

## RUSSIAN AUTOCRACY IN THE OPINION OF V.O. KLIUCHEVSKII

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### ABSTRACT

The history of the Russian autocracy, as well as the question of its character and historical significance, rests on the events of the Great Russian Revolution of 1917, which turned out to be an insurmountably fatal obstacle for it. A contemporary of the last Romanovs, the great Russian historian V.O. Kliuchevskii could observe and analyze the agony of the Russian autocracy, drawing on the experience of his academic knowledge of the history of Russian power and society. This part of his creative heritage should be considered as historical elitology, which directly follows from an analysis of the essence of the subjects of the highest power (elite), and in particular the ruling tsar's dynasty in Russia.

**Keywords:** history, historical science, autocracy, kings, tsarism, political leadership, elites, elitology, power, society

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The outstanding Russian historian Vasili Osipovich Kliuchevskii can justly be considered a very noticeable domestic political scientist and philosopher of the political history of his time. His political science heritage consists of analyzing the nature and essence of the supreme power (political leadership and elites), as well as the cultural

and psychological characteristics of prominent historical figures. The last two circumstances indicate the presence in his creative legacy of a significant elitological element of knowledge, which has yet to be revealed by modern social science. (Ashin, 2010; Karabushhenko et al., 2012; Jelitologija, 2013) Therefore, the main objective of this work is to reveal the main conceptual aspects of the elitological historical worldview of V.O. Kliuchevskii through identifying his key issues. The whole bulk of his elitological knowledge, in addition to the theory of political power, also includes consideration of the problem of holiness in Russia ("Old Russian Lives of Saints", 1871), the composition and activities of the Boyar Duma ("Boyar Duma of Ancient Russia", 1880-1881), and the elite of Zemsky Cathedrals ("Composition of Representatives at Zemsky Cathedrals of Ancient Russia", 1890) and works on historical personalities ("Historical portraits"). The historian himself was at one time a member of the family of the last Russian Tsar (1893 - 1895) and could observe the last Romanovs as the home teacher of the universal history of Grand Duke Georgii Aleksandrovich (1871 - 1899) (Nechkina, 1974). He had no illusions of monarchism and understood very well how their three-hundred-year rule would most likely end. In this regard, we are interested in the way Vasilii Osipovich assessed the political bundle and personal potential of the tsarist dynasty, what he saw as its main omissions and fatal flaws, and what constitutes the Russian Time of Troubles in its elitological context. All these questions come down to one general answer, namely, in his opinion, the main cause of the Time of Troubles is the total degradation of the internal quality of the elite, which is unable to give an adequate answer to the objective challenge of its historical time.

### 1.1. Russian Autocracy

V.O. Kliuchevskii expresses the key features of the Russian elite of his time on the pages of his diary and in his other notes. This is a kind of "esoteric" heritage of the historian regarding the essence of the supreme power in Russia, not intended for the general public. In this secret material (i.e. not intended for publication) V.O. Kliuchevskii did not mince his words, which he often draws up in the form of aphorisms containing both bitter truth and satirical criticism at the same time. The Romanovs became the target of much of the criticism by V.O. Kliuchevskii, which was the result of his historical dislike of the monarchy. That monarchy, which existed in reality, sharply diverged from its fundamental idea, as the historian himself understood it. And he gives not so much a historical but a philosophical and political analysis of the role of autocracy. In his opinion, "autocracy is not power, but a task, that is, not a right, but a responsibility. The task is for the sole authority to do for the good of the people that the people themselves cannot do through their bodies. The responsibility is that one person is responsible for all failures in the achievement of the public good. Autocracy is a happy usurpation, the only political justification of which is a continuous success or constant ability to correct one's mistakes or misfortunes. Unsuccessful autocracy is no longer legal. [italicized by P.K.] In this sense, Peter the Great was the only autocrat in our history. The rule, accompanied by Narva without Poltava, is nonsense" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). We see a completely different understanding of the historical role and political tasks of the autocracy. Kliuchevskii offers us an elitology of responsibility, which the Romanov dynasty did not have. This is its main drawback. Unlike the Rurik dynasty, who saw the Russian state only as their patrimony they had gathered together (that is, the state existed for them, and not they for the state), the new dynasty understood its "selective"

