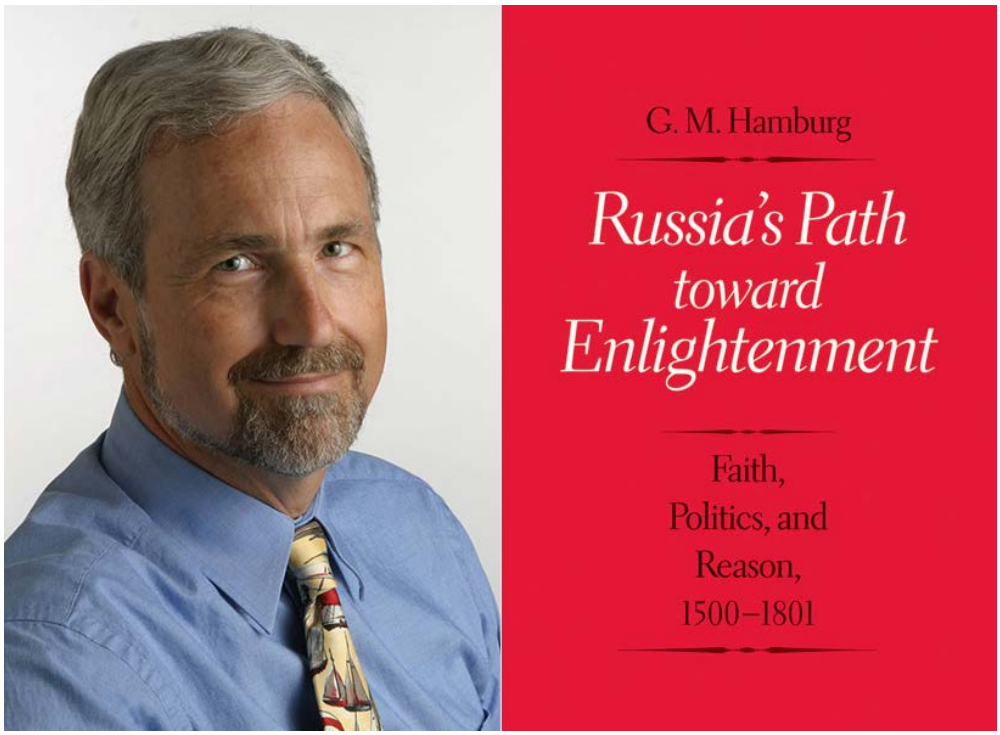
CMC Prof. Gary Hamburg authors a text that could become a benchmark of Russian history



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ItÕs not often that an author writes what may come to be considered a seminal work. But thatÕs what Gary Hamburg, Otho M. Behr Professor of the History of Ideas at CMC, has done with his new book: *RussiaÕs Path toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500-1801*.

Published by Yale University Press in June, the book offers an in-depth examination of every important Russian thinker and their ideas regarding faith, politics and reason over a period of three centuries.

In the words of Manfred Hildermeier of the University of Gottingen, Professor HamburgÕs nearly 1,000-page opus Òis the first comprehensive, in-depth survey of political thought in Russia from medieval times until the end of the eighteenth century.Ó

Caryl Emerson of Princeton University says Professor HamburgÕs comprehensive history is Òan indispensable prehistory to the Russia we think we know, a country whose politics constantly disappoints.Ó

Derek Offord of the University of Bristol offers that ÒProfessor Hamburg has produced a magisterial grand narrative, from which there emerges a fresh interpretation of the Russian Enlightenment that will have enduring value for students of Russian intellectual history.Ó

We took the opportunity to sit down with Prof. Hamburg to gain some ÒenlightenmentÓ of our own about his new book. HereÕs what he had to say.

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Q: *RussiaÕs Path toward Enlightenment* is a long book Đ more than 900 pages! What is it about?

A: The book is my answer to a simple question: How did Russians think about politics during the three centuries from 1500 to 1801?

