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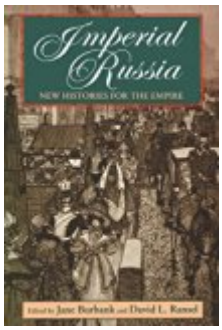

Jane Burbank, David L. Ransel, eds.. *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. Xxiii + 359 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21241-2.

Reviewed by Theodore R. Weeks

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The field of Russian and East-European studies has changed enormously over the past decade. With the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, the field's central justification for existence and funding disappeared. At the same time, research opportunities and archival access improved greatly, enabling scholars to delve into areas previously little studied. Perhaps most salubrious of all for the field, the end of the Soviet era, allowed (indeed forced) historians to reconceptualize the years 1917-1992 as one period of Russian imperial history. The "great break" of 1917, while retaining importance, increasingly does not form an unbridgeable divide within the discipline. Removing the spotlight on 1917 means taking another look at our traditional assumptions about Russian history in the previous centuries. At the same time, with the loss of the "cold war justification" for studying Russian history, we are forced to find a new place for ourselves within the rubrics of European and World history. These essays help us do just that. As such, this collection is an important event in the process of re-thinking and re-writing Imperial Russia's History.

The editors emphasize in their introduction that the essays here reflect a trend away from mainly political and intellectual "scholarly autopsies" (p. xi) and toward an embracing of methodologies from different disciplines (literary criticism, anthropology, subaltern studies--to name a few), an opening of Russian history to questions and insights gleaned from other histories, and pluralism in topics and approaches. Let a thousand histories bloom! One can, of course, always criticize such exuberant eclecticism, but at this stage in our field's transition from parochialism to seizing our (Russia/Eurasia's) proper place in world history, this reviewer at least applauds such an approach.

Chronologically the essays range from the early eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth. The editors intentionally avoided the post-reform period, with the exception of Irina Paperno's essay on suicide. Their justification for concentrating on this earlier period is easy to understand: far more work has been done on the post-1861 period. Furthermore, the editors and authors rightly insist on the need to seek continuities, breaks, and

traditions of Russian history over a longer period than just the two or three generations preceding 1917.

The book is divided into four sections containing a total of twelve essays. The first part examines the politics, ideology, and symbolism of autocracy. The second, entitled "Imperial Imagination," offers fresh insights into the character of Russian national feeling and self-perception in the first half of the nineteenth century. The third section builds on this topic, looking at the peasantry, the Orthodox church, and ethnic frontiers in the Caucasus. Finally, the fourth section contains essays on freemasonry in eighteenth-century Russia, a "micro-history" view of an eighteenth-century Russian merchant family and an essay on the meaning of suicide in the era of the Great Reforms.

As even this brief description indicates, there is material here to pique the interest and stir up discussions among a wide variety of students and specialists. The book ends with a short essay, "In Place of a Conclusion," in which Jane Burbank both pulls together and teases apart issues dealt with in the various essays, and proposes directions for future research and inquiry. Any downcast graduate student (or burn-out faculty member) wondering "***a chto dal'she***?" would do well to consult these invigorating pages.

Different readers will have their own favorites essays but most important is the uniformly high quality here. Judging either from the range and quality of sources used or from the methodological point of view, there is little to criticize. To be sure, one may take issue at some of the authors' conclusions and at the pervasive attempt to argue that the Russian Empire was in fact far less backward and incompetent than has been generally accepted.Along these lines, Valerie Kivelson takes the example of the "Constitution Crisis of 1730," arguing that by accepting the rule of Anna Ivanovna, the Russian nobility did in fact act in its own interests, pursuing to defend kinship connections even while engaging in a "creative adaptation of traditional clan politics to new political circumstances" (p. 22).

In a similar vein, Steven Hoch in his essay "The Serf Economy, the Peasant Family, and the Social Order," insists that such long-maligned institutions of the Russian agricultural economy as the peasant commune and "peasant patriarchy" were in fact reasonable responses to a harsh and unpredictable climate. Hoch argues that agricultural output in Russia was in fact higher and the rate of poverty and famine in Russia lower than generally presumed. At the end of the essay one is left, however, with the nagging question: if agriculture in Russia was indeed in relatively good health, then why did the "land question" and perceptions of peasant poverty play such a great role in Russian political and social thought in the second half of the nineteenth century?

