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Personal Loyalties and Work Relationships:

On the Approaches to the Study of the Russian 18th-century 'Bureaucratic Apparatus'

Anna Joukovskaïa-Lecerf

In the last ten years, the revival of interest in the study of the Russian Ancien Régime government has resulted in the publication of several important works based on thorough archival research.¹ It seems, nevertheless, that this new and sometimes strikingly original empirical evidence has not yet profoundly influenced the standard historiography. Thus, in a recent collective study on processes of modernization in Muscovy, renowned historians reproduce the habitual scheme, drawing a more or less clear evolutionary line that starts from a medieval administration, continues through a 'patrimonial bureaucracy' of an early modern Western European type, and finally arrives at a bureaucracy approaching, or at least aspiring to ideal Weberian criteria.

1 D.A. Redin, Administrativnye struktury i biurokратиia Urala v epohu petrovskikh reform (zapadnye uezdy Sibirskoi gubernii v 1711-1727 gg.), Ekaterinburg, 2007; L.F. Pisar'kova, Gosudarstvennoe upravlenie Rossii s kontsa XVII do kontsa XVIII veka, Moscow, 2007; D.O. Serov, Administratsiia Petra I, Moscow, 2007; V.N. Glaz'ev, Vlast' i obshchestvo na iuge Rossii v XVIII veke: Protivodeistvie ugolovnoi prestupnosti, Voronezh, 2001; E.V. Anisimov, Gosudarstvennye preobrazovaniia i samoderzhavie Petra Velikogo v pervoi chetverti XVIII veka, St Petersburg, 1997; M.O. Akishin, Politseiskoe gosudarstvo i sibirskoe obshchestvo: Epokha Petra Velikogo, Novosibirsk, 1996; V.A. Aleksandrov and N.N. Pokrovskii, Vlast' i obshchestvo: Sibir' v XVII veke, Novosibirsk, 1991.

Peter Brown concludes his synthesis on the 17th-century Muscovite ‘bureaucratic administration’ by writing that ‘Russia’s bureaucratic processes, expectations, and conduct were [...] a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, much like computerization in late twentieth-century life. [...] Almost no one had any choice but to conform to bureaucracy's rhythm, be that person a serf, Duma member, or tsar’.² Likewise, Richard Hellie states that ‘what was solely a palace administration in 1450 evolved to a differentiated system based on “proto-Weberian” functional chancelleries a century or so later’, and that the Muscovite chancelleries of the 17th century were staffed by ‘a professional bureaucracy which did not depend on personal relations.’³ In the present historiographical context, such simplistic commonplaces no longer seem so obvious. This short article deals with just one particular problem, namely the nature, the place, and the role of the aforementioned ‘personal relations’ within the ‘professionalized’ administrative system of 18th-century Russia.

As is well known, one of the striking features of 18th-century Russia, in comparison with the preceding period, is that, with the beginning of the reign of Peter I, the Russian monarchy stopped pretending to be a conservative guardian of

2 Peter Brown, ‘Bureaucratic Administration in Seventeenth-century Russia’, in Jarmo Kotilaine and Marshall Poe (eds.), Modernizing Muscovy: Reform and Social Change in Seventeenth-century Russia, London and New York, 2004 (hereafter Modernizing Muscovy), pp. 57-78 (p. 78).

3 Richard Hellie, ‘The Expanding Role of the State in Russia’, in Modernizing Muscovy, pp. 29-55 (p. 30). Similar views are expressed by B.N. Mironov, Sotsial’naia istoriia Rossii, St Petersburg, 2 vols, 1999, 2, pp. 162-75.

traditions, explicitly presenting itself as an active agent of social change. And though the 18th-century successors of Peter I on the throne were relatively moderate in experimenting with reforms, the abstract notion of change maintained its new and positive meaning of salutary renovation, rather than the ancient and negative one of degeneration and impending doomsday.

With Peter I, legislation came to be considered an important medium of change. In contrast to the preceding centuries, his lawgiving was interventionist rather than arbitrating and aspired to shape society almost as much as it simply conveyed orders to its members. A domain where Peter I's normative activity attained an utmost intensity and a high degree of abstraction was the internal functioning of the administration. Up to the victory of Poltava in 1709, this sphere was almost without general written norms, apart from several articles of the Law Code of 1649. The government body regulated itself by tradition-rooted practical experience and the common sense of the decision-makers and performing agents. Inspired by contemporary Swedish legislation, Peter I, who disliked native customs and distrusted native common sense, tried to replace both by an ample and systematic corpus of written regulations, statutes and instructions regarding governmental and judicial procedures, and the duties of office. In a solemn public speech in 1719, on an occasion of promulgating these institutions, Peter I proudly compared himself to Noah, destroying the old and vicious world and bringing forth a new and better one.⁴

