The study of Russia’s domestic political struggle during the years of World War I began even before those battles were fully over; and it has continued, more or less unabated, ever since. Rich (though not coterminous) source bases existed both inside and outside the Soviet Union, and the dramatic and weighty events of the war years made for good history. All the ingredients for a great potboiler were there: high-stakes political gambling, conspiracy and intrigue, mysticism and murder. The main actors were distinctive personalities, and they were bold. Furthermore, since the leaders of the opposition were inclined both to rhetorical virtuosity and to the practice of history, they left fine sources and their own histories of the events they helped shape.

In the West, these factors combined with the unavoidable question of “what went wrong” in the Russian Revolution to produce an extremely

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Thanks to Ted Weeks and Peter Holquist for their suggestions regarding this piece.
distinguished lineage of historical works on the period.¹ In the Soviet Union, as the authors under review all argue in their surveys of the literature, the scope of investigation was rather more limited. Still, as they also make clear, scholars tugged on their Stalinist and neo-Stalinist leashes, eager to get at least a taste of the raw historical morsels that the period provided.²

The opportunity for young Russian scholars like those under review was, no doubt, clear. With the topic no longer restricted, with foreign scholarship now available, and with archival sources open, the chance to write the definitive work on wartime politics glittered before them. Armed with knowledge of foreign languages, strong interpretive bents, and a healthy dose of vigor, they threw themselves into their projects with abandon and emerged with significant findings. Fedor Gaida’s work, in particular, is so comprehensive and deeply researched that a Russian colleague of mine commented informally to me that he considered it “the last word” on the subject of Russian liberals in the war.

I cannot agree with this assessment, but Gaida himself claimed no such lofty pretensions. Instead, he wanted his work to be seen as the “beginning of a new stage” (11) in the historiography, one that was able to use fresh materials and the older works within a broad context. His main goal was to “examine

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the question of power and the methods of struggle for it” (31) in the Russian liberal movement during World War I and the February Revolution. In practice, this meant a study of Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) in Petrograd during these years.

The focus is announced on the cover of the book, which includes miniature photographs of 19 men and 1 woman (Ariadna Tyrkova). All of them were members of the Central Committee of the Kadet Party. Other important figures play significant roles in the story, notably the most prominent Octobrists and Progressists, the leaders of the public organizations that coordinated much of the wartime relief work, and the provincial Kadets who eventually became more radicalized than their compatriots in the capital. But these men are examined largely in the context of their relationship with the Petrograd Kadets. Gaida’s focus is defensible, for in important ways the Kadet Duma delegation was the beating heart of the “liberal opposition” throughout the war. Still, if a “new stage” in the historiography of the movement is in fact beginning, one hopes that future authors will devote more attention to a wider group of liberal activists.

Gaida divides his work into three large chapters, each representing a major period in the wartime struggle for power. The first chapter, “A Liberal Play (Summer 1914–Summer 1915),” deals with the first year of the war, describing the move away from the policy of “Sacred Union” that informed the first months of the war to the creation of a multi-party, moderate Progressive Bloc in the summer of 1915. The formation of the bloc and the ensuing demands on the tsar from the political center led to a major crisis that culminated in Tsar Nicholas II turning to the right, dismissing moderate ministers, proroguing the Duma, and taking personal control of the armed forces. The second chapter, entitled “Yearning for Influence (Autumn 1915–February 1917),” details the activities of the liberal opposition from the political crisis of 1915 until the eve of the Petrograd uprising in February 1917. The third chapter, “The Russian Revolution Elected Us (Spring 1917),” outlines liberal actions during the February Revolution and the first few months of the Provisional Government, ending more or less with the departure of the Kadet leader Pavel Nikolaevich Miliukov from the cabinet on 2 May 1917.

In broad strokes, Gaida’s narrative is a familiar one, especially to Western readers. Starting the war with virtually unanimous support among the country’s political elite, the tsar and his government frittered away that support over the course of two and a half years of war until finally no one remained on the tsar’s side of the barricades. The main moments are familiar, too. The first key moment was the decision of moderates to enter into the “Sacred Union” upon the outbreak of the war in July 1914 after the bitter and oppositional political history of the previous decade. The second came in the wake of the devastating military defeats of the spring and summer of 1915,
when many political figures in the parliament and the ministries alike futilely urged Nicholas to broaden his political base by bringing public organizations and opposition parties into the business of governance. The third came in November and December 1916, when the Duma returned from a long break, was immediately greeted by Miliukov’s famous “Stupidity or Treason” speech on 1 November, met for 18 stormy sessions, and then recessed for the holidays on 16 December, just hours before Grigorii Efimovich Rasputin was murdered. The fourth was the endgame of the crisis in February and March 1917, which concluded with the collapse of the Romanov dynasty and the establishment of opposition leaders as fragile new ministers of a revolutionary state.

Gaida agrees with most previous historians that though the Kadets were a varied lot, Miliukov proved able to carry the day in most of the key decisions of the party. Miliukov’s course was seen at the time and later as relatively moderate. In 1914, Kadets pressed for no concessions in return for their entry into the “Sacred Union.” In 1915, Miliukov successfully got his colleagues to agree to call for a “Cabinet of Confidence” (that is, one appointed by the tsar with the informal input of key social and political leaders) rather than a cabinet formally “responsible” to the Duma. In 1916, the “Stupidity or Treason” speech was in its own odd way moderate as well. By focusing attacks on the German influence at court (particularly the empress and Rasputin) and on a couple of ministers (especially Boris Shtiurmer), Miliukov stopped short of attacking the tsar personally and of calling for an end to the monarchy. Finally, in 1917, during the February Revolution, Miliukov was one of the most vocal proponents of keeping the monarchy alive, at least until the constituent assembly.