Gregory Freeze's article, "Institutionalizing Piety: The Church and Popular Religion, 1750-1850," similarly takes up the defense of a long maligned institution of Russian life -- the Orthodox Church. In this nuanced essay Freeze demonstrates that the Orthodox establishment worked steadily to rationalize, bureaucratize (in the Weberian sense), and achieve an appropriate level of control over local parishioners (and the local faithful). One strategy adopted earlier on by the Church was to delineate more clearly the lines between the holy and the secular, for example by forbidding the use of churches for secular celebrations, meetings, and even concerts. In the eighteenth century, according to Freeze's account, the Orthodox hierarchy was almost uniformly suspicious of signs of popular religiosity, in particular the veneration of local saints, miracle-working icons, and the like. After 1800, however, rather than opposing such manifestations, the hierarchy began to react more sympathetically to them. "It was in the face of parish resistance and religious dissent that the Church was ultimately driven to

change course and attempt to coopt popular piety" (p. 236).

Four essays by young scholars deal with diverse aspects of Russian nationality. Kevin Tyner Thomas describes the fascinating polemics surrounding the creation of a Russian National Museum (Rossiiskii otechestvennyi muzei) in the early nineteenth century. Ironically but not surprisingly, Thomas's essay concentrates on two essays and conceptions of a future museum penned by gentlemen with the highly Russian surnames Wichmann and Adelung. Despite the differences between the two conceptions presented here, both (like Herder, Mazzini,Mickiewicz and other nationalists of the early nineteenth century) saw no contradiction between their patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Perhaps most significant of all, these proposals found little resonance in Russian court or "society" circles.

Germans also figured among the founders of the Russian Geographical Society, the topic of Nathaniel Knight's contribution to this volume. Knight discusses here two opposing conceptions of anthropology, indeed of "science" in general, within the Society during the first decade of its existence (1845-55). Here the main bone of contention was between the more cosmopolitan "Germans" who stressed the scientific and universalist role of the Society's research and enlightenment efforts and the "Russians" who maintained that the Russian Geographical Society needed to concern itself primarily with studying and spreading knowledge about the fatherland. The Russians carried the day, but in practice, as Knight shows, the anthropological studies carried out by the Society were characterized by a descriptive and nonjudgemental style that contrasts sharply with contemporary American (and, we presume, European) descriptions of "barbaric" American Indians. Reading the article it is difficult not to wonder just how typical the nonjudgemental, positivist style was among Russian anthropologists; one looks forward to Knight's future works on the subject.

Thomas Barrett's contribution, "Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the Northern Caucasus" will be familiar to readers of *Slavic Review*. Perhaps the most valuable insight that Barrett offers is to stress the multifaceted and constantly changing nature of Russian encounters--both physical and intellectual--with the national "other" in the Caucasus. Much can be done by applying and testing this insight to ethnic relations.

The final essay dealing with nationality is Willard Sunderland's exploration of "Empire-Building, Interethnic Interaction, and Ethnic Stereotyping in the Rural World of the Russian Empire, 1800-1850s." Rather a lot, one might say, to cover in an essay not thirty pages in length! And yet Sunderland does an excellent job of elucidating these topics using his research on peasant migration and settlement along the southern and eastern frontiers of "Great Russia" (esp. Tavrida, Orenburg, and Kazan' provinces). Sunderland's discussion of the peasant settlers' perception of their own role in "empire-building" and their own ethnic conceptions and stereotypes makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of "Russian-ness" in the early nineteenth century.

To conclude, the field of Russian history is at present in a stage of significant and highly fruitful ebullience. The essays collected here reflect the diversity and excitement of the field. One may regret certain absences here--no essays on gender or women's history, on non-Russian nationalities, on diplomatic or military topics. But this is quibbling--the essays brought together by Professors Burbank and Ransel present a wealth of new information and interpretations and deserve a broad readership. Anyone wishing to understand the "state of the field" in Imperial Russian history would do well to start with this collection.

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