

Western European Intellectual Practices of a New Type in Russian Everyday Life in the Early 18th Century (the Case of Feofan Prokopovich)¹

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Abstract. This study focuses on the views of Feofan Prokopovich, a unique Orthodox thinker whose world outlook was shaped by the obvious influence of the ideas of the Protestant and Catholic Enlightenment. Talking about the Enlightenment, modern historiography focuses on the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, preferring to talk about the Enlightenment, including the religious or confessional Enlightenment, aimed at rethinking the role of religion and the church. The Religious Enlightenment was a pan-European phenomenon that embraced Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and Orthodoxy, and grew out of the desire to create an intelligent religion free of superstition and serving society. The intellectual movement of the religious Enlightenment sought to reconcile the natural philosophy of the 17th–18th centuries with a religious view of the world, while at the same time trying to overcome the extremes of religious fanaticism, on the one hand, and nihilism and godlessness, on the other. The process of forming a new intellectual environment is marked by the coexistence and mutual influence of a variety of (sometimes poorly compatible) traditions, their transformation and modification. Comprehensively arguing the need for unlimited autocracy in Russia, Feofan Prokopovich, nevertheless, actively used the discourse of the Enlightenment in his writings, discussing the problem of the origin of the state, the mode of government, the boundaries of the power of the monarch, the rights and duties of subjects. Using the example of Feofan Prokopovich, we can talk about the emergence and rooting of intellectual practices of a new type in Russian everyday life. The integration of Western European ideas and practices into Russian culture was ambiguous, multifaceted and depended on their adaptation to the socio-political space of Russia. Being well acquainted with the works of European authors of the 17th and early 18th centuries, he rather took on the formal side of their discussions on socio-political topics, and adapted a conceptual glossary that was new for the Russian educated public, which opened up opportunities for talking about politics in a new way.

Keywords: Enlightenment; Orthodox Religion; Feofan Prokopovich.

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The 18th century was a time of large-scale reorganization of state and society in Russia, and in many ways, Moscow looked to the West for ideological guidance. However, unlike the Western European Enlightenment, which “put forth coherent sets of ideas to be realized through social and political change,” the Russian Enlightenment “stressed the spiritual development and moral perfectibility of the individual human being” (Wirtschafter 2010: 180). The enlightened Orthodox clergy thus played a significant role as conductors of new ideas.

As O. Tsapina has correctly pointed out, “researchers of Russian culture of the 17th–18th centuries tended to focus on the secularization of culture. As a result, Orthodoxy found itself outside the framework of the Enlightenment, and in fact deliberately distanced itself from it as a “secular culture completely alien to it. Nevertheless, research in recent decades has shown that Orthodox church culture played an important role in the formation of literary images, aesthetic ideals and philosophical concepts, and the relationship between Orthodoxy and secular literature was more of a dialogue than a confrontation.” (Tsapina 2004: 303).

In discussions on the Enlightenment – a European universal phenomenon adapting to various temporal and cultural circumstances (Riciperati 2003: 28) – modern historiography focuses on the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, preferring to talk about Enlightenments (in the plural), including religious and confessional enlightenment, aimed at rethinking the very role of religion and the church.² The Religious Enlightenment was a pan-European phenomenon that encompassed Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and Orthodoxy, and grew out of the desire to create a rational religion, one that would be free of superstition and serve society (Sorkin 2008; Sheehan 2005; Eijnatten 2009; Bradley, Van Kley 2001). The intellectual movement of the religious Enlightenment sought to reconcile the natural philosophy of the 17th–18th centuries with a religious view of the world, while trying to overcome the extremes of religious fanaticism, on the one hand, and nihilism and godlessness, on the other. The process of forming a new intellectual environment was marked by the coexistence and mutual influence of a variety of (sometimes poorly compatible) traditions, their transformation and modification.

