

Dmitri Panchenko

ROSTOVTZEFF AND HIS *SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*:
A COMMENT ON A SCHOLARLY MASTERPIECE*

The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire appeared in 1926. It was a great success. However, it was a success of somewhat unusual kind. Let us consider a characteristic remark in the preface to the second edition (1957) diligently prepared by P. M. Fraser: “Rostovtzeff’s work has become a classic, if not necessarily wholly correct, account of the subject with which it deals”.¹ One immediately notes a trace of the contradictory reception of the work. Less than three decades sufficed to make it classic! However, even though no professional scholar would expect from any historical study of so large a scale to be “wholly correct”, the editor feels the need to draw attention to the point.

Indeed, respect and admiration in the scholarly perception of Rostovtzeff’s work have been repeatedly combined with a reluctance to accept its major ideas. For instance, Glenn Bowersock, an outstanding scholar himself, in his elegantly written essay on *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, goes so far as to declare: “Rostovtzeff’s view of the collapse of the Roman Empire soon became and remains a curiosity”.² He continues sympathetically, nevertheless: “Yet today the book in which it was presented is considered a classic work”. One is puzzled: is there such a thing on earth as a classic work with cheap ideas?

1

I will start with a particular point – did the critics correctly understand what they styled a “curiosity”? Here is another of Bowersock’s comments on Rostovtzeff’s ideas: “In his view, an alliance of the rural proletariat with the military in the third century AD destroyed the beneficent rule of an urban bourgeoisie. This explanation of the end of the Roman Empire

* I am grateful to David Konstan for his comments on the draft of this paper.

¹ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, VII.

² Bowersock 1974, 19.

is so obviously unsatisfactory that one may well wonder why an acute scholar like Rostovtzeff took it seriously”.³ I reply that he did not, for this view is not his. The interpretation formulated by Bowersock omits the emperors, a political institution never underrated by Rostovtzeff, and introduces instead “the rule of an urban bourgeoisie”. It is true that Rostovtzeff’s picture of a satisfactory (rather than “beneficent”) rule includes the urban bourgeoisie, but as an element within a larger system. He speaks of “the constitutional monarchy of Antonines, which rested on the middle class throughout the Empire and on the self-government of the cities”; in this system, “the imperial bureaucracy and the army were coordinated with the self-governing bodies in Italy and in the provinces”.⁴ As to what was destroyed, and what was left, in the third century AD, during the period called by Rostovtzeff “military anarchy”, a quotation at length seems appropriate:

In this heritage there was almost nothing positive except the fact of the existence of the Empire with all its natural resources. The men who inhabited it had utterly lost their balance. Hatred and envy reigned everywhere: the peasants hated the landowners and the officials, the city proletariat hated the city *bourgeoisie*, the army was hated by everybody, even by the peasants. The Christians were abhorred and persecuted by the heathens, who regarded them as a gang of criminals bent on undermining the state. Work was disorganized and the productivity was declining; commerce was ruined by the insecurity of the sea and roads; industry could not prosper, since the market for industrial products was steadily contracting and the purchasing power of the population diminishing; agriculture passed through a terrible crisis, for the decay of commerce and industry deprived it of the capital which it needed, and the heavy demands of the state robbed it of labour and of the largest part of its products. Prices constantly rose and the value of the currency depreciated at an unprecedented rate. The ancient system of taxation had been shattered and no new system was devised. The relations between the state and the taxpayer were based on more or less organized robbery: forced work, forced delivery, forced loans or gifts were the order of the day. The administration was corrupt and demoralized ... The city *bourgeoisie* was tracked out and persecuted, cheated, and maltreated. The municipal aristocracy was decimated by systematic persecution and ruined by repeated confiscations and by the responsibility imposed on it of ensuring the success of the organized raids of the government on the people. The most terrible chaos thus reigned throughout the ruined Empire.⁵

³ Bowersock 1974, 18.

⁴ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, XII.

⁵ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, 505–506.

