

## The Book Review

For this course I have asked you to write a book review of either Halperin's Russia and the Golden Horde or Pavlov & Perrie's Ivan the Terrible. The instructions below apply to either choice.

The purpose of this exercise is to allow you to engage more deeply with one of these works and the associated issues, depending on your own interests & proclivities. It also is designed to compel you to identify the arguments or central findings of a book and to analyze with those critically. Finally, it is designed to establish a certain intellectual rapport between you and me, so that you have a better idea about what I am looking for and how I grade (and why), so that your research paper later in the course will be truly excellent. It is not my expectation that you will do any external research to supplement the required readings for the course on this exercise, though of course if you wish to do this – and it is hard to deny that this could well lead to a better paper – I will certainly be happy to advise you on what to read.

The purpose of a review is to relate the central findings of the book in question and to critique its methodology and conclusions. The review should recap these central findings – the "argument" – as clearly and fairly as possible, and should then discuss whether those findings are credible, convincingly argued, supported with sufficient evidence, and consistent with what you now know about Muscovy & Russia. What is the main thing that the author wants to convey in his/her book? Is there a single argument or perhaps a set of several assertions that perform this function? How does the author position him/herself with respect to other scholars who have gone before? What evidence does the author marshal to make his/her claim? How convincing is this evidence for those purposes? How much evidence can we realistically expect an author to produce on such a weird, murky, and distant time and place? Here you need to be careful in crafting your critique, since any aspect of a book that displeases you needs to be critiqued in distinctly intellectual terms and cannot amount simply to the idea that you didn't "like" it. You may find that you thought the book was excellent and really merits no criticism as such. In that case, dwell on the things that make the book convincing, its effective use of argument and evidence, and perhaps its implications for Russian history. ("To critique" is not a synonym of "to criticize".) Keep in mind that you will have read a fair amount – and thus you will *know* a fair amount – by the time you write the review. It would seem logical, therefore, to use materials from our course in the book review, to the extent that these are relevant to the points that you make. I would go so far as to say that a review that completely ignores the other evidence that you have at your disposal will probably not be very good. A solid review, then, will make use of the sources that you have at your disposal – *explicitly*.

The paper should be 4-5 pages in length with double-space, one-inch margins, 12-point font, no breaks between paragraphs, a title, some citation from the book under review, some reference to other sources, logically organized paragraphs, top-notch & awe-inspiring topic sentences, and so forth. How might you organize the review? Some sort of introductory paragraph would be nice – one that perhaps places the issues of the book in the larger sweep of early Russian history. Then I would probably take two or three paragraphs to recount the book's central findings (without engaging – yet – in critique). Then the last several paragraphs could deal with strengths and weaknesses of the book, while a final paragraph could offer a short, summary assessment. I would even be curious to know whether, in your humble opinion, I should assign this book again next time I teach the course.

As in almost all cases, the best way to approach this exercise is to learn by example: look at book reviews in major journals such as *Journal of Modern History*, *American Historical Review*, *Slavic Review*, *Russian Review*, etc. Perhaps the best bet is to check out the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, since the reviews there are usually somewhat longer and are therefore closer to the exercise I propose here. Pay close attention to how those reviews are structured and presented. As always, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.