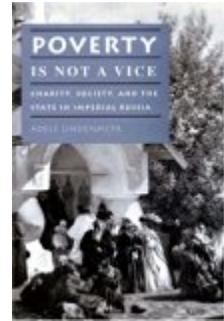


Adele Lindenmeyr. *Poverty Is Not a Vice: Charity Society and the State in Imperial Russia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. xiv + 335 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-04489-7.

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Russian Charity

In light of the reappearance since 1991 of overt material hardship in Russia, Professor Adele Lindenmeyr's excellent monograph on charity in the Imperial period is welcome for the perspective it affords on Russia's current social problems, but more importantly for the light it sheds on a long-neglected area of its history. She is careful to distinguish between the long-lived tradition of private charity and the autocracy's attitude toward poverty and begging in her initial chapter—one devoted primarily to Russia's "culture of giving." Noting that the Russian Orthodox Church neither condemned nor celebrated wealth, but instead subscribed to the concept of the stewardship of God's gifts, she stresses too the tradition of looking for guidance to idealized men and women—lay and religious—who were renowned for their feats of charity. In fact, her discussion of the role of gender in the elaboration of the Orthodox charitable ideal (pp. 13-16) is an important one. She suggests, for example, not only that men who dedicated themselves to the religious life were encouraged to learn the "feminine" qualities of tenderness and compassion in acts of charity and that Russian women were considered especially suited by nature to nurturing and serving others, but also that the traditional culture of direct, personal giving even enjoyed favor by women of the Westernized intelligentsia of the later imperial period. One would, therefore, expect that the role of women in the evolution of Russian charitable practices would constitute an enduring thread in this history. Unfortunately, while it is a repeated one, it is not a major one—a theme to which I will return below. In addition, Professor Lindenmeyr hints in her initial chapter

at the appearance of harbingers of civil society's concern with charity in the form of the physician-philanthropist, but takes care to devote the final portion of this first chapter to history from below: the popular beliefs and customs used to aid the "unfortunate" (pp. 24-25).

Professor Lindenmeyr's narrative approach is an effective one, devoting Chapters Two through Four, for example, to a roughly chronological treatment of the autocracy's approach to poor relief from the seventeenth century through Emancipation; the posture of the Estates and local government to poor relief from Emancipation to the outbreak of the Great War; and the autocracy's fluctuating policies toward revision of the poor laws between 1891 and 1914. There is such a wealth of information and analysis in these three chapters alone that the reviewer is hard-pressed to choose what to emphasize. However, several themes stand out. In her discussion of the autocracy's developing posture toward poor relief, for example, the author places special emphasis on the state's emerging perception of poverty as a problem of national rather than religious significance and the fact that this secularization of the problem undercut the Russian Orthodox Church's legal responsibility for poverty relief. She further adds that the state-building activities of Peter and Catherine thus included creation of new administrative bodies to prevent mendicancy and provide relief for the deserving poor. This latter categorization is especially interesting since it reflects the dichotomy between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor that was emerging in most of Western Europe's states and would receive

its fullest expression in nineteenth-century England. It also implies, naturally enough, that in this area at least, Russia was fully abreast of Western Europe—with the important distinction (one noted by Professor Lindenmeyr) that in the latter, estate organization and local authorities were well developed, whereas in Russia the local bodies for poor relief were creations of the Autocracy, artificial transplants of Western models with little or no recognition of Russian tradition or capabilities. In this, as in so many things, the message is that Russia was seeking to modernize through a slavish imitation of the West, and according to a bureaucratically-conceived model of the process at that.

In the realm of local government and poor relief in the post-Emancipation period, Professor Lindenmeyr observes the same pattern of failed half-efforts and inconsistency: failures to define respective responsibilities and jurisdictions of communes, *zemstva*, and municipalities; the proclivity of each to pass the burden of poor relief on to the next lower administrative level; and, finally, the lack of regular sources of funding that plagued so many areas of social policy and public health in pre-revolutionary Russia. Recent monographs on other areas of social policy and public health in fact show numerous close parallels to this struggle, replete with the same kinds of problems to the extent that the reader is struck by their depressing similarity. In the final chapter of this chronological section, Professor Lindenmeyr turns to the Autocracy's fitful efforts to reform Russia's poor laws—attempts that were compressed into a period of less than a quarter century and encompassed the usual welter of bureaucratic proposals (in this case for the creation of special agencies or Guardianships to administer public assistance to the poor and organized at township, district, town, and provincial levels [p. 79]), official commissions with heavy bureaucratic representation to study these proposals and, inevitably, the creation of sub-commissions of even more refined purviews. It is an interesting narrative and, again, certainly no fault of Professor Lindenmeyr's research or writing, that much of this activity is the generally depressingly familiar Autocratic routine toward most of its pressing social and public health problems. Familiar, too, is the opposition to these proposed reforms by the Ministry of Finance—although S. Iu. Witte's role here as the chief culprit is surprising in view of his reputation as an "enlightened" bureaucratic "modernizer." Anticipating the remaining 60 percent of the monograph, however, Lindenmeyr does note the essence of the debate that raged in these bureaucratic enclaves and, indeed, immobilized them while at

the same time anticipating a wider and more important phenomenon: the conclusion of the Grot Commission that an acknowledgment of the state's responsibility for poor relief was tantamount to socialism, whereas Western practice had shown it that aiding the needy was properly the responsibility of "society"—parishes, communes, and other local, self-governing bodies (p. 85).