The Western European intellectual transfer of the 18th century did not change Russian social thought overnight. The discussion about the mutual influence of cultures within the pan-European space and the transfer and adaptation of European ideas in the Russian historical context of the 18th century is one of the key topics of modern historical studies and involves, among other things, the study of the history of a given book, its authors, translators, publishers, vendors, consumers, subscribers, readers, etc. In order to trace the transfer of ideas, we need to have information about where the idea originated, how it moved, and who the receiving parties were. Phrases such

² On the multifaceted nature of the Enlightenment, see: (Edelstein 2010; Pocock 2008: 94–95)

as “ideas spread” and “the Enlightenment influenced” are not particularly useful when it comes to divining how Russia fit organically into the pan-European cultural and political space of those times. How, and to what extent, did the ideas of the European Enlightenment penetrate into Russia? How were they adapted? What are the specific features of their assimilation into Russian culture? Who was mostly responsible for bringing them?

The fact that a given work (or translation of a work into Russian) is available in the library is not enough for us to conclude that a transfer of ideas took place. For example, John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, published in England in 1690, appeared in Russian via a French edition that was published in the 1720s. The presumed translator of the work was D. M. Golitsyn, or his son, S. D. Golitsyn. The *Two Treatises of Government* was not successful in Russia; Peter the Great did not approve of it, believing that reading such works engendered “odd reasoning that dissented with the wisdom and benefit of the state” (cit. ex: Polskoy 2002: 107).

It is possible that the works of Western European authors were available in the Russian intellectual space in the form of handwritten translations commissioned by representatives of the secular and church elites. And a growing number of Russians were able to read foreign works in the original. During the rule of Peter the Great, young noblemen could receive their education in Europe, which (along with self-study) afforded them the opportunity to become acquainted with Western European political thought. As for printed works, Russian political culture gravitated towards moral instructions on how to lead a virtuous life, as well as historical descriptions. As the Russian scholars K. D. Bugrov and M. A. Kiselev have convincingly shown, “doctrines did not move from Europe to Russia by themselves, with the wave of a magic wand, and the influence of European literature was not at all reduced to the abstract ‘Enlightenment,’ being in fact a complex conglomerate dominated by religious and moralistic literature” (Bugrov, Kiselev 2016: 54).

On the topic of Peter the Great’s modernization, researchers typically point to its elitist nature and the fact that it led to a cultural split in society and the emergence of two, often opposing, cultures: one that started to develop dynamically, and the other that remained practically rooted to the spot. The main consumers of advanced European science and culture in the latter half of the 18th century were the court nobility. Even back then, the life of an ordinary landowner was marked by the confrontation between the old and the new, and innovations mostly touched on the external aspects of everyday life. Meanwhile, countryfolk, in terms of their family relationships, occupations and worldview, lived their lives primarily in accordance with ancient Russian traditions and the realities of Russian serfdom. “However, the reforms carried out in Russia in the 18th century, to one degree or another, affected the entire population, shaping and changing their lives. Any discussion of the success of the reforms must necessarily include a conversation about changing the value orientation of society” (Kulakova 2014: 383).

The polemics of the religious Enlightenment often focused less on the fight against “heresies” and more on justifying the policy of religious tolerance (albeit with significant restrictions). Of particular importance was the need to purify religious practice from superstition, which was often understood in a rather broad sense. Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736), who would become the main visionary of the state and political reforms of Peter the Great, can rightfully be considered the founder of this new tradition – the rational condemnation of superstitions. He invariably maintained a mockingly derisive tone when describing “superstitious ravings [...] from the most insane and ill-mannered nonsense to fictitious drivel and antics” (cit. ex: Smilyanskaya 2004: 207).

