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Between Barbarism and Progress: Enlightenment Historical Writings on a Major Conflict in Russian History

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ABSTRACT

The dichotomy of barbarism and progress has long been a focal point for the discussions about Russia's past and present. The discourse on Russian barbarism had been known in Europe since at least 16th century, but Enlightenment thinkers gave it a new shape by juxtaposing the ancient conception of barbarism with the rather modern idea of progress. In this article, Enlightenment historical writings are examined; the focus is on the question of how Russian history was studied in order to find signs of barbarism and the different guises of progress. The primary sources for the article are mainly Russian historical writings; however, relations and interactions between Russian and European intellectuals, as well as intellectual exchange and influence, are also noted. As there were no word "civilization" in 18th-century Russian, enlightenment was deemed by Russian thinkers as the antipode to barbarism. It is concluded that most Enlightenment writers saw Christianization as a step forward from barbarism in Russian history. Parallels between Russia and Scandinavia as they were drawn by August Schläözer are also analyzed. The article shows how the idea of conflict between barbarism and progress altered the understanding of Russian history in the Enlightenment.

KEYWORDS

barbarism, civilization, progress, the Enlightenment, intellectual history, historical writings, Christianization, Scandinavia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation under the grant No. 18-18-00216.

Introduction

The discourse on issues of barbarism and civilization in relation to Russia have been well studied in the recent academic literature. Several volumes containing quite thorough research into the subject have appeared over the last three decades (Scheidegger, 1993; Wolff, 1994; Poe, 2001; Velizhev, 2019). There is also an endless list of less comprehensive academic and popular books and articles dedicated to the search for Russia's place among civilized or underdeveloped nations with assessments of the various primary and secondary sources. However, despite how massive the literature is, there is still a lack of works discussing the ways in which ideas of barbarism and progress were used in the study of Russian history during the Enlightenment. This caesura is the reason I decided to join the international horde of scholars by making a small contribution to this astonishingly dense field.

As is obvious, the subject of barbarism, progress, and civilization in Russia is infinitely greater than the scope of a journal article. I have no intention of offering a comprehensive treatment of the subject. My goal is to study an Enlightenment perspective on barbarism and its opposites (enlightenment or civilization) in Russia's history with an emphasis on interpretations of the conflict between barbarism and progress. In other words, this study is focused on the Enlightenment vision of barbarism and civilization in the Russian past, the numerous meanings that the term *barbarism* had, and the role of the phenomena in country's history. I will try to show divergent opinions on the history of Russian society and its change (or inability to change) from barbaric to civilized. Historical treatises on Russia which lack the word *barbarism* or challenge the idea that Russia was once a barbaric commonwealth are also worthy of note.

In this work, I will pursue the goals and approaches usual for intellectual history. Probably, the most useful methodological approaches belong to the German and Anglo-Saxon schools: here, I refer to the German school of Reinhart Koselleck (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and the Cambridge-born Anglo-Saxon "history of concepts" (the main figures of which are Quentin Skinner and John Pocock). Both approaches are relevant for my study, but Skinner and Pocock's methods will be employed to a greater extent. Skinner's methodology has won wide acclaim in Russian academia in recent years (Timofeev, 2015) and has seen great success in studies of political ideas and social processes (Bugrov, 2015; Redin & Soboleva, 2017; Prikazchikova, 2018), and even in the studies of administrative development (Kiselev & Graber, 2015; Lazarev, 2017) during the Russian Enlightenment.

This study is mainly based on 18th-century Russian historical writings, as Russia's history was rarely examined closely in other European languages during the Enlightenment. There is another reason for the choice of source base: different European traditions and languages in the 18th century possessed slightly different understandings of civilization and progress. In French, civilization was more often used to talk about education and the refinement of manners (the French word *civilisation* was often translated as "polished" in 18th-century English); in Britain, *civilization* was more about economics, the perception of civil rights, industrial development, and

social progress; and in German the term had close ties with culture and the nation's spirit (Velizhev, 2019, pp. 34–50).

The types of historical writings used in this study vary from long narratives (Tatishchev, 1768; Shcherbatov, 1770; Karamzin, 1818) to reviews and publicist works (Boltin, 1788; Karamzin, 1991). It is difficult to draw a line between academic and amateur Enlightenment historical writing. Both groups are studied together in the Russian historiography, since the works of non-professional and professional historians had much in common in the 18th century.

It is necessary to describe how barbarism in Russian history was categorized, which nations were considered barbaric, and on which occasions the term was applied. It is also necessary to provide a comparative perspective. That means observing how historical Russians, their society, customs, etc., were juxtaposed to or equated with neighboring nations and societies. The primary sources mostly originate between 1750 and 1820. Although the word *barbarism* can be encountered in the connection to Russian history before 1750, the idea of a conflict between barbarism and progress had not yet clearly emerged. By 1820, the Enlightenment historical perspective had evolved into something very different, and therefore deserves special study.