Gaida therefore agrees with most recent scholars about the basic contours of Kadet policy during the war, even though he claims a certain methodological novelty in his study. Arguing that earlier works on wartime liberals missed the mark because they focused too much on the social base of liberal parties or on proving that liberals were either “revolutionary or counterrevolutionary,” Gaida is eager to assert that he parts ways both from the “Hegelian–Marxist paradigm of historical inevitability” and the “positivist refusal to draw general conclusions.” “The political actions of liberals,” he proclaims, “can be evaluated only on the basis of their expediency in concrete historical circumstances, an expediency that can be determined only through an accounting of their own worldviews, opinions, and appraisals in relation to the surrounding reality” (33). This will not strike many readers as a groundbreaking innovation, though I suppose, given the works Gaida discusses in the mandatory comprehensive review of the Soviet literature, he might have a point in his specific historiographical context.
Still, there is a distinctive tone here, one that emerges when it becomes clear that what Gaida takes to be the “surrounding reality” of Russian liberals is the reality of the cynical political operative. Reading this book, I was repeatedly struck by the similarity between Gaida’s interpretive line and the whole genre of what Americans call “inside the Beltway” books—that is, works that focus on the claustrophobic world of elite politicians living in the capital city. Gaida insists that the decisions made by liberal oppositionists can be explained almost universally by reference to their calculations of political opportunity and risk. Thus he argues that the outbreak of the war was a “real gift” to Miliukov, for it allowed him “artfully to remove from the [party] agenda the most difficult questions about power and revolution…. The first explosions of shells muffled the voices of the Left Kadets. In addition, the war—in the opinion of the Kadet leadership—strengthened hopes for the postwar victory of liberalism in Russia and its ‘liberation’ from ‘internal enemies.’ The tactic of ‘sacred union’ in this way continued the prewar course of ‘isolating the government’” (57).

Likewise, the political stridency of the opposition in the summer of 1915 “was not dictated by the failures at the front as such.” Instead, it was brought on by fears that the “panic and pogrom mood” of the population would lead to an attack on the regime that liberals could not control (75). The “Stupidity or Treason” speech in 1916, in the same vein, was the result of Miliukov’s calculation that the country’s mood had radicalized in response to the supply crisis and “required the opposition to awake from its summer hibernation and to activate political struggle” (221). All this is to some extent true. The Kadets were no fools. As politicians, they continually evaluated the political situation and tried to make the most of their opportunities. There is, moreover, no reason to suppose that the Kadets were immune from the tendency of politicians to enclose themselves in hermetic systems in which every move is primarily evaluated to see who is up and who is down in complex games of status and power. It is therefore reasonable to pursue the hypothesis that Russian wartime politics is best understood through this rather cramped lens.

But to make this narrow interpretation believable, a historian must demonstrate that the political actors involved were in fact controlled by this sort of self-absorption. Gaida does not demonstrate this sufficiently. Kadet party discipline may indeed have been improved by the war, for instance, but it does not follow that this consideration determined Miliukov’s actions at the outset of the war. Miliukov was able to hold tactical political considerations in his head at the same time that he held broader judgments about the need for Russia to maintain great-power status and prevent German dominance in Eastern Europe, the desire to throw Russia’s historical lot in with Great
Britain’s and France’s, and, not least, a humanistic concern about the suffering that the war would bring.

Similarly, I thought Gaida’s interpretation was skewed by the same concerns of political gamesmanship when he discussed specific policy issues. While notable in many areas, it was most obvious in the analyses of nationality policy, especially on the Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish “Questions.” Here, too, Gaida might have been a bit more expansive. Nationality policy questions bitterly divided the Russian political elite, and the fault line often ran through the liberal camp itself. ³ Again, though, these sorts of issues were considered only when they touched on party politics, most notably in the period of the Progressive Bloc. Gaida is surely right that partisan politics was always important when these issues arose. It is clear that men like Miliukov understood that the short-term goal of maintaining alliances with antisemitic members of his political coalition would occasionally mean putting on hold long-term goals like the bill for establishing full Jewish equality.⁴

But these were deeply felt issues that were important personally and professionally to many members of the elite. As a result, principle frequently trumped practicality in liberal debates. In the midst of the Russian army’s “Great Retreat,” for instance, Miliukov argued at the June 1915 Kadet party conference that they should call the military to account for violating international law during the occupation of Galicia. Ariadna Tyrkova countered that this was a losing proposition and an “excess of academicism.” Russian soldiers were bleeding there, “and we, on the basis of the Hague Convention—may God grant it health (laughter)—are going to issue a reprimand [to the army]!”⁵ Miliukov responded that he “couldn’t agree with this very contemptuous attitude to the Hague Convention.” “The law,” he said, “is our only weapon.”⁶ It is difficult to see this appeal to the Hague Convention, which had so demonstrably failed in its purpose of preventing and ameliorating warfare in Europe, as a shrewd tactical move in the context of Russian politics in June 1915.

Thus the “yearning for influence” in the domestic structure of power was only one of the motivations and concerns of liberal oppositionists. Indeed, one of the remarkable aspects of Miliukov’s personal files is that they demonstrate how avidly he kept up with a wide variety of issues in Russia, at the

³See, for instance, Richard Pipes’s clear discussion of the Kadet fracas over Ukrainian policy that led to Petr Struve’s resignation from the Central Committee in June 1915 (Struve, Liberal on the Right, 210–19).
⁴Stockdale, Paul Miliukov, 230.
⁶Speech of P. N. Miliukov (7 June 1915), in ibid., 112.
The main problem with Gaida’s book is that one would not always appreciate that the “context” of liberal political action that Gaida promised to excavate went well beyond the city limits of Petrograd. In fairness, a book on how liberals sought to travel their “paths to power” should properly focus on the political jostling that Gaida so exhaustively describes. It is simply that following one’s personal path to power was not the only—and I would argue, in those times of catastrophe, not even the main—activity of liberal politicians who strongly believed in the cause of their country and deeply feared the potential consequences of revolution.

