

Towards a Conceptual-Historical Critique of the Essentialist and Teleological Interpretations of Russian History* **

Part 1

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*In memory of Viktor Zhivov,
brilliant scholar, generous friend*

The author discusses some of the dominant assertions in the literature on Russian history. One of them is the disqualification of the myth of the benevolent tsar as “false”. This disqualification is accompanied by the formulas “naïve or popular monarchism”, which designate the “pre-scientific illusions” that would have guided the collective movements of resistance to autocracy. Given the importance of collective representations of the tsar and power in Russian history, the theoretical premises on which the above-mentioned disqualifications are based *affect the general interpretation of this history*, for example the conception of the Russian people as “passive”. The author proposes to abandon this positivist scaffolding and approach the sources from other theoretical perspectives, in particular conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte), to pose a radically different question: what truth is contained in the myth of the benevolent tsar and to reconstruct, against the essentialist and teleological vision, the *historicity* of the collective resistance to power in Russia. The first part studies the genealogy of the expression *samozvan/ets/stvo* (self-appointment), its original meaning – individual initiative against divine appointment – and its functions in the autocratic political paradigm. The lack of heuristic value of the formulas of “popular, or naïve monarchism,”

* I am pleased to express my thanks especially to Maureen Perrie for her review on my book *Le Tsar c'est moi* [Ingerflom, 2015] (later translated into Spanish and Russian), and the compliments she addressed to it [Perrie, 2019]. Likewise, her unfavourable remarks and also her surprising misunderstanding of some passages of my book convinced me of the need to open a respectful debate about the theoretical and methodological premises *on which* we study Russian history, because they are the ones that ultimately determine the choice and approach to the sources, their interpretations and the conclusions we reach. I also would like to express my enormous gratitude to Olga Domínguez who helped with the translation into English of this text originally written in Spanish.

** *Citation*: Ingerflom, C. (2023). Towards a Conceptual-Historical Critique of the Essentialist and Teleological Interpretations of Russian History. Part 1. In *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 11, № 2. P. 677–702. DOI 10.15826/qr.2023.2.812.

Цитирование: Ingerflom C. Towards a Conceptual-Historical Critique of the Essentialist and Teleological Interpretations of Russian History. Part 1 // *Quaestio Rossica*. 2023. Vol. 11, № 2. P. 677–702. DOI 10.15826/qr.2023.2.812.

the logic of which is to deprive the most oppressed segments of the population of their culture and language, is emphasized.

Keywords: Resistance to power, popular/naïve monarchism, positivist historiography, essentialism, teleology, conceptual history

Автор рассматривает ряд спорных концептуальных утверждений, касающихся интерпретации российской истории. Одним из них является оценка мифа о добром царе как «ложного». Эта дисквалификация сопровождается формулами «наивный/народный монархизм», обозначающими «донаучные иллюзии», которыми якобы руководствовались коллективные движения сопротивления самодержавию. Учитывая то, как массовые представления о царе и власти в русской истории, теоретические предпосылки, на которых основаны вышеупомянутые дисквалификации, влияют на общую интерпретацию этой истории, автор предлагает отказаться от этих позитивистских штампов и подойти к источникам с других теоретических позиций, в частности, концептуальной истории (*Begriffsgeschichte*). По его мнению, необходимо вопреки эссенциалистскому и телеологическому пониманию реконструировать историчность коллективного сопротивления власти в России, поднимая вопрос о содержательности мифа о добром царе в массовом сознании. В этой части работы исследуются генеалогия понятия «самозванец» («самозванство»), его первоначальное значение – индивидуальная инициатива vs божественное назначение, его функции в самодержавной политической парадигме. Подчеркивается отсутствие эвристической ценности выражения «народный», или «наивный монархизм», логика которого заключается в лишении наиболее угнетенных слоев населения их культуры и языка.

Ключевые слова: сопротивление власти, народный/наивный монархизм, позитивистская историография, эссенциализм, телеология, концептуальная история

The Object of the Article

Geschichte zu denken bleibt ein Wagnis,
sie zu be- greifen nötigt immer zum Umdenken¹.

R. Koselleck

Even at present, we often find articles or books in which the “passivity” of the Russian people and, in particular, that of the peasantry is pointed out². This passivity is explained by the “belief of the people” in the inherent goodness

¹ “Thinking history remains a risk, understanding it always requires rethink” (Hereafter translations by the author of this article. – *C. I.*)

² Against the current trend, K. V. Chistov vindicated the value of utopia as a critique of domination: “in the writings of amateurs and some foreign Slavists, vulgar or masochistic-nationalistic stereotypes continue to exist: the Russian peasant was supposedly lazy from time immemorial and outrageously patient” [Чистов, с. 480].

of the tsar. The traditional historiography asserted that this belief was “naïve”.³ An old expression, “the myth of the tsar” was adopted to accompany this “popular belief”, which would extend from the early seventeenth century to the present day, through the cult of Stalin’s personality. The prevailing verdict is: “the myth of the tsar is false” because the monarch was the very real, and the most responsible, perpetrator of the misfortunes of the people [Field, p. 18; Perrie, 1987, p. 2]. Yet both of those categories and the resulting statements raise as many questions as assertions. Given that “naivety” is presented as inherent in the “*traditional* peasant mentality”, how to explain, using these categories, the *changes* in the collective representations of the monarch and power between the 16th and the early 20th centuries? How to reconcile what should be the historian’s central concern – reconstructing historicity, that is, being attentive to discontinuity – with the four-centuries *continuity* attributed to that “mentality”? With what heuristic and theoretical arguments does this historiography take up the evolutionary ethnology of the late nineteenth century when it affirms, today, that a myth “is false” when, for almost a century, the human sciences have demonstrated that myths are neither false nor true? [Wittgenstein]. And more generally: why are the academic categories of a secularized reason applied to systems of thought and action alien to them by cultural or temporal alterity, without precautions or nuances? All of them are questions whose authorship I do not claim: they are part of the debates that we have carried out in the West in the 1970s, but, unfortunately, those debates did not affect or did not sufficiently affect the historiography of Russia, in particular, on popular resistance to power.⁴ The famous “passivity of the Russian people” raises other kinds of questions. *Passivity* compared to what? To the rest of Europe? Are there many European countries in which there were more popular insurrections than in Russia during the 17th–18th centuries and of their magnitude? The *popular* passivity compared to the Russian *nobility*? Let’s put the dimensions of popular resistance and noble oppositions side by side: the revolts of Bolotnikov and the demands of the boyars and the nobles to Shuiskii; Razin and the Conditions submitted to Anna in 1730; “Pugachevshina” and the Decembrist uprising... I am well aware that the claims and situations are not the same, but I am referring to the enormous difference between the human, sociological and geographical magnitude and also the intensity of the respective antagonisms. Popular *naivete*? And here, a doubt overwhelms me: Were Alexei Mikhailovich and Catherine II also convinced in their hearts that they were fighting the naivete embodied in the two gigantic insurrections led respectively by Stenka Razin (1670–