One can see that the unfortunate situation of the urban bourgeoisie is only part, though an important one, of the whole picture and that the government rather than the rural proletariat or the army emerges here as the main destructive force with which the urban bourgeoisie had to deal. If we go beyond the quotation, it is true that Rostovtzeff assumes that the army was filled with the soldiers who came from the rural proletariat and that he cites examples of the open hostility of the army to the relatively prosperous population of the cities. Nevertheless, this implies a more complex and nuanced interpretation of the course of events than the destruction of the rule of an urban bourgeoisie by an alliance of the rural proletariat with the military. Rostovtzeff's study reveals a complicated historical process, more powerful than the will of its participants, though not wholly predetermined. Yet the emperors appear almost invariably as the most influential participants in what happened. They needed money, and they chose to impose such a burden on the cities and urban bourgeoisie that it resulted in their decline and near collapse.

A particular historical situation appears in his story as having special importance. Like Edward Gibbon before him, Rostovtzeff associates an important turn with Septimius Severus as a military usurper: "With the senate and a large part of provincial aristocracy against him, Septimius was forced to make one concession after another to the army... Septimius was the first to base his power firmly and permanently on the army". The "baneful aspect" of his policy "was, not that he made the army democratic, but that he militarized the principate; and that was in fact a necessary consequence of his usurpation of power and his establishment of a hereditary monarchy".⁶

To be sure, no attentive reader of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* will think that Septimius Severus, a military usurper, came out of the blue. Rostovtzeff points to the limits on economic growth in the second century and to the policy of exclusiveness of the city bourgeoisie, both resulting in a growing gap between the *honestiores* (who also included the imperial aristocracy and bureaucracy) and *humiliores*. In his view, the city-based capitalism gradually degenerated.

The creative forces which in the early Imperial period produced a rapid growth in every quarter of the Empire, and promoted a high standard of technical improvement alike in commerce, in industry, and in agriculture, suffered a gradual atrophy, which resulted in increasing stagnation of the

⁶ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, 401–404.

economic life. The activity of the urban middle class degenerated into a systematic exploitation of the toiling lower classes.⁷

The accumulated wealth of the city bourgeoisie was mostly invested in land, and their prevailing outlook was that of the rentier.

The burden of supporting the life of the State lay entirely on the working classes and caused a rapid decline of their material welfare. As they were the chief consumers of the industrial goods produced by the cities, their diminished purchasing power reacted adversely on the development of commerce and industry.

The measures taken by the emperors were typically inadequate.

To save the state they resorted to the old practice of the ancient world – the policy of force and compulsion. Force and compulsion were applied both to the city bourgeoisie and to the lower classes, and they embittered each against the other. The result was the collapse of city-capitalism and the acute economic crisis of the third century.⁸

Rostovtzeff does not claim, however, that the course of the events was strictly predestined:

I see no reason why another pair of emperors of the type of Trajan, Hadrian, and M. Aurelius should not have prolonged the quiet and comparatively prosperous period in the history of the Empire for some scores of years, had it not been for the ambition and unscrupulous policy of Septimius Severus.⁹

Rostovtzeff does not regard, of course, the crisis of the third century as marking the end of the Roman Empire, though he displays no sympathy with what he calls the Oriental despotism of the fourth and fifth centuries, based on the army, a strong bureaucracy and on the mass of the peasants. “In the mind of Diocletian”, he says, “the state meant compulsion, and organization meant organized violence”. Accordingly, “the more one produced, the more would be taken by the state”.¹⁰ He may concede that “Gelzer and Heihelheim are right in observing that there is throughout

⁷ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, XIV.

⁸ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, XV.

⁹ Rostovtzeff 1957, II, 710.

¹⁰ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, 522–523.

the Roman Empire a certain awakening of economic life between Diocletian and Theodosius”, yet he maintains that this awakening was short-lived and limited and that “pressure exerted from above continued to be the hall-mark of the age”.¹¹

Such are (more or less) the main ideas of Rostovtzeff’s work, in brief. I see no reason to approach them as a “curiosity” and to treat *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* as a classic work filled with readily dismissible views.