The Formulation of Feofan Prokopovich's Views

Feofan Prokopovich is one of the most interesting representatives of the Orthodox intellectual tradition, and scholars are typically divided in their assessments of his activities and creative endeavours (Bugrov 2020; Bucharkin 2009; Buranok 2005; Solovyev 2015; Nichik 1977; Vinter 1966; Gurvich 1915). The turning point in his spiritual development came when he visited Rome around the year 1700, where he “was able to observe the birth of the Catholic Enlightenment and where he witnessed the crisis of scholasticism” (Vinter 1966: 44). It was during his time as an instructor at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (1705–1706), where he engaged in polemics with scholastic theology, that he began to develop his own concept, the key ideas of which were “clarity,” “vision” and, most importantly, “light,” which he placed in opposition to the darkness of ignorance and the blindness of stupidity.

Researchers pay particular attention to Prokopovich's unique understanding of historical development, which also began to take shape during the Kyiv period of his work. He even added a module to his lecture course at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy called “On the Method of Writing History” (Nichik 1977: 149–150). Noting the unquestionable influence of Prokopovich in the formation of the historical consciousness of the Russian intellectual elite, Kirill Solovyev concludes that “in this sense, we can probably assume that the historical narrative of the mid-18th century, in both the ‘literary’ and scientific senses, was influenced significantly by the work of Feofan Prokopovich, his personality, views and ideas, which his students and younger contemporaries readily absorbed” (Solovyev 2015: 98).

Turning to medieval Russian history, Prokopovich notes the powers of the ruler, his “righteousness,” and singles out “expanding the territory of the state and protecting Orthodoxy” as the main tasks of government. He invokes Yaroslav the Wise to posit another key task of the ruler – the enlightenment of the people. And, as far as Prokopovich was concerned, Peter the Great was incredibly successful in this respect: the image of an enlightened Peter is produced by “mention not only of the Slavic Greek Latin Academy, which he turned into a state academy, but also by the praise for the expanding circle of ‘edifying people.’” Thus, according to Solovyev, Feofan Prokopovich,

in keeping in line with the Church Slavonic tradition, “tried to use images of the past not only to strengthen the unity and power of Orthodoxy (which for his main audience, Peter the Great, sounded archaic at the very least), but also to create, on the basis of the established tradition, new meanings in secular education and progress” (Solovyev 2015: 104–105).

Arguing from all possible positions the need for unlimited autocracy in Russia, Prokopovich nevertheless made active use of the discourse of the Enlightenment, discussing the issue of the origin of the state, polity, the limits of power of the monarch, and the rights and responsibilities of his subjects. The case of Feofan Prokopovich allows us to talk about the emergence and establishment of a new type of intellectual practice in everyday Russian life. The integration of Western European ideas and practices into Russian culture was ambiguous, multifaceted and depended on their adaptation to the socio-political space of Russia. Scholars researching the legacy of Feofan Prokopovich typically mention Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf and Thomas Hobbes among those who influenced the author of *The Truth of the Will of the Monarch* (Bugrov 2020: 102; Gurvich 1915: 91; Nichik 1977: 148; Whittacker 2003: 56–57). Being well acquainted with the works of European authors of the 17th and early 18th centuries, Prokopovich rather took on the formal side of their discussions on socio-political topics, and adapted a conceptual glossary that was new for the Russian educated public, which opened up opportunities for talking about politics in a new way. “Each such glossary did not imply a sharply defined doctrine, but was rather a tool that made it possible to prove a particular point of view or interpret certain objects in a special way” (Bugrov & Kiselev 2016: 9).

Soon after his arrival in St. Petersburg in 1716, Prokopovich read three sermons. In the first (“Sermon on the Occasion of His Tsarist Majesty’s Return from Abroad”), he proclaimed the significance of Peter the Great’s trip to Europe from the point of view of educating the people and improving the system of government: “... travel gives sense to government and is the best school for honest politics.” According to Prokopovich, it was through travel that “a prudent person sees the many-changing fortunes of play and learns meekness, sees the guilt of prosperity and learns the rule, sees the guilt of misadventure and learns courage and guardianship, and sees in foreign peoples, like a mirror, his own faults and shortcomings, as well as those of his people” (Prokopovich 1961a: 65). Prokopovich admired the monarch’s curiosity and his thirst for knowledge: “this is verily wisdom: never be satisfied with the acquired knowledge of things, always seek more light” (Prokopovich 1961a: 66).