³ I have always argued that the category of naïve monarchism was not epistemologically relevant and led to misinterpretations of popular adherence to false tsars and tsareviches that populated Russian history since the early 17th century [Ingerflom, 1992; Ингерфлом, 1991].

⁴ Regarding what Mark Bevir calls “developmental historicism”, a vision of history marked by evolutionism and teleology, it was recently written that “on Russian soil, the influence of developmental historicism remains predominant” [Олейников, с. 147]. It can be added that this influence is also predominant in the “Western” historiography of popular resistance to power in Russia.

1671) who claimed to be accompanied by the son of the Tsar and in 1773–1775, by Emelian Pugachev, self-appointed Peter III? The popular collective representations were *naïve* with respect to others that would be *scientific*, like the monarchism of the nobility or the ideology of Marxism-Leninism? Finally, there is a historiography to which the permanent (although in different forms and proportions) and popular resistance to each reigning monarch does not lead to a rethink of the meaning and function of “the myth of the tsar”.

However, it is true that the main form of popular resistance to oppression, namely ‘self-appointment’ (*samo-zvanstvo*) – with its underlying interrogation of the authenticity of the *physical* body of the tsar – did not offer the prospects of a change in the political system. It is also true that the representation of the one chosen by God to occupy the throne was mythical. The aim of this article is to show that another interpretation of Russian popular resistance to power is possible. Such an interpretation should be focused on the reconstruction of historicity, i.e., it should be non-evolutionist, non-essentialist and non-teleological. The term *self-appointment* functioned as a keyword from the seventeenth century and, from the beginning of the twentieth century, has been transformed into what Reinhart Koselleck called a fundamental and modern concept: “The concept is connected to a word but is at the same time more than a word: a word becomes a concept only when the entirety of meaning and experience within a sociopolitical context within which and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word” [Koselleck, 2004, p. 85]. Throughout its history, the term *registered* different political-legal structures and at the same time it was a *driving factor* in them. In consequence, its meaning and its functions were ever changing. My thesis is that the transformation of the *word* “self-appointment” into a *concept* signals a fundamental change in Russian political history. This thesis is actually an answer to a simple question, and rather basic for an historical investigation, but which needs to be made explicit because it is very rarely formulated, if ever formulated at all: did the terms *self-appointed* / *self-appointment* have the same meanings at the beginning of the 17th century and three centuries later?

A journey through this *longue durée* forces the researcher to reconstruct the *historicity* of the *keyword* and the semantic and temporal sediments that converged to constitute the *concept* self-appointment. At the same time, the revision of the dominant interpretation of popular resistance goes well beyond the latter. Because of the centrality of self-appointment in Russian political history, this revision affects the understanding of Russian political history *tout court*. Based on historical sources, I will expose the differences between two types of interpretations of popular resistance to power and the dependence of each one of its *theoretical* premises⁵. In fact, all historians work from theoretical premises, either consciously or unconsciously, and

⁵ The conceptual debate that I propose in this article is not made explicit in my book where I have exposed the *practices* called in Russian *self-appointment* between the 17th and 20th centuries: [Инггерфлом, 2020]. To see the complete critical apparatus and the bibliographical references I refer the reader to the French edition.

with explicit acknowledgement or not. I am aware of the mistrust that expressions such as “theoretical premises” generate in some colleagues. Notwithstanding that, I believe, without being very original, that it is indisputable that the methods and conclusions of any research depends on such premises. Let us take an example, to which we will return later, that illustrates the preceding lines and serves as an introduction to the further development of the article. Demonstrations of confidence in Soviet leaders, such as Lenin and Stalin, expressed in letters or workers’ and peasants’ delegations requesting the redress of injustices or improvement of situations, as well as the contrary expressions, such as calling Bolshevik leaders self-appointed or impostors (*samozvantsy*), are traditionally interpreted by the historiography as the result of the continuity of the so-called naïve or popular monarchism that would have been in force for several centuries. This monarchism is an idea that would change its forms but not its semantic core: an idea turned into an essence that would characterize the “mentality” of the Russian popular masses. This statement results from an ahistorical conception of history, that freezes ideas or phenomena, presenting them as fixed features of a country’s history, which means knowing and closing its future: an essentialist and teleological vision, elaborated within the framework of 19th century positivism and which presupposes a historical continuity held in a single linear time. Now, to what other understanding of the phenomenon do we arrive if, instead of positivism, we take into account, on the one hand, that history unfolds in a plurality of different times, which affect the components of a structure – language, beliefs, institutions, etc. – at a given moment in different ways and, on the other hand, we stay attentive to the semantic modifications of the language and to its articulation with the social and political transformations in factual history? These premises command a reformulation of the research topic and lead to radically different conclusions from those obtained by an essentialist vision. The subject of the investigation would no longer be continuity or essence, but factual discontinuity and contingency registered in the use of ancient words impregnated with religiosity, such as self-appointed. So, as the subject of investigation was changed, *naivete* becomes a feature of the historiography, which presents the presence of old words as evidence of continuity, when in fact we are facing a structural discontinuity. Those old words have changed their meaning; now they point to the maximum holder of a power – Lenin, Stalin – that no longer claims the Heavenly as the foundation of its legitimacy, but the earthly and immanent social class struggle. Then, when workers’ assemblies and peasant soviets, the same actors who conquered the political representation in 1905 and universalized the idea of popular sovereignty throughout the empire asked the leaders of the Soviet country for support or denounced them as self-appointed or impostors, they do so, with greater or less awareness, not in the name of the mythological good tsar, but in the name of the popular sovereignty and representation, the two pillars of political modernity, although the language continues to be the traditional, what is explained, let us repeat it,