The dominant 20th-century historical interpretation has presented Peter I's

4 Friedrich Christian Weber, Das veränderte Rußland, Frankfurt, 1721, p. 332.

institutional reforms as one of the most important vehicles of modernization during the life of at least two generations that followed his reign. Now, however, this historiographical trend seems distinctly outdated, and historians tend to agree with Peter's scepticism about the effective power of regulations to shape society and even government, for it did not escape the tsar that his servitors, in his own words, managed 'to play cards' with the laws he wrote for them.⁵ Today, Peter I's prescriptive instruments might be more usefully analysed in terms of cultural monuments.

One of the most important and still almost neglected aspects of this problem is the nature of the hierarchical work relationship among the personnel of Peter's administrative bureaus. I use this expression to denote a complex relational phenomenon that can be observed taking place between the members of a given governmental agency considered as a collective action. On the one hand, its members are bound by functional links, the existence and nature of which are more or less independent of individual wills, being defined by the practical tasks the agents have to perform, such as collecting taxes or recruiting soldiers. The horizontal division of duties among the servitors and the vertical relation of command and obedience between superiors and subordinates constitute the functional body of the work relationship. On the other hand, cooperation between men presupposes a certain degree of personal relations that depend upon multiple general and individual factors,

5 Ukase of 17 April 1722, Zakonodatel'nye akty Petra I, ed. N.A. Voskresenskii, Moscow and Leningrad, 1945, No 132, p. 107.

such as social origin and economic position, age, competence, cultural background, temperament, and charisma, as well as habits, customs, working conditions, among others. Personal relations are integral to the work relationship and cannot be separated from the functional links other than in theory, though it does not mean that the historical agents did not distinguish between the two. The nature of both relational components and, more importantly, the mode of their coexistence within a work relationship are subject to variations in time and space, but in some instances they are stable enough to create patterns discernible not only from a long temporal or cultural distance, but also on a contemporary and local scale.

Considering the history of government from the angle of work relationships has the advantage of revealing its dynamic nature. From a strictly methodological point of view, it resolves the current separation between the study of government agencies and the prosopographical study of personnel and so forth. This globalising effect, as it were, is particularly valuable in the case of Russian history of the 18th century. Here, government agencies on one hand and the so-called bureaucracy on the other, have been reified to a particularly exaggerated degree. In a symptomatic manner, historians usually refer to the realities they study as a government apparatus, bureaucratic machine or administrative mechanism. Such metaphors successfully obscure the fluid, negotiable nature of work relations, that were characteristic of the early modern and 18th-century Russian government.

While the relational perspective I am advocating has never been systematically

applied in standard studies of Russian administration,⁶ it has naturally been employed by those interested in the phenomena of personal loyalty and patron-client relations, but without paying any special attention to government personnel.⁷ It might be due to this indiscriminate approach that the results in this sphere do not seem entirely convincing. Thus, it has been stated that up to a certain stage of historical development, patron-client relations played a positive role in government, because they enabled the transmission and fulfillment of orders through informal power chains where institutions were lacking or insufficient. But the emergence of the Modern State, supported by a functional bureaucracy supposedly brought about by Peter's reforms, would have promoted a formal and impersonal kind of vertical relationship, while the patron-client relations would have become a serious drawback for the efficiency of the administrative system, and thenceforth a synonym for corruption. Besides, those 18th-century officials who were part of an Enlightenment-

6 To cite just some symbolic examples: S.M. Troitskii, Russkii absoliutizm i dvorianstvo v XVIII veke: formirovanie biurokratii, Moscow, 1974; Russian Officialdom: The Bureaucratization of Russian Society from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century, eds. Walter Pintner and Don Karl Rowney, London and Basingstoke, 1980.

7 David Ransel, 'Bureaucracy and Patronage: The View from an Eighteenth-century Russian Letter-writer', in Frederic Jaher (ed.), The Rich, the Well-born, and the Powerful: Studies of Elites and Upper Classes in History, Urbana, Chicago, and London, 1973, pp. 154-78, and 'Character and Style of Patron-client Relations in Russia', in Antoni Mączak (ed.), Klientelsysteme im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit, München, 1988, pp. 211-31; E.N. Marasimova, Psihologiiia elity rossiiskogo dvorianstva poslednei treti XVIII veka (po materialam peregiski), Moscow, 1999, pp. 99-117.

influenced educated elite would have come to associate patron-client relations with abasement of an individual's honour. As it is easy to notice, this interpretation is based on an implicit equation between the personal ingredient of the work relationship and patron-client relations. The object of the pages that follow is to show what exactly seems incorrect in the analysis of the hierarchical work relationship within the context of patron-client studies, and to present research approaches that it seems necessary to develop.