origin and the inadmissibility of such a "specific view of the state... The collective election gave the tsars of the new house a new foundation and a new character of their power. Zemsky Sobor asked Michael to rule, and not Michael asked Zemsky Sobor for the kingdom. Consequently, the tsar is necessary for the state, and although the state does not exist for the sovereign, it cannot exist without him. The idea of power as the basis of state order, the sum of the powers arising from this source, exhausted the entire political content of the concept of the state" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). In his opinion, the Romanovs "ruled Russia rather than owned, pursued their dynastic and not state interest, exercising their will on it, not wanting and not knowing how to understand the needs of the people, exhausted its forces and means, not regenerating and not directing them to the goals of the national good" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). That is exactly what the Romanovs behaved like. It is precisely for this distortion of the fundamental idea of the autocracy that V.O. Kliuchevskii criticizes them in his diary. According to his point of view, "the state of the first Romanovs is a national Russian Union with fresh memories and habits of a patrimonial order, governed by a class of military servants held at the expense of a controlled people. The center of gravity in the first period is in the Boyar Duma, in the second - in the Razryad. The Front Porch took over the Main entrance" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Vasiliy Osipovich gave characteristics to almost all the kings of the Romanov dynasty. And they do not look like the way Russian official historiography draws them. He characterizes the first Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich as the Sobor-elected autocrat, the closest relative of the last Rurik dynasty (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich "Tishayshy" is characterized as an avid swear and extremely hot-tempered man (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Tsar Fedor III is a great lover of science and poetry (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Tsarevna Sofiiia Alekseevna is a courageous energetic girl (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Tsar Ivan V Alekseevich is week-minded, (Kliuchevskii, 1989) a "day-off", "ceremonial tsar" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Tsar Peter I is characterized by him as a business and very restless ruler, with a bulk of projects and thoughts in his head and with a bloody whip in his hand. Catherine I is a spender and reveler, funny and promiscuous in her lifestyle (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Peter II is a teenager who frightened all the Petrine reformers with a "return to Moscow darkness" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). The reign of Anna Ivanovna is characterized by him as "one of the darkest pages of Russian history, and the empress herself is the darkest spot on it" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Elizaveta Petrovna "was a smart and kind, but promiscuous and wayward Russian mistress" who "lived and reigned in gilded poverty" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Peter III was the Prussian minister on the Russian throne (Kliuchevskii, 1989) Empress Catherine II was a "philosopher on the throne", although "she did not strike either with depth or brilliance of her mind... She did not have a particularly thin and deep but flexible and cautious, quick-witted, clever mind that knew his own place and time, and did not sting the eyes of others" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Paul I showed "the instinct of order, his guiding motive was discipline and equality, the struggle with estate privileges was his main task" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Alexander I "was a magnificent but tender creature, who did not have time or failed to acclimatize on Russian soil". (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Nicholas I was "the tsar-auditor"; (Kliuchevskii, 1993) in the first half of his reign there was "the hope that it was possible to give the country political freedom by retaining slavery for a while" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Alexander II - "took the path of Alexander I. On the one hand, he provided reforms that aroused the most courageous expectations in society, and on the other, he put forward and supported the servants who destroyed them" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The author generally characterizes the last two representatives of the tsar

dynasty with one phrase: "his father [Alexander III] still knew how to build something; the son [Nicholas II] was only able to talk stuff and nonsense" (Kliuchevskii, 1993) The characteristics are original and eloquent. They were the result of his many years of work as a historian and political scientist. V.O. Kliuchevskii saw a general decline in the quality of the aristocratic type of government. Monarchies degenerated as the tribal aristocracy supported it. "The monarchies of old Europe: crowns without heads, governments without ministers, armies without commanders: power without the advice and a sword, a bare skeleton, or rather a ghost from a historical grave" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). At the time of Vasilii Osipovich, a lot of things for the Russian tsar were already decided by his ministers, who actually acted as correctors of his will. "The tsar will command - the minister will cancel... He better understands the will of the tsar than the tsar himself" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The personality of the last Russian tsar was tragically subordinated to his highest bureaucracy, which most fatally lacked initiative and intelligence. In his diaries dating back to the 1900s, the historian comes down with very harsh criticism of the Russian autocracy as a whole. "Russian tsars are not mechanics with a car, but scarecrows for birds of prey. Tsars are the same actors with the difference that burghers and commoners play tsars in the theater, and tsars play burghers and commoners... Kings will become extinct over time: these are mammoths who could live only in the antediluvian times" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). There is no trace of loyal love for the supreme authority. Tsars for him are a garden scarecrow, i.e. institution of power that has lost all respect. And we ask ourselves the question - if the Russian autocrat learned about this then how would he react to this criticism and to the political freethinker?

