Former People: The Destruction of the Russian Nobility in the 20th Century

“Douglas, this is all that remains of the Sheremetev fortune,” Nikita Sheremetev, a direct descendent of Count Nikolai Sheremetev, told Douglas Smith over dinner as he held up a silver pate fork. Mr. Smith, an award-winning historian and translator, as well as Resident Scholar at the University of Washington’s Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, appeared at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University on October 8, 2009, to discuss research for his book-in-progress, “Former People: The Destruction of the Russian Nobility in the 20th Century.”

Smith had met Nikita Sheremetev while conducting research for his previous book The Pearl, which tracked Nikolai Sheremetev’s secret romance with one of his serfs, Praskovia Kovalyova. The dinner conversation with Nikolai Sheremetev’s descendant was one of the igniting factors for Smith’s current project, which will explore the plight of the Russian nobility after the Revolution, in the context of two families of the Russian aristocracy, the Sheremetevs and the Golitsyns.

Smith noted that while the Russian nobility played a crucial role in shaping Russia’s culture and history, it was a taboo subject in the Soviet Union and therefore its history after the victory of the Bolsheviks was never coherently documented.

Smith described his futile efforts to search through the card catalogue at the Lenin Library in Moscow for cards on “nobility and the Revolution.” “They had everything from the Bashkir bicyclists in the Revolution to I don’t know what,” he laughed, relating how he had approached a librarian and told her that someone must have removed the “nobility and Revolution” section. “She got a sort of strange look on her face and said, there’s never been a section on the nobility and the Revolution,” he remembered, saying that when he probed her for reasons, she replied, “Well, they’re utterly unimportant.”

Smith stressed that the nobility is important for several reasons. “The nobility’s destruction is one of the great tragedies in Russian history,” he declared, “for centuries they had supplied Russia’s political, military, cultural, and artistic leaders. They produced generations of writers, thinkers, and artists, and their fall marked the end of a long and deservedly proud tradition.” Yet their story is one of the untold chapters of the Revolution. According to Smith, the fate of the nobility “foreshadowed that of other groups,” because the nobility was one of the first clusters subjected to state repression as a collective of people, “a brand of political violence that would become the hallmark of the 20th century,” he pronounced.

Through his research Smith seeks to answer two questions—what happened to these people? And, how did noble identity mutate after the Revolution? He is organizing his findings around the stories of two families—the Golitsyns and the Sheremetevs—in order “to give the book a sense of coherence and structure.” He explained, “I wanted to involve my reader in the fates of a few families. As a writer, I think this will help the book speak to a broader audience.”

Smith noted that the nobility was “truly a small percentage of the population,” only 1.5%, but, he added, “workers comprised only about 1.6% and clearly they’ve been the subject of a great deal of study.” He located the heart of the Bolsheviks’ message in the notion that “creating a new world required the destruction of the old.” The noble class represented the past. “The people who represented the old order were not intended to have any place in the new order,” stated Smith.

The more and more I researched, the more I realized that the nobility as an institution was swept away after the Civil War, but the preoccupation with what they represented remained,” asserted Smith. This preoccupation resulted in cycles of repression against former nobles. Smith described the repression through stories of the Golitsyns and the Sheremetevs, two families connected by marriage. He related that noble families often fled to the country together to form colonies of former nobles, where they tried to survive by marketing their skills. “Most of these people could not get official work and had to live on any freelance work they could get,” noted
Smith. He listed jobs such as shoemaker, illustrator, music instructor, mural artist, as survival vehicles.

“I’ve learned from their grandchildren that despite what horrors befell these families, life went on, they had children, threw parties, went fishing,” remarked Smith. He pinpointed a constant tension in their lives, “the tension of not knowing if you were going to be arrested tomorrow or if you would get to go on your fishing trip.” Smith recounted some of the various murders and arrests that plagued both the two families. As he summed up, “With this book I don’t want to portray a misty-eyed, sepia-toned image of the past,” mentioning that his intent is not to create an idealized image of Russia before 1917. “I want to look at the complexity of the situation,” Smith concluded. His book is scheduled for publication in 2012 with Farrar, Straus & Giroux. To learn more, visit www.douglassmith.info.

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