European Notions of the “Barbarian” in Relation to Russia and 18th-Century Dictionaries

The historiography shows that the first modern accounts of travelers and various thinkers contained ideas about Russia's barbarian past and/or present. As the first eyewitness testimonies arrived, later travelers and writers began to expect barbarity and ignorance in Russia, especially from the common people: the whole country was branded as barbarous or savage. For example, the English traveler and merchant Richard Chancellor, despite his admiration for the Ivan the Terrible's court, called the people “barbarous Russes” (Cross, 2012, p. 18). Giles Fletcher, who was on a mission to Russia in 1588, was very critical of Russia's “true and strange face of a tyrannical state [...] without true knowledge of God, without written law, without common justice” (Fletcher, 1591, Epistle). As Anthony Cross writes: “For many in Britain, Russia represented an unknown; it conjured up images of a barbaric people living in arctic cold and ruled by tyrannical despots – a view established by English travel accounts of the 16th century” (Cross, 2012, p. 92).

All these stereotypes about *Moscovia* were common across Europe. Even those who had some sympathy towards Russia were certain that Russians had a kind of barbarous history. They were “formerly called Scythians” (Wolff, 1994, p. 10), as Captain Jacques Margeret put it, and were surrounded by “the most vile and barbarous nation of all the world (Cogley, 2005, p. 781).

Furthermore, in some European languages the words *Moscow* and *Muscovite* had negative connotations. For instance, there is the Italian word *Moscoviteria*, a derogatory literary designation of behaviour supposedly characteristic of Russians: the term *Muscovite* “could be equated with Asiatic” (Berezovich & Krivoschchapova, 2015, pp. 132, 147).

However, only in the 18th century was the almost unequivocally acknowledged barbarism of Russia placed on a scale of progress according to which all nations could be measured in compliance with universal laws of social development: this replaced the rather vague juxtaposition of Russia with “our” culture or religion, as was common among 16th- and 17th-century writers. As Larry Wolff has accurately concluded, “it was [...] the Enlightenment [...] that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of “civilization”, an eighteenth-century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism” (Wolff, 1994, p. 4). Paradoxically, the idea of Russia’s barbarism was reinforced at the time, when the country became much better known due to its military victories and active diplomatic travelling of tsar Peter (Redin & Serov, 2017, p. 477).

At the beginning of the 19th century, the discourse of barbarism and civilization even became a tool for justifying Napoleon’s campaign against the Russian Empire. There are numerous accounts of soldiers and officers from the 1812 campaign who labeled Russia “a barbaric country” and branded Russians as “barbarians”. Napoleon himself on Saint Helena claimed that “the courage of the French was defeated by frost, the fire of Moscow and Russian barbarism” (Segur, 1859, p. 311). Thus, the conflict between the two empires was interpreted as a conflict between barbarism and progress (civilization).

Civilization was represented in this conflict by Western Europe. Russia, due to its position on the map, was perceived as an Asiatic country, even if it possessed a European façade in the form of its capital. Count de Segur, a French envoy to Russia in 1784–1789, described St. Petersburg as a combination of “the age of barbarism and that of civilization, the tenth and the eighteenth centuries, the manners of Asia and those of Europe, coarse Scythians and polished Europeans” (Segur, 1859, pp. 329–330). His son Philippe-Paul, an army general who took part in the Russian campaign of 1812 and became the author of a memoir, used “barbarism” quite often, although mostly in relation to Cossacks or Bashkirs.

The position of Russia in between the civilized and barbaric worlds became a typical matter for reflection in the first decades of the 19th century both in Russia and in the West. In his *Lettres philosophiques*, Chaadaev wrote that Russia is “situated between East and West, resting with one elbow on China and the other on Germany”: “We should have combined within ourselves these two principles of intelligent nature imagination and reason, and unite in our civilization the histories of the whole globe” (Aizlewood, 2000, p. 28). Writing in French and using the word “civilization” quite frequently, Chaadaev was deeply pessimistic about the past and future of Russia. “We belong”, he wrote, “neither to the West nor to the East”: “We are an exception among peoples. We belong to those who are not an integral part of humanity but exist with the sole goal to teach the world some type of a pitiful lesson” (Aizlewood, 2000, p. 29).

Unlike “civilization”, the term “barbarism” has had a much longer history and possessed quite similar meanings in major European languages in the 18th century. The literal meaning of “barbarian, barbarous” etc. was “non-Greek or Roman tribes, which once lived by the borderline of those ancient states”. However, this meaning was quite specific, and another, figurative meaning was very widespread. Figuratively,

“barbarism”, as it was defined in an English dictionary from 1708, meant “inhumanity, cruelty”, while “barbarous” referred to “wild or rude people” (Kersey, 1708).

Ten years later, *Nouveau Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* provided almost the same meanings for *barbare* and *barbarie*, but with two significant additions. According to the French Academy, *barbarous* could mean “lack of politeness”. *Barbarian* or *barbarous* more often than not referred to a “broken language”, “a language, which has no relation to ours and which is harsh and shocking” (*Nouveau Dictionnaire*, 1718, p. 131).

Twelve years down the line, the new *Dictionarium Britannicum* mentioned both new meanings: “Barbarous [...] savage, wild, rude; also improper with respect to speech”; “barbarism [...] an impropriety of speech, a rudeness in language” (Bailey, 1730). “A form of speech contrary to the purity of language” was the first meaning of “barbarism” offered in the 1768 edition of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (Johnson, 1768). In 1781, the same definition was the first one provided for *barbarisch* in *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der Hochdeutschen Mundart*, a dictionary of the German language by Johann Adelung (Adelung, 1781). All dictionaries maintained “cruelty, cruel” as the proper synonyms for “barbarity, barbarous”.

