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Ivan Pavlov: A Russian Life in Science by Daniel P. Todes

Leon Yacher

Southern Connecticut State University

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Todes, Daniel P. *Ivan Pavlov: A Russian Life in Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xix + 855 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

This book is the culmination of more than two decades of meticulous research. Well known for his previous publications about Ivan Pavlov, in this extraordinary tome, historian Daniel Todes, delves deeply into the life and accomplishments of the 1904 Nobel Prize laureate who is primarily known for his work on ‘classical conditioning’ as a form of learning. Pavlov also contributed to major changes on the nature of the scientific method while substantially adding to the field of physiology.

For a scholarly work such as this one, there are at least three critical conditions necessary for it to be realized: 1) the person being studied contributed a plethora of documents that have survived time; 2) these collections can be located and accessed; and 3) the researcher invests the time and energy necessary to bring the search to its logical completion. Pavlov was prolific not only in his research and publications, but he also kept every document, letter, and other materials he received, as well as authored, during his lifetime. Due to Mikhail Gorbachev’s ‘Glasnost’ and the sequence of events that followed, collaboration with foreign scholars was encouraged and previously restricted Russian materials, including Pavlov’s documents, became accessible. Lastly, due to Todes perseverance – obsession, in his own words – he invested several years travelling throughout Russia, Europe and North America, to incessantly pursue a thorough understanding of Pavlov and his work. The result of his tireless work with primary source, and other documents, was 800 pages replete with detail and in-depth analyzes of previously unknown facts about Pavlov. Todes yielded the first, and – so far – only, scholarly, objective, biographic study of Ivan Pavlov.

This successful book is not purely a biographic exercise. Todes intermingled historical events with Pavlov’s life (both personal and scientific) creating context for the reader. Pavlov breathed during tumultuous times, living as the Tsarist Russian Empire period ended, and to the peak years of Stalin’s era. In spite of his country’s troubled years and many dangerous events, as well as Pavlov’s detractors and supporters, what consistently surfaces is Pavlov’s strength, discipline and skills permitting him to succeed. Pavlov’s perseverance remains an admirable accomplishment. In addition, for Pavlov, objectivity and honesty were paramount; however, he was also pragmatic and compromised on a number of occasions on issues of much importance. While he often defied authority, his sense of objectivity led him to declare what he also considered positive policies decreed by the State. Ultimately, Todes reflected upon Pavlov’s life while attempting to enter the man’s mind and mind set. Todes successfully described Pavlov’s personal and professional life while thoughtfully dispelling a number of myths about him. Pavlov never trained a dog to behave a certain way on cue!

This book is no ordinary contribution to the literature. Relying heavily on primary sources, Todes provided insights about Pavlov never before seen. For those wishing to pursue further understanding about Pavlov, and of Russian history during the time of his life, the bibliography (especially for those who can read Russian), while not fully comprehensive, is rich with sources largely unknown outside of Russia. For History of Science researchers, this is an important addition to its literature. For biographers, the book provides examples of methodological value worth considering for one’s own work. Last, but certainly not least, for those interested in biographic studies, Todes’ provides a wonderful, and ‘hard to put down’ read.

Leon Yacher, Ph.D.
Professor of Geography
Southern Connecticut State University
New Haven, Connecticut