As I have already underlined, historians who have tackled the problem of patronage and clientelism in the 18th-century Russia have implicitly admitted an a priori equation between the personal ingredient of the hierarchical work relationship and the patron-client link. This attitude is explained by the fact that, speaking in abstract terms, the personal ingredient of the hierarchical work relationship corresponds with a theoretical definition of the patron-client link used by most historians: a 'dyadic, personal, vertical, unequal, reciprocal, exchange relationship.'⁸ But we should consider that while the hierarchical work relations were, in fact, profoundly personal, they were not automatically perceived as patron-client ones by the actors, nor judged as such by contemporary observers.

This can easily be seen as well in the 17th as in the 18th century. Let us take a look at the pre-reform Muscovite offices and their provincial town branches (prikazy and prikaznye izby). The superiors normally possessed an almost complete discretion

8 Sharon Kettering, Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France, New York and Oxford, 1986, p. 20.

with regard to their subordinates, though the latter were not confused with personal servants. A superior recruited servitors, decided all questions concerning their career and remuneration, served as a unique intermediary between them and the tsar, judged the personnel for civil and criminal offences, ordered and surveyed the execution of punishment, and so on. On the other hand, the superior was dependent upon his subordinates' services, and his discretionary powers had to be used not so much as a tool of compulsion, but also as a resource for negotiation. In this system, the execution of tasks related to the tsar's service and not lucrative in themselves were not otherwise obtained from the subordinates in exchange for some gain, privilege or advantage for them. To be sure, negotiation took the form of reverential supplication and free gift, but the servile language of the subordinates did not annul the bargaining character of their procedure, as might be seen from cases when subordinates disobeyed the superior who would not or could not follow the exchange logic.

We have very limited evidence of the superiors hiring, or at least occasionally gratifying, personnel at their own expense. Normally, they obtained what might be called exchange capital from the tsar. Thus, a superior who needed the cooperation of his subordinates was bound to extend his protection over them. If we analyse his behaviour in terms of the patron-client paradigm, he appears to have been acting as a broker, a form of patron distributing his own patron's resources. But from the historical actors' point of view, to be identified as patron and client, two individuals had to present symptoms of particular proximity. The customary and standardized personality integral to the work relationship was not individualized enough to be

perceived in this light.⁹

Peter I expressed a most intense aversion toward the discretionary powers of his senior servitors, whom he publicly characterised as ‘those judges who act as they choose.’¹⁰ His institutional reforms were intended primarily to change this basic feature of Russian government. As is well known, the most drastic changes concerned the central administration. The principal prikazy were dismantled and replaced by ‘colleges’ directed by a president with a board of counsellors. Peter stripped the central agencies of their independent sources of income, centralising his finances in a single treasury. He introduced detailed college budgets and salary charts for the whole staff, and gave the entire power over the budgets, the charts and, of course, promotions, to a single institution, the Senate, under his direct control. He also organized independent courts of justice, and tried to transfer the college personnel under their jurisdiction.

It seems clear that such measures could have changed the overall protection mode based on personalized exchange of services described in the previous paragraph. But the old Muscovite practices largely survived the whirlwind of these reforms. If we take a closer look at the colleges, we can see that they functioned not only in much the same way, but that some of the old customs finally received a formal confirmation in the new Petrine legislation.¹¹ This outcome of the reform was

9 Anna Zhukovskaia, ‘Ot porucheniia k uchrezhdeniiu: A.A. Kurbatov i “krepostnoe delo” pri Petre I’, Ocherki feodal’noi Rossii, 13, St-Petersburg, 2009 (in print).

10 Ukase of 19 December 1718 (Zakonodatel’nye akty Petra I, No 381, p. 378).

11 Anna Joukovskaïa-Lecerf, ‘Hiérarchie et patronage: Les relations de travail dans

not solely an effect of inertia retained in new agencies still heavily staffed with the former personnel. It was the result of active opposition on the part of the college superiors. These men were persuaded that their power to command obedience was dependent upon the maintenance of the personalised protection-counter-services relationship with the subordinates. The most articulate opponent of reform, Andrei Osterman, a university-trained German who became vice-chancellor after progressing step by step through the Russian Foreign Service, bluntly declared that no college president would be capable of commanding the personnel if he were deprived of complete control over remuneration funds and promotions.