By the last decades of the 18th century, the situation had changed significantly. With the appearance of a clear antonym for *barbarism* (i.e. *civilization*), the meaning of this long-extant word began to change. From the 1770s, the conception of “civilized or polished nations” influenced the meanings of *barbarism* in European languages. For example, the British clergyman and historian William Tooke when writing about Russia held that without “agriculture [...] the nations would be called savage”, while without commerce “they might be deemed barbarous” (Tooke, 1799, p. 231). This judgement is characteristically 18th-century British due to the peculiar perception of *civilization* as a term describing economic and social development. Such a view was not universally shared in France or Germany. However, there were some remarkable exceptions, such as the Göttingen professor August Schlözer, an anglophile and historian of Russia who maintained an understanding of barbarism and civilization very close to Tooke’s. The influence of Schlözer’s research was immense, particularly in the Russian Empire of Alexander I.

Barbarism Versus Progress in Russian History

The word *barbarian* and its derivatives can be found in the Russian language long before the 18th century. Obviously, the term was borrowed from Greek and became popular in Mediaeval Rus’. “Barbarian, barbarism, barbarous” had both literal and figurative meanings in Russian, as was the case in English, German, and French. The Russian Primary Chronicle called the cruel Biblical tribes *barbarians*. In 13th-century Old Church Slavonic texts, barbarism was a typical synonym for heresy (Avanesov, 1988, p. 359). 17th-century Russian inherited the latter meaning. In the Kievan *Synopsis* of 1674, the word *barbarians* is applied only to the Mongols and was often collocated with the adjective *nechestivyi* or *zlochestivui* (*Kievskii sinopsis*, 1836, pp. 125, 158), literally *dishonourable* and figuratively *sinful, godless or impious*. *Nechestivyi* was

routinely interchangeable with *pagan* or *non-Christian* in the language of the time (Shmelëv, 1986, p. 350).

The first comprehensive dictionary of the Russian Academy refers to the same two (literal and figurative) meanings of *barbarian* and its derivatives. It points out that the figurative meaning of *barbarian* was more popular in Russian at the time. *Barbarous*, according to the dictionary, meant “cruel, fierce, and inhuman” (*Slovar’ akademii rossiiskoï*, 1789, p. 492). However, the Academy’s dictionary, unlike its European counterparts, does not include the meaning “broken language”; apparently, this meaning did not exist in 18th-century Russian.

Barbarism had several meanings in the historical writings of the Russian Enlightenment. First, Russian authors used this term in the ancient style: barbarians are peoples outside Greece and Rome. The Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Roxolanians, and others were called *barbarians*, with references to ancient and Byzantine writers (Lomonosov, 1766, p. 51; Tatishchev, 1768, pp. 40, 123, 125; Shcherbatov, 1770, pp. 136, 49, 114). Figuratively, *barbarism* was often used as a synonym for cruelty, just as in most other European languages (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 291; Shlëtser, 1819, p. 223; Karamzin, 1991, p. 94).

Enlightenment Russian historians did not regard Russia as Asia. On the contrary, they believed that barbarians like the Huns or Mongols brought barbarism to Russia from Asia (Karamzin, 1818, p. 43). Catherine the Great stated in her *Nakaz* of 1768 that “Russia is a European state” (Velizhev, 2019, p. 71), and Russian intellectuals seemed to share this view. In the 18th century, Russia did not associate itself with Asia and connected barbarism with Asian tribes. This distinguished 18th-century Russian thinkers from their contemporaries in the West and from later Russian thinkers, who, like Chaadaev, the Slavophiles, and 20th-century disciples of Eurasianism, saw Russia as at least semi-Asian.

The Slavs were regarded by Greek and Roman authors as barbarians. 18th-century Russian historians seemed to accept this in two respects. Sometimes (although still quite rarely), they directly called the Slavs *barbarians*. Another method was to call the whole epoch *barbarous*, thus moving the emphasis from their ancestors to a vaguely determined area or group of nations.

It seems that the barbarism of the Slavs was a matter for debate, but the number and quality of works written in defense of these ancient ancestors was limited. Such texts are mostly restricted to the so-called “Norman” or “Varangian” question, which made its first appearance in 1749 during a discussion between Gerhard Miller and Mikhail Lomonosov, professors of the Academy. Miller, following his mentor Gottlieb Bayer, proclaimed that the Varangians (Scandinavians) had once ruled over Russia and founded its first dynasty. Lomonosov set out his objections, postulating that the Slavs had their own rulers. In the following decades, both sides had their disciples.

However, this early discussion had very little to do with the issues of social development, progress, etc. The divisive issue was ethnicity, principally the ethnic origin of Russia’s first princes. To this the idea of glory and splendor of national history was added. Both sides believed that conquests, battles, plunder, and military victories were symbols of national glory. In this respect, *barbaric* Slavic acts at the dawn of

their history were praised rather than dismissed. Lomonosov's fierce response to the idea of the Scandinavian origin of the Rurikids was grounded in the same logic: if the first prince of Russia (Rurik) had been a Scandinavian, this would bring disgrace on the Russian people (Bugrov & Sokolov, 2018, pp. 107–108). This is why although the word *barbarian* was (rather rarely) invoked by Miller and Lomonosov, neither found any conflict between barbarism and progress in the first centuries of Russian history. Moreover, Lomonosov did not hesitate to use “barbarian, barbarous” in reference to the Slavs (Lomonosov, 1766, pp. 19, 79).

