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Introduction: Revising Old Narratives – Masculinity and Autocracy in the Nineteenth Century

Nostalgically recalling his days as a Kazan' University student in the 1840s, Nicholas Osviannikov described how the university constituted 'a cherished dream of every young boy' and how 'a young man could instinctually feel that here he would experience everything he needed for his future conscious life.'¹ To another student memoirist, the university seemed 'an enchanted island in the middle of the sea ... where one experiences a baptism of the soul.'² A third student recalled that his admission to Moscow University was 'the first notable achievement in my life, not to mention the most important ... It indicated an entrance into a new age and a new walk of life ... Childhood had now passed ... We became adults ... With such pride I wore my [university] blue color and sword, the accessories of an adult – man!'³

In memoir accounts such as these, men who had attended Russian universities in the first half of the nineteenth century remembered their student days as a formative period. At universities, young men developed enduring intellectual and ideological commitments, embarked on careers of loyal state service or revolutionary opposition, and started friendships that lasted decades. To be sure, the university sent men on disparate paths, intellectually, politically, and personally. But, regardless of where they ended up, former students looked back on the university as a place where they had come of age.

This book explores the notions of masculinity that students encountered and created during their three or four years at universities, and especially those in Kazan', Moscow, and St Petersburg. It considers both the university as a formal institution, and the conduct and views of the students and administrators who populated it. Rather than singling out any particular group of university students – whether future

2 *Masculinity, Autocracy, and the Russian University*

radicals, reformers, or bureaucrats – it highlights the common experiences of cohorts of young Russian men at a crucial point in their lives.

The book focuses on the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55), the so-called apogee of autocracy. During these decades, the Russian government turned to the universities as an instrument for the cultivation of obedient, respectable men, ideal servitors of the autocratic state. But even as students learned to act as administrators as the university regulations demanded, they also created their own social spaces and forged and transmitted their own masculine ideals, which were often at odds with official prescriptions. Even at the height of autocratic control, men were ‘agents in their own making.’⁴ By examining the making of masculinity through the interplay among different agents – government officials, university administrators, and students themselves – this study sheds light on key areas of Russian history in the decades before the Great Reforms.

Masculinity in modern Europe

Within Russian studies, the history of masculinity, until recently, has been a neglected field of inquiry. In recent years, as scholarship on masculinity in Russia has emerged, it has tended to focus on the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.⁵ The study of masculinity, however, grounded in the broader field of gender studies, has figured prominently in a number of historians’ accounts of other European societies in the nineteenth century. These accounts offer a useful starting point for considering the Russian experience.

Historians and theorists of gender have shown how norms of masculinity and femininity are never monolithic, but rather encompass a range of contradictory and complementary impulses.⁶ Influenced by feminist theory, gender historians tend to reject natural, transhistorical understandings of masculinity and femininity, and instead explore how gender ideologies change over time and across space. Once independent of sex, gender ‘becomes a free-floating artifice’ subject to change by ‘individuals, groups, institutions and societies.’⁷

European historiography has built on these theoretical frameworks and emphasized that masculinity, like femininity, has a history. Historians have explained the shifting and contested nature of societal expectations of what constitutes appropriate manliness – from the Hellenic image of homoerotic attachment to the bourgeois ideal, which combines physical strength and domesticity.⁸ This historiography connects changing ideas about masculinity not only with femininity, but

also with broad social, economic, and cultural dynamics, such as the emergence of new social groups, the birth of nations, changing political ideologies, and the relationship between state and society.⁹

A number of scholars of modern Europe have highlighted the profound changes in gender norms that were underway in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ They have suggested, in particular, that at the dawn of the nineteenth century, monarchs, modern states, and social institutions were negotiating for control over the formation of social identities, including the transformation of gender norms. Isabel Hull describes how in Germany-speaking central Europe, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, absolutist states began not only 'to relinquish [their] ... monopoly over public life,' but also to oversee the making of an independent civil society.¹¹ With their control over the lives of their subjects diminished, regimes no longer attempted to retain exclusive power over the regulation and molding of behavior.¹² In the emergent spaces of civil society – from voluntary associations to the press – groups of individuals (composed of male members of the middle classes) articulated their own notions of respectability and morality. Male subjects became male citizens as they began to shape their own social and gender norms.¹³ The nineteenth century thus witnessed the birth of a new hegemonic norm of respectable masculinity, emanating from within institutions of civil society, and a diminishing role for the state.¹⁴