S. V. Kulikov’s book shares the same “Beltway” analysis, but from the other side of the political war. His goal is to understand the behavior of Russia’s “bureaucratic elite.” I began this book with high expectations, for a deep study of top bureaucrats has long been needed. There has been an unfortunate habit in the historiography of wartime politics to treat the bureaucratic elite as a bit of a rogues’ gallery. Russian political memoirists were not above reaching for telling *bon mots* in describing their colleagues or enemies, and historians have appreciated both the flavor and concision those epithets provided, especially since the revolving door of bureaucratic appointments leaves even specialists a bit dizzy. A similar need for a shortcut made attractive the explanation that Rasputin’s influence was responsible for most of the wartime administrative changes. The image of a charlatan leading a parade of fools did much to explain the tsar’s political collapse and relieved both contemporary commentators and later historians from having to explain the otherwise bewildering policies pursued by the emperor on the eve of his demise.

It is therefore salutary to have a book that so openly challenges the major premises of this interpretive line. In Kulikov’s account, the tsar, far from being a weak reactionary dominated by his wife, was a relatively consistent liberal reformer. His ministerial choices came from a bureaucracy that was itself dominated by other liberal reformers. Indeed, in Kulikov’s view, the top bureaucrats were themselves members of the intelligentsia. Rasputin and Alexandra played virtually no role in choosing cabinet members. Rather, the choices Nicholas made were more often intended to be concessions to the opposition, beginning with zemstvo men with gubernatorial experience and moving on quickly to Duma members on the right (Khvostov) and then the center (Protopopov). The effect of the book on someone familiar with the period is rather disconcerting, like reading Russian history in Bizarro world.

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7 Miliukov’s personal *fond* (f. 579) is in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiiskoi Federatsii, GARF) and contains thousands of files, many from the war years.
8 Kulikov defines “bureaucratic elite” to mean ministers, assistant ministers, department chiefs, senators, and the appointed members of the State Council.
Kulikov, like Gaida, divided his book into three long chapters, but his periodization is strikingly different. Chapter 1, “The Beginning and End of the ‘Sacred Union,’” lasts beyond the summer crisis of 1915 until the start of 1916. There are some good reasons for doing this, for in fact the big rupture in political life that occurred in the late summer of 1915, while sudden for dispersed Duma members and for those surprised by Nicholas’s departure for the front, was more prolonged for cabinet members. Some moderate ministers departed immediately, but important moderate figures like War Minister Aleksei Andreevich Polivanov and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Dmitrievich Sazonov lasted until March and July 1916, respectively. The key reason, however, for extending the first period of the war into 1916 was to place the figure of Boris Vladimirovich Shtiurmer at the center of the book. Chapter 2, “‘A Calm Benevolence’: The Premiership of B. V. Shtiurmer,” makes this centrality clear. This chapter extends until Shtiurmer’s dismissal in the wake of Miliukov’s treason charges in November 1916. The final chapter, “The Bureaucratic Elite during the ‘Storming of Power,’” takes the story up to the February Revolution.

Kulikov’s iconoclasm extends well beyond his attempt to rehabilitate Nicholas II. Indeed, having tried to restore faith in the emperor’s political judgment, he goes on to venture the same with Boris Shtiurmer, a man who has traditionally been seen as one of the most loathed and least effective tsarist ministers in history. The result is, frankly, shocking. On the first page of chapter 2, I raised an eyebrow at a chapter title that suggested that the premiership of Shtiurmer was either calm or benevolent, much less both. Learning a bit farther down that Shtiurmer had a reputation as a “master of political compromise” caused a bit of a gasp. Reading on the final line of the page that Shtiurmer had consistently displayed the “authenticity of his liberalism” made me deeply suspicious (165). This was, after all, the man whom Miliukov had directly accused of either “stupidity or treason” and whom the French ambassador called, in a series of the scalding epithets alluded to above, “worse than a mediocrity, with limited intelligence, mean spirit, low character, questionable honesty, no experience, and no idea of statecraft.”

To make sense of these statements, one must understand Kulikov’s main argument about wartime politics. Kulikov believes that the main struggle was not between “state” and “society,” between “liberals” and “conservatives,” or even between the Duma and the government. All these interpretations, he believes, derive from a misunderstanding of the political views of the tsar and his top servitors. They were the real “liberals,” since the Kadets had moved so far to the left that they should be considered “radical,” and since the right

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was occupied by black-hundredist extremists from whom the tsar and his government continuously strove to “distance” themselves. At first, one might get the impression that in referring to figures like the emperor or Shtiurmer, Kulikov is using the term “liberal” a bit colloquially and sloppily to refer to the political center, but in fact he means something more by liberalism. The “state liberalism” that the bureaucratic elite shared was, according to Kulikov, very similar to the conservative-liberal views propounded by Boris Chicherin, widely considered to be the founding father of Russian liberalism. The real contest was within two strands of this state liberalism. The first, more traditional strand Kulikov calls “dualist.” It was from this strand that the Fundamental Laws derived, and it was based on the notion that popular representatives were desirable but should be limited strictly to legislative functions. The tsar, Kulikov writes, would hold absolute power, but only in the realm of administration.

In contrast, the “parliamentarists” believed that popular representatives should have a say in the actions of the bureaucracy. They were forever pushing for “responsible cabinets” or other forms of “interference” (vmeshastel’svo) in the government. “Dualists” resisted this interference with vigor, and their resistance was liberal in nature: “Dualists were passionate supporters of the most basic principle of classical liberalism, the principle of the separation of powers. This was the root of their disagreement with the parliamentarists.” The tsar and other committed “liberal dualists,” Kulikov continues, were therefore followers of Montesquieu, while the so-called liberal “radicals” were followers of Rousseau (18).