In a nutshell, the so-called fledgelings of Peter I's nest seem to have believed that the colleges were able to fulfill their manifest function of administrating the country just as long as their presidents continued to act as coordinators of the college's latent function of extending protection to the personnel.¹² This mode of operation persisted during the whole of the 18th century, and probably well into the 19th. A Petrine college president behaved like a servant of the monarch charged with a certain task and used material, symbolic and other power resources afforded to him by the Crown to force the necessary individuals to fulfil this task. He was very far from the type of a state official entrusted with the direction of a public service.

The college of Foreign Affairs under the direction of Osterman and his

l'administration russe au XVIIIe siècle', Cahiers du Monde russe, 47, 2006, 3, pp. 551-80.

12 For the notions of manifest and latent functions see: Victor Morgan, 'Some Types of Patronage, Mainly in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England', in Klientelsysteme im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit, pp. 91-115 (pp. 104-5).

successors offers a good example of how the overall protection mode and patron-client relations coexisted in a single frame of the hierarchical work relationship. Contrary to all Petrine regulations, this college had two communicating but distinctive executive levels: an official department, and a (usually) smaller office of the minister, the existence of which was never institutionally recognized or made public.

This structure emerged spontaneously. Every successive minister arriving at the head of the college of Foreign Affairs surrounded himself with a relatively restricted circle of servitors picked from among the departmental personnel. The choice men were given more important responsibilities, worked more and were remunerated accordingly on a larger scale than the rest of the servitors. The latter included many aged persons who lived in retirement with the tacit consent of the minister, while the younger ones did some deciphering and translation, but in general were not much occupied. Accordingly, they did not benefit from any special promotions or material advantages, and though some of them had very comfortable careers, their advancement was never rapid or spectacular.

The servitors in the small office were not automatically considered as the minister's clients by their colleagues, or by foreign diplomats. This happened if the minister treated them on more intimate terms, lodging them at his house, inviting them to his table, playing cards with them, introducing them to his friends, as well as giving them tasks that had little to do with their office, such as handling his private correspondence. Catherine II's minister Nikita Panin went as far as to give several subordinates with whom he was on most intimate terms a part of his own land and

peasants - a gesture that was judged as a mark of an advanced patron-client relationship.

An interesting document from the archive of the college of Foreign Affairs illustrates the modalities of coexistence between the overall protection mode and the patron-client mode in this government agency. In 1762, Catherine II ordered a general revision of the college budgets by the Senate. The ministers of Foreign Affairs traditionally opposed themselves to any intervention by the government into the financial management of the college, so this time Nikita Panin ignored the order. But his subordinates (those who did not have the chance to be his clients) used this occasion to draw up a new college budget accompanied by a series of propositions concerning the treatment of the personnel. They asked for pensions after retirement, stipends for educating their sons, preferential recruitment to the college of Foreign Affairs for their sons, pensions for their widows, and so on. There was nothing extraordinary in the list of privileges itself, for, as I have shown, they were customary for government agencies. The radically new and exciting thing about this text is its form, which broke completely with the ancient tradition of supplication. The authors did not ask for individually-accorded privileges, but demanded a right, legally defined and promulgated by the monarch, which would apply to everyone who had attained a certain rank in the college service. They explained it by pointing out that the customary goodwill of the college superiors could no longer guarantee the treatment that the college personnel deserved, they said, by its service to the monarch.

The project of 1764 was provoked by a particular context, when the college of

Foreign Affairs found itself in a strained financial situation. A lack of cash lasting for several years resulted in an uncommonly profound distinction between the two categories of the personnel: the real clients of the minister in office, who managed to keep their benefits, and the rank-and-file, whose level of protection decreased and who suddenly felt the instability of their situation. In the following years, the financial difficulties of the college were partly resolved, which explains that the personnel did not try to resume its initiative.

The overall protection mode continued to function at least up to the end of the 18th century, though some ministers started to feel uncomfortable about it. Indeed, with more than 400 salaried servitors, the college represented by far the largest diplomatic service in the world, and three quarters of them were considered superfluous: ‘Si vous saviez le désordre qui règne dans le Département, si vous aviez une idée du tas de misérables et de sujets ineptes qui s'y trouvent, vous seriez comme moi persuadé de la nécessité de les renvoyer et fâché de l'impossibilité de ne pouvoir le faire’ [If you knew the disorder which rules in the Department, if you had any idea of the piles of miserable individuals and inept subjects who are to be found there, you would be as persuaded as I am of the need to dismiss them and angry at the impossibility of ever being able to do this], wrote the last vice-chancellor of the century.¹³

The study of the college of Foreign Affairs does not allow us, of course, to draw

13 Letter from V.P. Kotsubei to A.R. Vorontsov, 1799 (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 40 vols, Moscow, 1870-1895, 14, p. 105).

general conclusions about the situation throughout government agencies. But, on the other hand, this particular case provides access to the basic conditions capable of provoking, but also of suspending impulses of change in the work relationship.