In the European West, those 300 years witnessed events of enormous political significance, such as the splintering of the Christian Church in the Reformation, religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries, and revolutions in the Netherlands, England, and France. Those events responded to but also shaped ideas of liberty and obedience, religious toleration, and the rule of law that still influence Western societies in our day. During the 17th and 18th centuries, in the period we historians call Òthe EnlightenmentÓ (common people and even most thinkers in the 18th century did not use the term) these concepts were fiercely debated.

In scarcely a hundred years from the late 17th century to the French Revolution, John Locke wrote his famous treatise on government and his

letters on toleration, Baruch Spinoza his books on political ethics, the Baron Montesquieu his remarkable and funny *Persian Letters* on diversity and his astonishing *Spirit of the Laws*, Voltaire his treatise on toleration, Jean-Jacques Rousseau his *Social Contract* and his imaginative books on education, David Hume his attacks on religious Òsuperstition,Ó Adam Smith his two great books on ethics and economics, and Immanuel Kant his books on reason, ethics and perpetual peace. Even in the United States, whether we realize it or not, government operates on principles developed or perfected during the European Enlightenment.

But my book asks what about Russia? Did events in the European West influence Russia, and, if so, how? Was the Russian Enlightenment just a weak imitation, an echo of the Western Enlightenment under different conditions?

Q: How did you answer your Òsimple questionÓ?

A: It struck me that RussiaÕs 18th-century debates about politics had their main roots not in the European West, but in older Christian ideas about spiritual illumination and virtue. The Russian Orthodox Church was a branch of Eastern Christianity, which taught Christian rulers to defend their people against attack, to take care of widows and orphans, to rule firmly but wisely; it taught common Russians to obey honest and virtuous Christian rulers, but to resist ungodly princes; it commanded leaders of the Christian Church Ð the bishops, metropolitan and patriarch Ð to admonish princes and tsars when they acted wickedly. In other words, according to the Orthodox perspective, political and social behavior was supposed to follow moral precepts. An individual was said to be ÒenlightenedÓ when he or she imitated religious models Ð the saints, apostles, Christ. The modern Russian word for ÒenlightenmentÓ (*prosveshchenie*) comes from the Christian word meaning Òspiritual illumination.Ó

This was the basic idea of the book Ð that, to a large degree, Russian ideas about politics originated in Eastern Christian notions of duty and virtue. RussiaÕs ÒEnlightenmentÓ was therefore mainly an indigenous development, not an imitation of the West. But that interpretation has to be qualified, because, in the 18th century, well-educated Russians read major European thinkers Ð Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Smith, Hume, and Kant Ð and studied political events in the West. Therefore, the Enlightenment in Russia was a cultural hybrid, in which Orthodox ways of thinking about duty, virtue, and faith were supplemented by Western

European teachings about virtue, justice, and the political order.

Q: Did the Russian idea of enlightenment change during the three centuries you studied, or did it remain static?

A: A good question! The notions of the rulerÕs responsibility to the people, of the peopleÕs duty to obey the ruler when he or she acted properly, and of the ChurchÕs duty to admonish bad rulers for misconduct Ð these notions remained pretty consistent. But the history of Russia during these three centuries was full of drama: Ivan the Terrible launched a campaign to kill many of the boyars he considered his enemies; in the early 17th century, the Muscovite dynasty came to an end and the state barely survived a series of foreign invasions; in the mid 17th century, the church suffered a schism; in the early 18th century, Peter the Great imposed his Òrevolution from aboveÓ on Russian society; in the late 18th century, Catherine the Great expanded Russian power to the point that the Russian Empire became the largest contiguous empire in the world.

In each of these moments, Russians debated how to adapt their political ideals to actual circumstances. Sometimes they decided to resist government decrees as immoral; on a few occasions, they recommended taking up arms against the tsar, whom they portrayed as the Antichrist. In the 18th century, a handful of brave thinkers called for a rule-of-law state or for representative government. Sometimes, the Russians praised their rulers for doing what rulers are supposed to do. In other words, based on a few simple ideas, the Russians built a very complex and rich political heritage.