This is a stunning and basic misunderstanding of both liberal political theory and of Russian political history. The “separation of powers” does not mean that an unbreachable wall should be established between the branches of government. To the contrary, the functional and institutional separation of powers requires oversight of each branch by the others. Otherwise, as political theorists (and Russian politicians) fully understood, the legislative branch becomes nothing more than a talking shop. If legislators cannot know whether the laws they pass are being enforced properly and cannot call the executive branch to account for a failure to execute the laws, they do not really have legislative powers. If courts are not independent, they, too, have no real constitutional function. Oversight and “interference” in the working of all branches is important, but it is especially important for liberal theorists that the executive branch be limited in the exercise of its powers, since the courts and the legislatures have no real power unless executive agents perform according to the legal precepts they establish. At best, in conditions of unfettered executive power, legislators and jurists play an advisory and consultative role, in other words, exactly what Nicholas II thought the role of these political institutions should be.
One might also note that even in the best light the “dualists” were not exactly forwarding a program of balanced power. For all the talk of the legislative branch’s aspirations to influence the executive, it was the tsar who was allowed to “meddle” in legislative activities by the Fundamental Laws. The tsar appointed half the membership of the upper house, held veto power, could dissolve the parliament, and could simply work around legislators by emergency decree. It is really very difficult to swallow the idea that the emperor (or Kulikov’s other “dualists,” like Ivan Logginovich Goremykin) was a “passionate supporter” of the “separation of powers.” No matter how you slice it, Nicholas II was not a liberal, and the Russian empire was not a liberal state.

This is not simply a terminological quibble, for Kulikov’s argument (and the attempt to rehabilitate the tsar and his conservative ministers) depends on the proposition that the “dualists” were acting soberly and responsibly in a conciliatory fashion throughout the wartime political crises and that the conflict stemmed from the unreasonableness of radicals posing as liberals. Over and over, Kulikov insists that the tsar and his “dualist” ministers did everything they could (save crossing the Rubicon to the “parliamentarist” side) to make concessions to the opposition. The blame for the political war, in Kulikov’s view, therefore lies squarely on the shoulders of the oppositionist “parliamentarists.” Nicholas’s only fault was to believe that he could reach a compromise with the other side. Indeed, Kulikov begins his book with de Tocqueville’s famous passage on the danger that reform poses to old regimes. What brought down the empire, in this interpretation, was not mismanagement by the tsar or his government but betrayal at all levels save the top.

Kulikov is at pains to argue that the government, far from persecuting the opposition, heavily subsidized it in the form of state monies to the war-relief projects run by public organizations openly hostile to the tsarist order. He presents several tables showing how much more money was given to public organizations on the “left” than to those on the “right.” It follows, for Kulikov, that this is evidence that the tsar was acting in conciliatory fashion to the Left and “distancing” himself from the Right. As further proof that concessions were breeding betrayal, he outlines the alliances made by “parliamentarist” ministers with colleagues in the Duma and describes in detail how even the members of the State Council appointed directly by the tsar turned against him during the war. These alliances, facilitated by the umbrella of the Progressive Bloc, turned reliable institutions away from the emperor’s control. Likewise, he identifies General M. V. Alekseev as the lead figure in army coup-plotting, an argument that led even Kulikov’s editors to write a most unusual disclaimer in the form of a footnote noting that they felt that his evidence was not sufficient to back up this claim (205). Finally, he describes the ways that even the royal family got involved in the...
plotting to overthrow Nicholas, some of it conducted at the Imperial Yacht Club in Petrograd. (Note to aspiring monarchs: if political dissatisfaction reaches epidemic levels even among your uncles at the yacht club, it’s time to start looking for a comfortable island home.)

Most of Kulikov’s claims have some documentary basis, and some (like the plotting of the grand dukes) are widely accepted by historians, but Kulikov tends to be indiscriminate in his treatment of sources, believing virtually everything he reads if it backs up his argument. To take the military coup as one example, there were, of course, people (Mikhail Konstantinovich Lemke in particular) who reported widespread discussions of coups during dark days at Stavka. This in itself is not particularly surprising given the experience of the war years, and it is entirely reasonable to believe those sources that indicate that Alekseev had knowledge of these rumors and may have even had open discussions about them. It is even more certain that Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the former supreme commander of the army, was approached by oppositionists during the 1917 New Year holidays with pleas to lead a coup and that he took two days to think about it before saying no. But the fact remains that no coup was ever launched against the tsar. It was only after the capital was lost to the crowd that the top members of the political elite stepped forward to demand abdication. In his discussion of conspiracy, as elsewhere, Kulikov’s historical judgment is shaky, which is a shame, since there is so much material here on bureaucratic politics during the war and so many interesting angles that one would like to have more confidence in the author.

Nikita Dedkov’s work is of a different sort than those of Gaida and Kulikov. It deals with liberalism during the war, but only briefly. Dedkov attempts to describe the “conservative liberalism of Vasilii Maklakov.” Maklakov was an extremely interesting figure. He was a leading Kadet most noted for his willingness to deviate from the party line (normally erring on the side of caution) and for his reputation as one of Russia’s very best orators, a skill he honed as a famous defense lawyer in the waning days of the empire. After the Revolution, he was well known for sparring in print with Miliukov on the reasons for the liberal defeat in 1917. Again, this is a three-part

11 A much superior discussion of these coup plans, and Alekseev’s position on the eve of the February Revolution, has recently been presented by Oleg Airapetov, who makes a similar case for the damage done by Russian liberals during the war but does so far more judiciously. See O. R. Airapetov, Generaly, liberaly i predprinimateli: Rabota na front i na revoliutsii (1907–1917) (Moscow: Modest Kolerov i Tri kvadrata, 2003), 191–204.
work. The first chapter, entitled “Signposts,” runs through the major events of Maklakov’s life in Russia, from his childhood to his rocky educational experiences (he was expelled from the Natural Sciences Faculty of Moscow University for student activism, allowed to return to the History Faculty, then denied a professorship on the basis of his past miscues), to his career as a lawyer (in which he defended at various times both pogromists and Mendel Beilis, the Jewish man framed for the ritual murder of a young Christian boy), to his activities in the Kadet Party and in the Duma. Chapter 2, “Independent Strength Is Good,” deals largely with Maklakov’s interactions with Leo Tolstoy and Tolstoy’s influence on him. Chapter 3, “Conservative Liberalism,” outlines the major features of Maklakov’s liberal thought.