It is with this concept that the author introduces the emergence of a civil society concerned with charity and poor relief in Russia before the 1917 revolution. Indeed, the remaining six chapters are arranged not so much chronologically as topically—all centering around the kind of civil society or *obshchestvennost* posited in the Russian context in the Clowes, Kassow and West collection of essays in 1991. Thus, the author's chapter "Charity and Civil Society" is a crucial one, for it posits the rise and development of that kind of voluntarism that was central to the emergence of a civil society in the West. Aided and abetted by discussions in the press and educated society of the "woman question" and Church reform in the 1860s and 1870s, Lindenmeyr argues that this voluntarism led ineluctably to the rise of "scientific charity" in Russia—i.e., the desire to put relief on a rational basis as typified by the bureaucratically-connected Imperial Philanthropic Society and the St. Petersburg Society for Visiting the Poor. It is in this context that the author observes that the Russian definition of a civil society introduced by the 1899 model rules issued by the Ministry of the Interior for municipal guardianships of the poor was a narrow one—i.e., allowing only those with appropriate property qualifications to vote in the municipal elections to these bodies (p. 153). However, Professor Lindenmeyr also makes the point that some Russian towns objected to this narrow definition and adds, somewhat parenthetically in this reviewer's opinion, that it was parish guardianships of the poor that thus contributed directly to the development of a "truer" civil society than the state was capable of fostering.

As central as these chapters are, it is, arguably, the final two chapters that are the most effective. This is because they both discuss the limitations and the composition of the voluntary charitable organizations that emerged in the final years of Imperial Russia to address the problems of the poor. While Professor Lindenmeyr concisely sets forth the limitations and weaknesses of such groups in these chapters, perhaps by far their most fascinating collective aspect is the inference that can be drawn from them. That is, contrary to the argument manifest in the Clowes, Kassow, and West collection and the collection edited by Harley Balzer on the Russian profes-

sions that the emerging civil society in Russia was both an urban and a secular professional one exclusively, Professor Lindenmeyr describes the Orthodox clergy—or at least a segment of it—as having played a prominent role in this area of social policy. In fact, the clergy has been (with the exception of Rosenthal’s contribution to the first-mentioned work) largely excluded from this discussion. However, Professor Lindenmeyr contends that the efforts of parish Guardianships of the Poor were integral to the development of a civic consciousness of the poor and therefore contributed significantly to the emergence in Russia of values usually associated with a civil society (p.160). It is only natural, then, that her penultimate chapter focuses in part on the work relief efforts of pre-revolutionary Russia’s most famous clergyman, Father Ioann of Kronstadt, as well as those of his one-time collaborator, Baron Buksgevdn. And while she makes note of the fact that this work-relief movement—as embodied in the Guardianship of Houses of Industry and Workhouses—came by 1905 to draw its membership overwhelmingly from St. Petersburg bureaucrats, jurists, professors and other male professionals, the moral leadership lay squarely with clergymen such as Father Ioann. Thus, she here seems to be making a salutary adjustment in the perception of Russia’s emerging civil society by spiking the conceit (one largely the product of this element) that the only impetus for redressing Russia’s social problems in the pre-revolutionary era came from that “progressive” element of Russian society, but not from the clergy. Further, Professor Lindenmeyr rebuts the conventional wisdom that this civil society necessarily concentrated its efforts on the urban setting. In fact, her discussion of the Guardianship’s involvement in famine relief, peasant poverty and rural work relief from 1899 to 1912 is so revealing of another area for the efforts of Russian civil society that it can well serve as an inspiration for future specialized studies.

Finally, the author’s chapter on the zenith of volun-

tarism is a magisterial example of the very best kind of social history, taking a close look at the personnel of the private charitable organizations, their methods of operation, and the goals they pursued. Beyond this, however, she addresses much larger issues: did they represent new types of social communities or simply reproduce existing estate, religious, or ethnic ties; did they stimulate civic consciousness, self-government and an “authentic” public sphere; did they foster social unity or promote fragmentation; and did they had any impact on poverty? Her answers are yes to the first parts of each of the first three questions and, sadly, no to the last one.

Accompanied by a series of period photographic reproductions, an appendix of eight clear and well-thought-out tables that provide a quantitative appreciation of the scope and growth rate of charitable efforts in the late imperial period, and a first-rate, comprehensive bibliography of archival, primary and secondary materials, this monograph is an absolutely necessary work for anyone interested in the rise (and the failures) of civil society in Russia and the vexing problem of charity that it faced. The only complaint is, again, the relatively brief treatment of the role women played in these anti-poverty efforts and organizations. One is left wishing for more than the less than thirty pages devoted to this particularly subject in the monograph. Perhaps it will be the subject of a future work by Professor Lindenmeyr that goes beyond even her ground-breaking article in *Signs* in 1993. If so, it is to be eagerly anticipated. This aside, however, this is a work that will surely stand as a benchmark of Russian and European social history and the emergence of a civil society against which future monographs must necessarily be measured.

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