Feofan Prokopovich's Concept of Natural Law

In his sermons, Feofan Prokopovich frequently made reference to natural law and “natural reason,” which gives people the capacity to understand obvious truths (“does not require much argument”). At the same time, his use of the concepts of “natural law” and “natural reason” in the sermon “A Word on the Birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ” were decidedly theological (Prokopovich 1760: 125–126).

Discussing the sources of natural law, Prokopovich gives priority to the “social instincts” of people and expresses thoughts that are close to the concept of Samuel von Pufendorf, whose *De Officio Hominiis & Civis Juxta Legem Naturalem* was translated into Russian by Ivan Krechetovsky at the instructions of the Synod and approved for publication by Peter the Great (Pufendorf 1721; Doronin 2008: 37). According to Prokopovich, state power is necessary, first of all, to ensure that natural law is not violated and to protect human society from evil passions, just as civil law is necessary to preserve natural law: “if government is not what you want,” he writes, “then it is human destruction that you want” (Prokopovich 1961b: 83). “This supreme power in human beings is both a bridle of human obliquity and a fence of human cohabitation, a kind of protection, a leeward refuge. If not for this, the earth would long have been empty, and the human race long extinct. Enmity forced people to gather into a single society, union and caste, and with the help of rulers, and with the will of the people, and of God himself, they took up arms to guard and defend themselves against the outside world, as well as from malefactors within” (Prokopovich 1765: 73).

In the “Sermon on the Royal Authority and Honour,” delivered on April 6, 1718, Prokopovich again talked about “natural laws,” proving the primacy and inviolability of autocratic power: “Is this not also among the natural laws, the powers that be over peoples? This is true! And all laws are supreme” (Prokopovich 1961b: 81–82). Power in the interpretation of Prokopovich is the main guarantor of compliance with natural laws: “on the one hand, nature tells us to love ourselves and to not do to others what we would not want others to do to us; on the other hand, the malice of corrupted peoples will not doubt this law. Always and everywhere fear has been desired, as is true of a protector, a strong champion of the law – that is, a sovereign power” (Prokopovich 1961b: 82–83). Prokopovich saturates his reasoning in the spirit of natural law theory with excerpts from the Holy Scriptures: on the one hand, “sovereign power is necessary to natural law,” on the other hand, “as supreme power, by its very nature, accepts guilt. If by nature, then by God, the creator of nature” (Prokopovich 1961b: 82). Disobedience of the “hereditary authority” of the monarch is a violation of natural law, and thus disobedience of the Divine will. Rebellion against the authorities is fraught with misfortune: “this sin brings forth a fog, a storm, a terrible cloud of innumerable troubles. Rumbings and cowardice immediately appear in the state: civil discord on a large and bloody scale, smaller instances of unrest on principled grounds, crying, disaster,

and depraved people, like wild beasts released from their bonds, free to attack, rob and murder wherever they please.” Prokopovich supports his conclusions with examples from (mostly Russian) history, arguing that “refuted by the supreme power, the entire society is wavering towards its own fall. But this disease rarely leads to the demise of states, as can be seen from world histories” (Prokopovich 1961b: 92).

The justification for the absolutist definition of state power – the indivisibility of the power of the monarch and the denial of the right of subjects to revolt – that we find in Prokopovich’s sermons is in many ways consonant with the ideas put forward by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. Just like in the works of the English political thinker, Prokopovich’s sermons demonstrate the “tensions [...] between traditionalism, natural law theory, and empirical reasoning [...] he simply employed any theory convenient to his conviction that the monarch is owed unconditional obedience” (Hamburg 2016: 266). As K. Bugrov rightly points out, “Feofan’s political thought remained eclectic both in terms of its sources and in terms of the complex context in which it functioned.” (Bugrov 2020: 106).