Scholars have described how this new nineteenth-century man was distinctly a product of the emergent middle classes.¹⁵ This respectable masculinity was one of the ways in which members of the bourgeoisie defined themselves vis-à-vis both the excesses of the aristocracy and the 'filth' of the working classes. The decent bourgeois man, in theory, minded his manners and his morals. He was modest, clean, polite, and self-controlled, particularly with respect to his sexual desires. His manhood also rested on his status in the domestic realm, as husband and father.¹⁶ The new Victorian middle-class man derived his power – and asserted his masculinity – from within the institutions of social, political, and domestic life.¹⁷

The conduct of Russian men, by contrast, was overseen by the state, to varying degrees, from the days of Peter the Great (1682–1725) through the nineteenth century. The modern Russian state actively attempted to regulate the behavior of its elites through institutional, legal, and – in some cases – coercive means.¹⁸ Petrine prohibitions on beards and prescriptions for dress were meant to help transform Russia into a modern polity complete with a westernized elite. Peter's efforts

at molding behavior, though, concentrated primarily on external conduct. Catherine the Great (1762–96) too relied on the law and police in her efforts to create a westernized, refined elite. But, unlike Peter, Catherine was also interested in promoting ‘the internal mechanisms of behavior regulation’ through programs of education and the spread of conduct literature. Under Catherine’s guidance, ‘the Russian population was to police itself as well as be policed’ by the autocracy.¹⁹

Alexander I (1810–25) concentrated on the creation of new institutions in order to shape behavior and mold the social identities of those who would serve in prominent state positions. As part of these efforts to train more young men for key positions within the civil service, he expanded the university system in 1804 and created the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum in 1811.²⁰ At these institutions, young men were taught to be honorable and polite. At the same time, Alexander never fully exerted autocratic control over these new institutions, allowing for a degree of autonomy in the curricular and personnel matters. Moreover, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, members of polite society could turn to other institutions for advice and direction. They read prescriptive literature in various forms – much of which came to Russia from Europe – and participated in institutions of a nascent civil society, from *salons* to more formal literary societies.²¹ This combination of institutional autonomy and access to ideas emanating from semi-autonomous arenas, including the press and literary societies, suggests that the autocracy’s priorities did not include complete control over the upbringing of its young men.

Nicholas I, by contrast, formally granted no such autonomy. Armed with the Romantic conviction that autocracy was Russia’s only natural and legitimate form of governance, Nicholas sought to control autonomous impulses, strengthen the autocracy, and guarantee its continuation. Distrustful of institutions and their potential for the creation of diffuse loyalties, Nicholas put his energies into the cultivation of loyal individuals. He both created new institutions and used the regime’s available coercive structures to mold trustworthy men who would staff his bureaucracies and devote themselves to the Tsar and Fatherland.²² The making of obedient, respectable Russian men was at the heart of the Nicholaevan project of state-building.²³

Nicholas I and the ‘civilizing mission’

Nicholas I came to power in the shadow of the Decembrist Uprising, a loosely organized revolt by a group of Russia’s most elite military

officers, following the death of his elder brother, Tsar Alexander I, in 1825. The Decembrist Uprising was a trauma that no doubt colored the first years of Nicholas's reign. During his years in power, Nicholas took steps to prevent any repetition by building mechanisms of surveillance and censorship. Most famously, he established the Third Section of His Majesty's Chancellery, or Russia's first political police, with Nicholas himself directly in charge.²⁴

But repression was not the sole instrument that Nicholas used to fortify the autocratic state. Under Nicholas, the Russian state took an active interest not only in quashing dissent and sedition, but also in positively shaping the values and behavior of its subjects. No group received more attention in this regard than elite young men, who were seen as both future leaders of Russia's expanding civilian bureaucracy and military forces and as a potentially lethal source of unrest. By overseeing – under the threat of punishment – the gendering of its future servitors, the autocracy itself became the main motor behind what Norbert Elias, in the western European context, has called the 'civilizing process.'²⁵ Rather than relinquishing control over the moral upbringing of its subjects – as was taking place elsewhere in Europe – the Nicholaevan regime made a concerted effort to inculcate an official ideal of masculinity among its future servitors.