The historian saw the fall of the authority of tsarism in debunking the myth of its sacred nature. The historian continues that "our tsars were useful as formidable gods, not useless and like a garden scarecrow. Degeneration of authority started with the sons of Paul. The former tsars and queens are rubbish, but hid in the palace, providing an epic-pious imagination to create idols of them. Paul' sons began to become popular... Seeing them close, the people ceased to consider them gods but did not stop being afraid of them as the gendarmes. Images that frightened the imagination now began to frighten the nerves. Since Alexander III, his children, moral degeneration is accompanied by physical... This dynasty will not live to see its political death, will die out before it is no longer needed, and will be driven away. This is happiness and misfortune of Russia and its people, moreover, repeated: it again faces imperfection, a troubled time" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). In the latter, we see the historical prophecies of V.O. Kliuchevskii, which follows from a deep analysis of political and historical reality. If we look closely, the point of view of Vasilii Osipovich practically coincides with another famous memoirist of that time, Count S.Iu. Witte, who also spoke very critically about the last Romanovs, seeing in them the features of degradation not only of the ruling dynasty but of the whole aristocratic principle of government (Vitte, 1994). Both Witte and Kliuchevskii agree in answer to this question, speaking like-minded people in the matter of criticizing Russian tsarism. A special topic in his thoughts is the theme of the Russian nobility and autocracy. He called the court nobility the "livery aristocracy of the main entrance" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The historian was not a fan of noble dignity and soberly assessed his real possibilities. "Nobility is "loyal rebels". It is used to surround the throne with the beggar's forever outstretched hand and shake it for intransigence" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Being a "priest's son" himself, Vasilii Osipovich had no illusions about the Russian nobility and was not going to be his apologist. He pointed out that "the noble Russian nobility exchanged their estate debt for debts to a state bank"



(Kliuchevskii, 1993). "They carried the nobility of the soul not as a moral duty of every person, but as a noble right bestowed upon them by the letter of Empress Catherine II, and were indignant as an anarchist seizure, when they noticed in a peasant or commoner a creep to share with them this estate privilege" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). In other words, too many corrupting privileges were granted to the Russian nobility, which ultimately ruined their socio-political quality. The tsars of the Romanov dynasty could allow themselves some liberties in communication with both the Russian aristocracy and the people. Peter I could be himself since he was the absolute master of his country. The dynasty owned Russia as its personal estate. Emperor Paul could afford to be so original that everyone considered him crazy. The absolute monarchy, in his opinion, leads to the insanity of its crown bearers. "The Roman emperors went crazy with autocracy; why should not the emperor Paul do the same?" (Kliuchevskii, 1993), the historian reasonably asks. In fact, he adheres to the principle of a dialectical approach, since he puts a specific problem to comprehensively objective analysis. This is especially true for the analysis of the role of historical figures. The desire for objectivity makes him identify and weigh on the scales of history all their pro et contra. The result is a very voluminous image of the persons of the past. A special place in the criticism of autocracy Vasilii Osipovich gives to the personality of Tsar Peter I.

### 1.2. Peter I: pro et contra

The personality of this tsar is key to the history of Russian tsarism. V.O. Kliuchevskii pays special attention to this figure. The historian does not completely conceal the negative aspects of Tsar Peter's policies and the negative aspects of his personality. He is dialectical in everything. Dialectical to the end. And this causes great respect.

