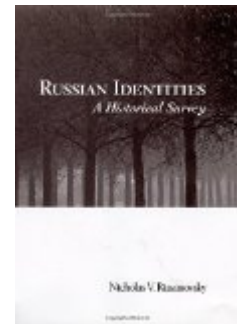


Nicholas V. Riasanovsky. *Russian Identities: A Historical Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 257 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515650-8.

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Russianness in Historical Perspective

Despite its modish title, Nicholas V. Riasanovsky's *Russian Identities* fits well within the author's greater oeuvre. In some senses a distillation of his epic *History of Russia* (2000), it also can be seen as a broad contextualization of ideas aired first in his important *Nicholas I and Official Nationalism in Russia* (1959). Glimpses of Riasanovsky's other books, particularly *Images of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (1985), are also clearly reflected in the text. Indeed, *Russian Identities* is better read as a broad introduction to Riasanovsky's contributions to the field over the course of the past four decades than as the complex, interdisciplinary literature on Russian national identity.

In the brief introduction, Riasanovsky introduces the work of a few modern theorists of nation and nationalism (including Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson), and he questions their stress on the modern "constructedness" of the phenomenon.[1] Echoing Anthony D. Smith's theory of politically conscious premodern "ethnie,"[2] Riasanovsky argues that "even if we accept in the main the modern view of nationalism, we have to recognize that nationalism in each case descended upon not a tabula rasa, but a society with a past. Moreover, the descent usually took many years, decades, even centuries, with most of the people in question still belonging most of the time to the old world" (p. 4). Historical continuity, in other words, leads Riasanovsky to question the recent advent of something so significant as national identity.

Riasanovsky also questions the modern origins of the nation in light of the fact that national identities are often

defined at least in part by historic individuals and events dating back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Unconvinced by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's work on the "reinvention" of these symbols in modern times for modern purposes,[3] Riasanovsky declares that the past's influence over the present is much more direct and unmediated. "What happened long ago can be significant, even decisive today," he argues. "For example, if I were to name the single historical event most significant for Russian identity and Russian nationalism, I would propose not Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812, not Stalin's turn to a limited and strictly controlled nationalism in the late 1930s, not even the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, but the so-called baptism of the Rus in 988" (p. 4).

More of a skirmish with the literature on nationalism than a drawn out engagement, Riasanovsky's introduction also serves to foreshadow the role that continuity and great names and dates play in the nine chapters that follow. Effective in this regard, the introduction is too brief to fully contextualize the nature of Riasanovsky's views on identity, nation, and nationalism. For example, Riasanovsky's expertise in intellectual history allows him to demonstrate convincingly that Russian elites possessed hints of national identity long before such concepts found broader resonance within society. But does this argumentation really call into question Gellner's and Anderson's work on the effect of industrialization and print culture on nonelites? Is it not almost axiomatic that issues of continuity and historical fame will always be of greater interest to elites than to commoners? [4] Riasanovsky's conceptual brevity leaves other questions

unanswered as well. In particular, he proposes to use terms like “identity,” “nationalism,” and “patriotism” interchangeably without explaining the conflation. Many of these assumptions make sense to those familiar with Riasanovsky’s entire *oeuvre*, of course, but are never explicitly articulated in the present book under review.

Riasanovsky begins the core of *Russian Identities* with prehistory—something he readily admits to following only through the secondary literature. His first chapter focuses on defining the nature and extent of the eastern Slavic peoples before recorded time. Surveying limited archeological and ethnographic evidence, he concentrates on linguistic and folkloric research, particularly that of B. A. Rybakov.^[5] Through the latter’s work, Riasanovsky presents the eastern Slavic world before recorded time as not only demographically dynamic, but surprisingly united by commonly held cultural and mythological beliefs. This impression is carried over into chapter 2, which provides a statist reading of the history of Kievan Rus’, beginning with this minor Slavic principality’s all-important decision to join the Byzantine religio-cultural orbit in 988. Literacy among the clerical elite followed, as did centralization, international respectability, and marriage alliances between the Rus’ and the royal houses of western Europe. Responding to scholars who question the influence of this experience on Muscovite political culture, Riasanovsky offers a strong defense of Russia’s claim to a tenth-century pedigree, warning that any questioning of the Kievan inheritance results in a “postponement of Russian history to an inchoate emergence of some northeastern principalities, possibly Finnic or Turkic as much as Slavic, to the Mongol invasion and, especially, to the rise and dominion of Moscow” (pp. 21-22). Riasanovsky, then, considers Kiev and the Byzantine inheritance to be absolutely central to pre-Petrine Russian identity.

