—and, on the other hand, free citizens, whatever be their social rank, never ceased to be a fundamental feature of Muscovite society under the rule of the Danilovichi. The question therefore reads: Why did free citizens of Russia ever embraced a type of relationship to their ruler that was, at least externally, modelled on the relations between 'true slaves' and their masters? What was the *rationale* behind it?

We saw earlier that, in the hesychast tradition, slavery is not necessarily a bad thing. According to Cantacuzene, there is a most excellent kind of slavery, a slavery 'greater and more eminent than any kind of freedom' that is plainly the opposite of the slavery of sin; namely, the slavery-in-Christ, that consists of deliberately 'discarding any will of one's own' and submit to 'some divine man capable of leading to God'.[46] From a hesychastic perspective, the surrendering of one's will to the benefit of a stranger's will is a perfectly rational gesture as long as it is the condition to reaching a higher state of freedom, the freedom-of-God associated with divinisation. Manifestly, the Danilovichi were from the very beginning, familiar with the traditional Byzantine way of designating Christians, and especially members of the Church hierarchy, as 'slaves of God', *δοῦλοι Θεοῦ*.[47] Far from the abasement of

[44] If there is currently any North Korean citizen who sincerely believes that there can be no better head of State than Kim-Jong-Un, then this citizen has a few good reasons to deliberately entrust the ruler with his life and personal properties.

[45] 'What Did Russians Mean When they Called Themselves "Slaves of the Tsar"?', *Slavic Review* 57, no. 3 (1998): 585–608.

[46] *Ἰωάννου Στ Καντακουζηνοῦ Κατὰ Ἰουδαίων*, Λόγοι Ἐννέα, Or.1, l.50.

[47] See G.W.H. Lampe's *Patristic Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), art. 'doulos', B.2. On the manuscript of a Gospel going back to the year 1340, one reads the inscription: 'This Gospel was copied in the city of Moscow that is on the river Dvina on the order of the slave of God monk Ananias'. Likewise, Ivan Kalita's last will (*dukhovnaja gramota*), probably prior to the Moscow Gospel by one year, opens with the following words: 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I, the sinful and miserable slave of God Ivan, write this Testament', see N.S. Borisov, *The Political Activity of the Princes of Moscow, 13th-14th c.*, in Russian, *Политика Московских князей, конец XIII—первая полови на XIV в.*, (Moscow: MGU

material slavery, becoming a slave *in this sense* was such an honour that it could not go without the avowal of one's unworthiness, even if one happened to be Prince of Moscow.[48] But why and how did this insight become prevalent in the political strategy of the Muscovite rulers during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries?

To understand how this 'slavery-in-God' became a political concept designating the universal condition of the Prince's subjects, we need to briefly recall a few elements from early Medieval Russia's inseparable cultural and political contexts. There is an ancient Russian use of the term *volja* that is both specifically political and axiologically positive. It is the equivalent of *samovlastie*, *αὐτεξούσιον*, of the power of self-determination, which was predominantly used in the theological sphere: 'Man was created in the image of God, free to determine himself (*samovlasten*) either for the good or for the bad'.[49] At the same time, by indicating the fact of not being submitted to any social authority, of not needing to refer to anyone as to deciding about the direction of one's existence, the term *volja* preserved something of an originally pagan dimension of absolute boundlessness. It defined the very mode of existence of the Russian *bogatyry*, the wandering knight-warriors that gave birth to numberless tales of Russian folklore. It was the main value on which drew the *drujiniki,* the companions-in-arms of a prince—and later whoever from among the nobility would decide to join the service of a particular prince. 'Between us, princes, and free (*vol´ny*) boyars and servants, there is freedom (*volja*)'—this clause applied to all contracts of service and guaranteed that a noble serviceman could annul the contract at will, possibly transferring himself with his own troops to the service of another prince.[50] Not only would individuals define their social and political status in reference to their *volja*, but also collective political bodies such as the Republic of Novgorod. The most striking illustration of this is probably the custom of the Princes, protectors of the city, to literally 'kiss the cross on the freedom (*volja*) of Novgorod' as a sign that they would respect the administrative autonomy that its citizens had acquired for themselves.[51] However, from the moment of the Tatar conquest (1240), the negative sides of such *volja* as guarantor of political cohesion became manifest. The mid-thirteenth-century *Tale of the Battle on the Kalka River*

University Press, 1999),329.