Nicholas himself served as a role model of masculine appearance and behavior. The Tsar, by most accounts, cut a memorable figure. Even as a newborn infant he impressed his grandmother, Catherine the Great, with his extraordinary size and strength. 'He was just over two feet tall,' the Empress reportedly commented, with hands 'only a bit smaller than my own.'²⁶ The adult Nicholas was noted for his 'particularly masculine beauty.'²⁷ Standing six feet and two or three inches tall, broad-shouldered, with a trimmed mustache, he was compared to a *boggytyr*,²⁸ a legendary Russian warrior, and remembered by one French traveler, the Marquis de Custine, as having a 'naturally imposing' presence with a 'perfect Grecian profile.'²⁹ A young man in the Cadet Corps recalled how, on the day that Nicholas visited his school, he got a clear view of 'the manliness of his beautiful face' and heard his unforgettable voice with its astonishing power.³⁰

Richard Wortman argues convincingly that around this time European rulers went from being viewed as untouchable, angelic creatures (like Alexander I) to 'exemplars of human conduct, modest virtue, to be admired by their subjects.'³¹ No longer 'raised above the ordinary' as Alexander I had been, Nicholas appeared before his subjects as a mortal to be emulated. Historians and contemporaries agree

that Nicholas projected an image of himself as a man with a singleness of purpose and iron will, who was most content when engaged in military exercises or inspecting his men.³² The following words, uttered by Nicholas in his admiration of the Prussian army – and often repeated by scholars – reflect the enduring image of Nicholas as a man of the parade ground:

No one [in the Prussian army] gives orders until he has learned to obey ... all are subordinated to a single defined purpose, all have their assignments. That is why I feel so well among those people and why I will always hold in respect the profession of a soldier. I look upon all human life in the same way as I look upon service, for each person serves.³³

Nicholas's contemporaries confirm this portrait of the Tsar. The head of the Third Section, Alexander Benkendorf, wrote that 'the sovereign's relaxation with his troops is his only real pleasure.'³⁴

The drillmaster, however, was only one side of the persona that Nicholas projected to his subjects. The public presentation of Nicholas and his family – what Wortman has called the 'dynastic scenario' – was premised on the image of the domestic bliss of the royal family. His ideology of rule was replete with images of European domesticity; the Tsar was presented as the paterfamilias, both within his family and before all Russian subjects.³⁵ Observers noted how Nicholas softened in the presence of his family. The Marquis de Custine, for example, observed that a great deal of Nicholas's parade ground harshness disappeared in the company of his wife and children: 'in the heart of the husband and father' there was affability and a glimmer 'of softness [which] temper[ed] the imperious looks of this monarch.'³⁶

The example set by the Tsar, of course, was far from the only means at the disposal of the Russian state for shaping the manners and morals of young men. The government-controlled press offered another powerful tool. Until about 1848, when revolution swept across Europe, there was a relative flowering of journalistic enterprises in Russia's capitals, Moscow and St Petersburg. Alongside the high literary culture nurtured in the pages of the new thick journals,³⁷ emerged the official press. The most widely circulated and popular among the array of state-sponsored publications were the journal *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* – comparable to the American *Reader's Digest*³⁸ – and the thrice-weekly (later daily) newspaper *Severnaia pchela*. These publications were sponsored by the government and run by the infamously conservative and

sycophantic triumvirate of Nicholas Grech, Faddei V. Bulgarin, and Osip Senkovskii, each of whom had strong ties to the regime.³⁹

The essays, stories, and various columns contained in these widely circulated publications mimicked the government's ideological emphasis on Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality (*narodnost'*) in the form of simple, straightforward prescriptive morality tales, often focused on how to cultivate proper social and gender roles. From stories about the trials and tribulations of marriage, romance and professional life, to advice columns on how to eat, dress, and behave, consumers of these publications were inundated with images of official values and respectable etiquette.

