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## James Cracraft, The Revolution of Peter the Great

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## REFERENCES

James CRACRAFT, *The Revolution of Peter the Great*. Cambridge, MA-Londres, Harvard University Press, 2003, 192 p.

- 1 The reign of Peter the Great saw enormous changes in Russian culture and the Russian state, if not in the foundations of society. James Cracraft believes that these changes amount to a revolution in Russian culture. That revolution brought to Russia “Europeanization” which in that time was “equivalent to modernization” (158). The cultural revolution in turn made possible lesser revolutions in other areas of Russian life, for new institutions required new cultural practices. The book is really an essay on this theme, an attempt to demonstrate the fundamental character of the changes that took place in the armed forces, the state, culture, as well as resistance to Peter’s changes. He covers all the main areas in brief strokes and the final chapter on St. Petersburg correctly places the construction of the new capital in the center of Peter’s work and his legacy. Perhaps more than any of Peter’s other projects the new city established his “revolution” and ensured that it would endure.
- 2 Cracraft wrestles with the problem posed by Peter’s personality. The tsar-emperor was, as he notes, the first Russian about whom we know very much of a personal nature, and this is not a merely antiquarian issue. The Russian monarchy of the time was unusually personal, even by the European standards of the time. The story of Peter’s entourage and his favorites, wild parties, and other eccentricities is well told without the introduction of spurious incidents from doubtful sources, but we get little sense of Peter as a ruler, his relationship to other powerful men, his judgment or lack of it, his tactical sense in war and politics.

- 3 Anglo-American historians have spent a great deal of effort on Peter and his reign in the last decades, the pioneer among them Cracraft himself. He has used his own work and that of his colleagues with thoroughness and tact to provide his own synthesis of the events and their meaning. The mere choice of the word “revolution” marks a break with the tradition, stuck in most cases with “reforms” (an obvious reference to the 1860’s) or the vaguer Russian *preobrazovaniia* and various equivalents in other languages. In speaking of the cultural transformation of Russia “revolution” seems more appropriate than other terms, but the interpretation of this revolution as “modernization” introduces another rather nebulous phrase in place of the old ones. What is modernization supposed to mean in 1725? Absolutism? Secularization of culture? New technologies? Cracraft draws back from asserting that it meant the appearance of a “scientific” or “secular” mentality, since he does not find enough evidence for such a mentality, especially if it is to be called scientific. He is perhaps too modest. “Scientific” mentality certainly would seem to demand a greater degree of learning in mathematics and the natural sciences than the Russian elite or their tsar possessed, but a secular mentality was certainly present – especially keeping in mind that secular does not imply irreligious. Peter and his courtiers spent long hours in church, but their mental world was no longer the all-embracing Orthodox world view of their fathers and grandfathers. Indeed Cracraft seems to agree, but to be more cautious in his conclusions than the available evidence requires.
- 4 Was there more to the cultural revolution than secularization of thought? What principles or common features were present in the various fields of architecture, painting, writing, and science that Cracraft so deftly describes? Did they add up to anything different from the European paths of “modernization”? No short book can answer all these questions, but Cracraft has succeeded in conveying the latest understanding of Peter’s time, one that he himself has been so central in creating, in an elegant and highly readable form.