[48] The same goes for the famous *chelobitie*, the gesture of bowing one's head so low before the sovereign that it touched the ground, becoming the general term designating the action of addressing a request to the Tsar. This mimesis of the condition of slave, in which Herberstein saw the clear manifestation of the totalitarian nature of the Muscovite State (*Notes upon Russia*, 125), can be understood as a secularised version of monastic *metanoies* or prostrations.

[49] Creed from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, , quoted in G. P. Fedotov's *The Russian Religious Mind*, in Russian, *Русская религиозность* (Moscow: Martis, 2001), 202.

[50] Quoted in Pavlov- Silvianskii, *Feudalism in Russia*, 72.

[51] 'A.D. 1229, A.M. 6737. Prince Mikhail came from Chernigov to Thomas's Week, and the men of Novgorod were glad at their choice; and he kissed the Cross on the whole liberty of Novgorod, *na vsej voli Novogrorodstoj*, and on all the charters of Yaroslav'. *The First Chronicle of Novgorod*, in Russian, *Новгородская первая летопись* (Sankt-Petersburg, 1888), 230. There are a number of references to the *volja* of Novgorod throughout the Chronicle.

describes how hatred and envy between the Russian Princes led to the ruin of the defensive campaign against the Tatars. The fact that each Prince would act according to his own will to the detriment of the common cause repeatedly doomed efforts to get rid of the Tatar yoke. That each boyar could withdraw from the service a Prince as soon as his own interests would cease to coincide with that of his Master resulted in continuous political instability. The same can be said of Novgorod's political life in the fourteenth century, torn apart between the mutually exclusive interests of the very social classes that were supposed to preside over its destiny in unison.[52]

Men are free, but when they freely use their will to satisfy their passions, they lose their *samovlastie*, their power of self-determination, becoming slaves of sin.[53] The fact of doing one's will becomes a vector of personal and collective chaos.[54] In the sphere of politics, the clashes of individual or clan ambitions led to arbitrary oppression and social disintegration. Among other negative consequences, they resulted in the loss of Russia's traditional *samovlasti*e and the enduring political enslavement associated with the Tatar yoke.

The hesychast remedy to the enslavement of the will by passions is its deliberate surrendering to the will of a divine man; the complete espousal of this foreign human will as if coming out of God himself. The hierarchs of the Church who, throughout the Tatar yoke, conveyed to Russian princes the concerns of Byzantium regarding the inseparably political and religious unity of the Land, supplied the Moscow principality with the divinised concept of imperial power that went back

[52] See V.O. Kliuchevskii on Novgorod´s social feud, *Course of Russian History*, in Russian *Курс русской истории*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Mysl',1988), 93–94.

[53] Traditional optimism regarding the fundamentally free nature of human beings was balanced by a pessimistic view regarding the possibility of using this freedom for good after the Fall. The twelfth to thirteenth-century creed that describes the inalienable freedom of a man created in the image of God (see footnote 48) adds: '[Man] was cast out of the abundance of grace and heavenly life; he became prey to death and corruption, changing into a slave of Satan'. Answering to Sigismund II, king of Poland, in 1567, Ivan the Terrible writes: 'You, our brother write that God created man giving him freedom (*vol´nost´*) and honour. But elsewhere what you write strays away from the truth. There it is also written that God gave to Adam, the first man that he created free (*samovlasten*) and noble, the commandment of not eating of the Tree. How terrible the judgment that fell upon him….Do you not see that freedom is presently nowhere to be found, so that your writing thoroughly strays from the truth?', *Epistles of Ivan The Terrible*, ed. V.P. Andrianov-Peretz (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 1951), 242 (translation mine).