The Concept of the Social Contract as Expounded by Feofan Prokopovich

The most consistent version of Prokopovich’s concept of politics is found in *The Truth of the Will of the Monarch*. The entirely secular picture of the contractual creation of a “hereditary monarchy” is complemented by arguments from theology: “It is fitting that the will of the people, both in the elective and the hereditary monarchy, as well as in other forms of government, is not enacted without the supervision of God [...] but it is moved by God’s beckoning and acts, as the Holy Scripture clearly teaches us [...], that there is no power that does not come from God. And for this reason, all duties, both of subjects before their Sovereign and of the Sovereign for the common good of their subjects, do not come from the will of the people only, but also from the will of God” (The Truth of the Will of the Monarch 1722: 31–32).

On the one hand, it is the people who, by their own will, establish a “hereditary monarchy” for the sake of the “common benefit.” On the other hand, power is established by the Divine will, which acts through the will of the people, for “there is no power that does not come from God.” The treaty that established the state is not a basis for rebelling against a bad ruler, since the people “cannot abrogate the will of God, which also moves the will of the people [...] And so every Autocratic Sovereign need not keep human law, especially as he is not judged for crimes against human law: he must keep God’s commandments, and for their transgression only God himself, not people, can pass judgement. This we will demonstrate clearly through natural reason, and through the word of God and the testimony of ancient teachers.” According to the logic of Prokopovich’s reasoning, “the subjects of any monarch must endure disorder and depravity: just as the Holy Spirit demands, it is not only the good and the weak who must obey, but the obstinate must obey as well.” The examples from 17th-century

English history (in particular, discussions about the legality of the execution of Charles I) contained in *The Truth of the Will of the Monarch* can also be interpreted as an indirect argument that Prokopovich was familiar with the political concept of Thomas Hobbes: “This is why the people cannot judge the actions of their Sovereign, otherwise they would still have the will of general government, which they renounced and gave to their Sovereign. And for this reason, a most lawless deed was perpetrated by certain traitors in the Parliament of Great Britain against their King, Charles the First, in 1649, an act denounced by all, the English people included. That sad day is now commemorated every year – a truly blasphemous event that is not worthy of being remembered” (*The Truth of the Will of the Monarch* 1722: 30–31).

Prokopovich uses the concept of the social contract, first and foremost, to “draw a line between different forms of government and, in particular, between elective and hereditary monarchy. After all, Peter’s companion was faced with a difficult task: to simultaneously protect the principle of succession and dissociate himself from any association with the idea of elective monarchy” (Bugrov 2020: 106).

Prokopovich resolves the main contradiction of his political concept (unconditional obedience to the power of the monarch, even if the monarch violates the agreement concluded with his people) by referring to a key concept of the European Enlightenment – the “common good.” The main task of any government is “to care for the common good” of its subjects: “the ultimate responsibility of supreme power is to establish itself, for the benefit of the people” (*The Truth of the Will of the Monarch* 1722: 36). Thus, although Prokopovich’s argument for natural law was built into traditional theological discourse, he nevertheless created favourable conditions for the full perception of the concepts of the Enlightenment in his works.

The extraordinary phenomenon of the Orthodox Enlightenment – the synthesis of secular and spiritual cultures, traditional theology and Western European intellectual practices of a new type – allows us to reconsider the notion that the Enlightenment was a single set of ideas. To be sure, “the gap between ‘traditional Orthodox culture’ and the ‘culture of the Enlightenment’ turned out to not be dramatic at all, mainly because ‘Orthodox culture’ was not as ‘traditional,’ and the ‘Enlightenment’ not as revolutionary, as was originally imagined” (Tsapina 2004: 313).

The concept of politics developed by Feofan Prokopovich, distinguished by a certain eclecticism and a combination of secular and theological arguments, had a noticeable influence on the development of Russian political thought. The case of Prokopovich demonstrates that the reception of Western European ideas in the first quarter of the 18th century was an active process of cultural transfer, accompanied by selection, adjustment and adaptation.

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