The daily morals columns, in particular, supplied lessons in proper and improper behavior, from the minutiae of dress to prescriptions for service to the Fatherland. The proper male citizen/subject was instructed to be modest in his tastes and loyal to the Fatherland, God, and his fellow man. According to one such column appearing in 1827 entitled 'Life,' a mature man must be 'a man, a citizen. He must be useful to mankind, useful to the Fatherland. He must work for the general good.'⁴⁰ Modesty – 'a priceless virtue' and 'a tender movement of the soul' – emerged in many of these columns as an essential quality for men, who were constantly tempted to behave with arrogance and pride.⁴¹ The writers regularly instructed men on how to behave respectably and how to be good sons, fathers, and husbands, as well as obedient Russians.⁴²

In many instances, these lessons came in the form of individual role models. In an 1826 cautionary tale entitled 'Lesson for Braggarts and Empty-headed Men,' the arrogant, lorgnette-wearing Khariton was taught a harsh lesson by his aging uncle, Arkhipov Faddeevich.⁴³ In order to receive his family inheritance, Khariton had to drastically reform his behavior and transform himself into a patriotic, upstanding Russian, much like his respectable and humble uncle. Unless he heeded the following advice, Khariton would find himself penniless:

He must behave well and refrain from the braggardliness of Frenchified dandies.

He must prove that he soulfully and passionately loves his Fatherland and that he will serve his sovereign truly and zealously.

He must fulfill all of the responsibilities of an honest man of faith.

He must not run from obligations.

He must respect his studies of science and Russian philosophy so that he can become a useful bureaucrat.

He must change his name on his calling card from the French spelling back to the Russian.⁴⁴

He had, in essence, to shed his superficial European ways and become a modest, Russian man.

The regrettable Khariton was not alone. Readers could also delight in the stories of more positive – more masculine – role models. Ivan Stepanovich was one such man. During his fictitious lifetime, he had undergone military training, traveled to France to fight, and after the war returned home to the provinces, where his parents gladly welcomed him. Soon after his return, he married well (his wife was in possession of a substantial dowry) and ultimately fathered a number of children. The story depicted how, during his name day celebration, he and his family enjoyed simple provincial hospitality and customs; they ate Russian food and sat around the table for hours relaxing.⁴⁵ Back in his native Russia he felt at home and achieved the status of provider and head of household, all the while fulfilling his duty to the state. Loyalty, simplicity, and modesty all constituted expressions of manliness in the official press.

Another way in which Nicholas and his officials attempted to implement autocratic priorities and create ideal servitors was by expanding the institutional base of the Empire's military schools, and overseeing the moral development of the regime's future military leaders. Of all of Russia's military training institutions, the Cadet Corps was the largest and increasingly the most desirable among members of the elite to train the Empire's future officers.⁴⁶ Ranging in age from ten to 18, cadets generally studied for four years and received a broad Enlightenment education combined with intensive military training. Nicholas himself, in 1838, helped to rewrite the military statutes that would regulate the minds, morals, and bodies of the Empire's future elite military servitors.⁴⁷ The codes articulated the detailed procedures governing the everyday lives of Russia's cadets, from the wearing of mustaches – no small order – to the temperature in their bedrooms. Official values – such as mental and physical strength and moral and religious discipline – were fostered in the classroom, on the training field, and in the dormitory.

Nicholas was especially involved with the young men in the Corps. The cadets were, as one memoirist put it, 'the favorite offspring of Tsar Nicholas.'⁴⁸ Not only did the Tsar guarantee the Corps skilled teachers of military affairs and humanistic fields by offering excellent salaries and other advantages, but he also frequently visited the cadets themselves. He appointed his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail

Pavlovich, to lead the Corps and the Tsar served as father and inspector to these officers in training. At the graduation ceremony of one of the Empire's most prestigious military schools, Tsar Nicholas gathered a select group and congratulated them on becoming officers in the Imperial army. One of the young men was named Romanov, like the Tsar himself. Nicholas lightheartedly inquired of the young graduate: 'Are you my relation?' The cadet replied 'Yes, exactly, your Greatness ... you are the Father of Russia and I am her son.' Pleased, Nicholas smiled and kissed the cadet Romanov: 'Here you are – a kiss from your grandpa.'⁴⁹ The cadets were encouraged by Nicholas, his wife, brother, and sons to see themselves 'as members of the imperial family.'⁵⁰ Nicholas served – as he had for university students – as a role model, inspector, and father figure for these officers in training.

