H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vadim Kukushkin. *From Peasants to Labourers: Ukrainian and Belarusan Immigration from the Russian Empire to Canada.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xvi + 283 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-3267-0.

Reviewed by Krystyna K. Cap (Department of History, The Johns Hopkins University)

Published on H-Migration (April, 2008)

Monographs treating the complexity of Eastern European migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are scarce. While scholars have become increasingly interested over the past decade in questions related to population movements within national, regional and transatlantic systems, more studies are needed that aim to deconstruct cohorts, that analyze relationships between donor areas and the establishment of ethnic communities in recipient countries, and that examine changes to socioeconomic structures in both sending and receiving areas. Moreover, historical studies of migration employing interdisciplinary approaches from such fields as anthropology, political sociology, and demography, are critical in an effort to bridge the existing "disciplinary canyon" between history and the social sciences.[1]

Vadim Kukushkin's fascinating study, *From Peasants to Labourers*, attempts this by informing the existing literature on Canadian immigration with a study that treats the area of Russia's western borderlands–from the Dnieper River basin, to the west coast of the United States and Canada–as the "easternmost Atlantic migration system" (p. 10). Kukushkin's monograph fills the lacuna inadvertently created by studies that often fail to differentiate sufficiently between East Slavic immigrants and tend "to 'essentialize' the boundaries of immigrant communities as they were 'imagined' and constructed by ethnic elites" (p. 7). As Kukushkin rightly notes, the teleological trajectory of many previous studies tracing the crystallization and national awakening of ethnic groups have often underappreciated the transference of "cultural subdivisions" between communities in recipient countries (p. 6). Furthermore, this reading has led to reluctance on the part of many scholars to probe the nuances of political, social, and economic behavior within diasporic groups–with the Ukrainian Diaspora being a particularly striking example.

From Peasants to Labourers, thus, challenges existing conceptions of emigration from tsarist Russia, demonstrating that most migrants were neither predominantly political nor religious refugees, but rather temporary, economic "sojourners" and transient laborers, who intended to return to Russia after earning money in Canada. Driven from the land due to a demographic explosion and facing poor soil conditions and unfavorable land inheritance practices in mid to late nineteenth-century Russia, many Ukrainians and Belarusans were pushed to explore economic possibilities outside of the empire and even outside of continental Europe.

Kukushkin's research also demonstrates that a significant portion of "Russian immigrants" to Canada in the 1900s were not ethnically Russian at all, but rather Russified Ukrainian or Belarusan peasants. Relying heavily on the biographical and geographical data of émigrés from the Russian Empire found in the Passport/Identity series of the Likacheff-Ragosine-Mathers (Li-Ra-Ma) Collection at Library and Archives Canada, Kukushkin supplements this research by compiling information on the villages and regions of origin. Taken together, Kukushkin determines that many migrants came from the western frontier of the tsarist empire, the least ethnically integrated region due to its late incorporation into the Russian state after the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century.

In the first chapter, "Economy, Society, and Migration on Russia's Western Frontier," Kukushkin tests the existing assumption that the combined forces of modernization, capitalism, and birth of the market economy in Russia promoted migration. Without question, Russia in the 1860s was embarking on a painful path towards industrialization after the abolition of serfdom. But, the only partial and largely unsuccessful proletarianization of the peasantry; the "peasantization" of formerly non-peasant groups (like the odnodvortsy, the descendants of "frontier servitors with hereditary land ownership");

the demographic explosion in the countryside; and the scarcity of arable land produced a massive populace without job opportunities and lacking a competitive advantage over skilled Russian workers already employed in the industrial sectors of Ivanovo, Moscow, and St. Petersburg (p. 14). While some peasants chose to participate in the burgeoning colonization project of northern and eastern Russia in this period, the peasants of the western borderlands were instead drawn–Kukushkin speculates owing to their longer attachment to western culture–to North America and not to Russia's periphery.