It explains, why we do not observe any clear-cut tendency towards 'bureaucratisation' in that period.

The overall protection mode did not decrease linearly, but fluctuated in a subtle way, for it depended heavily on working conditions that changed from time to time and varied among agencies. Patron-client relations did not decrease linearly either. In the college of Foreign Affairs they were much less present in the 1730s than in the 1760s and the 1770s, and in the 1790s, they exploded and became different in nature, for the exchange of services was no more predominantly limited to the functional frame of the college service, but expanded to a larger context of the social life of St Petersburg. It seems, in fact, that the patron-client relations became more robust during the periods when the overall protection mode shrunk.

Now let us look at the cultural reasons that are supposed to have acted as a reducing agent on patron-client relations – the ideals of legality introduced by Peter I, and the notion of individual honour internalized by the educated elite by the middle of the century. First, it is necessary to point out, that the elite in question was still extremely limited in number in the 18th century. Second, if we examine closely these cultural mechanisms, it appears they did not work at all in such a straightforward way.

The clientele of Nikita Panin in the college of Foreign Affairs comprised a famous playwright, Denis Fonvizin, who is considered by literary historians as one of

the most virulent critics of favouritism and clientelism in the 18th century. But his whole career was deliberately constructed as a patron-client relationship with his two successive superiors. He left the first feeling indignant about the man's incapacity to appreciate his devotion and engage fully in a patron-client exchange. In a letter to his parents, Fonvizin called this superior a monster (urod).¹⁴ The choice of this somewhat unexpected epithet indicates, in fact, that Fonvizin considered such behaviour generally abnormal. With Panin, who proved a good patron, Fonvizin's attitude came to resemble fidelity. He integrated his patron's political views, even though these were in opposition with the regime, and maintained them after the latter's death, notwithstanding the damage it caused to his career.¹⁵ The case of Fonvizin shows well that the estimation of the patron-client relations by the educated elite was a relative one. It was viewed in a positive or in a negative light depending upon the context. A similar attitude can be observed in the writings of another well-known author, the journalist Nikolai Novikov, whose satire aimed at corruption, not the patron-client relations as such. These relations appeared as a neutral phenomenon, and were praised or condemned contextually, according to whether they served just or unjust ends, or produced good or bad effects.¹⁶

Peter I himself, in one of his fundamental ideologically pointed legal texts,

14 Letter of 11 September 1768, D.I. Fonvizin, Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh, ed. G.P. Makogonenko, 2 vols, Moscow and Leningrad, 1959, 2, p. 349.

15 David Ransel, The Politics of Catherinian Russia. The Panin Party, New Haven and London, 1975.

16 Satiricheskie zhurnaly N.I. Novikova, ed. P.N. Berkov, Moscow and Leningrad, 1951.

pictured the hierarchical work relationship in the following way:

It is not infrequent that a judge, or an officer, finding himself in the claws of a passion, feeling obliged, or searching for a gain, commits an offence. Seeing that, his subordinates get out of order, for they are no longer afraid of their superior's wrath, because a partial superior cannot punish his subordinates.

Whenever he starts scolding a delinquent, the latter defends himself unashamedly with false arguments, warning the superior with a glance, or a whisper in his ear, or letting him know through a friend, that if the superior were not indulgent, he would denounce him. And the officer, similar to a slave, must keep silence, tolerate and cover up. What will be the outcome of all this?

Nothing but vile living in the subordinates, general fearlessness, a bitterer disaster for the people, and God's anger. And thereof might follow a calamity and a final downfall of the realm.¹⁷

In this citation, one of the possible reasons for corruption is a feeling of obligation towards someone. A personal relationship was thus presented as a factor that enhanced the possibility of corruption. Yet, as with Novikov and Fonvizin half a century later, the tsar did not push the abstraction far enough to direct his criticism against the existence of personal relations between the superiors and the subordinates. The personal character of the hierarchical work relationship seems to have been experienced as something almost as normal as the necessity to eat; that is, not something commented on in qualitative terms, when it is not associated with gluttony

17 Ukase of 25 October 1723 (Zakonodatel'nye akty Petra I, No 176, pp. 131-2).

or starvation.