[54] That the very freedom granted to human beings as to the determination of their will could become the reason of their damnation is a recurrent theme of Russian Medieval spiritual culture: 'Sinners have an advantage. God *lets them act according to their will*, *противу изволению их бог им попусти*, and because of that did not allow them heavenly food', Slavic Prologue of the *Cheti Minei*, Sept–Dec., in *Monumenta from Ancient Russian Religious Didactic Literature*, in Russian *Памятники древнерусской церковно-учительной литературы*, ed. A.I. Ponomareva (Sankt-Petersbourg, 1896), 107. The term *svoevol´stvo* that designates the ability to do one's will, is still viewed positively in the sixteenth century translation of *Barlaam and Josaphat,* where it stands for the Greek *αὐτεξούσιον*, a term that, as we saw, was sometimes also translated as *samovlastie* (see footnote 48). However, a manuscript of the fourteenth century (the *Rules of Metropolitan Ioann,* where it renders *αὐτοβούλως*) already bears witness to the negative semantic register that will become prevalent in Russian culture: 'act according to one's whim', 'not submit oneself to any authority', 'transgressing the law', etc. On *svoevol´stvo* and cognate terms, see for instance *The Dictionary of Russian Language*, *11th–17th c.*, in Russian, *Словарь русского языка XI – XVII вв.*, vol.23, (Moscow: Nauka, 1996).

to the era of Justinian: 'For in body the king is like unto all men, but in power he is like unto God Almighty' (Joseph Volotsky).[55] However, if there is a political genius specific the Danilovichi dynasty—and I am convinced there is—it is about conceiving the concrete means and steps that would induce individual Russian actors as well as collective bodies to surrender their autarchic and mutually conflicting *svoevolje* to the one supreme and all-provident *volja* of the Great Prince.[56] Where there used to be a free contract between the Prince and the members of the elite, preserving the private possessions of the contractors and setting conditions to their mutual commitment, a personal and absolute exchange of power and duties took shape, gradually becoming a law that would not suffer exception. Members of the elite gave *everything* to the Prince—that is, their right to govern their possessions, goods, estates as well as men, according *to their private will*—so that the Prince might gave them back everything—goods, estates and men—to administrate *according to his official and governmental will.* The progressive restrictions and eventually abolition of their archaic right to leave the service of the Prince at their convenience, a policy that led to *de facto* transformation of their estates in domains of the Crown, the progressive formation of a sophisticated hierarchy among them (*mestnichestvo*), the concomitant development of a State administration, all these reforms that characterise the government of the Danilovichi made the evolution toward a personal and absolute type of relationship between the Tsar and his subjects irreversible. Kissing of the Cross, a symbolic gesture that used to be a sign of equality between all those who complied with it, became the very expression of the voluntary and complete subordination of the grandees and political bodies to the Great Prince.[57] This new social contract between the once-independent nobility and the Great Prince rebounded to the administrators, peasants, and even to the *kholopy-smerdy* of the nobility as these servicemen became *de facto* property of the Tsar through their masters' oath of

[55] I quoted earlier (see note 34) Metropolitan Daniel's justification of the Prince's absolute authority: 'those who fear earthly rulers will not devour one another like fish do'.

[56] In 1478, after a series of humiliations, the notabilities of Novgorod, the proud republic, are summoned to 'kiss the Cross' of the Great Prince 'on the legal rescript (*gramota*)', that he drafted, so that their homeland will finally 'submit in all to the will (*volja*) of the Great Prince', see S. Soloviev, *The History of Russia from the Most Ancient Times,* in Russian, *История России с древнейших времен*, vol. 5 (Google books reprint, 2017), 37–40 (quoting from the *St Sophy Manuscript*). In 1510, when Basil III orders that the bell-tower, the symbol of Pskov republic's former independence, be pulled down, the citizens of Pskov are described as—literally—'crying over their past and their [lost] will (*volja*)', ibid., 339.

