



BOOK REVIEW

History

The Tsar's Happy Occasion: Ritual and Dynasty in the Weddings of Russia's Rulers, 1495–1745 by Russell E. Martin. NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. 378 pp. \$59.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-5484-5

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The editors of *The Russian Review* kindly invited me to review Russell Martin's study of Muscovite royal marriages in late 2021, and I accepted with alacrity, having eagerly awaited this sequel to his important first book, *A Bride for the Tsar* (2012). Unfortunately, the book went astray in the post, and I received it only a year later. I include this preamble to place both the book and my response to it in historical time. The world has changed radically since 2021, particularly the part of the world most relevant to readers of *The Russian Review* and of *The Tsar's Happy Occasion*. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has pushed all of us in the field to do some profound soul-searching. No aspect of our work or our thinking can be immune to this forced revision, even our book reviews.

But first and foremost a review should address the book itself. *The Tsar's Happy Occasion* is superb, and its erudition, argument, and clarity are of a high caliber that transcends our historical moment. It traces wedding ritual at the Muscovite, and eventually Petersburg, courts, from the earliest mentions in fifteenth-century sources to the mid-eighteenth century. Martin presents these rituals as central to the political order, "more significant to the political culture than even coronations" (p. 5).

An interesting historiographical introduction reminds us that earlier generations of scholars dismissed rituals as frothy fripperies and mocked anyone superficial enough to attend to them. That approach has long been eclipsed, and serious engagement with the meanings, messaging, and efficacy of ritual has been widely accepted. Martin acknowledges his debt to Richard Wortman, Robert Crummey, and Michael Flier, among others, and returns to the anthropologists who inspired them in turn. Arnold van Gennep features prominently in Martin's schema. Weddings, he shows, fit neatly into van Gennep's tripartite sequence of ritual: separation, transition, and incorporation. The stages of the wedding ritual choreographed the bride's separation from her family, her transition to her new location and new status, and her incorporation, along with her family, into the court elite. That final stage, incorporation, is central to Martin's argument. Since, as Martin's earlier book established, most royal brides came from middling rather than elite families, their incorporation required making room for newcomers in a world of punctiliously calculated hierarchy and generally "reshuffling" the political elite. Wedding rituals were scripted to smooth that reshuffling and to stabilize court circles. Royal weddings became one of the early sites of Muscovite elite service declared "*bez mest*," that is, outside of the precedence ranking system.

The book tracks changes over time through close readings of the wedding musters—descriptive lists of who sat where and accompanied whom, how gifts were given and received, who served in what roles at the wedding—and other documents, most of which have received little attention until now. Martin describes his book as devoted as much to the sources themselves as to the information they



convey, and he makes visible the detective work required to track the last-minute changes and evident concern that went into staging the ceremonies. Following the details over time, he finds significant continuities in elements of the ritual and in the messages on display, continuities that he stresses lasted even through the disruptive reign of Peter the Great. But both elements of the ritual and their central meanings evolved over time. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century weddings emphasized “sacrality and fecundity.” The early Romanovs, precariously elevated to the throne, emphasized “legitimacy and continuity.” Later, seventeenth-century Romanovs, their dynastic claim comfortably ensconced, broadcast themes of “piety and power.” Under Peter, the key messaging emphasized his own personal charismatic authority, a theme announced both in his own second wedding and in collateral royal weddings and staged comedic unions enacted by his will. For Peter’s heirs, given the chaotic sequence of rulers, the main themes were rather “dynasty and succession” (p. 236).

The women at the center of the marriage ritual, the brides, remain a surprisingly minor thread through the book. Martin asserts that because they were allotted a role in handing out gifts, they qualify as “active agents.” In his conclusion, Martin acknowledges that “a fully gendered history of Russian political rituals may be past due,” and I would agree (p. 237). This book does not undertake such a study, which is fair; that is not its remit. But its omission permits a rosier reading of the ritual at the heart of the study than might be occasioned by a shifted focus. Perhaps a scripted role as giver of gifts can be seen as granting agency to women, but how do we account for the series of teenage girls who sickened or died after their selection as brides-to-be? Or for involuntary tonsure that awaited *tsaritsy* unfortunate enough to survive their royal spouses or to be cast aside by their fully agentive husbands? The behind-the-scenes death toll and lack of control over their fates complicates the attribution of agency to these women. Furthermore, it muddies the idea that weddings, those happy occasions, successfully integrated court elites or that consensus, rather than conflict, was the order of the day. That may well have been the goal, the intent, but the deaths, along with the harsh sequelae for aspiring in-laws whose plans were foiled, make it clear that more destructive forces were also at work.

Acknowledging the darkness as well as the light returns us to my opening observation about the invasion and the shadow it casts on our field. Martin shares the general approach of a group of scholars—and I count myself among them—who have described Muscovite political culture as one committed to consensus-building and integration through cultural mechanisms: rituals and ceremonies, frescoes and icons, courts and law. I am proud to say that this school, called the “Harvard School” by Marshall Poe, has made valuable interventions, combatting the reflexive impulse to demonize Russian rule, whether historical or present, to presume brutality and despotism, to exaggerate the violence. But since February 2022, the urgency of bearing in mind both sides of the coin has been made apparent. In Martin’s excellent and insightful book, I see an imprint of a more innocent, perhaps more naïve time. The murders, the violence, the backstage maneuvering that accompanied the pomp and ceremony of Muscovite weddings, not to mention the plan to engage twelve hundred armed soldiers to protect the ill-fated wedding procession of the young Peter II (who died on his wedding day, preempting the ceremony), remind us that not all was harmonious at the Muscovite court.