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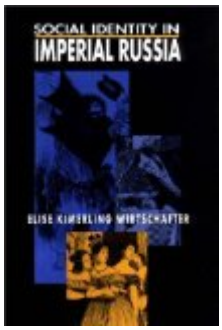

Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter. *Social Identity in Imperial Russia.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997. xi + 260 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-231-2.

Reviewed by Gregory Bruess

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In *Social Identity in Imperial Russia*, Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter undertakes the difficult, valuable and sometimes ironic task of delineating and clarifying the imperial Russian government's own attempts to construct an integrated and stable "society" by conceptualizing a rational, ordered and delineated framework of social categories and imposing it on the ethnically and culturally diverse subjects of its far-flung empire. Professor Wirtschafter is particularly equal to this task as she has already contributed to our understanding of and appreciation for the complexities of Russian society with her earlier articles and monographs on common soldiers, soldiers' families and the "people of various ranks" (*raznochintsy*). It was, in fact, the very issues of social ambiguity and malleability raised by her previous research which induced her to explore the "relationships between state building, large-scale social structure, and everyday life" through "a selective synthesis and interpretation of the highly diverse historiography of social categories in Russia" (p. x).

Wirtschafter's essay on imperial Russian society is divided into four chapters: "The Institutional Setting," "'Ruling' Classes and Service Elites," "Middle Groups," and "Laboring People." The opening chapter briefly addresses the issues of state and empire building and the place of women and the family within the imperial framework. Beginning in the reign of Tsar Peter the Great, Russian policymakers embarked on a program to construct a well-ordered police state. To service this new state, the policymakers attempted to conceptualize a new "society" defined by a set of legal-administrative categories (*sostoiianiia* or *sosloviia*).

The process of regularization faltered for two reasons: first, in a classic Weberian sense, rationalization and bureaucratization robbed the monarchy of the very mystique and sacrality which underlay its effectiveness as a centralizing force; and second, rationalization demanded financial, institutional and human resources which imperial Russia was never quite capable of providing. As a consequence, numerous social groups and a multitude of local communities remained

immune to the integrative impulse of the central government. In the realm of family relationships, the advent of legal-administrative categories reinforced the patrilineal system by extending the social identity of the husband or father to his wife and children. Although the primary function of women in this type of social system is reproductive, once again, sufficient autonomy allowed certain women to achieve an identity not entirely confined to the roles of wife and mother.

In the second chapter, "'Ruling' Classes and Service Elites," Wirtschafter examines the landowning nobility, bureaucracy, military ranks, and clergy. These four categories assisted the state in maintaining social order and extending central power into society. The civil and military ranks were direct instruments of the state, while the nobility and clergy served as representatives of central power in venues beyond direct bureaucratic or military control. The groups shared certain similarities: legally, they possessed certain privileges which distinguished them from servile society; functionally, they were the "meditating links" between state and society; and economically and socially, they experienced significant uncertainty. Within this integrated order, however, the chasm separating the highest elites from the lesser was tremendous. Most lesser service "elites" were economically and socially indistinguishable from the common people. The boundaries between the "ruling" classes and the general population, porous even in the early imperial period, essentially disintegrated with the Great Reforms.

In the third chapter, "Middle Groups," Wirtschafter turns her attention to the *raznochintsy*, commercial-industrial elites and semi-elites, professionals and the intelligentsia. The groups and subgroups which comprised the "middle," and their relationship to the imperial framework, seem to have been the very definition of indeterminacy. The middle, as portrayed by Wirtschafter, was in continuous flux, constantly in search of a social identity and the free spaces where its constituent elements could engage in economic and public activity. The atomization of the middle could be and was beneficial to individuals but was a significant obstacle to the emergence of a civil society or political bourgeoisie in imperial Russia. The middle groups, hobbled by the social fragmentation, economic insecurity, and absence of a clearly defined boundary between town and country that was Russia, were incapable of mimicking the more coherent middle-class movements of western Europe.

The "Laboring People" -- peasants, townspeople and workers -- are the subject of the fourth chapter. These people were the unprivileged. They paid the head tax, offered up conscripts to the military, and worked to feed themselves and the privileged. Wirtschafter brings some cohesion to this broad and heterogeneous group by focusing on the interaction of peasant societies, townspeople and workers with imperial Russia's larger economic, social and the state structures. She includes in this analysis an overview of the peasant family and community, the role of peasant society in economic development, the relationship of peasants to the legal order, peasant resistance and rebellion, the peculiar circumstances of townspeople, the place of workers in late imperial society, the impact of industrial development on social boundaries, the general experience of the factory regime, and labor mobilization. In sum, in "their dealings with formal society and superordinate authority, peasants and workers consistently focused on issues of 'moral economy' and fair treatment" (p. 161).

Initially, "society" (as conceptualized by Russian policymakers) in combination with the mythic sacrality of tsarist authority, was a limited, but effective force of integration and stability. Local communities, families and unofficial social groups possessed sufficient autonomy that each could evade administrative commands thought inimical or accept those judged beneficial. The boundaries between formal and informal structures were ex-

tremely porous and the legal-administrative categories of the state were malleable to say the least. This state of affairs allowed for continuous "self fashioning." In time, as a consequence of the gradual desacralization of tsarism, the emancipation of 1861, and the legal reforms of 1906 and 1912, social fragmentation transformed into alienation, and political and economic chaos ensued.

Wirtschafter has accomplished her task splendidly. The secondary literature on Russian social history in the last two decades alone is extremely rich in depth and breadth. A synthesis of this new material is a valuable asset to the specialist of one of the myriad social groups of imperial Russia and the non-specialist alike. Wirtschafter's study is important in that it deftly delineates the tensions that lay at the core of social identity in imperial Russia: between the center and periphery, the local and the imperial, Orthodox and dissenter, the ascribed and the non-ascribed, and the privileged and the non-privileged. Not surprisingly this same tension and dynamism animates the current scholarship on imperial Russian society. Russian policymakers conceptualized a "society" a la Linnaeus and were unpleasantly surprised by society's reaction to it. The social landscape of imperial Russia was amorphous, ambiguous and the object of constant self-fashioning. In other words, social identity in imperial Russia was not fixed and readers of Wirtschafter's fine book should not expect to discover anything different.

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