because history unfolds in a plurality of times⁶. As we see, what is also at stake is the political understanding of the present and its possible horizons of expectations. The contempt for the epistemological orientation, as has been pointed out recently, led to the historicity's ignorance, as contained in the formula "naïve peasant monarchism" [Коновалова, 2008, с. 15]. The disdain for theoretical reflection on the foundations of our discipline undermines its heuristic potential and can lead to significant errors. It is a situation that led Reinhart Koselleck to write an article whose title "Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft", according to the meaning we give to the word Theoriebedürftigkeit, underlines the *need* for theory in history science or its *indigence*, or, both at the same time [Koselleck, 2000, S. 309].

What do we mean when we say *self-appointed*?

Only the reference to the present creates real history that arouses lively interest. But the reference to the present often leads to the transfer of categories of the present to the past that are not in keeping with it.

O. Brunner. Der Historiker und die Geschichte von Verfassung und Recht⁷

"There are no experiences without concepts and there are no concepts without experiences" [Koselleck, 2006, S. 59]. In a few words, Koselleck inextricably linked social and conceptual history, and affirmed that experiences are embedded in language, but the latter is the one that attributes significance to them. This dialectical relationship makes the transmission of history possible. However, this transmission, in the case of *self-appointment*, raises two difficulties. One, which is visible when we try to explain to the readers who do not know the Russian language, is that neither the Romance languages nor English offer a *common* term as *widespread in common language and equivalent in meaning* to the Russian word *samozvanstvo* (self-appointment). That is, when it is not only a matter of a transparent translation of a signifier but when the operation must integrate the *use* of the signified. This being specified, we must take this absence as an opportunity, a chance that forces us to reflect on what resists a direct translation in the Russian term. The Russian reader might think

⁶ This is the heart of conceptual history that is not reduced to a mere history of concepts. The original is in German: „Die Begriffsgeschichte, wie wir sie versuchen, kann ohne eine Theorie der historische Zeiten nicht auskommen“ [Koselleck, 1972, S. 302]. My translation would be: "Conceptual History as we conceive it, cannot be developed without a theory of historical times".

⁷ Sf.: [Brunner, S. 7].

that the problem of the translation of the Russian word does not concern him. But, and here the second difficulty appears, whether it is a linguistic translation into another language or a *mental transfer into a modern concept network* of the same word and in the same Russian language, this operation reveals an understanding or misunderstanding of a given phenomenon. Paradoxically, in the historiographical debates about the meaning of the term, there is hardly any reference to the sources of the time in which it arose. On the contrary, what we can frequently observe is what Brunner was fighting against: *the transfer of modern definitions to ancient times*. Such transfer ignores the fact that, since the irruption of political modernity, the meaning of many preceding words, ideas and institutions are no longer understandable without a *previous* work of exegesis.

Let's start with the second difficulty. Many scholars within our field know, and are indebted to, the magnificent work published by Chistov in 1967. In the reissue of 2003, the author added a new chapter, one of the sections of that chapter is entitled "On the term *samozvanchestvo*".⁸ The author writes that "it is very important to find out in what sense this term was used and what are the permissible limits of its use when discussing the problems of socio-utopian legends" [Чистов, с. 457]. The subject of that section is an explicit criticism of B. A. Uspenskii, P. V. Lukin and V. G. Korolenko for -according to Chistov- unjustifiably expanding both the type of experiences that the three have called *samozvanstvo* or *samozvanchestvo* (for example: games in which someone disguises himself as tsar) and that of the individuals designated by them as *samozvanets*. In this way, Chistov writes, the "authentic" (подлинное) *samozvanstvo* is lost from sight. Without attempting to summarize the work of these three authors in relation to this topic, it seems to me that what Uspenskii did was to reconstruct the organic articulation between the religious factor and self-appointment, particularly during the 17th-18th centuries, while Lukin analyzed a relationship between self-appointment and the identity of each subject of the tsar during the 17th century. Korolenko, in turn, highlighted the contamination of the entire Russian social organism by self-appointment at the end of the 19th century. The great contribution of these authors is to have demonstrated parts of the mechanism that unites Russian orthodoxy, Russian political culture and everyday life to self-appointment in clearly *defined historical times*. Chistov opposes them with a notion of the "authentic self-appointment", "exactly (*tochno*)" defined according to him in the Ushakov *Dictionary*, published in 4 volumes between 1935 and 1940: a) "A self-appointed [person] is a person who arbitrarily or illegally appropriated someone else's name, title, posing as someone else" or b) "An epithet of a person who appropriated the name of a king or someone from the royal house in the struggle for political power"

⁸ The lack of consensus on the meaning of the terms, *samozvanets*, *samozvanstvo* and *samozvanchestvo* in Russian historiography was recently analyzed [Обухова, с. 21-42]. The subtleties that distinguish *samozvanstvo* and *samozvanchestvo*, which gave a rise to a debate between Russian authors, is a matter outside the purpose of these pages.