Q: Does the title of your book, *RussiaÕs Path toward Enlightenment*, imply that the Russians never reached enlightenment? Did they fall short of their goal?

A: Exactly so. Spiritual illumination is a difficult thing to achieve; being enlightened in the 18th-century sense Ð that is, being wise, prudent, rational, and tolerant Ð is also hard to achieve. How many of us can claim to have reached genuine wisdom, to behave virtuously, to exhibit toleration of others in every aspect of our lives, to celebrate from the heart our differences with others? Being enlightened is a high aspiration! The wisest Russians understood that its achievement is a rarity for individuals and a virtual impossibility for societies, but they did not cease to strive for the goal. After all, what was the alternative if they were to be saved and if they wished their society to improve?

Q: Was it difficult to write your book? What obstacles did you encounter?

A: Every writer contends with difficulties. Virginia WoolfÕs splendid lecture on womenÕs literature identified two of them: having a room of oneÕs own, and enough money to sustain body and soul during creative moments. I was lucky to have a quiet condo in Claremont and a summer place in Indiana, where most mornings could be spent writing. The college generously funded my book budget and research trips during the 10 years I spent writing the book. My private pantheon of heroes includes three deans IÕve worked for (Bill Ascher, Greg Hess, and Nick Warner) and President Pam Gann, who approved my hiring and encouraged my research in the years I spent refining the project. I also owe a huge debt to Jack and Kingsley Croul, who endowed the Otho M. Behr chair in intellectual history I occupy.

The biggest challenges I confronted are ones familiar to most historians Ð thinking my way into another culture in a distant age, seeing that culture as contemporaries saw it, and then relating what I had discovered to readers in the here and now. These challenges were formidable and could not be met in a single day. If you were to ask, which particular problem was the hardest one to resolve?

Q: Yes, you took the words out of my mouth. What was the biggest challenge for you?

A: É well, IÕd have to put it this way: the biggest challenge was psychological. When you write about a person who lived two centuries or five centuries ago, under different circumstances than the ones with which you are familiar, you have to discover what made that person tick. How did he or she think about the world? You look for clues in the personÕs biography: How was he or she educated and by whom? Was he or she deeply religious or not? What subjects did the person write about? What kind of a political record did he or she leave behind? You read the personÕs sermons, poems, letters, and books to discover his or her habits of mind, the characteristic ways the person expresses ideas. You reflect on the political and cultural context in which that person lived, and you study how the person responded to the crises of the day. In all this, you are searching for keys to that personÕs soul Ð in the language of our time, for earmarks to his or her identity.

My book treats two dozen thinkers in detail, so I went through this process of psychological probing of individuals many times. In every case I tried to find through my own experience the right language to describe my subject to

readers. My wife and friends can tell you I often felt myself failing rather than succeeding in the writing.

Q: Your book covers such a big cast of characters É

A: Yes. I write about Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, about leaders of the Orthodox Church like the martyr Filipp Kolychev and the outspoken religious dissident Awakum, about extraordinary poets such as Mikhail Lomonosov and Gavriil Derzhavin, about the playwright Denis Fonvizin, the philosopher Aleksandr Radishchev, and the historian Nikolai Karamzin. All these figures are well known to educated Russians, but, except for the rulers, are not broadly known in the West. But alongside this cast of the Òusual suspects,Ó I write about pretenders to the throne like False Dmitrii, and about rebels like the bandits StenÕka Razin and EmelÕian Pugachev. Some of my colleagues in the Russian field might object that tsars, martyrs and rebels, poets and philosophers donÕt belong in the same book. But IÕm trying to stretch the historical canvas so that the reader will see the whole range of political possibilities at a given moment.

Q: In your introduction, you say you want to capture all the voices of the Russian ÒchorusÓÉ.

A: Not all the voices Ð that would be impossible. But I want the reader to listen to as many voices as the book can provide, to hear whatÕs unique about each one, and to experience the harmony and disharmony of these voices singing almost simultaneously. I believe that writing history involves empathy Ð listening to and understanding others. But because true empathy entails listening to people from different social backgrounds, the writing of history is necessarily a democratic enterprise.