Along with the negative connotations of the word *barbarism*, the concept of the noble savage also existed in 18th-century literature. This idea embodies the notion of people as yet uncorrupted by civilization. Many of the philosophers of the Enlightenment held that humans have an innate moral sense, a mirror of humanity's inherent goodness. This goodness can be preserved, but it is threatened by a “dirty” and immoral modern world.

It is interesting that Enlightenment European writers of the 18th century showed no inclination to portray contemporary Russians and their ancient ancestors as noble savages. Most probably, Russians did not resemble the sentimental archetypal look of a noble savage, in contrast to the native Americans or some other peoples discovered by Europeans. However, the idea of a noble savage had its place in 18th-century Russian historical writings. For example, Mikhail Shcherbatov applied this notion to the ancient Scythians, who once had “a higher standard of morals than the most learned nation in the world [the Greeks]” (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 10).

In the 18th century, there were two main approaches to the conflict between barbarism and progress. The first approach, which can be called “cultural” and had its roots in Greco-Roman narratives, implied that civilization is under constant danger from barbarism. The danger may come from without or from within (Ionov & Khachatourian, 2002, pp. 61–78). A great example of the practical application of this approach can be found in Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon portrayed the fall of Rome as a result of a deluge of barbarians made possible by internal crisis (Gibbon, 1891, p. 113). Even more interestingly, Gibbon fantasized about the possibility of a new barbaric invasion into Europe. He seems optimistic and suggests that European nations (including Russia) would withstand the invaders together (Gibbon, 1891, p. 493). Such a union of “civilized” nations would be unimaginable without a complete understanding of a principal conflict between civilization and barbarism.

Another approach was represented by a linear conception of progress. Adam Ferguson, a Scottish philosopher, was probably the first to introduce this approach in his *Essay on the History of the Civil Society*. Ferguson believed that every society goes through the same three stages in its social development. The three consecutive stages are: savageness, barbarism, and civilization (enlightenment) (Ferguson, 1782). This approach does not necessarily imply conflict, as barbarism was seen only as a stage. However, barbarous nations are such not because they are insufficiently “polished”: their aggression is caused by the pursuit of material goods, not an intense hatred of civilization. This approach became popular in Russia after 1800, when

British philosophy became better known. At the same time, August Schlözer's book about early Russian history was published: he promoted the Fergusonian triad.

At this time, the period when historians ascribed striving for glory to the ancient barbarians as a motive for military campaigns was coming to an end. The discourse on "glorious deeds and greatness" fell into decline: in its place, the main characteristics of barbarians became seeking profit ("predation") and amorality. Karamzin wrote that the barbarian invasion of Rome (which had earlier often been attributed to the Slavs) was caused not by the desire for glory, but the appetite for prey "which the Huns, Goths, and other peoples possessed: the Slavs sacrificed their lives to this, and were not inferior to other barbarians in this regard" (Karamzin, 1818, p. 58).

However, during the second half of the 18th and the early 19th centuries, the concept of "civilization" did not yet exist in the Russian language. As such, it is not fully correct to talk about a contraposition between barbarianism and civilisation. Nonetheless, the French word *civilisation* was well known among the European educated elites, who spoke French well. The French phrase "*civilisation en Russie*" would not have surprised the literate Russian public, since it was used in one of the chapters of Denis Diderot's book (Mezin, 2016).

Instead of the dichotomy between barbarism and civilisation, we find in 18th-century Russian an opposition between barbarism and enlightenment. Indeed, the concept of "enlightenment" was so close to the meaning of "civilisation", which became entrenched in Russian in the 1830s, precisely because the former was placed in opposition to barbarism by Russian history writers at the end of the 18th century. One of the meanings of *enlightenment* was the "softening of morals", society's achievement of a certain level of culture. The "softening of morals" was pointed out as one of the possible meanings of "civilization" in the *Complete Dictionary of Foreign Words* published in 1861 (Geïze, 1861, p. 549). Mikhail Velizhev observes that this was the first dictionary to cement the concept of civilisation in Russian, but we should note that Ivan Poplavskii's German-Russian dictionary of 1856 directly connected the two concepts (Velizhev, 2019, pp. 81–83). The other meaning of the word enlightenment, education, was also maintained in the 19th century as one of the meanings of the concept of "civilisation".

As soon as "enlightenment" was designated as a synonym for the later concept of civilization (at least in Russian), the opposition between barbarism and civilization could be extended to enlightenment. At the turn of the 18th century, barbarism was seen not only as alien to enlightenment but also as openly hostile to it. Nikolai Karamzin pointed out in his *History of the Russian State* that the conflict between barbarians and the Roman Empire was not merely a military conflict, but a horrible long-term war between "barbarism and civil enlightenment, which eventually ended with the downfall of the latter" (Karamzin, 1818, p. 12). In the war against civilized nations, barbarians always had an upper hand and a near certain chance of winning. This was not just because of their ferocity, military capabilities, or indefatigable character. Civilized or enlightened nations are susceptible to laziness and the corruption of morals, the main reason for their defeat. As Karamzin wrote, "pampered by luxury, Rome lost its noble pride together with its civil liberty" (Karamzin, 1818, p. 12).