[Чистов, с. 460]. A look at Russian penal codes shows that Ushakov took up the language and definitions of *Razdel IX, glava II Ulozheniya o nakazaniyakh ugovolnykh i ispravitel'nykh* (1845) and several articles as the 1415 of *Ulozhenie o nakazaniyakh ugovolnykh i ispravitel'nykh* (ed. 1885), the 134 of *Ugolovnoe ulozhenie* (1903) [Малянтович, Муравьев, с. 101–102, 162–163], and, to a certain extent, of articles 91 and 77 of *Ugolovnyi kodeks RSFSR* (1922 and 1926), respectively. These articles were taken up to define the crime of *samozvanstvo* in article 194 of *Ugolovnyi kodeks RSFSR* (1971). That is, the *Ushakov Dictionary* conveys the conception that the late imperial and Soviet political powers wanted to impose on the term self-appointment. As it is well known, the Law and its codification are not *the* truth but always an expression of interests and are historically determined. On the other hand, if we consider the distance between official legal documents and social and political reality, the meaning of the term is revealed to be much broader and is not limited either to the sphere of utopian thought. Indeed, we know that the actors of the same time in which the penal codes were drawn up understood self-appointment in a much broader sense, as demonstrated, among others, by the peasant from a military village who, in front of Nicolas I, blurted out his claim of the latter not being the authentic emperor but a landowner in disguise (we will return to this case). But it is not just about popular discourse: the “exact” definition of the “authentic” self-appointed figure, as advocated by Chistov, does not correspond to the meaning of the word since it appeared in the 17th century. Thus, the first record that I know of, in Timofeev’s *Vremennik*, associates the false Dimitri, Godunov and Shuiskii under the same accusation of self-appointed, even though *the last two did not impersonate other people*. The same goes for Stalin, who was regularly accused of being a self-appointed.

Similar difficulties arise in translations from Russian. For example: “A pretender (*samozvanets*) is literally a ‘self-styled’ (*samozvannyi*) tsar or tsarevich, that is, someone who has falsely adopted a royal title or identity” [Perrie, 1995, p. 1, fn. 1]. I am grateful to Maureen Perrie for having called my own translation of ‘*self-appointment*’ [Ingerflom, 2013] “clumsy” [Perrie, 2019, p. 858, fn. 8], thus, inviting me to explain my choice. Perrie uses “impostor” for the false tsareviches of the Time of Troubles because it “is perhaps the more correct translation”, although she finally decides to “follow established custom and practice in using ‘pretender’ along with ‘impostor’ as English equivalents of *samozvanets*” [Perrie, 1995, p. 1, fn. 1, 6, 247; Perrie, 2006, p. 8, 422, 615; Perrie, 2014, p. 136]. But these terms do not necessarily convey the religious dimension, which is a *constitutive and defining component* of the Russian original. In the interpretation of self-appointment and its indissoluble relationship with religiosity there is a before and an after the famous article by Boris Uspenski [Успенский]. Today, I believe, there is no researcher who refuses to affirm that religiosity was an important factor in Muscovy. However, if, in parallel, the sense of the language of the time is not

respected and it is secularized instead, the aforementioned affirmation is emptied of content. Thus, the imprecise translation cancels the necessary correspondence between the interpretive framework used by the historian and the historical actor's intended meaning when using that language. That specific language was an indicator of, and a factor in, the theological-political context of the time and, as such, it was this language that gave meaning to events. The terminology about "false tsars and tsareviches" used in the 17th–18th centuries, and to a large extent in the 19th century as well, inhibits their secularization. To think of these events as pretenderism and imposture constructs an object alien to the relations of culture and power that gave birth to the phenomenon we are dealing with. The pretension of having been appointed by God and the religious vocabulary ("apparition", "revelation" and others) of the magical rites sometimes used to verify the authenticity of self-appointed [Ingerflom, 2000, p. 103–112] by the population form a semantic field ignored by the established translations, *whose language blocks other possibilities for thinking about the Russian experience.*

Now, why did I choose "self-appointed"? In some English translations of the Bible, *appointed* is used to indicate divine designation⁹. North American exegetes have insisted on the fact that "appointed", in contrast to the "ordained", "always contains the notion of an ordering, arranging, setting or appointing *from without*, that is, from a source *other than the individual himself*. <...> In other words, their faith was *not self-generated*" [Ritenbaugh]¹⁰. I do not claim that self-appointment is a unique translation. But it seems to me to be faithful to the meaning of the Russian signifier since the Time of Troubles of the early 17th century and whenever the alleged divine legitimacy of the monarch was at stake in the following centuries. A correct translation should primarily convey the idea that self-appointed "names himself *instead of being named by God*". But, over time, the self-appointed became sociologically very broad, with diverse practices and aims, and included mystification. In this case neither the accusation nor the self-justification necessarily referred to the Heavenly. There are examples of mystification without religious reference in the seventeenth century, but its use expands dizzily from the late nineteenth – although this may be partly a product of the state of the sources – while still coexisting with those connoted by religion.¹¹ To capture this sense of mystification, also designated in Russian as *samozvanstvo*, the translation *imposture* is justified. But that is not all, because, as we will see, there is a radical difference between the *word* "samozvanstvo", in the sense of imposture, used in the 19th century and the *concept* "samozvanstvo" also understood

⁹ "There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (Romans, 13 : 1); «And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed» (Acts, 13 : 48).

¹⁰ The italics are mine.

¹¹ See cases in [Короленко, p. 3; Kivelson, p. 190–192; Ингерфлом, 2020, с. 276–280; Ingerflom, 2015, p. 334–338].

as imposture, in the 20th century. The historian is obliged to reconstruct historicity, identifying what Koselleck, in a geological metaphor, called *semantic-temporal sediments*: layers of experiences and events that constitute themselves and move in different times and directions, changing the historical fault lines [Koselleck, 2018].