Q: Which of your subjects is your favorite?

A: Every person I wrote about was my favorite, at least for the moment. ThatÕs the way it had to be. But I was very impressed by the courage of certain lonely dissenters. The Metropolitan Filipp, the head of the Church in Muscovy, chastised Ivan the Terrible for his attack on the boyars and, as a result, was murdered by one of IvanÕs henchmen.

The solitary clerk Ivan Timofeev composed secretly a history of Muscovy during the Time of Troubles, in which he criticized Boris Godunov for murdering the legitimate heir to the throne and criticized courtiers for their silent

acquiescence to BorisÕ tyranny. The humble archpriest Awakum excoriated Metropolitan Nikon and Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich for forcing a new prayer book and new liturgy on all the priests in Russia; for his opposition, Awakum was arrested, exiled to Siberia, and compelled to live in an earthen dugout until he was finally burnt at the stake.

Yet Awakum maintained his opposition to the end, and even managed to compose an autobiography, one of the jewels of Russian literature, while in Siberian confinement. SilÕvestr Medvedev, a priest who was probably the most learned Russian of the late 17th century, was declared a heretic on dubious evidence and was executed during the first days of Peter the GreatÕs reign. The great philosopher and historian Vasily Tatishchev, who criticized the court favorite in the early 1740s, wrote his finest works while under house arrest. The philosopher Aleksandr Radishchev published at his own expense a book criticizing serfdom and censorship, and calling for social justice in Russia. For his trouble he was arrested and sent to Siberia. He died a suicide, despairing at the apparent impossibility of real change in Russia.

I suppose the tendency of most Americans is to search out success stories: the amazing feats of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. Peter introduced the first (incomplete) system of mass education in Russia; Catherine wrote a book promising to abolish torture and capital punishment in Russia, to institute religious toleration, to create a government of laws. And no history of enlightenment in Russia would be complete without them. But in Russia the governmentÕs victims are often so much more interesting than the officials who condemned them to arrest, hard labor, or death!

Q: Is there a lesson in your book relevant to us in the 21st century?

A: Forgive me for saying, your question is a good one, but I hate it! As a writer, I donÕt think it right for me to teach readers how to live their lives: that would be arrogant, presumptuous. (In this respect, I differ sharply from Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, and other great Russian ÒprophetsÓ.) Readers decide on a bookÕs ÒlessonÓ or what is relevant to them. That, as I understand it, is the division of labor between authors and readers. But if you re-formulate your question this way, ÒWhat aspects of your book interest you the most?Ó Well, then I might point to two elements: the method of presentation, and peculiar contexts in which Russian thinkers had to write.

Earlier, I mentioned my hope to put before readers a ÒchorusÓ of Russian voices. Coincidentally, Svetlana Alexievich, winner this year of the Nobel Prize

in Literature, uses a similar technique in her marvelous oral history of Soviet people after the Soviet UnionÕs collapse. She records snatches of conversation from common people and builds from them an impressionistic picture of Soviet life. My daughter Rachel, a radio journalist, also employs this technique in making podcasts: she wants to allow one voice to play off another, to mix them and juxtapose them. Somehow all of us arrived at a way of telling complicated stories through multiple voices. Maybe that is evidence that history, literature, and journalism are headed in a common direction? Perhaps this is one of the ways we can make sense of the diversity of people and cultures?

Of course, for me one of the most remarkable features of the Russian past is the way Russians deal with political dissent. In Russia, politics is most often a blood sport. Governments suppress, punish, and kill dissidents, but a few intrepid souls dissent anyway. This means that in the centuries I have studied, some of the most profound thinkers have suffered for their ideas, and the ideas themselves have been hidden away in rare, forbidden books. We Westerners may be tempted to regard Russian political ways as awful and outmoded, but perhaps we should think again. The Russians have shown us what dissent looks like in a polity with few representative institutions, a polity that often set itself against free intellectual exchange. They illustrate how to hint at big ideas, how to hide oneÕs dissent in plain sight, when and how to oppose tyranny. RussiaÕs path toward enlightenment was long, perilous, and did not lead to a perfect society. But isnÕt it interesting that so many splendid people set off on the path?

