

*The Invention of Mikhail Lomonosov: A Russian
National Myth*
By Steven Usitalo

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Roberto Castelar Lizardo (University of Glasgow)

The figure of the polymath Mikhail Lomonosov occupies a singular place of honour in Russian popular imagination, comparable to that reserved for Newton and Franklin in Western countries. Yet in contrast with these widely acclaimed names, no considerable scientific achievement or discovery can be reliably attributed to Lomonosov, and the direct impact of his work on subsequent scientific developments in Russia was not significant. With a clear argument and an extensive interaction with primary and secondary sources, Steven Usitalo undertakes the task of elucidating the process through which the figure of Lomonosov has been received by Russian historical narratives and substantially transformed into a national symbol.

Usitalo begins by identifying two factors that originally gave rise to the idealization of the memory of Lomonosov. The first is Lomonosov's own account of his experiences as a student and natural philosopher, which are contained within the numerous letters he wrote to advance the cause of his work and to gain the support of his "maecenas", Ivan Suvalov. Usitalo also argues that contemporary Russian society was susceptible to the emergence of national myths and symbols, due to the general perception that the reforms of Peter the Great inaugurated a new phase in Russian history and the consequent tendency to see such change embodied in particular events and figures.

Having examined the ways in which Lomonosov portrayed his experiences in the first chapter, Usitalo proceeds to describe in the following chapters how the figure of Lomonosov was presented to the public by those writing his biography, seeking to identify the trajectory from personal memory to the idealized narrative of his life that nurtured the widespread national mythology. In this sense, the book is essentially an exercise in textual interpretation: concentrated on evaluating the treatment of the life of Lomonosov in his own writings, and his most important biographies and eulogies. The author attempts to highlight the particular contribution of each biographer to the

formation of the myth, and seeks to describe a probable rationale for the layer added or the differential distribution of emphasis in each biographical account.

Usitalo's analysis of the biographies and eulogies reveals a careful attention to the depth of internal structure and coherence, sources, historical circumstances and personal motivations. The author also pays close attention to the relationship between the biographers and the general state of science in contemporary Russia, including and the demands of Russian national identity and the process of modernisation. Consideration is given to those biographers who did not follow the general pattern and tended to offer a more historically reliable picture of Lomonosov, as well as the role of figures of great authority, such as Euler and Pushkin, in solidifying the mythic narrative of Lomonosov's life.

Although Usitalo assesses the accuracy of the descriptions given in Lomonosov's biographies in light of the evidence available, a consistent and systematic reconstruction of the historical Lomonosov is not given in the book. This might be considered an inconvenience insofar as there is no historical narrative at hand to compare and contrast the parallel emergent mythology. Certainly, the objective of the book is to describe how the idealization of Lomonosov developed, not to recover the historical figure that lies under the mythological layers. Nonetheless, an accurate perception of the idealized imagery and its evolution cannot be obtained without clear understanding of the gap that separates historical fact from myth.

This problem is perhaps most noticeable in the first chapter, in which extracts from the letters of Lomonosov are reproduced and assembled to support Usitalo's argument, but often evident distortions are simply assumed and do not appear to be derived from a rigorous examination of the texts. It is true that the context of letters and some of the expressions of self-exaltation point toward these distortions, and a number of the elements analysed indirectly indicate the probable presence of exaggeration, but a more careful contrast between historical facts and his elaborated self-imagery is necessary for the sake of precision and rigour.

The concentration on the biographies, eulogies, and praises gives a meaningful depth to the book, yet it should be noted that this occurs at the expense of breadth, and there remains several aspects that must be discussed in order to have an accurate view of the formation of the mythology of the life of Lomonosov. For example, it is necessary to consider with more attention the interaction between the myth-making process and the reception of these biographies in Russia and elsewhere, as well as the

presence of the figure of Lomonosov in the different manifestations of the Russian culture and imagination. These absences do not compromise the quality of the argument, but show that the book left some uncovered areas for the consideration of future investigations.

Careful readers might question whether the susceptibility of 18th century Russian society to the creation of myths and national symbols was examined appropriately, and others might protest that the use of his figure in the early years of the Soviet Union, in the context of the Russian nationalism and the appropriation of the Russian past under the rule of Stalin, was a topic that received much less consideration than deserved. Overall, *The Invention of Mikhail Lomonosov* provides substantive data for the estimation of various problems beyond the world of Lomonosov and Russian culture, including the role of the individual in building his or her own public image, the function of national symbols and myths, and the usefulness of the construction of myths and ideal realities for the promotion of group interests (e.g., scientists) in their struggle to consolidate their position in society.