Before exposing the religious sediment, let us summarize the preceding pages around two topics: historiography and the problems we must face in building another way of tackling popular resistance. As we saw, traditional historiography postulates that the terms *samozvanets* and *samozvanstvo*, and what they mean, are defined by a core of constant and invariable definitions, thus giving reason to Nietzsche: “Definierbar ist nur was keine Geschichte hat”.¹² Both terms could only be defined because they were deprived of historicity: the slight changes that traditional interpretation detects are adaptations that do not alter that core¹³. It is a historiography that, through a work of erudition and accumulation of data of great value, is concerned with verifying the continuity and recurrence of self-appointment throughout the various periods of Russian history. Self-appointment emerges as an idea with a life of its own, independent of the politico-social systems of the time. As is well known, the Cambridge School, also called “Ideas in Context” since its 1969 liminal manifesto, was constituted largely and explicitly against this idealist Anglo-Saxon History of Ideas, paradigmatically elaborated by Arthur O. Lovejoy [Lovejoy, 1940, p. 3–23; Lovejoy, 1953], which ignores the *use* of ideas and the *role of actors* [Skinner]. In turn, the German *Begriffsgeschichte* was constituted against the theoretical assumptions of that paradigm, and against Friedrich Meinecke’s *Ideengeschichte* [Koselleck, 2011]. Indeed, since semantics always refers to that which is outside language, the temporal relationship of the semantics of concepts with the factual history is close, either simultaneously with their changes or because it anticipates or synthesizes them [Koselleck, 1987; Gadamer]. The timeless definition of the concept forgets that there is always a surplus, either factually with respect to language or vice versa. The sign, i. e. the word, can persist through the ages and even retain its meaning, which allows it to be defined. But when it changes radically and fulfills the double function of registering a new historical structure and, at the same time, being a driving factor in it, then we are talking about a concept. With this distinction between word and concept, *Begriffsgeschichte* prevents the fixation of its object and the freezing of history. The second topic concerns language: the categories as well as the concepts that we use can cause cognitive distortions and as we have already said, *block other possibilities to read the sources*, or, on the contrary, *unlock* the field of interpretations and leave it open to be fertilized by historicity.

¹² “Only what has no history can be defined” [Nietzsche, p. 53].

¹³ “Popular monarchism” remained “itself in virtually unchanged forms over some four centuries”, which “suggests that it belonged to a realm of ideas largely independent of mutable socio-economic or political-administrative structures” [Perrie, 1999, p. 167].

Individual “initiative” vs “Divine appointment”

Христолюбивому и богом утверженному государю великому князю Ивану Васильевичю всея Руси... исходиши противу оному окаанному мысленому волку, еже глаголю страшливому Ахмату... *самому называющуся царю!*

Vassian Rylo to Ivan III (1480).

To the Christ-loving and *God-approved* sovereign Grand Duke Ivan Vasilyevich of all Russia... come out against the wicked wolf as I call Ahmat, the *self-appointed* tsar.

[*Italics are mine*]

Let us now turn to the sources. The term *samozvan*, known at least since the 11th century, had different but closely related meanings.¹⁴ As the source cited in the epigraph shows, in the theological-political genealogy of the term *samozvanets*, relating to the figure of the monarch, the self-appointed is the one who is not appointed by God, in opposition to Ivan, but who has divine appointment.¹⁵ Although in Russian historiography *samozvanets* is usually used for the false tsareviches of the Time of Troubles, I have found only two occurrences of this term in sources from that period.¹⁶ The early seventeenth-century chronicler of the Troubles, Ivan Timofeev, says that Godunov and the false Dimitri are “self-appointed new apostates who have renounced God and the fair faith (*самозванным новобогоотступником от правоверия*)” [Тимофеев И., с. 32 (“самозванных”), 98 (“самозванным”)],¹⁷ because “they do not belong to the lineage that has received the grace of God (*neblagoslovna korene*), they are not His chosen ones”. Two close signifiers, *самонаназначенный* (self-designated) and *нововонарекшагося* (called by another [a new] name), were applied to the first and the fourth false Dimitri.¹⁸ All these

¹⁴ “By his own will” “appointing himself”: «По своей воле», «Пришедший без приглашения» [Ягич; Книга степенная, с. 643]. Princess Olga is *samozvannaia* because she had decided on her own will to go for the baptism [Книга степенная, с. 31]. One can also be a martyr by choice [Там же, с. 276]. See also: Olga, “*istinnaia Khristova uchenitsa samozvannaia*” [РНБ. Собр. Погодина. № 744. Л. 69].

¹⁵ «Самому называющуся царю» [Памятники литературы Древней Руси, с. 530].

¹⁶ Certainly, the word *samozvanets* appears in many published sources, but it has been inserted into their titles by later editors of these texts, for example: [Дополнения к Актам историческим].

¹⁷ The manuscript was discovered in 1834. I am grateful to Professor Iankel Solodkin for dating the paragraphs: the first was written after 1608 and the second one between July 1611 and mid-1612.

¹⁸ *Ordo* of the coronation of Vasilii Shuiskii, [Акты, собранные в библиотеках и архивах, с. 94; Памятники литературы Древней Руси, с. 160].

expressions demonstrate that legitimacy was played out in a primarily religious sphere: the false (*лже / ложный*) or self-tsar (*самоцарь*) is a falsely anointed (*лжехрист*), incarnation (*оболкся в плоть*) of the heretical Antichrist, “apostate, criminal, (*отступник / вор* – the most common), precursor of the enemy of God, the Antichrist (*предтеча богоборного антихриста*), “follower of the Antichrist” (*последователь же стопам антихристовым*), demonic seducer... [Тимофеев И., с. 66, 72, 83–88, 111, 122, 124; Сказание Авраамия Палицына, с. 108, 110, 117, 121, 123, 126, 131, 205–207, 219].¹⁹ Godunov is a false tsar, tsar-slave (*рабоцарь, рабоименного царя*) just like Shuiskii, who was not chosen by God but instead chose himself (*самоизбранна без Божия*), and not by the assembly of Russian cities (*по общаго всеа Русии градов людцакого совета*), but by his own will (*самоизволне*): he is a self-crowned (*самовенечник*) tsar [Тимофеев И., с. 32, 95, 100, 101]. Like the False Dimitri, the two crowned themselves on their own initiative. They appointed themselves [Сказание Авраамия Палицына, с. 110, 205, 207, 219, 221; Тимофеев И., с. 122; Памятники литературы Древней Руси, с. 136, 140, 146, 330, 340, 366, 374, 383, 388]. Shortly after the end of the Times of Troubles, in the Chronicle of Pskov, Sidor, the fourth false Dimitri, who had acted in Pskov, has his region referred to as “new self-called” (“*novonarekshagosa*”). In contrast, Mikhail Romanov is a true monarch: he was not appointed (*зван*) by men, but by God.²⁰ A false monarch was one whom God had not appointed. The opposition formulated by Vassian Rylo between the individual will and the divine will was still valid, harbouring semantic potential and pragmatic possibilities that were gradually released: the verb acquired such weight in the political reality that the action – “was named” – gave rise to the noun and adjective self-appointed, which had not been possible before the Time of Troubles.²¹ The subjects of political action, still subsumed in religiosity, were no longer just the great, but ordinary human beings.