2

Critics of Rostovtzeff’s work find an explanation for its allegedly unsatisfactory ideas in their dependence on Rostovtzeff’s personal experience as an exile from revolutionary Russia. I think this is misleading. The use of such terms as “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat” is such a minor issue that it need not be discussed here. Now, there is no direct retrojection of Russian conditions onto the Roman in *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*; and although the presence of Rostovtzeff’s personal experience in his work is undeniable, its effects operate on a deeper level and they are essentially positive and productive: a historian troubled by the problems of his own time may acquire a more acute vision of comparable phenomena in the past.

Let us consider a couple of quotations in which Rostovtzeff explicitly bridges the ancient and the modern worlds. The first one comes from his description of daily life in Egypt of the third century:

Evidently corporal punishment very often followed financial ruin, and the only way to escape it was to flee from one’s domicile ... A striking private letter from Oxyrhynchus may also be quoted. Charmus writes to his brother Sopatrus: “The prefect has sent an amnesty here, and there is no longer any fear at all; so, if you will, come boldly; for we are no longer able to stay indoors. For Annoë is much worn out with her journey, and we await your presence, that we may not withdraw without reason; for she considers herself to be keeping the house here alone”. The enigmatic sentences, comprehensible to the addressee, remind me of many letters which I receive from Soviet Russia. The system of terrorism gives rise to the same phenomena everywhere and at all times.¹²

¹¹ Rostovtzeff 1957, II, 749.

¹² Rostovtzeff 1957, I, 487.

One can see that Rostovtzeff's personal experience fostered his empathy, which brought his, and then his readers' attention to remarkable documents. There are many examples of such documents in his work. They serve both to create a better understanding of the historical process and to lend an aura of compassion to the oppressed, to the common people of the Roman Empire.

The other quotation pertains to Rostovtzeff's treatment of the despotism of the fourth and fifth centuries:

Compared with the delicate and complicated system of the early Empire, in which stress was laid on the self-government of the cities, while the bureaucracy was a subsidiary organ and an organ of control, the system of the late Empire, despite its apparent complexity, was much simpler, much more primitive, and infinitely more brutal. Being supreme and omnipotent, and not subject to any control exercised in one way or another by those who were the life-blood of the state, the bureaucracy gradually became utterly corrupt and dishonest and at the same time comparatively inefficient, in spite of the high professional training of its members. Bribe and illicit gains were the order of the day ... The worst were the thousands of secret police agents, the *agentes in rebus*, who were the successors of the *frumentarii* and whose duty it was to keep an eye on the population and on the host of imperial officials. Corruption and inefficiency is the fate of all bureaucracies which are not checked by wide powers of self-government vested in the people, whether they are created in the name of autocracy or of communism.¹³

One can say that the last sentence adds nothing to the description of the state of affairs in the Roman Empire. However, it puts Roman history in a larger context of human history, and this is not something to regret. One more point also seems worth making. Relating the ancient world and the modern, Rome and Russia, Rostovtzeff incidentally made a prediction: "the thousands of secret police agents" would prove to be a reality of Soviet Russia soon after the publication of his book.

The personal experience of Rostovtzeff was not, of course, narrowly Russian. He writes in the conclusion of his book:

But the ultimate problem remains like a ghost, ever present and un-laid: Is it possible to extend a higher civilization to the lower classes without debasing its standard and diluting its quality to the vanishing point? Is not every civilization bound to decay as soon as it begins to penetrate the masses?¹⁴

¹³ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, 512–513.

¹⁴ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, 541.

Rostovtzeff addresses here the problem raised in the great books by Alexis de Tocqueville and José Ortega y Gasset. I cannot say whether Rostovtzeff knew *The Democracy in America*, but the author of *The Revolt of the Masses* cites his study of the Roman Empire.