Chapter 3 develops this statist line further, treating the decentralization of the appanage period of early Muscovite history as an anomaly within an otherwise triumphalist narrative surrounding Moscow’s “gathering of the Russian land.” Tatar-Mongol influence during this period is likewise rejected in favor of the traditional picture of subjugation and isolation. Ivan III “the Great” returns Russia to its proper path, and neither the excesses of Ivan IV’s reign, nor the Time of Troubles that follow, do more than temporarily delay Russia’s reunion with Europe that occurs in chapter 4 under Peter the Great. First Peter and then Catherine the Great introduce Russian society to the European Enlightenment and its concomitant agenda of reform and rationalization (in chapter 5).

Chapters 1 through 5 thus provide a chronologically organized narrative that readers of Riasanovsky’s *History of Russia* will find quite familiar. Identity factors into the discussion chiefly through its stress on historiography. Although Riasanovsky refers to the *byliny* and other sorts of ostensibly medieval folklore in passing, he focuses neither on elite mentalité nor on the worldview of the eastern Slavic peasant during the first third of *Russian Identities*. Instead, he discusses early Russian national identity in a way reminiscent of the nineteenth-century state school of Russian historiography and its Soviet heirs after 1934. Such a historiographic perspective is intriguing and useful; it would have been even more enlightening if Riasanovsky had addressed some of the limitations of this school’s construction of Russian identity—particularly its teleological and ethnocentric dimensions.

Following this detailed exploration of the Russian state school, Riasanovsky segues to other subjects of inquiry in the book’s middle chapters on Alexander I, Nicholas I, and the remainder of the imperial period. A leading intellectual historian of the nineteenth century, Riasanovsky surveys a series of prominent personalities—Nikolai Novosil’tsev, Mikhail Speranskii, Sergei Uvarov, Mikhail Pogodin, Petr Chaadaev, Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevskii, Konstantin Aksakov, Vissarion Belinskii, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, Ivan Turgenev, Dmitrii Pisarev, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Nikolai Dobroliubov, Petr Lavrov, Nikolai Mikhailovskii, Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, and Georgii Plekhanov—in an eloquent essay-like style that echoes the most influential work in his greater *oeuvre*. With the exception of a discussion of Uvarov’s ideology of “official nationalism,” however, these chapters focus much more on Russian intellectual debates than on the way that these intellectuals thought about their ethnicity, the developmental trajectory of their state and society, or their membership in the nascent Russian nation. Although attention to these latter topics would have tied chapters 6 through 8 more tightly into the book’s overarching theme, they do survey issues of vital interest for students of the Russian nineteenth century. Perhaps the best way to read these chapters is to look to them as an illustration of how a disparate array of famous Russian personalities thought about their society over the course of the nineteenth century.

Riasanovsky concludes the book with a ninth chapter on the Soviet experience and a speculative conclusion on the future of Russian society’s sense of self in the post-Soviet era. His treatment of the Soviet period

is somewhat schematic and focuses on the flawed nature of Marxism-Leninism rather than addressing the Soviet Union as a distinct stage in Russian state history or a context for another series of engaging character studies. The reasoning behind this narrative choice is clear: in Riasanovsky's mind, the Soviet experience was "a departure and a deviation in the history of Russian identity and nationalism" that allowed the grand patterns and continuities of Russian history to resume only in 1991 (p. 6). In his conclusion, Riasanovsky balances optimism over the resumption of Russian national traditions—Orthodox belief and patriotism—with misgivings over the rampant corruption, criminalized economy, and political turmoil that have retarded the consolidation of Russian identity since the fall of communism. Ending with a line from Nekrasov—"you are both mighty, and you are impotent, Mother-Russia!"—the author seems uneasy about what the future may hold for the society.

Broadly conceived and elegantly executed, *Russian Identities* is best viewed as an element of Riasanovsky's greater *oeuvre*—an inquiry into a series of subjects and individuals that have interested a prominent Russian historian over the course of his entire career. But due to its breadth, readers will not find the book to offer either a deep, systematic discussion of Russian identity over the

longue durée or a major contribution to the literature on nation and nationalism.

Notes

[1]. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1983).

[2]. Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Blackwell, 1987).

[3]. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[4]. Anderson says it best himself: "the new imagined communities ... conjured up by lexicography and print capitalism always regarded themselves as somehow ancient. In an age in which 'history' itself was still widely conceived in terms of 'great events' and 'great leaders,' pearls to string along a thread of narrative, it was obviously tempting to decipher the community's past in antique dynasties." Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 109.

[5]. B. A. Rybakov, *Iazychestvo drevnikh slavian*, 2d ed. (Moscow: Nauka, 1994). The first edition of this tendentious book dates to 1981.

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