¹⁹ In other examples [Сказание Авраамия Палицына, с. 208, 210, 211, 219] it is a question of the false Dimitri II (“*Lzhe-Khrist zhe, naritsaasia Dmitriem tsarevichem, zhivyi v Koluge*”) [Там же, с. 210] or of Sidor of Pskov, who had not been anointed. In this case, the formula “false Christ” is not exempt from a certain ambiguity: these two false Tsarevichs can only be “false anointed” insofar as they are also “false Dmitri I” (anointed and therefore false-anointed since he was anointed by the devil and the demons and not by God) [Акты времени правления царя Василия Шуйского, с. 1, 28–29, 47, 65, 77, 80, 187–188, 197, 244; Дополнения к Актам историческим, с. 255–256, 259; Памятники литературы Древней Руси, с. 136, 140].

²⁰ «Михаила, воздвигена Богом... зван бо не от человек, ни человеки» [Тимофеев И., с. 160]. See also: “*ne chelovek, no voistinnu ot boga izbran velikii cei tsar i gosudar*” [Сказание Авраамия Палицына, с. 233].

²¹ The use of the word increased slowly over the course of the century. Examples: (Most before 1627) [Дмитриевский, с. 169; Акты, относящиеся к истории Южной и Западной России, с. 424–426, 429–430; Дело Т. Анкудинова, с. 105, 110, 152; Акты исторические, с. 528–530; Собрание государственных грамот, с. 325]. Thanks to Andrei Iurganov, Pavel Lukin, Gyula Szvák and Oleg Usenko for generously providing these references.

Previously, the only subjects of political action had been the great boyars and nobles. The irruption of several self-appointed with the groups that surrounded them changed the political scene. The emergence of ordinary people in the role of subjects of politics, meant a historical change that was registered by a new term: *self-appointed*, a keyword that synthesized a nascent political reality.

The place and functions of the leading concept *self-appointment* in the autocratic political paradigm

The political concepts have to acquire a higher degree of generality, in order to be key concepts (*Leitbegriffe*). They now aim to speak simultaneously to people of most different living spaces and most varied strata with often diametrically opposite experiences. The concepts become catchwords in their use

[Koselleck, 2006, S. 84]

From an onomasiological perspective, the set of meanings attributed to the false tsars/evichis of the Time of Troubles was finally recorded in the keyword *self-appointed*. Dimitri was the first²² of a large and multi-secular series of self-appointed tsars. Its *longue durée* and social reach indicate that it was the autocratic system that made *self-appointment* structurally possible. The word, *samozvanstvo*, shares with *samoderzhavie* (autocracy) not only the prefix, but also a set of political practices that accompanied the history of autocracy, and of which *samozvanstvo* gradually appropriated: the appointment by the Heavenly in a secret and direct relationship, a strategy to render the difference between the false and the true indeterminate²³; an inversion of norms that prevents the operation of positive legal criteria to judge the legitimacy of the monarch's conduct; the identification of the monarch with Christ or with the Antichrist as a consequence of the demand for loyalty understood as a religious belief [ЖИВОВ]; the possibility left open by Peter the Great for persons outside the dynasty to occupy the throne.

²² Dimitri was the first to aim for the Moscow throne. In the Cossack lands, he was only a relative novelty. Between 1490 and the first third of the 17th c. about twenty false monarchs pretended or occupied the Moldavian throne, often thanks to the Cossacks coming from the same regions from which many of the troops of Dimitri, Razin and Pugachev would be recruited, [Ингерфлом, 2020, с. 42–44; Ingerflom, 2015, p. 57–65].

²³ False genealogies of the tsars, their titles and the boyar clans, the disguises of Ivan IV, Peter I and their respective entourages during official ceremonies, Ivan IV's false resignation to the throne, the false naming of tsars by both monarchs and the exchange of roles between monarchs and boyars. This could sometimes be presented as burlesque, but it always anticipated governmental decisions consisting of real political acts. On the strategy of "disguise" see: [Успенский].

The pair *samozvanstvo* – *samoderzhavie* entered into a relationship with a third signifier which has the same root – *samovlastie* (*samo* = self, *vlast'* = power) – thus forming a semantic network in which the meaning of each one was conditioned by that of the other two. *Samovlastie* emerges in theological debates and refers to the government of men without allusion to legal rules. It was used literally to designate the power of a man who behaved as if he himself were the source of power: the autocrat (*samoderzhets*). [Московский летописный свод, с. 72; Софийская первая летопись, с. 126–127]. Through Adam, God had granted mortals freewill (*svoevolie*): the ability to choose between good and evil [Клибанов, с. 139–140, 142, 155–157, 162, 193–196; Памятники литературы Древней Руси, с. 538]. Adam's fall provokes a dispute: do we have the divine gift of free choice in a direct relationship with God or through the Church and the prince? [Юрганов, с. 260, 271]. In the Muscovite Chronicles, Yaroslav the Wise and Andrei Bogoliubskii were called *samovlastietsy* [Илиева, с. 87]. The first Tsar, Ivan IV, dissolved the conflict in favor of the monarch, the only one who possesses the freewill that allows him to reward and punish the sinner [Послания Ивана Грозного, с. 230, 243–244; Переписка Ивана Грозного с Андреем Курбским, с. 39; Юрганов, с. 273–274]. Punishment, in this divine context, carried a particular benefit because when God punishes, even with death, He saves the sinner. To attribute to the tsar the ability to act like God allowed him to come as close as possible to Him: he was *similar in power*. But in contrast to the tradition originated with Agapetus in Byzantium [Kantorowicz]²⁴, the practice of Muscovite power, in particular that of Ivan IV, opened a mental space for an unstable balance between the different and the similar. The connection between *samoderzhavie*, *samozvanstvo* and *samovlastie* was indissoluble, but conflicting. The people's revolt was contemptuously labelled “*samovlastie* of the slaves” [Тимофеев И., с. 113]. A major change in this usage took place in the 18th century, at which point it was the autocrats themselves, the *samoderzhets*, who defined their power as *samovlastie*. Meanwhile, the disgruntled complained that the monarchs were allowing themselves to *samovlastvovat'*, that is, to exercise a self-power not delegated by God. Regularly revived, the *samoderzhavie* (autocracy) – *samovlastie* (self-power) – *samozvanstvo* (self-appointment) paradigm was the theological-political foundation of tsarism.