[57] The gesture was very well-known in Novgorod, but was used in contexts such as political assemblies and courts of justice where everyone was required to acknowledge God's ultimate authority in case of dissension, see R. Hellie on Novgorod's judicial charter in *Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. M. Peerie, vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 372. In Muscovy, meanwhile, the custom of having nobles suspected of wishing to leave service kiss the Cross as a token of fidelity to the Great Prince became the origin of a system of personal obedience that was superimposed on previous laws and customs, eventually overshadowing them entirely, see M. Diakonov, *The Power of Muscovite Sovereigns*, 182. The fact is that Great Princes of Moscow were reluctant to officialise the abolition of the ancestral right to resign and leave of their nobles and administrators, lest the news would stem the inflow of servants leaving the service of other princes to their benefit.

fidelity. Even if not everyone became a civil-servant, all became citizens of a national State through the duties and rights that stemmed from the will of the sovereign. Work on behalf of a prince or boyar, whether based on life-long commitments or temporary contracts, served a purpose that was no longer exclusively defined by the private interests of their local employers as it necessarily reflected decisions dictated by the Tsar's concern for the good of the whole nation. Through an obedience ultimately vowed to the Tsar, simple people were now working for themselves—for their own material and spiritual welfare—just as a novice hesychast knows that embracing the will of an elder will eventually result in his own spiritual advantage.[58] In some respect, they saw themselves as contributing to shaping the destiny of their country on the same level as the members of the social classes that were above them, merchants, clerics, as well as nobles.[59]

Whatever specific measures of coercion were taken by the Danilovichi to guarantee that this evolution would not be stalled, the fact remains that their policy was immediately perceived by a number of princes, boyars, and members of lower social classes as *the* remedy to the chronic weakness of the ancient *Rus'*, the territory once bequeathed to the offshoot of Vladimir the Great. From this point of view, V.O. Kliuchevskii was essentially right when he claimed that the rule of the Danilovichi and the progressive gathering of lands around Moscow went together with a powerful surge of patriotism.[60] The deliberate surrendering of their political will by each of the members of the rising State was the condition according to which they would be free as a whole body politic, a *samovlastnoe gosudarstvo*—in what was to become one word and enduring concept: a *samoderjavie* (autocracy).[61] What is most difficult for Western minds to conceive is a collective capacity of self-determination that does not rest on taking the political views of each member of the State into consideration,

[58] The sixteenth century witnesses a remarkable growth of a sense of citizenship among the lower classes of society, as a consequence of the Tsars' policy. With the establishment of *vojevody*, the Princes of Moscow tried to assume control over the use of power by their local *namestniki*. In matters of justice for instance, the constitution of courts formed by locally elected members (*gubnye golovy*) was promoted. The *zemskie sobory*, extraordinary parliaments summoned by the Tsars, gathered representatives from all walks of life throughout the sixteenth century.

[59] In the *Belozerskaja gubnaja gramota* (1569), a document related to the establishment of justice courts, Ivan the Terrible introduces himself as the 'Great Prince of all Russia' and immediately thereafter starts listing out what, or rather who, the notion of 'all Russia' includes; that is, 'princes, boyars, peasants, huntsmen, fishermen, beaver-trappers…and simply everyone without exception'. The Prince is one with the whole nation he represents.

[60] *Course of Russian History*, vol. 2, Lesson 21, 5–26.

[61] A passage from *The Conversation at Valaam monastery* (*Valaamskaja beseda*), a work from the middle of the sixteenth century that originates in monastic circles that sided with Nil Sorkii's 'non-possessors' party, clearly implies that the reason for the establishment of the State lies in the condition of a human will inherently non-free or enslaved by sin: 'Many today in the world claim that God created man master of his will (*samovol´ny*). But if God had created man free (*samovlasten*), he would not have established Tsars, princes, and other civil powers; he would not have distinguished between the different bodies invested with political authority (*ordy*). God created the pious Tsars, the great princes, and other political powers in order to exert control [over evil desires] in this world and on behalf of the salvation of our souls', quoted in Valdenberg, *Russian Medieval Teaching on the Limits of Tsars´ Power*, 187 (translation mine).

but on the ability of *one* man to formulate where the interest of the whole nation lies. Here, self-determination refers to the universal belief that the commands of this one man, far from aiming at satisfying his personal desires, manifest the *real will* of the nation as an organic body. Another thinker affiliated to the 'State historians', B. N. Mironov, has more recently formulated the content of the new social contract in a remarkably concise manner:

> Surrendering its own will to the benefit of the Sovereign, the nation (*narod*) embraced the authority of a superior, divine will by the same token. But the Tsar himself would surrender his private will and conceive his [royal] service as a work of obedience (*poslushanie*). *The power of the sovereign was understood as an onus that God had laid upon him, so that in no manner could he shy away from it*. [62]