Maklakov is an important figure who tells us a great deal about Russian liberalism, including Russian wartime liberalism, and Dedkov writes well about him.13 In many areas, however, more depth would have been useful. Much of the problem is structural. Determined to write a biography of a major figure, an account of the interaction between liberalism and Tolstoyanism, and a description of the elements of conservative liberalism, all in the space of less than 200 pages, Dedkov frequently leaves central questions unanswered. Take, for example, his study of Maklakov’s early years. It is interesting, of course, to learn about the parade of liberal figures who came through the house in Maklakov’s youth, but why the detail? Dedkov would like to suggest, reasonably, that much of Maklakov’s temperament and many of his later political positions were foreshadowed in his home life and years of schooling. But there is a problem: Vasilii’s brother Nikolai grew up in the same house and became one of the most right-wing ministers in the government. Dedkov notes this problem (27) but fails to pursue the issue. Nikolai appears again briefly later, when Dedkov reports that the brothers had stopped speaking to each other as early as the 1890s (65), but this intriguing story of how two close brothers became estranged and ended up as leaders of opposite political strands at the close of the empire is not told. One suspects the issue here was a lack of sources, but the need to elide what seems to be the most important familial story calls into question why Dedkov used valuable space to describe Maklakov’s childhood home. That space would have been better used to examine Maklakov’s later career as a lawyer, which Dedkov leaves out because he feels it would take him “too far away from the history of social thought” (55). Since one of the core features of Maklakov’s “conservative liberalism” was that he took the rule of law to be a bedrock liberal and practical principle, it would seem that more time spent on his legal career and less on his childhood might have been helpful.

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Similarly, Dedkov is a bit weak on Maklakov’s career as a politician. Of special interest for the purposes of this essay is Dedkov’s thin treatment of Maklakov’s actions in the war years. He believes that Maklakov was “surprisingly passive” right up to his “unambiguous declaration of war” on the government (106–7) on 3 November 1916, two days after Miliukov had done the same. This claim is in sharp contrast to Gaida’s description of the key role that Maklakov played in serving as a mediator between parties in the Progressive Bloc and in providing much persuasive support for Miliukov’s moderate inclinations at key Kadet meetings. The published records of Kadet party conferences back up Gaida’s interpretation. Maklakov was as vocal and controversial during the war as he was after it.14 Gaida’s book is not listed in Dedkov’s bibliography, even though it was published two years earlier. For questions regarding liberals during the war, it is already evident that Gaida is required reading if one is to avoid mistakes like this.

The section on Tolstoy seems curious at first, for the core of Maklakov’s conservative liberalism is his thoughtful understanding of the role of the state in the liberal order. He realized that the dilemma of liberalism was that a strong state was necessary to protect individual rights but that too strong a state would encroach on those very rights. Like liberals around the world, Maklakov saw the rule of law as a possible solution to this dilemma, since it would both protect the security and liberty of citizens and provide a check on executive power ambitions. This was a far more sophisticated model than Tolstoy’s often crude characterization of the state as the simple embodiment of violence and coercion. As Dedkov himself notes, Tolstoy was “indifferent” to the form of the state and held frankly anarchist views (182). Indeed, Dedkov admits that in concrete terms the only “influence” that can be traced directly to Tolstoy was Maklakov’s principled opposition to the death penalty and, to a lesser extent, his distaste for war (139–40).

The real issue, of course, is not that Maklakov borrowed Tolstoy’s ideas but that he was attracted to Tolstoy’s vision of morality, humanity, love, and respect for the individual. The long friendship between Maklakov and Tolstoy does much to prove that there was a common moral ground shared by oppositionists in the late imperial period. Not all of them threw on peasant smocks and took out their hoes, of course (though Maklakov did visit a Tolstoyan commune early on). Most instead sought to act within the world of states, nations, and empires rather than outside it. Finally, Dedkov is surely right to suggest that Maklakov’s long association with Russia’s most prominent writer said something not only about Tolstoy’s attractiveness but about Maklakov’s own intellectual and moral substance.

14 See, for instance, the controversy surrounding his 7 June 1915 speech in S’ezy i konferentsii Konstitutionno-demokraticheskoi partii, 89–91.
The final chapter is Dedkov’s attempt to describe in some detail the content of Maklakov’s “conservative liberalism.” He first argues that despite accusations to the contrary by Maklakov’s contemporaries, he was a true liberal. As Dedkov notes, many have stressed that Maklakov belonged to the right wing of the Kadets and was often inclined to Octobrist positions. Maklakov himself at one point even ironically commented to his colleagues that “I’m an excellent Kadet. I accept the whole program, with the exception of the forced alienation of land, universal suffrage, and equal rights for Jews” (173). But Dedkov counters that despite this fact, Maklakov never flirted with joining the Octobrists and stayed a Kadet to the end.

Maklakov stayed with the Constitutional Democrats because he believed that the most important political task before Russia was the establishment of a state based on the rule of law. Russia needed a real constitution, and the Kadets were the party for ideological constitutionalists. Dedkov’s treatment of Maklakov’s political thought, which was never really laid out fully in treatise form, stresses Maklakov’s essentially liberal belief that an effective but limited state was the key to the cause of liberty. As he would succinctly put it in the 1920s, “The true purpose of the state is revealed in the area of culture: to build conditions for the people in which its free energies may develop and flower. That is a great deal, but that is also all it should do [Eto ochen’ mnogo, no eto i vse]” (154). We have already mentioned Maklakov’s second liberal tenet: the importance of law and the rule of law in the proper function of political and social systems.

