



The Drama of Russian Political History: System against Individuality (Eugenia & Hugh M. Stewart '26 Series on Eastern Europe)

Alexander V. Obolonsky

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In his introduction, Alexander Obolonsky notes that Russian history and life are full of paradoxes, most of them rather sad. Why, he asks, have the Russians, who have not only been endowed by nature with enormous natural, human, and intellectual resources, but who have also developed a great literary and scientific heritage and made significant contributions to world civilization, proved unable to arrange the conditions of their own existence to realize their great potential? “What fundamental deficiency,” he wonders, “made this great anomaly possible?” Alexander Obolonsky has undertaken the formidable task of reinterpreting Russian history from the Time of Troubles and the reign of Ivan the Terrible to perestroika, glasnost, and the dismantling of the Soviet system under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. He seeks to understand the present and assess the social trends that will shape the future through a careful reconsideration of Russia’s past. In his sweeping analyses of historical trends, Obolonsky structures his analytic narrative around two opposed concepts—a system-centered understanding of social existence in which individuals are viewed as “cogs” functioning for the sake of the whole, and a liberal person-centered paradigm in which society seeks to promote the development of the individual. Obolonsky distrusts all monistic explanations, from Marxism and geopolitics to scientific and technological models. He prefers to utilize a variety of variables—ethical, economic, sociopsychological, cultural—to explain Russian history, presenting its course as a long-term and ongoing struggle between two competing models of life. Obolonsky is neither a determinist nor a romantic. In his thought-provoking and historically grounded analysis, he challenges standard interpretations regarding Russia, the USSR, the role of political leaders, and the Russian people. Far from satisfied with Russia’s past, Obolonsky worries that Russia’s future will be tainted by the persistence of an anti-individualist mentality and attitudes shaped by centuries of autocratic rule and by a conservative mass consciousness rooted in Russian experience. Students of Russian history, politics, and culture, and also those interested in the broader issues of twentieth-century society will find this informative magnum opus of a senior Russian scholar insightful and thought-provoking.

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