Already in the very personality of Peter, Vasilii Osipovich sees a kind of systemic incompleteness and even a split. The tsar was simply woven from contradictions. As an elitologist, he is interested in those personality traits of this figure that made him a great historical figure. In his works on this subject, he gradually reveals the character, motives, strong-willed characteristics, and mental abilities of the first Russian emperor. He does this very correctly and throws out his emotional attitude towards the tsar only in his diary.

First of all, it is impossible to imagine Peter I without his reforms. His reforms grew out of the children's fun of the tsar (Kliuchevskii, 1991). By his nature, he was a fidget - he could not sit in one place for a long time, he always ran somewhere. Since his youth, "Peter lived a life of a homeless, wandering student" (Kliuchevskii, 1991). He was not like any of his predecessors, the faint-of-heart tsars. Peter was the master-laborer, self-taught, the tsar-craftsman. "Hurry of affairs, lack of courage, sometimes the impossibility of waiting, mobility of the mind, unusually quick observation - all this taught Peter to think and make decisions without hesitation, think about the matter in the middle of the case and sensitively guess the requirements of the minute, figure out the means of execution on the go" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). He evaluates Peter's reforms ambiguously. He wrote in his "Course in Russian History" that "Peter's reform was a struggle of despotism with the people, with its inertness. He hoped to provoke independent activity in an enslaved society and through European slaveholding to introduce European science, public education as a necessary condition for the social initiative, he wanted the slave to remain conscious and free, still being a slave. The

combined action of despotism and freedom, enlightenment and slavery is the political quadrature of the circle, a riddle that has been solved for us since the time of Peter the Great for two centuries and hitherto unresolved" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). The historian admits that starting from Peter's era, the government traded "the state, as its international shop" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). In this case, the abuse of power was explained by the interests of the state, the interests of Russia. In his opinion, "the reform of Peter drew from the people the strength and means for the struggle of the ruling classes against the people... After Peter, the state became stronger, but the people became poorer... To protect the fatherland from enemies, Peter devastated it more than any enemy" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The authorities, therefore, existed and could only act effectively through the extreme exploitation of their people. At the same time, the autocracy relied on an army entirely composed of people but distracted from its tradition. Peter's elite was just as controversial. According to the historian, Peter's elite did not match the breadth of his ideas. "Peter served his Russian homeland, but serving Peter did not mean serving Russia. The idea of the fatherland was too high for his servants, not according to their civic growth. The people closest to Peter were not reform-executors, but his personal courtyard servants" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). Peter's elite was an elite only when in his reins and under his whip: "These people had neither the strength nor the desire to continue or destroy Peter's project; they could only spoil it. Under Peter, accustomed to act on his strict order, they seemed large figures, and now, left alone, turned out to be simple zeros that had lost their advanced unit" (Kliuchevskii, 1989). As a result, the elite lost the ability to take initiative and responsibility. The autocratic power of Peter killed its desire and ability. It was the despotic energy of Peter that made his elite brilliant. Without it, it would lose all power and quickly faded in the harsh wind of history.

## 2. ELITE AND SOCIETY

The professor believed that the social issue is not an attribute of the political economy but of political law (that is, popular psychology): "The rich are not harmful because they are rich, but because they make the poor feel their poverty. By destructing the rich, the poor will not become richer but will feel less poor" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The historian was convinced that the state should contribute to the prosperity of the people, and not power. "In a state, a people becomes not only a legal entity but also a historical person with a more or less clearly expressed national character and a consciousness of its world significance" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). In his opinion, the authorities behaved provocatively towards society. Since the time of Tsar Alexander I, "the Russian government conducted purely provocative activities: it gave society exactly as much freedom as it needed to cause its first manifestations in it, and then covered and punished imprudent simpletons" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). In his era, a general misunderstanding of the authorities and society, which actually lived two different lives, markedly deepened. The existing split gave rise, as it were, to two kinds of Russia - the Russian government and the Russian society. In this regard, V.O. Kliuchevskii wrote that "every society has the right to demand from their state officials satisfactory government, to say to its rulers: "Rule us so that we live comfortably". But the bureaucracy usually thinks differently and is disposed to respond to this demand: "No, you live in such a way that it is convenient for us to manage you, and even pay us a good salary so that we have fun in managing you; if you feel uncomfortable, then you are to blame, not us, because