Finally, Dedkov describes Maklakov’s thoughts on “Evolution and Revolution.” This was, of course, a major issue for Russian liberals. On the one hand, being very conscious that they lived in an illiberal state, they actively sought a fundamental change in Russia’s political system. On the other, they all knew that full-blown revolutions destroy the state, and along with it the very rights and security that they hoped to ensure. Ideally, all liberals would have preferred that Russia adopt a constitution and develop a functioning democratic order without major upheaval, but the likelihood of such a transformation depended in the end on the willingness of the autocrat to renounce autocracy. Maklakov was both patient and relatively optimistic, and this led him to condemn the revolutionary path for most of his career. He saw, along with all his colleagues, that the October Manifesto and the Fundamental Laws had not made Russia a constitutional state, but in contrast to those in the left wing of the party who saw the concessions of 1905 as the limit of what the tsar would countenance, Maklakov had hopes that they were just the first in a series of evolutionary steps that would eventually result in constitutional rule. That said, Maklakov openly acknowledged the right of the people to revolt. If the state had the right to defend itself from attack from subversives, so too did people have the right to lash out violently to overturn regimes that suffocated them.
But Maklakov believed that such revolutions were unlikely to turn out well, in large part because he did not trust the masses, least of all the Russian masses, to construct just systems of governance. This was the core of the “conservative” aspect of Maklakov’s “conservative liberalism.” Maklakov thought that Russia’s cultural level was low and that given the chance, Russian citizens would seek violent retribution rather than the creation of a liberal order. Dedkov links this attitude primarily to Maklakov’s experience as a lawyer, and this interpretation makes some sense. To take just the best example, Maklakov, in contrast to much of Mendel Beilis’s defense team, urged that they should not attempt to save Beilis by condemning antisemitism, feeling that this would not play well with a local jury. Instead, he argued that they should demonstrate that framing anyone, even a despised Jew, was not only antithetical to the notion of justice but constituted an insult to Russian statehood. Maklakov won the argument, and he won at trial, too (64–67).

He took the same position on the “Jewish Question,” believing that making Jewish equality a key part of the program was a mistake. Instead, he promoted the idea that they should press for full civic equality for all citizens, which would solve the question without mentioning Jews. This distrust of one’s fellow citizens is indeed “conservative,” and it is awkward for liberal theorists, but it has been a part of liberalism from the beginning. Dedkov is quite right to insist that Maklakov’s combination of views marks him as a conservative liberal rather than a liberal conservative. This is an important distinction, for it helps establish the boundaries of the liberal camp in late imperial Russia, boundaries that are occasionally difficult to determine.

It is worth noting at this stage that none of these authors ever defines precisely what liberalism is. This is not necessarily a problem, as there is no firm agreement on a definition that would obtain in all times and all places—even among reference works from a single publisher, Oxford, there are six different definitions from six different books. I would define it as the doctrine that seeks to guarantee individual rights within a stable, just, and democratic political order, but this definition begs equally large questions about the definition of “rights,” “justice,” and “democracy.” This conceptual amorphousness has its drawbacks: it gives space to scholars like Kulikov to

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claim that Nicholas II was a liberal, for instance. But it also has its strengths, most notably that it can encourage historians to understand liberalism as a dynamic force that can be properly understood only within specific historical contexts.

Dedkov missed his opportunity to show the dynamism of Russian liberalism when he decided not to undertake a serious study of Maklakov’s political evolution during the war years. This is a shame, as Maklakov’s journey is perhaps the best evidence of how Russian liberalism was transformed during that era. Indeed, at each key moment of crisis, Maklakov expressed the liberal dilemma in more crystalline ways than any other figure. The first such moment came on 27 September 1915, in the wake of Nicholas’s turn to the right, when Maklakov published an essay entitled “Tragicheskoe polozhenie” (A Tragic Situation) in *Russkie vedomosti*. In that piece, Maklakov introduced the memorable image of the Russian government as a “crazy driver” racing along narrow cliffs, dangerously out of control. The dilemma for the passenger was that he didn’t know whether it was more dangerous to let the driver continue or to try to take hold of the wheel to help stabilize the situation. In addition, Maklakov asked his readers to imagine that their mother was in the back seat, completely dependent on the passenger’s decision. On the one hand, it raised the stakes of the gamble, for failure would mean not only one’s own death but that of loved dependents as well. On the other hand, he wrote, what if “your mother, seeing the danger, asked you to help and, not understanding your conduct, accused you of inaction and indifference?” The answer to this dilemma in 1915 for Maklakov and the Kadet Party as a whole was to refrain from taking the wheel, in large part, as Gaida succinctly puts it, because they were keenly aware that the tragedy was compounded by the fact that, though they were acquainted with the theory of driving, they had no experience of driving and didn’t really know how the machine worked (Gaida, 161).

A year later, however, Maklakov (again, along with the rest of the Kadets) had clearly decided that it was time to wrest control from the driver. Maklakov’s speech in the Duma on 3 November 1916, two days after Miliukov’s explosive “Stupidity or Treason” speech, has regrettably gotten less historical attention than Miliukov’s. While Maklakov’s speech lacked the memorable slogan, it was, if anything, even more relentless in its logic. He asked at the start why so many Russians felt that they were facing a “new and terrible danger.” It was not, he insisted (correctly), because of military failure in late 1916. To the contrary, he argued, the situation at the front was promising to turn in Russia’s favor. It was no secret that “the [military]
production of our factories increases with each month … while the military exhaustion of Germany is becoming obvious to everyone.” It was rather behind the lines that something resembling a “military panic” was imminent. The reason for such a panic “is always the same: the troops stop believing in their leaders … the horrible rumor ‘we’ve been betrayed’ creeps in, and when that happens, then the idea of a common cause is lost, then the ability to obey is lost, then everyone begins to think only about himself—every man for himself—and then the panic begins.” That loss of faith, Maklakov argued, had already occurred at home, and it would soon spread to the front. Furthermore, and most important, faith had been lost not because of any specific mistake by the government. “An incident? No, gentlemen, it is not an incident, it is the system…. No, it is not an accident, it is the regime, that accursed, old, obsolete but still living regime that is the cause of everything.” The conclusion was clear enough: “The old regime and the interests of Russia have now separated, and before every minister there stands a dilemma: if he is chosen, will he serve Russia or serve the regime, for serving both is just as impossible as serving both Mammon and God. (Prolonged applause from the left part of the right of the hall, the center, and the left. Voices: Bravo.)”