From this perspective, the slave of the Tsar is true master of himself as he obeys himself when he obeys the Tsar.[63] Just as a novice hesychast striving to recover his 'real will' or self-mastery (*samovlastie*) by surrendering a private will (*svoevolie*) prone to sinning to that of a 'divine man', likewise citizens, each of them individually substituting the Tsar's commands to that of their egoistic will, would eventually enjoy a condition of collective political self-determination. And just as in the Hesychast teaching on divinisation, this fullness of self-determination could not be dissociated from a state of intimate union with God. The fact is that, from the moment the Great Prince of Moscow was enshrouded with the divinized aura of the Byzantine *basileus*, he was given a role of spiritual father, guiding his subjects, individually and collectively, to salvation.[64] This aspect of spiritual direction was foreign to the traditional

[62] *Social History of Russia*, in Russian, *Социальная история России*, vol. 2 (Sankt-Petersburg: Dmitri Bulanin, 2000), 117 (emphasis of the author).

[63] This was expressed with the utmost clarity by Iurii Krizanic (+1683) in his time: 'To be Tsar is to serve God, but to be the slave of the Tsar of one's own people, *this is honorable and is actually a kind of freedom*' (emphasis mine), see L. M. Mordukhovich, 'Manuscript materials from Iu. Krizanic', in Russian, '*И*з рукописного наследства Ю. Крижанича', *Istoricheskii arkhiv* 1 (1958): 185.

[64] I earlier mentioned Joseph Volotskii's implicit quotation from Agapetos' sixth-century *Ekthesis* regarding the divine nature of the Tsar (see footnote 37). Few scholars have paid attention to the immediate context of this quotation: 'You who have received the sceptre of stardom from God, see to it that you satisfy Him who has given it to you, *and you are about to answer to God*, who gave you power. [Here follows the quotation from Agapetos]. But as God wants to save all people*, so the Tsar also wants to save all that has been given to him from all spiritual and bodily woes*, you…' (emphasis mine). Nowhere in Agapetos' *Ekthesis* is it said that the divine status of the *basileus* implies a concern for the spiritual salvation of his subjects. Rather, what is at stake there is the administration of the State according to justice. The notion that the Tsar is responsible for the salvation of his people is repeatedly emphasised by Ivan IV in his *Correspondence* with Prince Kurbskii. According to Ivan, the difference between him and 'priests' (Ivan has obviously monks in mind) is that while the latter are busy seeking salvation for themselves, a Tsar has the spiritual care of the whole nation: 'It is one thing to save one's own soul, but it is another to have the care of many souls and bodies: it is one thing to abide in fasting; it is another to live together in communal life', *The Correspondence between Prince A. M. Kurbsky and Tsar Ivan IV of Russia, 1564–1579*, ed. J. L. I. Fennell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 57–59. The concern for the souls of those who are entrusted to

Byzantine political theology that was based on Justinian's 'division of tasks' between State and Church matters (*symphonia*). It witnesses the 'hesychastic adaptation' of the political order in early modern Russia. From this point of view, it is not wrong to define the State that arose under the heavy and steady hand of the Danilovichi as a 'popular', 'national', or even 'democratic Monarchy' as a number of Russian 'State historians' did.[65] In no way is the existence of official or unofficial counter-powers the reason why Russian citizens put a brave face on the rise of the new Muscovite power, as the representatives from the Harvard School would have it. For that matter, it does not mean that popular expressions for the regime were fake or coerced, as a more conservative line of Western thinkers have been claiming. It is the very nature of an absolute power—a power without any institutional counter-power—that captured the enthusiasm of Russian citizens as they recognized in in it both a medium of collective empowerment and of personal salvation.[66] As Aristotle taught:

> There is another sort of monarchy, examples of which are kingships existing among some of the barbarians. The power possessed by all of these resembles that of tyrannies, but they govern according to law and are hereditary; for because the barbarians are more servile in their nature than the Greeks, and

him, the responsibility before God for their fate, are features that define a spiritual father in the hesychastic tradition as well as in its Russian popularised version: '…submit in everything to your spiritual fathers. They exercise care over our souls and will answer about us on the day of the Great Judgment (*Strashny Sud*)', *Domostroi,* ed. D.V. Kolesov,, 141 (translation mine).

