

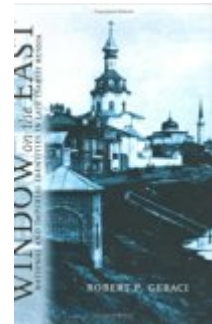
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert P. Geraci. *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. xi + 389 pp. \$52.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3422-8.

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Kazan and Russian Identity

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What does it mean to be Russian? We all have some answer: Eastern Orthodoxy, political loyalty to the tsar or to Vladimir Putin, a penchant for vodka and *zakuski*, a profound love for Pushkin's poems. The mutable and "invented" nature of national identities is by now accepted as a cocktail party banality. At the same time, even the most rational of social scientists cannot escape the fact that millions of people, perhaps billions, consider "their" national or ethnic identity a crucial element of their self-conception. How do these identities arise and develop, how do they affect the identities of neighboring national groups? These are the central questions considered by Robert Geraci's brilliant study of the Tatar-Russian city of Kazan in the nineteenth century. In Kazan Russian-European-Christian elements lived in close and sometimes strained contact with Tatar-"Asian"-Non-Christian elements from the mid-sixteenth century. The proximity of Kazan to Central Russia-Moscow is closer to Kazan than to St. Petersburg—made the city a unique site for the religious and cultural interaction of Europe and "Asia" (in the rather imprecise but often-used terms used in the nineteenth century). The highly contested aspect of Russia's own European-ness further heightens the interest of Kazan as a place where Russians tried to define their own identity and also tried to influence the identity of their non-Russian neighbors.

In this book, Geraci uses Kazan and the upper Volga

as his focus to develop some sophisticated and thought-provoking ideas about Russian nationality (as he points out, not "nationalism") and Russian attempts to incorporate non-Russians into the political, linguistic, and cultural world of the Russian state. Geraci's central heroes, so to speak, are those Russian (and later, assimilated non-Russian) scholars, teachers, and administrators who wrestled with the problem of how best to educate (in other words, to re-form) non-Russians. Among the thorny issues they had to decide were the extent to which Tatars (the core group dealt with here) could be assimilated into the Russian nation, the pace of any such assimilation, and the role of religion in this process.

One central figure here, not surprisingly, is Nikolai I. Il'minskii and his "system" of teaching non-Russian children in their native languages. The book is framed, in a sense, by Il'minskii. After a first chapter providing ethnic and historical background on Kazan and its region from the sixteenth century, Geraci discusses Il'minskii, his career, and his conception of missionary activity. While a devout Orthodox believer (and son of a priest), Il'minskii was never ordained and retained a healthy skepticism about the effectiveness of present missionary methods. At the same time, as Geraci admirably shows, Il'minskii's final goal was in fact to educate the Tatars, so to speak, "out of Islam." The use of native languages did not imply that Il'minskii regarded Islamic or Turkic culture as on a par with Russian civilization or the Orthodox Christian religion. A later chapter in the book describes attacks

on Il'minskii's "system" (but not on his person) as overly favorable to *inorodtsy* (in short, non-Russians) and their culture. These controversies of the early twentieth century, after Il'minskii's death, stemmed in great part from a shift in emphasis from religion (always Il'minskii's primary interest in education) to language as a marker of national identity. Geraci's discussion of these arguments is nuanced and lively, while the arguments themselves are frequently exceedingly similar to those forwarded, for example, for and against using Russian in Catholic church services after the 1863 Polish rebellion.

A short review cannot do justice to the richness and breadth of this book. Among other things, Geraci delves into considerations of missionary activity among the Tatar and "pagan" peoples of the upper Volga, the creation of schools for these peoples, including nominally Christian (but culturally rather diverse) groups like the Votiaks (Udmurts) and so-called "Kriashens" converted Tatars). The reader also learns much here about the Kazan Teacher's Seminary, the Kazan Tatar Teachers' School, and especially Kazan University and their role in the enterprise of bringing Russian (whether *russkii* or *rossiiskii*) culture to the peoples of this region.

Kazan University, one of the first founded in the Russian Empire, is devoted special attention. After all, the study of eastern languages (later transferred to St. Petersburg) as an academic discipline originated there. Other Kazan University scholars (including many German expatriates) developed the field of ethnography, using as their subject matter the various Finnic and Muslim peoples living in the city's proximity. A fascinating chapter recounts the "Multan case," an accusation of ritual human sacrifice levied against the Votyak community in 1892. The Votiaks as they were known before Soviet times) provide yet another case of "blurred boundaries" between Christian and "Pagan" peoples. While nominally Christian, the Votiaks were suspected of retaining

some of their ancient, pre-Christian customs, in particular the practice of human sacrifice in times of great need.

The book concludes with a chapter on the "*inorodets* as Russian scholar": Nikolai F. Katanov. Despite his Russian-sounding name, Katanov's origins were entirely Asian: he was born in Eastern Siberia to a nomadic, Turkic-speaking (though Christian) family. By dint of his intelligence and hard work, Katanov advanced from Krasnoarsk gymnasium to St. Petersburg University, ending as a professor in Kazan. Geraci's portrayal of Katanov illuminates in microcosmic form the large issues of the book: nationality, ethnicity, race, religion and how all of these worked together in creating Russian identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It will come as no surprise to learn that Geraci's work is based on a rich and broad variety of sources. He mined archives in Kazan, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, pored through dozens of contemporary periodicals, and assimilated a huge amount of the ethnographic literature. More important than the breadth of sources, however, is the nuanced and intelligent use of those documents. The book truly integrates the sources into a compelling and engrossing narrative, spiked with illuminating analytical insights. Perhaps best of all, Geraci is a gifted writer whose precision and elegance of expression is exemplary.

Like another recently-published "instant classic," Yuri Slezkine's *Arctic Mirrors*, Robert Geraci's *Window on the East* takes a seemingly small topic—Kazan, its environs and peoples, and how Russians tried to deal with them in the nineteenth and twentieth century—to develop a compelling argument about the construction and development of Russian national and imperial (the two cannot be separated) identity. Any serious student of Russian history, nationality policy and russification, ethnic relations, or Orientalism needs to read this book. Happily, that is a task as pleasant as it is intellectually stimulating.

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