As a keyword and as a set of practices, self-appointment functioned as the *indicator* and as a reality-transforming *factor* of the paradigm. I am referring to the set of phenomena that the Russian language covers with the polyvocal noun *self-appointment*, without distinguishing instances in which the divine is invoked from those where mystification is based on secular disbelief, nor splitting *samozvanstvo* into social-political and com-

²⁴ According to Agapetus, the monarch has a double nature: his mystical, political body and his physical body, though both are well defined.

mon forms of crim.²⁵ *Self-appointment* functioned as a weapon, loaded with *historically different contents*: used by the tsars against their doubles and by the people to accuse the former of despotism and, as we will see later, to condemn the Soviet regime for rejecting political representation.

Clarification of the functions of the concept is worthwhile. Within self-appointment, the protest factor had the greatest impact. Let us put Kliuchevskii in dialogue with Foucault. “Self-appointment became the stereotypical form of Russian political thought, the form taken by all social discontent” [Ключевский, с. 333], wrote the Russian historian. The philosopher generalized to the historian: to make power relations visible, let us take “as a starting point the forms of resistance to different kinds of power” [Foucault, p. 225]. Research confirms the accuracy of the Foucauldian thesis: the form of resistance represented by the self-appointment as indicator and factor, makes the functioning of autocratic power visible, provided that its historicity is reconstructed in order to avoid any essentialist, ahistorical temptations, such as those conveyed by the expressions “the monarchism inherent in the peasantry”, the “peasant mentality” and others [Lloyd].

“Popular naïve monarchism”

I beg you, once again, never to send
me anything from those who do not
ingenuously seek the truth.

Descartes to Mersenne. 12 October 1646

The traditional approach has simplified the analysis of the collective representations of the tsar, calling them “naïve monarchism”. In Soviet times, the reference to the “ideology or consciousness of the peasantry” had to be accompanied by the so-called “Leninist characterization”: the “naïve monarchism” of the peasants [Konovalova, 2010–2011]. Lenin’s political comments without any ambition of a conceptual systematization [example: Ленин, с. 425–426] were transformed into a hermeneutical category. As it has already been shown, Lenin’s reference to naïve monarchism was inserted into the positivist scientific tradition [Коновалова, 2008, с. 15]. This category belongs to the conceptual arsenal of the Enlightenment whose inherent inability to recognize otherness is well known [Ингерфлом, 2003, с. 68]. Nevertheless, the epistemological critique of the category “naïve monarchism” is far from unanimously accepted in the historiography. Some authors use it as valid and scientifically relevant [for example: Антипов, с. 89; Пихоя, с. 174–175, 177, 192–194; Мамопова; Донских, с. 123].

²⁵ In the West, the transition from the marvelous-religious to the delusion of incredulity occurred in the early 17th century [Zemon Davis]. Deception by disbelief also occurred in Muscovy, but those claiming to be the real tsars invoked the divine until the 19th century.

Other authors employ it, but indicate that, in some cases, there was little or no naivete at all [Карапетян, с. 7; Савельева; Field, p. 214; Филд; Perrie, 1995, p. 249].²⁶

However, in his anthological article of 1988, Nikolai Pokrovski, probably aware of the fragility of the adjective “naïve”, put it between quotation marks, while also adding, without quotation marks, the adjective “popular” (‘naïve’ popular monarchism»). The author sought to contrast this “naïve’ popular monarchism” with “official monarchism” and, thus, designate the collective representations of the tsar, which convey the idea that, if he is the authentic one, he is benevolent [Покровский, с. 25]. At the same time, since the late 1980s, several historians have highlighted the epistemological inconsistency of the category “naïve monarchism”.²⁷ In its place the category “popular monarchism” spread in reference to the beliefs held by the peasantry and the lower social sectors in relation to the tsar [Терехова, с. 39]. The critique of “naivete” lay the groundwork for restoring the historicity of collective representations of power. In this same process of overcoming essentialism, I propose a new step: to ask ourselves to what extent, in the *use* of the new category, the replacement of the signifier “naïve” by “popular” is accompanied by a change in their respective signified. The reason for this concern is the following: how to justify the opposition between “naïve” and “popular” if it is claimed that popular monarchism is founded on tsarist illusions. In Western historiography, Maureen Perrie also preferred the expression “popular monarchism” instead of “naïve monarchism”, but this shift, as is clear in her explanation, means characterizing the “popular” as “naïve” : “A number of more recent scholars have associated pretense with ‘popular monarchism’, the naïve faith in the benevolence of the tsar towards the common people (*narod*)” [Perrie, 1995, p. 2]. So, popular monarchism is naïve and naivete would be what distinguishes popular monarchism from that of the literate, ecclesiastical and political elites. A vicious cycle takes