Chapter 2, "The Anatomy of Migration," deconstructs Ukrainian and Belarusan migration cohorts by socioeconomic class, age, and marital status. Although Kukushkin finds that some of the earliest migrants were religious refugees, political activists, and military deserters, many subsequent village chains were composed of ordinary male peasants, in their 20s and 30s, primarily newlyweds or with young families. Unfortunately, the sources prevent the author from exploring the gender dynamics behind migration, and from providing a comparable portrait for Ukrainian and Belarusan women in this period. This said, Kukushkin's use of the Li-Ra-Ma Collection in this chapter proves especially helpful for gleaning information on literacy rates, type of immigration (in this case predominantly temporary economic migration), degrees of ethnic self-identification, religious divisions, and socioeconomic class. This allows the author to draw several conclusions, including the important correlation between the lack of a middle class and its impact on national consciousness, which ultimately precluded the formation of an "ethnic elite capable of providing leadership in the process of national consolidation either at home or abroad" (p. 49). This inevitably influenced the formation, or rather lack thereof, of clearly bounded immigrant communities, divided along ethnic lines. Later chapters demonstrate the effects of this in immigrant settlement patterns.

In the following chapter, "An Airtight Empire? " Kukushkin highlights the migration policies of the tsarist state and outlines the major positions of those divided over the migration issue. The Russian state long maintained strict anti-emigration laws, which were only relaxed when administrators confronted the reality that migration was occurring irrespective of preexisting laws. Within conservative-nationalist circles, concern about migration stemmed from the obvious drain of human capital from the empire, but also from a fear that migration eroded traditional peasant values and institutions. In contrast, liberal circles enthusiastically welcomed the potentially "civilizing" effects temporary migration was thought to have on backwards peasants (pp. 60-61). This debate not took place not only on the political-rhetorical stage, but also in the popular press, where, throughout the 1890s and 1900s, stories appeared attempting to dissuade emigration through tales of hardship and misfortune in North America. Advocates, however, countered the negative press with helpful travel tips, descriptions of economies and wages, and overall portraits of what was expected in destination countries.

Chapter 4, "So Close to Being Asiatics," treats migration policies from the side of the Canadian government. Although considerable interest existed in tapping the vast labor market of Russia–particularly by the Canadian railroad companies that attempted to lobby the government to bring about a relaxation of policies not favorably disposed toward Slavic immigrants–Canada, nevertheless, proved generally immovable on many regulations. The reason largely lay in the prejudices held against Russian immigrants relating to a fear, on the one hand, of Asians (many of the Siberian migrants were thought to resemble "Asiatics" rather than Europeans), and, on the other hand, of potential criminals coming from Siberian gulags. The Canadian government still believed Siberia to be a "mere dumping ground for criminals and misfits," evidently unaware of Russia's nineteenth-century colonization project (p. 89). While the government was more willing to allow Eastern Slavic migrants in the years prior to the outbreak of World War I, Canadian authorities were still concerned with potential ramifications of temporary migrants eventually desiring permanent citizenship. Kukushkin finds that migration policies of Canada and Russia in this period are strikingly similar in regard to population mobility issues when examined through the lens of their relationship to national development. According to Kukushkin, both "the Russian and Canadian states displayed essentially similar views of people as 'human capital' necessary for the economic growth and cultural survival of their nations and [thus they] acted as managers of this capital" (p. 91).

Kukushkin examines the settlement and employment patterns of Belarusan and Ukrainian immigrants in chapter 5, "Frontiersmen and Urban Dwellers." Typically, East Slavic migrants preferred settling in the "resource frontier or large urban centers of eastern Canada," living alongside one another and not in ethnically-segregated communities (p. 93). Many Ukrainians and Belarusans were employed in primary sectors like logging or mining, or worked as railway navies. Working conditions for migrants were often difficult and hazardous, and mal-

treatment by employers was common. Immigrants were frequently forced (or, perhaps more correctly, tricked) into contractual labor without knowledge of their consent, and protest by immigrants was rare, owing to an obvious language barrier. In this chapter, Kukushkin also sketches the networks available to East Slavic immigrants for assisting them in locating employment, often through relatives or friends who migrated earlier, or through multiethnic support agencies and associations.