For everyone else, the choice had become much clearer, for the “limits of the long Russian patience” had been reached. “And don’t let Markov-2 [a right-wing deputy who had earlier accused Miliukov of treason] think that I and others are calling for revolution. No, gentlemen, not at all, but it is no longer necessary to do so. The revolution is being brought about from the ministerial benches.” As we noted above, the reason for Maklakov’s resistance to revolution throughout his career had been his patience and his faith that the tsarist government had the potential to reform. With that faith lost, he had become a revolutionary. His advice to his Duma colleagues reflected this change and his understanding that Duma moderates lagged behind much of the population in this regard. They had been followers, but now they had to lead or “another catastrophe” would befall Russia. “We can no longer work with this government,” he argued, “we can only hinder it.” Maklakov’s new revolutionary disposition, his effort to grab the wheel from the crazy driver, was evident.

With the entire political elite now lined up against the tsar, some on the right still desperately clung to the hope that Rasputin was at the heart of the political disaster. The main plotters, Prince Feliks Feliksovich Iusupov, Vladimir Mitrofanovich Purishkevich, and Grand Duke Dmitrii Pavlovich, began reaching out to moderates in ways more appropriate to coalition-building than to a murder conspiracy. Though no moderates were foolish enough to join in on the night of the killing, they were informed of the conspiracy well ahead of time. After the 3 November speech, which Iusupov took to be directed at Rasputin, Maklakov was invited to join the band of
assassins. As Maklakov correctly pointed out later, he had not mentioned Rasputin in the speech; more to the point, the whole thrust of the speech was that the problem was “systemic” (i.e., the autocracy as such) and not “accidental” (i.e., Rasputin’s strange influence). Still, Maklakov listened and then kept silent, admitting later in life that he was certainly legally guilty of conspiracy in the act. The willingness of a lawyer with a fixation on the rule of law to commit a felony and conspire in assassination demonstrates how desperate those last months of the old regime were for Russian liberals, now convinced that the tsar was driving them off the cliff but unsure of how to save the car from crashing.

Maklakov’s different varieties of anguish during the war are somehow not fully felt in these books, a lack of empathy that extends beyond Maklakov personally to the liberal movement as a whole. Gaida certainly comprehends liberal politicking, and Dedkov ably explicates the conceptual issues that were central to discussions of Maklakov’s brand of conservative liberalism, but neither really seems able to convey the complexity of liberal commitment sufficiently. In part, this is due to a certain static quality that pervades all three of these books, a quality that fails to capture the organic development of Russian liberalism during the war years. For Dedkov, conservative liberalism was a political program that Maklakov elaborated more fully as time went on but that was a more or less consistent guiding principle throughout his adult life. For Gaida, understanding political tactics means understanding the reasons for liberal policy choices. For Kulikov, the insistence that the political debates of the era can be reduced to a struggle between “parliamentarists” and “dualists” is a constant fixation. For all their differences, all three writers assume that the major actors of this period had stable political selves and political desires that varied only due to tactical considerations.

This is an unwarranted assumption. War everywhere fundamentally challenges liberal views and politics. As Clausewitz noted long ago, military action has its own ruthless logic, and that logic is not liberal in nature. Those only weakly persuaded by liberalism rapidly desert, and even committed liberals may experience periods of real self-doubt. The context of liberal politics always changes in the midst of a war. In particular, I think that we should take the politicians of the day seriously when they describe their own feelings of crisis and impending doom. Maklakov was sincere and genuinely worried that the tsar was driving the country into the abyss. When Polivanov appeared in the Council of Ministers to describe the position at the front on 6 August 1915, he was so upset that he was visibly shaking. When oppositionists repeated time and again their fear that Russia had lumbered into a political dead end from which there was no good escape, it was an

expression of despair, not opportunity. This despair was private as well as public. Aleksandr Mikhailovich Koliubakin, a founder of the Kadet Party and member of its Central Committee, was killed at the front in 1915, as was Miliukov’s son Sergei. If we want to argue that wartime politicking was a sort of gambling, then we must at least acknowledge that these politicians were playing with their own money, not that of the house.

This failure to account for the emotional investment liberal politicians made in the policies they forwarded has serious repercussions. Most notably, the focus on political gamesmanship rather than political substance leads these authors to misunderstand the basic context of wartime politics. That context was not primarily the widened field of political opportunity. The major story of the war was that all these politicians witnessed the collapse of the Russian state, a disintegration that horrified them in its details (needlessly slaughtered soldiers, millions of refugees, and hyperinflation, to name a few) and made them deeply fearful about the future. State failure was taken for granted by the actors at the time and later in their memoirs, but it is treated too casually in these works. We cannot understand the actions of either the Petrograd Kadets or a very wide spectrum of people inside and outside of government without feeling the urgency that they did. It was the conviction that the autocracy could not effectively govern Russia in the midst of total war that turned even top bureaucrats against the tsar after 1915, not a debate over “parliamentarism” or personal betrayal.19