I thus conclude that the ideas in Rostovtzeff's work were solid and interesting and that the open appeals to his personal experience in his study were stimulating and positive rather than disorienting.

3

The ideas of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* pertain to the fate of the Roman Empire, of its particular institutions, like self-government, of its economy, of its culture and of its educated as well as lower classes. The book presents a kind of story, and this story is tragic. It is finally about degradation and annihilation. It puts at the core of the plot neither the barbarians who came from outside nor the allegedly malicious Christians – as the best dramas tend to avoid introducing a *deus ex machina*. We are offered instead an account of a structural evolution of political institutions, economy, and society. The story develops leisurely, with due attention to all sorts of details (for who can anticipate the future significance of this or that small thing?) and without a forced schematism. It introduces a great variety of *dramatis personae* and presents a large picture of social life.

I intentionally use the terms that may seem appropriate to talking about a novel. For I believe that many of the best books written by historians belong to the same realm as the best novels, dramas and poems like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. All such books are aimed at tracing and comprehending the story of a person, or a group, or a commonwealth, or a civilization. A great novelist or poet, on the one hand, and a great historian, on the other, may address different materials and employ largely different methods of constructing their narratives, but they share an interest in illuminating the human condition. The problems of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, originally a thick volume with a huge scholarly apparatus (published separately as a special volume in the second edition) make this work akin to a solid novel. In a work of that kind, the ideas need not be indisputably correct; they have to be thoughtful, elaborate, and nontrivial, as in the case of Rostovtzeff's work they certainly are.

A great book is typically a very personal matter, and the notion of the author's persona is not to be confined to lyric poetry. One feels the author's persona, and an attractive one, behind Rostovtzeff's work: daring, learned, hard-working, emotional and sober at the same time.

In a way, one may observe the treating of history as a story and of a historical episode as a drama already in Herodotus. Thucydides' narrative of the Sicilian expedition has been repeatedly compared with a tragedy. There is something, however, in *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* which is absent in the ancient historians. This is its quality as a study of a historical process. One can point, perhaps, to an anticipation in the introductory part of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* or in Polybius' approach to the rise of the Roman power (where it is a matter of a course of events with a fixed direction rather than a historical process in true sense), but the differences are still essential. One hesitates to see the idea of studying a historical process even in Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the obvious predecessor of Rostovtzeff's work. It is rather from the second quarter of the nineteenth century that this idea became firmly established. Rostovtzeff employs it while presenting his task:

The economic conditions of the Empire have been the subject of repeated study. Much valuable work has been done in various special fields. But no one has attempted to trace the main lines of the economic development of the Empire as a whole, no one has tried to show how and why its material aspect gradually changed, and how and why the brilliant life of the early Empire so completely degenerated into the primitive and half-barbarous life of the later period.¹⁵

An account of a historical process implies telling a story. To be sure, there are different stories. Since the nineteenth century the best novelists have created stories based on a deep insight (one may call it research) into human psychology and human behavior in general, including its dependence on social habits and values, a matter of change over the course of time. I mean grand novels like *Vanity Fair* or *War and Peace* or *Buddenbrooks*. It is hardly accidental that the rise of both novels and historical studies of this kind occurred in the same epoch. In any case, historians read the novels. When *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* appeared, its readers were (and, I hope, still are) prepared to appreciate the "novelistic" quality of the book, even without recognizing that aspect clearly. Since critics of the ideas of this book nevertheless have spoken of it as a source of inspiration,¹⁶ I suppose that these critics in fact liked the ideas – if not particular positions or interpretations, then at all events the general image that they produced.

¹⁵ Rostovtzeff 1957, I, XIII.

¹⁶ As Bowersock 1974, 23 does.

Aristotle observes in a famous passage (*Poet.* 1451 b 5–6) that writing poetry (that is, fiction) requires more skill than writing history, that it is intellectually a more difficult task. Yet in the case of the books like *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* a historian competes with the poets and all writers of fiction, and has, moreover, the advantage of dealing with historical, that is, “true”, and not fictional characters and situations.