Just as the Cadet Corps was central to the shaping of Russia's military elite, so was the university important for the shaping of Russia's civilian elite. In Nicholaevan society educational institutions of both varieties were meant to arm young men with the proper morals and manners to carry with them after graduation. Whether training to command an army or teach in a gymnasium, cadets and university students, imbued with official values, were required to spread autocratic ideology into the many corners of the Empire.

At a time when the Russian state bureaucracy had a growing need for educated civil servants, Nicholas I presided over a significant expansion in the number of university students. At the same time, the Tsar integrated the universities into the structures of the autocratic state, curbing the relative autonomy that they had enjoyed under his predecessor. The Nicholaevan university, in this way, became an instrument of government policy, the key function of which was to train future government administrators. This training would consist not only of formal education, but also of imbuing students with the personal qualities that would make them model servants of the Tsar. To ensure that students learned these qualities, universities published disciplinary codes that dictated to students the details of their everyday lives and hired inspectors charged with enforcing the codes and punishing violators. Through these mechanisms, the universities attempted to turn unruly boys into orderly, obedient men.

State and society in Nicholaevan Russia

For many years, historians of Russia tended to see the Nicholaevan period in stark terms, dominated by a dialectic of repression and rebellion. The

tendency to view the nineteenth century through the lens of 1917 focused attention on the antagonism between a reactionary state and an increasingly alienated educated society, particularly when it came to the decades of Nicholas's reign. Historians have described how state censorship and surveillance under Nicholas quashed the development of a healthy public sphere, just at the moment when other European nations were decreasing their intervention in the daily activities of their subject-citizens. Deprived of opportunities to associate and express themselves freely, these narratives suggest, members of Russian educated society rejected the idea of collaboration with the state's project and instead found meaning in the hidden spaces of an oppositional social life. In these radical 'circles' (*kruzhki*), they created a sense of social cohesion 'normally' found in public life. It is in these dark shadows that we find Russia's 'roots of rebellion.'⁵¹

But beginning in the 1980s, historians began to rethink both sides of the state–society divide. The autocratic state, as it appears in these accounts, was not a unitary actor, working with single-minded purpose to subjugate society. Instead, it was a collection of individuals and institutions, with diverse loyalties and pursuing their own goals. Richard Wortman, in his monograph on the development of a legal profession in imperial Russia, presents portraits of individuals who were central figures in the creation of Russia's modern judicial system but who also had changing allegiances and ties within a broader educated public life. Likewise, W. Bruce Lincoln's book on enlightened bureaucrats in the pre-reform era highlights the degree to which key officials balanced their own diverse loyalties.⁵²

Likewise, educated 'society' was not a singular, cohesive category. Jane Burbank and David Ransel, editors of a collection of essays on Imperial Russia, call for a 'reconceptualization of agency' in any study of state and society, arguing that subjects of the Tsar acted 'on their own behalf and not necessarily working for or against the interests of the state.'⁵³ Many of the authors in this collection argue for a shift in focus from 'society' to 'the public' and 'the family' as key organizing principles of Russian life. These alternative categories, which reflect a more nuanced understanding of social life, allow historians to get out from under the highly politicized singular category of 'society.' These scholars explore how the family, along with a newly emergent public – the professions, *salons*, Masonic lodges, and so forth – provided individuals meaningful frameworks within which to define themselves and understand others.⁵⁴

This book contributes to this new look at imperial Russia by investigating an institution at the nexus of state and society, the university.

A focus on the workings of the university's disciplinary system shows that there was frequently a gap between the published codes of conduct and the actions of those who were supposed to enforce these rules. University administrators applied the codes selectively and in a way that implied tolerance of certain behaviors that ran counter to the letter and the spirit of the codes. The 'state' that students encountered at the university, although a powerful and intrusive force in their lives, did not speak with a single voice.