²⁶ Regarding *circumstantial cases*, Perrie and Field consider that the “peasants were not naïve” but they maintain “naïve monarchism” as a hermeneutical category [Perrie, 1995, p. 249; Field, p. 214]. However, cases of the “not naïve” were so frequent that their exceptionality of the “not naïve” becomes problematic. There are also examples of “utopian legends” in which there are not even traces of monarchism [Чистов, с. 463]. There were *samozvantsy* who “revealed” themselves in the districts where they were born, others were known to the inhabitants, and there were those who took the name of the same monarch and acted simultaneously in the same region. Pugachev’s “court” was composed of atamans who were well known to the troops but who bore the names and titles of the dignitaries who seconded Catherine II, while the “Cossacks, colonels and generals” who dispensed justice in the seized villages were often Tatars or peasants from the same region, and known to all. And how to reconcile the supposed faith that Pugachev was really Peter III when other participants in the revolt, such as the ataman Pyotr Evseev also self-appointed Peter III in *his own village* and in the surrounding region, and who was addressed by the peasants as if he were the monarch? Simultaneously with the insurrection, in the Tambov region, the peasant Iev Mosiakin, proclaimed himself Peter III [Сивков, с. 120–122; Коган, с. 222–224; Миронов, с. 134; Ингерфлом, 2020, с. 252–253; Ingerflom, 2015, p. 308–310].

²⁷ Some examples cited in chronological order of publication, without any claim to completeness [Андреев, 1995, с. 8; Ingerflom, 1992; Ingerflom, 1996; Андреев, 1999, с. 10; Лукин, с. 29–32; Кедров; Терехова; Мауль, 2017; Коробков, Королев, с. 44–45].

place which invalidates the usefulness of replacing “naïve monarchism” by “popular monarchism”. Without quotation marks, the formula naïve popular monarchism is nowadays commonly used [Инсаров]. Pokrovskii was undoubtedly right in making explicit the equivalence between “naïve” and “popular” by grouping the two terms in a single formula. Viktor Maul broke that vicious cycle and offered a true perspective for reflection when he eliminates the ahistorical “naïve” component: “In the context of monarchical mythology, the tsar is not just the vicar of God on earth, but also the guarantor of the immutability of the order established by him” [Мауль, 2017, с. 225]. I agree with this recovery of the myth – I will return to this below – but, that function of guarantor of immutability was shared by most Russians, from slaves to Prokopovich, Uvarov and Alexander III. In other words, Maul confirms a consensus that far exceeds what historiography understands as “popular”. Indeed, he not only invalidates the adjective “popular” and with it the category “popular monarchism”: he also surpasses it by directing the reflection towards the question of myth.

There are also other reasons for us to distance ourselves from the term “popular.” It is used in two very widespread formulas. The first is “*popular illusions*”. The traditional interpretation does not cease to describe “*popular hopes*” in the Tsar as “illusory”. Scholars were right in pointing out that belief in the benevolent tsar was not the monopoly of the popular sectors [Field, p. 14–15; Perrie, 1999, p. 160]. Why should “peasants’ monarchist beliefs” be any naïve or more illusory than those of high dignitaries such as a Count Golovkin officially addressing Peter I in the words of the Prayer of the Trisagion of St. John Chrysostom: “You have brought all things into being out of nothing” is something that the historiography that affirms the naivety or illusory of the popular beliefs has not yet explained.

The second formula is “popular culture”, whose impasses have been signaled [Chartier]. This category has been the subject of debates, which have shown that there are eras, civilizations and items in which the division between “popular” culture and literate or elite culture does not work. Natalia Gurianova demonstrated that the monarchism of the old-believers in the 17th–19th centuries, both in their references to the Scriptures and in their interpretations, practically coincides with that of the political-ecclesiastic elites and distinguished religious intellectuals. According to Gurianova, what distinguishes the monarchism of the old-believers and intellectuals like Rozanov, from the monarchism of the elites as in the case of Prokopovich or Pobedonovtsev, is that the former admits the possibility of criticizing the concrete tsar or his policy. Despite this difference, there is a culture *common* to every “Russian individual”: a tsar is the animated version, living image (*odushvlennyi obraz*) of God and not only his lieutenant on Earth. However, Gurianova designates this culture as a “popular variant” of monarchism – since it harbors the possibility of denouncing as a personification of the Antichrist the tsars that it does not consider pious – though she immediately adds that it is a “conventional denomination” [Гурьянова]. The caution is understandable: it is a convention that does not seem the most appropriate

to the panorama described by Gurianova: a common representation of the tsar in the abstract, and of the tsarist institution that is not exclusive to the sectors to which the term “popular” refers.

If the object of investigation is a predominantly common culture, the adjective “popular” tends to be confusing. Conversely, if the adjective “popular” was used to differentiate a particular culture, other problems would arise since that would imply the emergence of comparisons. But with what other forms of culture? What would be the relevant oppositions? Maureen Perrie explained that the adjective “popular” refers to peasants [Perrie, 1999, p. 156]. Regardless of the author’s will, the use of the expression evokes the idea of a cultural hierarchy: high / low – and its variant highbrow / lowbrow, elite / mass, scholar / popular, legitimate / non-legitimate, cultivated culture / popular culture, cultivated / vulgar, etc. [Pasquier, p. 61; Fabiani]. Then, what does the use of the formula lead to if not stripping the culture and language of the most humble and oppressed people of all social value. Let us summarize: first, it seems to me necessary to reject the dependence that ties the representations of the tsar to social differences: the former are not the ideological translation of the latter, especially in the case at hand, when entirely immersed in the religious sphere [Тимофеев Д. В., с. 35, 44]. Second: the way in which the term “mentality” is usually used does not take into account social practices, the experiences of resistance and the creative capacity of the subjects, that is, of what elements produce diversity and discontinuity, thus, breaking the apparent homogeneity. It is a use that ignores them doubly: as moments of discontinuity, which historiography freezes with the word “tradition”, and as producers of changes in a collective vision of the world and, in particular, of power. The sources repeatedly illustrate the changes in collective representations, thus rejecting the replacement of historicity by essentialism, as conveyed by the categories “popular culture” or “peasant mentality”.

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The article was submitted on 24.02.2023