[65] According to Kliuchevskii '*narodnost*', the concept of Russia as a one people-nation, is the 'deep understanding' that accompanied the Danilovichi's strategy of territorial expansion, giving to the Moscow principality a character completely different from rival Russian entities, see *Course of Russian History*, vol.2, 107. S.F. Platonov explains that the thoroughly patrimonial nature of the Moscow State did not exclude a dimension that he calls 'democratic': 'If the power of the Sovereign rested on the consciousness of popular masses who saw in the Tsar and Great Prince of all Russia an expression of the nation's unity and a symbol of national independence, the democratic character of this power becomes evident, as well as its independence from any other private authority or force in the country. In this manner the power in Muscovy proved to be both an absolute and democratic power', *Essays on the History of Troubles in the Muscovite State 16th-17th c.,* in Russian, *Очерки по истории смуты в Московском государстве XVI-XVII вв*, (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoj mysly, 1995), 87 (translation mine). During the reign of Ivan IV the Terrible, lower classes were for the first time given a status of active political subjects as the Tsar sought their support in order to bring down the power of the boyars. V.R. Vipper spoke of a 'democratic monarchy' in this context—'populistic' would probably be more accurate, see *Ivan the Terrible,* in Russian, *Иван Грозный*, ed. D.M. Volodikin (Moscow: University Ross. Akad. Obrazovania, 1998), 112. But Ivan's dictatorial populism laid bare the very essence of the Danilovichi's concept of State: those who obey are *in reality* (i.e., through the devoted care of the Tsar) those in command.

[66] With his *opritshnina*, Ivan IV pushed this political logic to the extreme: citizens had to trust that the Tsar was the interpreter of God's will and had only the best interest of the country in mind at the very moment when his decisions seemed to lose sight of elementary justice and systematically wreck the prosperity of the nation. In his correspondence with Ivan, prince Kurbskii vents a resentment that, beyond the vilification of Ivan's policy, questions the legitimacy of the whole political order associated with the Danilovichi; he blames Ivan for tacitly forcing his grandees to kiss the Cross; he remembers the time when 'Yuri of Moscow in the Horde dared to raise his hand against Mikhail Prince of Tver'; he speaks of 'the immemorially bloodthirsty family' of Ivan; etc., see the *Correspondence between Prince A. M. Kurbsky and Tsar Ivan IV of Russia,* ed. Fennell, 207, 211, 213. But Kurbskii voiced his criticism from a land of exile, knowing that frontal opposition to the Tsar had no chance of success in Russia itself.

> the Asiatics than the Europeans, they endure despotic rule without any resentment.[67]

The Stagirite was right and Montesquieu wrong: in some countries, a majority of citizens may actively come to support the absolute rule of one individual over them. However, invoking the existence a 'servile nature' might miss the reason behind this state-of-affairs. True, to Western eyes, the type of regime established by the Danilovichi gave the impression of a political enslavement of everyone and everything. But there was a tacit *rationale* behind the general acceptance of this evolution. It drew on the spiritual teachings that began spreading to Russia, pervading all levels of society in the aftermath of Palamas' canonisation and the final victory of the hesychast party in Byzantium. Just like becoming the slave of God, becoming the slave of the Tsar came with an empowerment, as it meant for grandees the end of political chaos and for simple people freedom from the obligation to serve private interests. To all, the service of the Tsar gave a sense of purpose and unity. Universal obedience to his will was the way through which a pacified nation-society would strive towards its own material prosperity and spiritual good, each class contributing to the commonweal according to its social status and economic function. The Western world will probably never cease to ask about Russians the question that Montesquieu famously formulated about Persians; namely, *how can one be a Persian*? Referring to the notion of 'political hesychasm', in the sense developed above, is probably not the only way to solve the mystery that has to do with Russians being Russians, but I cannot help being convinced that it is definitely part of the answer.

[67] *Politics* 1285a, ed. H. Rackham, vol. 21 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), http://www.perseus.tufts.edu .