This study also uncovers a complex world of student sociability. My point is not that Russia under Nicholas I enjoyed a 'civil society' comparable to the institutions of Europe's more liberal states. But it would be a mistake to assume that Nicholaevan repression left no room for any manifestation of autonomous social cohesion among the Empire's educated subjects, beyond the underground circles where alienated youth met to debate ideas and hatch conspiracies. University students frequented taverns, joined student corporations, and formed passionate friendships. They also, of course, continued to participate in the lives of their families, even when they studied away from home.

And in all of these contexts, they taught one another and acted out gender ideals that contradicted official prescriptions. While officials and disciplinary codes created a model of masculine behavior emphasizing orderliness, submissiveness, and piety, students themselves made virility, physical courage, and passionate attachment central to what it meant to be a man. If these values seem to be at odds with one another, they were; and these contradictory notions of manhood occasioned moments of conflict, both within the consciences of individual students and between students and officials. That does not mean, however, that students had to choose between one or another model of masculine behavior. The respectable young man by day could turn into a drunken carouser after dark. Russian students lived in a world where the expectations and interventions of the state were one factor to be weighed – sometimes adopted, sometimes rejected – rather than a dominating force, which they must either bow before or defy with all their strength.

Outline of the chapters

Chapter 1 describes the changing relationship between the university and the autocracy. During the reign of Nicholas I, Russian universities lost much of the autonomy granted to them by Nicholas's brother, Alexander I. The central autocratic authorities incrementally usurped

the universities' decision-making powers, from the hiring and firing of professors to the shaping of the curriculum, as well as the governing of day-to-day operations. As this chapter shows, the state administration took responsibility not only for shaping the formal education of students, but also for their socialization, for training them in the manners and morals they would be expected to bring into the state service after they graduated. University inspectors and their helpers attempted to enforce strict disciplinary codes by monitoring their protégés' daily lives – where they lived, what they ate and drank, with whom they spent time, how they dressed, when and where they vacationed, and, above all, whether they displayed a sense of honor and morality. Under the threat of punishments, ranging from formal reprimands or three days in the student prison-room, to expulsion or low-ranking military service, students were taught to be modest, clean in mind and body, orderly, obedient, proper, moral, and controlled men.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on students' formal and informal rituals of sociability. Chapter 2, on tavern sociability, describes how drinking and fighting were key components in students' own definitions of masculinity. Based on memoirs, official correspondence, and police reports of student disturbances, this chapter explores the world of the tavern and the street, where students openly defied the norms of the 'administrative ideal' of masculinity; and suggests that university officials were, at the very least, somewhat tolerant of their transgressions. Chapter 3 examines more formal, although still unofficial, institutions of social life, and especially fraternities. In St Petersburg, in particular, German-influenced fraternal societies played an important role in student social life, regulating the values and behavior of members through a formal honor code and disciplinary system, including courts and the sanctioning of duels.

Student sociability also occurred in more private spaces of daily life. Relying primarily on memoirs, diaries, and personal and official correspondence, chapters 4 and 5 explore friendship, romance, and domestic life among these young men. Chapter 4 shows how students, influenced by Romantic ideas, participated in a culture of friendship where expressions of love and affection were commonplace. The language of passionate male friendship, sometimes identified by historians as a symptom of Russia's political dysfunction and a breeding-ground of radical opposition to the regime, was, in fact, part of the shared cultural property of the Russian elite.

Students' emotional worlds extended beyond the confines of the university. Chapter 5 highlights how individual students maintained

practical and emotional ties to their families and often participated in the family lives of their friends. In turn, university and central authorities – inspectors to university rectors to the Minister of Education – recognized the continued role of parental authority and familial obligations in the lives of students. What emerges is an integrated picture of family and university life where young men remained active participants in affective filial relations, while at the same time studying to be future state servitors. For the majority of students, an ideology of domesticity, with its celebration of sentimental attachments and filial obligations, was part of the world of the university. The Epilogue sketches the changes on the horizon within the university in the years after Nicholas's death in 1855.

Overall, becoming a man in nineteenth-century Russia required, as it did elsewhere, choosing among multiple representations and expectations. This book is organized around the masculine types that each student encountered and helped to create on his journey into adulthood: the respectable servitor, the drunken comrade, the honorable fraternity member, the romantic friend, and the loyal son.

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