To cite just one telling example, consider the question of the public organizations. From the very beginning, conservatives challenged the story told by liberal activists that groups outside the ministerial bureaucracies (like the Union of Towns, the Union of Zemstvos, and the War Industrial Committees) had saved the war effort. Instead, as both Gaida and Kulikov point out, right-wing politicians argued that these groups were liberal Trojan horses whose leaders were more interested in political gain than in assisting the war effort. The enormous sums of state money that were allocated to them despite this suspicion was, as we saw earlier, proof for Kulikov that the tsar and his “dualist” ministers were committed to conciliation and political peace. The conservative attack was bolstered even more by reports that these organizations were corrupt and wasteful, that they were draft-exempt sinecures for the well-off, easy targets for war profiteers, and profligate spenders of the government’s rubles for their own political benefit. This sharp criticism of these organizations and the men who led them (most notably Prince Georgii Evgen’evich L’vov, who would eventually leverage his position as the head of the Union of Zemstvos into

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19For a recent examination of the attitudes of one of these figures, see Peter Holquist, “The Dilemmas of an ‘Official with Progressive Views’: Baron Boris Nolde,” Kritika 7, 2 (2006): 241–73.
the position of the first premier of the Provisional Government) has been repeated many times by historians in the Soviet Union and the West and is enjoying a resurgence at the moment, too. The crux of the criticism is that liberals should not have insisted upon the creation and funding of organizations that paralleled the activity of government bureaucrats, as in doing so, they drained money, led to competition for key resources and supplies, and produced more confusion and waste than benefit.20

The public organizations were, of course, always wasteful, often incompetent, and occasionally corrupt. But to make the claim that the country would have been better off without them, one must assume that had the same resources been channeled into the state institutions whose functions were being duplicated, the outcome would have been better. It is an interesting and important question whether this was “objectively” the case. I suspect it was not, for the capacity of the Russian state and the tsar’s bureaucracy was reached early in the war. It seems clear, for instance, that the creation of a network of hospitals (and medical personnel) to care for wounded soldiers accomplished by the public organizations was well beyond the expertise of army officials, who struggled throughout the war even to train and staff their own medics and army doctors adequately. Indeed, the state had already seen its limitations in many important respects prior to the war, admitting that the experience of the famine of 1891 had shown them that only help from public organizations could help in hunger crises, for instance. In 1908, when failed harvests threatened the population of Saratov province, the response of the Council of Ministers was to sanction, encourage, and fund the work of local non-state groups to provide relief.21 This is not to deny the point made by many students of public organizations that they were inefficient, only that any efforts beyond the state capacity were bound to be extremely inefficient. Given the need of the country to have more state-like services, this was a price that had to be paid.

But the more important context for the political activities of the opposition and the government alike in the years of the war was the “subjective” understanding of the issue. Here, I think, we must take into account the fact that all the oppositionists (and an increasing number of government supporters) were convinced that the state had failed. Even figures on the right, like the Nationalist leader Anatolii Ivanovich Savenko, were admitting


failure as early as 1915: “War is an exam,” he boomed from the Duma floor, “a great exam, and it must be said that if during this great exam the Russian people and Russian society passed the test of maturity, then the government, and in particular the military administration, has failed.”\(^{22}\) It is abundantly clear that oppositionists genuinely believed that they could do a better job than the government in war relief efforts and that they were rendering an enormous service both to the state and the Russian people. From this perspective, the enormous assignations of money to those organizations by the government likewise amount not to a concession but to a tacit admission of the same understanding of affairs.\(^{23}\) It is not enough, in other words, to show that these new organizations represented a significant political opportunity for liberals. Of course, they were a tremendous opening, so tremendous, indeed, that Gaida argues convincingly that Miliukov quickly appreciated that they posed as great a threat to Kadet leadership in the liberal camp as they did to the government. But they were motivated by public-spiritedness and felt justified by their efforts to support the army in its goals.

In sum, these books have their share of successful moments, but they all miss the dynamic aspect not just of Russian liberalism but of liberalism as such. These flawed interpretations of liberalism are a bit worrisome in contemporary terms. Kulikov expressly argues that his book has importance not only for history but also for current Russian politicians, for whom the resurgence of interest in liberalism makes “the study of the prerevolutionary bureaucratic elite” important (18). If taken seriously, Kulikov’s argument—that liberalism means unfettered executive power over the bureaucracy and that those who challenge the administration are guilty of weakening the state and leading it to destruction—would make “liberalism” far too attractive for politicians and leave Russia’s poor liberal minority deprived of even the name of its own movement. Perhaps equally depressing is Gaida’s fundamental cynicism, a trait he shares with a great many historians from all countries. But perhaps we could use a bit less cynicism, especially when we project our disappointments back in time.

In this respect, all three would have benefited from a close examination of Melissa Stockdale’s book on Miliukov, which is cited once by Kulikov and not at all by the others.\(^{24}\) Stockdale’s book is distinguished not only by its treatment of Miliukov as a historical figure but by its subtle understanding of the varieties of liberalism that Russian politicians drew upon in the first

\(^{22}\) Speech of Deputy Savenko in closed session of State Duma, 28 July 1915, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA) f. 1278, op. 5, d. 205, l. 11–12.

\(^{23}\) Kulikov’s argument that most of this money was paid to “leftist” organizations rather than “rightist” ones should also be rejected for the same reason. Not even the most obtuse tsarist minister would have supported the grotesque idea that, say, the Union of Russian People should provide relief to Jewish, Polish, and Armenian refugees.

\(^{24}\) Stockdale, Paul Miliukov.
years of the 20th century and the way that liberalism was changing all over Europe even before the shock of war changed European liberalism for good. But Miliukov, important as he was, was just one of a remarkably talented and intelligent group of liberal oppositionists. Gaida goes a long way in showing the diversity and richness of the views of these figures, but there is, as yet, no “last word” on Russian liberalism. Gaida is right. We do need to understand the actions of Russian liberals in the context in which they lived. What we struggle with is appreciating the capaciousness of that context, matching the erudition of those politicians, and truly feeling the moral commitments that shaped their lives.

Dept. of History
Lafayette College
Easton, PA 18042 USA
sanbornj@lafayette.edu