In the beginning of the 19th century, when the Russian elite finally engaged in theoretical reflexion about the internal functioning of government, it was eager to criticise the normative tools of the type introduced and advocated by Peter I, pointing out their manifest low efficiency. In the Zapiska o drevnei i novoi Rossii (Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia, 1811) addressed to Alexander I, Nikolai Karamzin defended a model based on a virtuous minister's discretion. He summed up his views by saying, in a strikingly unbureaucratic spirit, that 'a useful ministry is not organized by writing a Regulation, but by forming good ministers' capable of 'handling the personnel.'¹⁸

I have designed this short demonstration to highlight a fact that the drawbacks of the standard interpretive approach of the work relationship in the 18th-century Russian government are due in a large measure to the inadequacy of the current conceptual language that operates by oppositions — personal/impersonal, formal/informal, patron-client/bureaucratic — as well as by such notions as 'professional'. The emergence of a more adequate conceptual framework is hardly possible without developing a different language, moulded by the specificity of the epoch under consideration, rather than imposing a logic proper to the historian's own time. That is why the last part of this paper introduces a discussion about the meaning of some of the very basic notions of the history of the administration. For example,

18 N.M. Karamzin, Zapiska o drevnei i novoi Rossii v ee politicheskom i grazhdanskom otnozhenijakh, Moscow, 1991, pp. 61, 99, 100.

the analytical term of government as a set of practical actions needed to exercise a political rule over a society as well as the historical term ‘sovereign's service’ (sluzhba gosudareva).

Levying taxes, rendering justice and so forth are government actions under any political regime. But, in different historical contexts, the agents who execute these actions on different functional levels can have various statuses. In Muscovite and Petrine Russia, these people were drawn from three large categories. The first one was the political elite, entirely covered by the contemporary notion of the ‘Sovereign’s Court’ (Gosudarev dvor).¹⁹ As is well known, the Sovereign’s Court was organized in a pyramid of grades, granted by the tsar on a hereditary basis with an additional consideration of merit, the grades ranging from boyar down to the d’iak (from the Greek diakonos, or ‘servant’, that in Russian came to mean a prince’s or tsar’s secretary). The second category consisted of literate men having obtained a status of pod’iachii (under-secretary), and who did most of the paperwork in the country. And finally, the execution of certain government actions, such as the collection of taxes, was systematically imposed upon a third category, the tax-payers, who elected special representatives on an annual basis. These people were often illiterate and had to hire under-secretaries to assist them.

As a group, the members of the Sovereign’s Court were characterised by a diversity of statuses, contrasted by a relative unity of social fibre: they were all

19 Praviashchaia elita Russkogo gosudarstva, IX - nachala XVIII v.: Ocherki istorii, ed. A.P. Pavlov, St Petersburg, 2006.

hereditary landed service nobility, dividing their time between living on their estates and accomplishing various services to the tsar, court, military or government, with very little or no specialisation. In their turn, the under-secretaries were distinguished by a status unity, contrasted by a great social diversity. They came from almost every social group, from peasants to the inferior grades of the Sovereign's Court, though heredity, of course, was strong. The under-secretaries preserved family and other ties with their original milieu. And one should not imagine that all of them presented a profile of a full-time government official. The traditional historiography has obscured an important fact that many of them lived as much or even not so much from the sovereign's service, as from exploiting land, small industrial enterprises such as alcohol-brewing or milling, from money-lending and notarial work, some of them successfully combining several of these activities.

Some historians have considered it possible to unite these two categories under the notion of the 'sovereign's servitors' for any historical period, though it is well known that the original term was applied exclusively to the members of the Sovereign's Court, and did not comprise the under-secretaries. This fundamental assumption on one hand, as well as the continuity of the political notion of service, and the equivalence of the basic government actions through the time on the other, explain the recurrent idea of a continual existence of bureaucracy in Russia from the 16th century: the 'service bureaucracy' of the 16th and 17th centuries would have mutated to the 'noble's bureaucracy' of the 18th century, that in its turn would have

evolved to the 'classless bureaucracy' during the 19th century.²⁰

I suggest that there is no reason to assume social, cultural and structural continuity of government action between the Muscovite realm and the Russian Empire, for we should consider the effect of a cluster of heterogeneous factors that imposed change on the nature of the work relationship in government under the reign of Peter I. The range of practical government actions that were performed by the under-secretaries and the elective representatives of the tax-paying population was larger than the notion of the sovereign's service, initially limited to the feudal military service. The political responsibility of tax collection vested in members of the Sovereign's Court was sovereign's service, but the technical task of collecting taxes was not. Judging a civil case was sovereign's service, but the paperwork engendered by the procedure was not. By contrast, an under-secretary who accompanied the army going on a campaign was rendering as authentic a service as that of a noble horseman in the same army. Duties and tasks of various kinds that required travelling far from one's home, were systematically assimilated into the sovereign's service. Finally, non-lucrative paperwork exacted from the under-secretaries, such as the drawing-up of the accounts or writing reports, had a special status of 'work on order' (prikaznaia rabota), and was sometimes remunerated in the same way as the service.