Q: Where were you educated and how and when did you decide to study Russian history?

A: I grew up in Denver, Colorado, in the beautiful western part of the city near the mountains. My family could look out our dining room window and see Red Rocks, one of the most spectacular amphitheaters in the world. But early in my boyhood I somehow understood that my family also lived in a dangerous place.

We were less than an hour from Cheyenne Mountain, where the center for the North American Aerospace Defense Command operated behind mountain walls, making Denver a target for missile strikes in the event of war. My father worked for a time in the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, where the armyÕs repository of poison gas was located; when I was 4 years old, he was apparently exposed to leaking gas and took sick. Not far from Denver,

about 15 miles to the northwest of city center, there was the Rocky Flat nuclear facility, a manufacturing site for nuclear weapons. In 1957, there occurred at Rocky Flats a release of plutonium into the atmosphere and fields close to the facility were contaminated. My mother worried that we had all been exposed to radiation from this accident.

So my childhood was happy but also uneasy. You couldnÕt reach adulthood in the 1960s without thinking about the fragility of life, about how dependent everyone was on political arrangements between the United States and the Soviet Union.

But I didnÕt decide to study Russia for political reasons. As a high school senior, I read DostoevskyÕs *Crime and Punishment*. It hit me like no other book had done Ð I felt feverish reading it, a detective novel that was not a whodunit but a whyhedidit. Dostoevsky opened up for me the question of who the Russians are and how do they think. From reading him in high school, I moved to studying Russian language and literature and history at Stanford. Later, before graduating, I spent a semester in Leningrad, a gorgeous city also filled with danger and unease. I felt as if I were at home Ð or at least at my home away from home.

In graduate school, also at Stanford, I studied the history of imperial Russia -- Russia from Peter the Great to Lenin. But I took two courses on earlier Russian history and there familiarized myself with some of the figures who now populate my book on the Enlightenment in Russia.

Q: Do you have a favorite passage in your book?

A: Hard to say. Perhaps I can suggest two? The first one is a prayer by SilÕvestr Medvedev, probably written in 1672. It expresses his hope for spiritual consolation and strength at a time when he had fallen into political disfavor. I like the prayer because it captures the religious tenor of the 17th century. Reading it, I think ahead to his return to Moscow, to his eventual arrest and execution. The prayer reads as follows:

> Turn my heart to right faith, my tongue to truth, my body to Your bidden ways; transform my memory into blessed gratitude, my reason into wisdom, my will into desire for the good; give my body strength, boldness, the capacity to do Your will. Help me vanquish my adversaries: to overcome my impotence with Your strength, my sloth with Your boldness, my melancholy with Your wisdom, my sinful

> appetites with Your goodness, my faithlessness with right faith, my falsehood with Your truth, my impulsiveness with Your restraint.

The second is a passage from Aleksandr RadishchevÕs *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, a book so dangerous that Catherine the Great ordered it burned. In the book, Radishchev imagines a father giving advice to his sons. The advice is this:

> Since virtue is the culmination of human aspirations, its observance must never be hindered on any account. Better to ignore customs and mores than to follow their dictates, if doing so will separate you from virtue.
>
> Do not dare to observe custom in violation of the law. The law, however bad it may be, is the tie that binds society together. Even if the sovereign himself should order you to violate the law, do not obey him, for he betrays himself and puts society at risk. But if he repeals the law, he may then order it violated, for in Russia the sovereign is the source of laws.
>
> But if the law or the sovereign, or any earthly authority should incite you to commit injustice and to violate virtue, remain steadfast. Neither fear ridicule nor torture, neither illness nor incarceration, still less death itselfÉ The anger of your tormentors will dissipate on the firmness of your resolve; and if they put you to death, they shall be ridiculed and you will live in the memory of noble souls forever.

What amazing advice! What father or mother now speaks to children in this fashion?

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