

MIKHAIL SHCHERBATOV

Johanna Granville

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Shcherbatov, Mikhail Mikhaylovich (1733-1790), scion of one of Russia's oldest families of the nobility, was a prominent historian, publicist, and government servitor. Upon retirement from military service in 1762 following Peter III's Manifesto on the Freedom of the Nobility, Prince Shcherbatov went on to serve as a deputy to Catherine II's Legislative Commission (1766-1767), and then as Russia's "official historiographer," beginning in 1768. (Shcherbatov's father-in-law, Prince Ivan Shcherbatov, 1696-1761, was Russian Minister to the court of St. James from 1739 to 1742 and from 1743 to 1746).

Prince Shcherbatov is perhaps best known for his publication On the Corruption of Morals in Russia (*O Povrezhdenii Nravov v Rossii*), in which he criticizes Peter the Great's introduction of the Table of Ranks (1722). He argued that the rank system reduced the prestige of the old nobility and allowed the rise of a mediocre and materialistic class of servitors. "By the regulations of the military service, which Peter the Great had newly introduced," he wrote, "the peasants began with their masters at the same stage as soldiers of the rank and file: it was not uncommon for the peasants, by the law of seniority, to reach the grade of officer long before their masters, whom, as their inferiors, they frequently beat with sticks.

Noble families were so scattered in the service that often one did not come again in contact with his relatives during his whole lifetime.” Shcherbatov believed in the innate inequality of human beings and genetic superiority of the noble aristocracy. He lamented the decline of the pre-Petrine nobility's influence in the eighteenth century, because he did not believe one could achieve the genetic superiority of the latter by meritorious service alone. While he did advocate a constitutional form of government, he urged that Russia be ruled by a hereditary monarch, who would be constrained only by a constitution and checked only by a Senate composed of the old nobility with extensive financial, judicial and executive powers.

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