The hierarchical work relationship between the members of the Sovereign's Court acting as administrative superiors and the socially ambiguous group of the

20 N.F. Demidova, Sluzhilaia biurokratia v Rossii XVII veka i ee rol' v formirovanii absoliutizma, Moscow, 1987.

under-secretaries, the two social strata that the accomplishment of the practical government actions brought into permanent collaboration, took the form of a continual and mostly individual negotiation about the boundaries of the customary notion of the sovereign's service. For a majority of the under-secretaries, it was vital that at least a portion of their paperwork was explicitly recognized as service, for this allowed them to maintain their privileged status, which could otherwise have been lost. It is clear enough that the reconstruction of the processes of change within the hierarchical work relationship in the 18th century must rely on a social history of the two strata in question and on a conceptual analysis of the dynamic interaction between the functional notion of government action and the political, ideological, and cultural notion of sovereign's service.²¹

As far as the governing elite is concerned, it has been assumed for a long time that Peter I would have changed the traditional recruitment pool of the upper government personnel, dismissing the old nobility and advancing commoners, which would have brought in new political interests and different backgrounds. Under the additional impact of Peter I's ideology of 'common good', these would have changed

21 The social history of what is called the governing elite and the bureaucracy of 18th-century Russia is poorly supplied with large-scale empirical studies. Even the most basic prosopographic research covers only the central administration and only the middle of the century, and it is based exclusively on the sources of a general service census, which are not completely reliable, for example, as far as the information on the servitor's economic resources is concerned. This kind of data in particular can be verified by sampling the Russian equivalent of notarial documentation, but, for mysterious reasons, it has never been used for serial studies.

the spirit of the sovereign's service. As is known, the thesis about the commoners finally proved incorrect, for Peter I's government absorbed almost all of the old service families. Nevertheless, the joint effect of Peter's refusing to have either courtiers, or a permanent residence, and his inversion of the elite's traditional sociability led to a collapse of the ancient court society.²² In 1722, the promulgation of the Table of Ranks gave a new basis to the power structure, since an individual's place in the hierarchy was no longer to depend upon birth (family service history) but predominantly upon his personal service record. In this way, the Table of Ranks suggested the disappearance of a social boundary between the deciders and the performers, the superiors and the subordinates, and it seems evident that this could not but produce profound effects upon the hierarchical work relationship, effects that still need to be elucidated.

On the side of the subordinates, changes were also quite important. Peter I, as is well known, completed the process of replacement of the traditional feudal cavalry by a standing army of a contemporary European type, as well as creating two navies, and it is not surprising that to provide for their needs, the existing government personnel had to be enlarged and reorganized. This reorganization, though, was a social earthquake, comparable in its violence to the one that had ruined the Sovereign's Court. But here the victory does not seem to have fallen on the tsar's side. Peter I wanted a kind of civil standing army, where every agent would have been mobile and easily interchangeable. He did not take into consideration that the under-secretaries

22 O.G. Ageeva, *Imperatorskii dvor v Rossii, 1700-1796 gody*, Moscow, 2008.

functioned, in essence, as local elites. Not only were they not used to being moved from place to place, but their extra-service economic resources, that allowed them to survive in a time when the Crown practically stopped supporting them, could not be exploited in an absentee-owner fashion. Besides, and this is still more important, if the under-secretaries had proved so valuable as local agents, especially as tax collectors, it was certainly related to their hereditary integration to the local life.

Soviet historiography never fully recognized the fact that the so-called bureaucracy made part of the society, interpreting it as a sort of functional super-structure and a pliable tool of the monarchy. In a curious way this view coincided with the treatment that Peter I tried to impose on the under-secretaries, with the difference that the tsar did not actually succeed. The passive resistance he encountered obliged him to resort to having army officers govern both the country and the country's traditional government personnel. The effect of his efforts – a topic that has yet to be studied properly – is an important factor in the evolution of the hierarchical work relationship, for it is clear that, for a superior, dealing with subordinates entrenched in local society and more or less economically independent was not the same thing as dealing with 'civil soldiers'. One might argue that Peter succeeded in destroying only the central government under-secretaries' pattern of life, by transferring the capital from Moscow to St Petersburg, a city of a totally different social and economic tissue.²³ There is little doubt, that for the under-

23 O.G. Ageeva, 'Velichaishij i slavneishij bolee vsekhn gradov v svete' – grad sviatogo Petra: Peterburg v russskom obshchestvennom soznanii nachala XVIII veka, St Petersburg, 1999;
O.E. Kosheleva, Liudi Sankt-Peterburgskogo ostrova Petrovskogo vremeni, Moscow, 2004.

secretaries employed in the northern capital it was all but impossible to conserve their old social profile, and the habitual type of the hierarchical work relationship.