The next chapter, "Sojourners and Soldiers," deals with the myriad dilemmas and challenges facing immigrants with respect to everyday life in Canada. Kukushkin treats three major themes in this chapter. First, he discusses the issue of socialization with other immigrant groups and the problems arising with regard to alcohol consumption in these social settings. Second, he examines correspondence with family back home in the form of letters or in the sending of remittances, as well as the "fallout" of prolonged periods away (e.g., instances of spousal infidelity and threats of divorce by wives left behind). Finally, he analyzes the effects of the outbreak of World War I on the sojourner status of many Ukrainian and Belarusan migrants. Many immigrants were torn between returning home to fight for "Tsar and Fatherland," and remaining in Canada, though both options posed their own sets of problems (p. 128). Migrants were often destitute as a result of the negative economic impact caused by the 1913 recession, but returning home was no simpler an alternative. While Kukushkin finds that ultimately "thousands of Ukrainians and Belarusans returned home during the war years," just as many remained in Canada either "by choice or [by] necessity" (p. 132). In the case of the latter, many joined the Canadian expeditionary troops in an effort to assist the Allies. For those who remained, the war period was relatively "trouble-free," as the majority of "Russian" immigrants were not (yet) regarded as "enemy aliens" like their counterparts from the Austro-Hungarian Empire (pp. 134-135).

In Chapter 7, "A Different Constituency: Priests, Preachers, and Immigrants," Kukushkin provides a particularly fascinating overview of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, beginning with the establishment of its first mission in Kodiak, Alaska in 1794. On the whole, Russian Orthodoxy was much stronger in eastern Canada than in the western part of the country, where immigrants from Galicia and Bukovina were followers of the Uniate Church, despite conversion efforts by Russian Orthodox missions in the prairies. While the position of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America and its promotion of official Russian nationalism was a contributing factor to its declining popularity, a culture of religiosity and religious attendance was also lacking in Eastern Europe even prior to migration. Many Ukrainian and Belarusan migrants did not identify with the church and its teachings and had hitherto viewed the church as one of the "mechanisms of social control enforced by the village community" (p. 145). Unless the church could serve some utilitarian purpose–either by reading or writing letters, conveying news, or providing employment assistance–migrants were not inclined toward frequent attendance. Moreover, challenges from socialism and anti-tsarist attitudes were becoming widespread among immigrants, further undercutting the spiritual and social significance of the Orthodox Church. The Ukrainian Baptist Church is the other major group treated in this chapter, though here many of Kukushkin's findings overlap with the challenges faced by the Orthodox Church, namely, with regard to the utilitarian approach towards religion maintained by migrants who appreciated the many perks offered by organized religion, but not necessarily earnestly desiring to practice it.

In the final chapter, "Bolsheviks or Rebels? " Kukushkin examines popular political organizations of migrant groups and their relationship with the Canadian socialist and labor movements. Inspired, in particular, by models of socialist activity in Russia and by revolutionaries' attempts to draw Ukrainians and Belarusians into the fold, many political émigrés sought to continue the Russian socialist movement–with varying success–in Canada, where émigrés were sympathetically received by the majority of Canadians. Revolutionary socialist organizations, whose platform included the abolition of large estates, peasant revolution, and a classless society, competed for immigrant membership against the better-organized Ukrainian Socialist organs. With the outbreak of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, the immigrant experience changed. The Canadian government become less sympathetic–and, in many instances, more hostile–to socialist groups. And, within political and legal circles the conflation of Russians with Bolsheviks took on a negative connotation. Although in many instances the deportation of Russian radicals was desirous, the war made it impossible to send these individuals back, and it was not until the 1920s that the situation stabilized, allowing repatriation to occur.

Scholars interested in Canadian immigration history will undoubtedly find this volume significant for its nuanced study of Ukrainian and Belarusan migrants. To a more limited extent historians of Russia and Eastern Eu-

rope might find some chapters useful in understanding the push/pull factors behind the vast population movements of the nineteenth century. This said, any insight into the readjustment period of sojourners upon their return to Soviet Russia lie beyond the scope of Kukushkin's inquiry. Nevertheless, this study is pathbreaking for its use of sources, its approach to the study of migration networks and cohorts, and its attempt to study Ukrainian and Belarusan communities on both sides of the Atlantic. For these reasons, *From Peasants to Labourers* will be a helpful volume for both regional and international migration specialists.

Note

[1]. Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield, eds., *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-migration

Citation: Krystyna K. Cap. Review of Kukushkin, Vadim, *From Peasants to Labourers: Ukrainian and Belarusan Immigration from the Russian Empire to Canada.* H-Migration, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14389

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.