However, the invasion of barbarians did not necessarily lead to the complete destruction of a civilized nation. Barbarians might enslave a more civilized nation instead of eliminating it. Although such enslavement certainly brought absolute disgrace on a nation, it gave its people a chance for future liberation. 18th-century Russian writers stated unequivocally that the Mongols were barbarians. The period of the Mongol rule was deemed a “yoke” (*igo* in Russian): *barbarous* was often the word used to describe it. It is interesting that Russian and European historians employed the same words about the period. In his *History of Russia*, William Tooke labeled the Mongols as barbarians, writing that they “marked their footsteps with barbarities and devastations”; he characterized the period of Mongol rule in Russia as “the yoke of the barbarians” (Tooke, 1800, pp. 240, 327). Tooke’s contemporary Nikolai Karamzin, in the *Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia*, called the period between the 13th and 15th centuries the “barbaric time of the Khan’s yoke”, noting that the Russian people “tamed by the barbarian yoke thought only how to save their lives and property and cared very little about civil rights” (Karamzin, 1991, pp. 22, 78). Earlier in the 18th century, Archbishop Feofan (Prokopovich) invoked the “barbarian yoke” to describe the aftermath of the Mongol invasion.

Moreover, 18th-century authors saw enlightenment as a reversible process. The entire matter could be returned to an earlier stage thanks to either internal or external reasons. The Mongol invasion was viewed as an obstacle in the path of Russia’s progress and was believed to have had a hugely detrimental effect on Russia’s morals, culture, literacy, and politics. From the 18th-century point of view, other events might also contribute and reverse the progress of enlightenment. Schlözer believed that the enlightenment of Russia, triggered by the introduction of Christianity, had been interrupted by “internal strife and the raids of the Kipchaks and the Mongols” and had therefore been postponed for 400 years (Shlētser, 1816, p. 181). All the cases mentioned by Schlözer represent incursions of barbarism into the territory of enlightenment. For a historical writer of the 18th century, the Mongols and Kipchaks were two barbarian nations, and the ruthless strife between the Russian princes was by no means an example of enlightened behaviour. Furthermore, Schlözer sincerely believed that the Russian conquest of Siberia had seriously damaged the enlightenment in Russia because the region was peopled with savage tribes.

Christianization as Civilization

It was almost a universal idea among Russian scholars from 1750 to 1820 that Russia took a path towards enlightenment after the baptism by Prince Vladimir in 988. Mikhail Shcherbatov wrote about the event: “The gloom of idolatry was changed thanks to the light of the holy Gospels, presenting to us a new condition in Russia: ferocious hearts softened by good moral teachings no longer appear barbarian to us. Although the ancient severity and remnants of idolatry still often occurred, virtues either equal to them or exceeding them presented themselves before our eyes” (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 271).

Ivan Boltin, on many occasions an opponent of Shcherbatov, agreed with him that Christianity began to enlighten Russia. Moreover, he pointed out the forceful character

of the baptism and explained that the Eastern Slavs withstood Christianization because of the principal conflict between their ignorance and paganism. This was a new explanation for the presumed conflict at the time of Christianization (Boltin, 1788, p. 543). At the beginning of the 19th century, Schlözer concluded that “the introduction of the Christian faith was” the strongest possible impetus for enlightenment (Shlētser, 1816, p. 181).

For enlightenment thinkers, the most important thing was that baptism brought with it not only faith but also Christian morality. Shcherbatov wrote that “Christian law, when directly understood, instructed us to honour our unity with our brothers: as a consequence of this teaching, barbarism was suppressed at its very roots” (Shcherbatov, 1774, p. 121). Lomonosov concluded that Princess Ol’ga “turned her thoughts to Christian law, in which she saw greater humaneness and enlightenment than in the earlier barbaric ignorance” (Lomonosov, 1766, p. 79). In his essays, M. M. Shcherbatov called the Greeks from whom Rus received baptism an “enlightened people” (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 270).

One of the main characteristics of an enlightened society was held to be its high level of morality in comparison with the preceding epoch (or, as Shcherbatov put it, its “softened morals”) (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 270). In contrast, barbarian society was characterised by its crude morality, which constituted its social unenlightened condition. According to views from the era of the Enlightenment, barbarian crudity in moral matters would be gradually overcome. Some historians, such as Shcherbatov, suggested that the meaning and content of historical development were determined by the “softening” and “improvement” of morality. Discussing the baptism of Rus, he wrote that upon Princess Ol’ga’s conversion to Christianity the new religion did not successfully spread “because of the crudeness of morals” (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 269). Rudeness was a characteristic of Prince Vladimir before Christianization. He conquered Cherson in Crimea and demanded baptism in return for the town. Immediately after the baptism his personality changed: unlike barbarians he kept his promise and returned Cherson untouched. It is interesting that real Vladimir probably destroyed the town, at least archaeological findings can be interpreted this way (Romantchuk, 2016, p. 204).