you do not know how to adapt to our management and because your needs are incompatible with the way of government, which we serve as bodies" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The authorities and society simply test each other's patience. V.O. Kliuchevskii notes that he "does not know society more patient, can't say more trustingly, treated the government, as well as a government that would spend the patience of society, just like official money" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Power is gradually losing the moral justification of its political existence: "Power as a means for the common good is morally binding; power against the common good is a simple takeover" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). V.O. Kliuchevskii actually describes the elite and society on the eve of the Great Russian Revolution of 1917. Back in 1898, anticipating the impending catastrophe, he wrote in his diary: "Russia is on the edge of the abyss. Every minute is expensive. They all feel and ask questions "what to do?". There is the answer" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The historian was well aware of the ongoing process of degradation of the ruling elite: "The worst people serve the state, and the best people serve only their worst properties" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). He was acutely worried about the loss of public confidence in his authorities: "The people's trust in their leaders is a sign of their faith in themselves, in their moral strength" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Paraphrasing V.O. Kliuchevskii, we can say that power in Russia consists of people who stumble over their own shadow (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The problem of Russian history lies in the fact that there is too little real law in it - the government issues laws that shine on their external side, but are not viable internally (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Both the people and the authorities, who demanded privileges (exceptions to the rules), had legal nihilism, and the people acutely felt this injustice and protested as best they could. V.O. Kliuchevskii stated, "The law gave private privileges and special class duties, but not general rights and obligations," (Kliuchevskii, 1993). One of the diary entries (obviously not intended for publication), we contains the following bitter revelation of a Russian historian: "The struggle of the Russian autocracy with the Russian intelligentsia is the struggle of a lascivious old man with his bastards who knew how to make but did not know how to educate them" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Frankly. Accurately. And it is extremely unpleasant for the Russian intelligentsia itself. V.O. Kliuchevskii sees the flaws of liberalism of the Russian intelligentsia. In his opinion, the Russian liberal is given completely out of touch with reality. It is so superficial that even the most insignificant wind of history blows it off. "Liberalism is the most flat-bottomed, confined to the Russian shallowing river" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). Liberalism cannot be the voice of the Russian opposition since it is potentially inferior to the capabilities of the Russian autocracy. Looking back, the historian painfully sought answers to current political events. "Politics should be no more and no less than an applied history. Now it is nothing more than a denial of history and no less than its distortion" (Kliuchevskii, 1993). The text by Vasilii Osipovich allows us to understand that the political vices of power themselves are striking, while its virtues still need to be sought. Therefore, it is not surprising that criticism of existing vices occupies a much larger place in his work than praising the virtues he discovered. V.O. Kliuchevskii understood that Russia would not limit itself to the 1905 revolution since the reasons that gave rise to it were not eliminated. This means that even larger relapse is possible. The historian himself did not live to the fateful 1917th year but very accurately predicted a new troubled time approaching Russia. And he openly calls the Russian autocracy one of the culprits of this tragedy, which has lost the ability to effectively manage social and political processes and has morally decomposed in front of the entire Russian society. And his verdict is harsh and objective - autocracy should

become the property of the political history of Russia. However, this does not mean at all that after falling into oblivion, existing vices of social and political life will also go there. He understood that the system reproduces itself, that the tsarist autocracy can be replaced by another much harsher type of autocracy.

### 3.SUMMARY

The events of 1917 are still the subject of fierce scientific disputes and political controversy. They will remain relevant for a long time, because they relate to the analysis of the nature of troubled times, cyclically repeated in world political history. And the key question is what the role and is the participation of the elite in the revolutionary process are. The general state of the political elite on the eve of the Great Russian Revolution of 1917 still leaves more questions than specifically defined answers. An analysis of the views of the leading representative of the scientific elite of the Russian Empire regarding the nature and essence of the supreme power allows us to shed light on how the critically thinking part of Russian society related to the vices and virtues of their power. The creative heritage of V.O. Kliuchevskii gives us valuable information on this issue we must always pay attention to in our own searches for answers to these eternal questions.

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