Dmitri Panchenko
Saint Petersburg State University;
Higher School of Economics in Saint Petersburg

dmpanchenko@yahoo.com
dmpanchenko@mail.ru

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M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* I–II (Oxford 1957).

The reputation of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926) is contradictory. On the one hand, Rostovtzeff’s work has been recognized as a masterpiece. On the other hand, its main ideas have been repeatedly dismissed. The critics pointed to the personal experience of Rostovtzeff, an exile from revolutionary Russia; they saw in his argument the intrusion of the concerns that properly pertain to Russian history. However, there is no direct retrojection of Russian conditions onto the Roman Empire in Rostovtzeff’s work, and his personal experience, that of a historian emotionally preoccupied with the problems of his own time, gave him a more acute vision of comparable phenomena of the past. The ideas of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* are in fact profound and persuasive though, of course, not all of them are unimpeachable. The book traces the fate of the Roman Empire with its institutions, social groups and economy. It is a tragic story of “how and why the brilliant life of the early Empire so completely degenerated into the primitive and half-barbarous life of the later period”, and here the reader senses the emotional involvement of the author. Such and similar features of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* make this book, with its formidable scholarly apparatus, akin to all great books that illuminate the human condition, and to the grand European novels in particular, and this must be recognized as a remarkable achievement rather than an idiosyncrasy.

“Социальная и экономическая история Римской империи” Ростовцева, с одной стороны, очень быстро получила статус классической работы, но с другой – ее идеи неоднократно отвергались; в них, в частности, видели проекцию на древнюю историю проблем, волновавших русского эмигранта. На деле идейный каркас исследования крепко сколочен, и автор вовсе не стремится населять Римскую империю русскими реалиями, а опыт исторической драмы, которую на его глазах пережила Россия, лишь обострил взгляд Ростовцева на ход истории. Его книга, справочный аппарат которой при подготовке второго издания сочли уместным вынести в отдельный том, является тем не менее превосходным примером того, как в своем высшем проявлении история может принадлежать литературе. Там, где прослеживается и постигается судьба, – человека, семьи, народа, цивилизации, – это литература. У большого писателя и большого историка разный материал, и их методы построения текста далеко не во всем сходны, но их общим интересом является понимание хода жизни. Перед читателем “Социальной и экономической историей Римской империи” открывается судьба – римского государства и особенно созидательных аспектов римской цивилизации; судьба, которую, в общем-то, можно обозначить двумя словами – деградация и крушение.

CONSPECTUS

ALEXANDER GAVRILOV, DENIS KEYER	
Preface	5
MICHAEL POZDNEV	
Das historisch-philologische Vorgehen bei Aristoteles und in der Wissenschaft seiner Zeit: Einige Randbemerkungen	9
ALEXANDER K. GAVRILOV	
The Scholarly Program of M. I. Rostovtzeff	30
ARNALDO MARCONE	
Rostovtzeff and Italy: A Long History	37
VLADIMIR KASHCHEEV	
Nikodim P. Kondakov and Mikhail I. Rostovtzev: A Teacher and his Disciple.	50
ALAIN SCHNAPP	
Des monuments à l’histoire : la raison des ruines et Michel de Montaigne	86
WJATSCHESLAW K. CHRUSTALJOW	
Michail Rostovtzeff als Universalhistoriker	99
LEONID ZHMUD	
Mikhail Rostovtzeff and the Modernization of Antiquity	115
DMITRI PANCHENKO	
Rostovtzeff and his <i>Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire</i> : A Comment on a Scholarly Masterpiece	134
STEFAN REBENICH	
Die wissenschaftliche Internationale der Altertumskunde: Ein Brief Michael I. Rostovtzeffs an Alfred von Domaszewski	144
DENIS KEYER	
Interpreting Horace in Th. Zielinski’s and M. Rostovtzeff’s Critique of I. Grevs	161
Keywords	176

Статьи сопровождаются резюме на русском и английском языке
Summary in Russian and English