Enlightenment through baptism was sometimes connected with the spread of literacy. The Russian Primary Chronicle noted Prince Vladimir’s foundation of a school: “He took the children of the best families, and sent them for instruction in book-learning” (Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 1953, p. 117). Historians of the Enlightenment necessarily focused on this fact (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 215). Schools were important not only because they made people more educated but also because they facilitated the “softening of morals”. In Shcherbatov’s conception, Prince Vladimir very well understood “that the seven Holy Gospels, sown everywhere, could not take root in peoples converted from idolatry if the previous severity and ignorance [continued] to abide in them: for this reason, he instructed that a school be established” (Shcherbatov, 1770, p. 272).

Baptism was probably regarded as an escape from barbarism and a start to the enlightenment of the nation because the word *prosveshchenie* (enlightenment) has

close ties with religion in the Russian language. A modern dictionary of medieval Russian gives “baptism” as one of the five meanings of the verb *prosveshchati* – “to enlighten”. According to the dictionary, the noun *prosveshchenie* can be used not only as a substitute for the word *baptism* but also as a synonym for “a space where baptism takes place, a baptistery” (Bogatova, 1995, pp. 213–214).

Christian people could again become barbarians if they persecuted religion and the church. A remark of I. P. Elagin’s in an unpublished section of his *Experience of Telling Stories about Russia* is entirely indicative of this notion. Discussing the contemporary situation, Elagin wrote that the most beastly habits were currently being observed among the Turks and the French (this was during the events of the French Revolution). Elagin called both peoples barbarians (Elagin, 1791). Of course, calling the French a “barbarian people” might have been connected with more than just the persecution of the church; however, the context of Elagin’s comments allows us to suggest that it was the rejection of Christian morality by the Muslim Turks and the atheist French that, in his view, made these nations barbaric. It is curious that Schlözer, when discussing the same “anarchic” times of the French Revolution, did not refuse the French the title of enlightened nation; however, he did decisively condemn their crimes. Thus, each historian individually made their own decision about whether to label contemporary European countries as barbarian. In any case, by the end of the 18th century a specific set of barbaric characteristics had been formulated, which included crudity, ignorance, murderousness, rejection of religion and the church, and other crimes.

From the point of view of Russian history writers, enlightenment by means of baptism was not equal to true Enlightenment in the spirit of the 18th century. Rather, baptism was considered a step to enlightenment, the beginning of a long path; nonetheless, without this step, reason would never triumph. Furthermore, Christianity was portrayed as a sort of surrogate of Enlightenment for those social estates in which reason and science had yet to flourish due to their lowly position. In this regard, it necessary to once again turn to Shcherbatov’s essays, which are well known for their critical attitude towards the enlightenment of the peasantry. In his essay “On the Corruption of Morals in Russia”, he demonstrated that the measures taken by Peter the Great against superstition had both positive and negatives consequences. Shcherbatov considered the main negative consequence to be the “harm” done to peasant morality: “At a time when the nation was still unenlightened [...] by taking superstition away from an unenlightened people, he [Peter] removed its very faith in God’s law [...] superstition decreased, but so did faith”. “Morals”, concludes Shcherbatov, “for lack of any other [form of] enlightenment used to be improved by faith”. When the tsar began to suppress superstition, faith lost this basis and “began to fall into dissolution” (Shcherbatov, 1969, p. 155).

Surprisingly, this excerpt is somewhat close to what Georg Wilhelm Hegel had to say about the Enlightenment attack on miracles some 50 years later: “When all prejudice and superstitions have been banished, the question arises: Now what? What is the truth which the Enlightenment has disseminated in place of these prejudices and superstitions?” (Outram, 2013, p. 114). Hegel saw a severe danger

in the Enlightenment's reckless disregard for religion and was much concerned with the undesirable prospect of religion's complete destruction.

The great significance given to Christianization as a step forward from barbarism might seem quite counterintuitive when we talk about 18th-century thinkers. Indeed, many contemporary historians hold that the Enlightenment was "characterized by deliberate efforts to undermine religious belief and organizations" (Outram, 2013, p. 114). However, when we take a closer look at the issue, it becomes obvious that, while organized religion was indeed under attack from the best minds of the epoch, the significance and great influence of all the good religion brought (including literacy) was never disputed. Moreover, the fierce criticism of the Enlightenment was aimed mostly at "bad beliefs", namely miracles and superstitions. The idea of an omnipotent God was rarely in doubt: even when it was challenged, the debates revolved around the question of God's power and his willingness to intervene in the established laws of nature. As Keith Thomas argues, the Enlightenment view was confined to a God who worked "through natural causes" and "obeyed natural laws accessible to human study" (Thomas, 1983, p. 659).

The real picture of the Enlightenment's attitude towards religion is much more complex, especially if we depart from the views of a relatively small group of anti-religious French writers. In fact, Enlightenment thinkers provided different arguments to pursue a divergent set of purposes ranging from religious obscurantism to the promotion of religious orthodoxy. Furthermore, the Enlightenment saw the rise of powerful religious movements: The Great Awakening in North America, Pietism in Germany, English Methodism, and others. The Enlightenment did not see an absolute decline in religious belief, so there still existed grounds to regard Christianization as progress. Even the very first conception of civilization put forward by Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, in 1756 held that European civilization was based on Christian belief and its ideals (Ionov & Khachaturian, 2002, p. 59). This notion reflects 16th- and 17th-century perceptions of religion and its role in the battle against barbarism. In this context, it is interesting to mention that 16th- and 17th-century Europeans "represented the [Russian] land as decidedly un-Christian, cruel and barbaric, Asian as opposed to European, and some even suggested that the Russians were in league with the Turks and Tartars to destroy Christianity" (Cross, 2012, p. 135).