Finally, there existed powerful cultural factors of change. Without dwelling on the emblematic beard-cutting and dress-changing episodes, let us consider directly another cultural shift, much more important for our subject, that is the reevaluation of the act of writing, the physical act of manipulating pen and ink and putting words on paper. On the whole, up to Peter I, the physical act of writing remained a socially unprestigious kind of activity. Writing was regarded as just another kind of manual labour. Among the members of the Sovereign's Court many could write, but they never did so in the context of performing their service duties; only the secretaries were bound to write a little when they had to give or transmit orders.²⁴ As a rule, they put brief phrases on the margin of the documents, taking care to employ a characteristically bad hand.²⁵ Writing could not but appear as another visible abyss between the superiors and the subordinates, a symbolic boundary that was continually enacted in the everyday hierarchical work relations.

Peter I completely overturned this cultural attitude, as old as Russian history itself. First, there was his personal example for his contemporaries to consider, and it was certainly no less shocking for them to see a tsar write than manipulate an axe in a shipyard. Second, Peter obliged his senior officials to sign all documents emanating

24 G.K. Kotoshikhin, O Rossii v tsarstvovanie Alekseia Mikhailovicha, Moscow, 2000, pp. 45-46.

25 See a collection of samples of secretaries writing in Ol'ga Novokhatko, Razriad v 185 godu, Moscow, 2007, pp. 19-39.

from them (as he put it in an edict addressing them, ‘in order that the stupidity of everyone could be evident’).²⁶ And finally, he put the governing elite in working conditions that often left them no choice as to write documents in their own hand. It is symptomatic that starting from the middle of Peter’s reign, the traditional terminological use of the word ‘work’ (rabota) for paperwork becomes less frequent, and subsequently disappears. On the whole, I feel confident that these practices were a mighty factor that soon effaced the socially stigmatic association with manual labour from the physical act of writing. From this point of view, subordinates were no longer different from their superiors, and some under-secretaries could have felt a sort of advantage over quite a few superiors who could not write well, when this came to be considered a handicap.

There is no need to stress that this drastic change could not but modify profoundly the hierarchical work relationship. It was a new factor in the mutual judgement between individual superiors and subordinates. More importantly, I suggest that the new cultural status of the physical act of writing contributed to the emergence of a more coherent notion of sovereign’s service in relation to government action. Up to Peter I, paperwork in itself was not directly valuable for an under-secretary’s career. Such an attitude might be explained by the fact that manual labour could not have been naturally included in the notion of sovereign’s service. In practice, a large amount of particularly useful and demanding paperwork allowed one to obtain the tsar’s gratification, but there persisted a sort of uneasiness about it, and

26 Ukase of 7 October 1707 (Zakonodatel’nye akty Petra I, No 238, p. 196).

the under-secretaries' requests for remuneration show that they shared this view to some extent. When Peter I finally overturned this attitude, the accumulated collective consciousness of the utility and importance of paperwork for the government action propelled this activity inside the notion of the sovereign's service. To my mind, this change progressively diminished and finally annulled the importance of individual negotiation about recognizing certain portions of paperwork as the sovereign's service, that structured the traditional hierarchical work relationship. Together with the disappearance of the Sovereign's Court, this change gave a powerful impulse for a subsequent implicit overall integration of the under-secretaries into the service class. The process had not been finished when the Table of Ranks first appeared, but it is clear that the preconditions were set, and that everyone who was not a taxpayer and who participated in government action was finally going to be considered a servant - of the monarch, of the Fatherland, and later, an abstract State.

Bureaus do not necessarily make a bureaucracy, no more than a lifetime occupation invariably forges a professional. For it is not the organizational chart, but the nature of the relations, personal – between breathing men – and social – between individuals as social functions – which is decisive for concluding whether an administrative organ is a 'proto-Weberian bureau' or a courtier's retinue, a local elite lobby, or perhaps (and why not) just a family. Counting bureaus and employees, drawing organizational charts, compiling basic prosopographical data, reciting the regulations and cataloguing the procedures, all of the useful and necessary as well as venerable methods of the traditional historiography of the Russian Ancien Régime administration, will continue to impose upon us anachronistic ideas about its

character as long as the work relationship has not received sufficient attention as one of the central questions of the history of government. In accordance with some other essays in the present volume, this article shows that focusing on personal loyalties remains a virtuous historiographical exercise as long as preference is given to careful investigation of the historical context rather than trying to arrive at an abstract definition and a general description of the phenomenon.