To sum up, we should not be surprised that baptism was regarded as a giant leap towards enlightenment by Russian thinkers. As Immanuel Kant famously put it, "we are now not living in an enlightened age, but we do live in an age of enlightenment" (Kant, 1784, p. 491). Equally, Denis Diderot, a great philosopher of the French Enlightenment, wrote in his *Sur la civilisation de Russie* that the progress of civilisation is a result of a social development, and civilisation can not be established from without. Diderot believed that Russia had embarked on the path to enlightenment, although barbarism still had a considerable influence (Mezin, 2016, p. 62). So, we see that even the strongest proponents and most beautiful minds of the Enlightenment believed that process was far from concluded by the end of the 18th century. Perhaps it had indeed started in the 10th century?

Barbarism in Russia and Scandinavia: August Schlözer's Perspective

August Schlözer, one of the biggest enlightenment names in the field of Russian history, wrote what is probably the most elaborate piece on history of barbarism in Russia. Schlözer's sources of inspiration were the works of Adam Ferguson. Schlözer admired the Scottish and English Enlightenment, could read English, and was acquainted not only with Ferguson's treatises, but also with works by David Hume, Edward Gibbon, and other minor authors. He regularly reviewed new publications from the British Isles in the several journals he edited.

Apart from his widely acclaimed book *Nestor. Russische Annalen in ihrer Slavonischen Grundsprache verglichen, übersetzt und erklärt* (Nestor. Russian Chronicles in the Old Russian Language Compared, Translated and Explained), Schlözer authored some publications on universal history. Especially popular was his 1779 children's book *Vorbereitung zur Weltgeschichte für Kinder* (An Introduction to World History for Children). In this book Schlözer formulated (like Ferguson) five fundamental factors for social progress from savageness to civilized status: lifestyle, climate and nutrition, the form of government, religion, and experience (of a nation or neighboring nations) (Shlētser, 1829).

At the turn of the 19th century, there were only a few authors who investigated Russian history within the Fergusonian (or British) paradigm of civilization. Semyon Desnitsky, a legal scholar at Moscow University, studied law in Glasgow and attended the lectures of Adam Smith. Desnitsky's own research was not specifically aimed at the issue of barbarism or progress, but he formulated a theory of four stages in world history, quite like what Schlözer and Ferguson had put forward. According to Desnitsky, every society goes from primitiveness through nomadism and agriculture to commerce (Ionov & Khachaturian, 2002, pp. 110–113). A universalist, Desnitsky made no exceptions for Russian history. In this respect he was close to Russian masons such as Ivan Lopukhin (Prikazchikova, 2018, pp. 713–719). Nikolai Karamzin, whose works enjoyed great popularity in the first decades of the 19th century, was somewhat connected with British thought. Karamzin used the word *civilisation* (although in French) and understood progress as a steady process from barbarism to enlightenment.

Unlike all of the above, Schlözer went very deep into the details and conceived his own conception of the civilizational development of Ancient Russia, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe. Although Schlözer did not mention the term *civilization*, he adopted *Aufklärung* (enlightenment) or *Kultur* instead: as I showed earlier, this was normal usage in the 18th-century Russian tradition.

The theme of the first volume of Schlözer's *Nestor* was the historical roots of nations. This was an important motif for early modern European historians. The creation of a glorious and ancient history was one of the most significant national tasks required of intellectuals. They had no doubts regarding the historical antiquity of nations. As Schlözer opined, "in the childhood of historical science [...] our great grandfathers assumed that since our ancestors have existed for more than 2,000 years, similarly [they assumed] each nation had to come into existence after the fall of the Tower of Babel" (Shlētser, 1809, p. 60).

As I discussed above, in 18th-century Russia the idea that the greatness of a nation's history was defined by its antiquity and the glorious deeds of their ancestors dominated. Therefore, Russian authors in the mid-18th century sought to describe, in as much detail as possible, the early history of the Slavs. All this was absolutely unacceptable to Schlözer. Indeed, he wrote his book as a refutation of the widespread and generally accepted reconstruction of the ancient history of the Slavs: "Better 600 years of authentic history than 3,000 years of fairy tales and fables", confirmed Schlözer in an earlier work from 1768 (Shlētser, 1809, p. 60).

Schlözer's main idea was the savageness of the Slavs before Riurik formed his new state. He suggested that the early Slavs were like "the inhabitants of Siberia, California and Madagascar: split into small hordes and lacking a political order, relations with other tribes, literacy, art, and religion (or only having a foolish religion)" (Shlētser, 1809, p. ND). His chief argument in favour of the savageness of the Slavs was theoretical: savageness is the natural condition of a people emerging from a primitive state. As Schlözer notes in his *Universal History*, all nations can be categorized as "savage, barbarian, or enlightened" (Shlētser, 1829, p. 59).

This was the key moment in Schlözer's historico-geographical views. He examined the social development of not only the Eastern Slavs but also of the entire region, which he dubbed "the High North". Besides Rus, Poland, the Baltic, Denmark, and Scandinavia belonged to this area. The notion of the High North was a manifestation of Schlözer's German-centric viewpoint. He juxtaposed this region with the Centre (Germany and Pannonia), which in turn was juxtaposed to the Northern Mediterranean (southern Europe), where the Greek states and the Roman Empire had once been located (Shlētser, 1809, pp. LE–LZ). Step by step, these enlightened peoples had discovered and enlightened Europe: around the 9th century, in the times of Charlemagne, they had discovered the High North.

According to Schlözer's theoretical postulations, the majority of nations received enlightenment from without. "The Germans", declared Schlözer in his *Universal History*, "were for 2,000 years half savage: The Romans educated them". After Germany was enlightened,

the Germans on this side of the Rhine, and especially in Francia, were appointed by fate to sow the first seeds of Enlightenment across the vast north-western world. Only with the help of the Germans did the Scandinavians begin, little by little, to become human. Prior to the arrival of the Normans, it seemed as if the Russian had been forgotten by the father of humanity because there, in the harsh north-western region, not one German landed on this side of Baltic Sea thanks to its great remoteness (Shlētser, 1819, p. 178).

After the arrival of the Scandinavians, Rus began to move from savagery to barbarism.

However, as I pointed out earlier, Schlözer argued that real enlightenment only began after baptism. This means that the real "enlighteners" of the Russian land were the Byzantines, from whom Rus accepted baptism in the 10th century. From the

Scandinavians “there remains not the slightest trace – even Scandinavian personal names disappear from the princely house after Igor and were replaced with Slavic ones” (Shlētser, 1809, pp. 21–22). The Scandinavians had not been enlightened when they took over Novgorod in the 9th century. Their way out of barbarism had just started, so they could not transfer enlightenment to the Slavs.

A heated dispute was sparked as soon as Schlözer’s book came out in Russian. His theories about the barbarism and savageness of the Slavs were heavily infused with the idea of a Scandinavian invasion at the beginning of Russian history, which provoked a negative response from the proto-Slavophiles and some conservatively oriented thinkers. They believed that Schlözer was driven by a prejudice that our Slavs were civilized by the Normans. At the same time, there were scholars like Karamzin and Mikhail Pogodin who followed the scheme and defended Schlözer and his ideas. Schlözer has long been a divisive figure in Russian historiography.

Schlözer’s main idea was not confined only to enlightenment as a synonym for social progress. Thanks to him, the early centuries of Russian history were placed on the developmental scale, and the country, although barbarous, was seen as gradually overcoming backwardness. This means that Schlözer, like Ferguson earlier, did not see civilization as the antipode to barbarism, but rather as a new stage in unstoppable social development. In this context, even the most barbarous facts of Russian history (the Mongol yoke, slavery, tyranny) were no longer seen as insurmountable obstacles on the pathway to civilization. On the contrary, civilization was deemed an inevitable station on the road of history. Following Schlözer, Karamzin wrote about barbarism of the Slavs. According to him, this was not a reason for national embarrassment, but was rather a common stage for all nations (Karamzin, 1818, p. 27). Schlözer’s British sources shared the same view. William Tooke, describing Russians at the time of Prince Sviatoslav, concluded that they were barbarians: but “all nations have once been barbarians” (Tooke, 1800, p. 181).

Conclusion

As we can see, enlightenment thinkers appropriated and enhanced a discourse on barbarism and civilization that had persisted in European thought for centuries. This discourse heavily influenced discussions about peripheral countries and cultures in the 18th century. There were numerous treatises discussing the exact position of Russia and its people among civilized/barbaric nations at the turn of the 19th century. Russian historical writers of the time followed the European fashion and reflected on the question. The word *civilization* may have not been incorporated into the Russian language before the 1830s, but, nevertheless, enlightenment was regarded as the antipode to barbarism. In this context, social development was often associated with Christianization, education, and the progress of morals. Russia’s place and role in European politics and culture were hotly disputed, and the assessment of the country’s level of development was an important matter for foreign and domestic thinkers.

This article was written as a contribution to a research project launched at Ural Federal University by a team of historians and philosophers. This project is dedicated

to concepts of conflict and concord in Russian and European intellectual spaces in the modern era. The very concept of conflict presupposes identifying the sides of any given encounter and the reasons for the clash. Civilizational differences (or at least as they appeared in the early 19th century) may well be regarded as such a reason. Such a difference shaped the ways in which each side understood one another and even helped develop the self-identities of both Russia and the West. Thus, the discourse on barbarism became a justification for Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812. The response to these ideas in Russian historical writings and media should not be omitted in future studies, both because of their potential in studying an early example of so-called "information war" and as an essential preliminary to the discussion between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers that sparked off in the 1830s.

At the same time, the conception of "a broader European civilization", which was put forward during Enlightenment discussions, worked as a staging ground for ideas of concord and peace between similar ("civilized") cultures. The dichotomic idea of barbarism/civilization survived long after its 19th-century heyday: to an extent, it still contributes to a stereotypical image of the world today, although in most cases it is not articulated openly. So, I believe that this article and the broader research project may be useful not only for educational or academic purposes, but also for achieving a better understanding of others in the current tumultuous political climate.

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