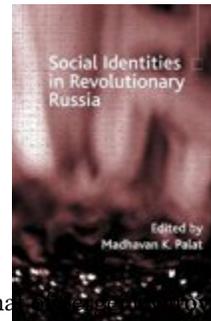


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Madhavan K. Palat, ed. *Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. xv + 246. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-92947-6.

Reviewed by Michael C. Hickey (Bloomsburg University)  
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This volume—the outgrowth of an international conference at Delhi’s Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts in 1996—presents ten essays on topics as disparate as the poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov and conflicts between Russian Orthodox laypeople and prelates over the disposition of parish funds. What ostensibly binds these is a common focus on “social identity,” conceived most broadly. In his introduction, Madhavan Palat describes social identity as a complex of subjective social constructs that are “problematic and contested” (p. xiii). Palat labors to fit these ten chapters into three rubrics: identity of region, bureaucratic construction of peasant identities, and examination of identities of the intelligentsia and the church. Several of the essays, though, fit under the umbrella of “identity” only if shoved with considerable force. As is often true of conference volumes, the chapters are of uneven quality; moreover, many of the best contributions have been published elsewhere in more expansive form.

In his essay “The Russian Idea: Metaphysics, Ideology, and History,” V. V. Serbinenko astutely observes that we should not conflate metaphysical conceptions of “the Russian Idea” with efforts to construct a “national ideology.” Serbinenko focuses on selected passages from the works of Dostoevsky and Vladimir Solov’ev, for whom, he argues, the Russian Idea inferred a supranational Christian Universalism rather than nationalist chauvinism. Serbinenko’s Dostoevsky and Solov’ev are champions of multicultural tolerance, whose Russian Idea involved the gathering-in and appreciation of elements of other cultures while preserving that which was distinctly Russian. For both thinkers, the Russian Idea demanded that Russia follow the “Christian path of history” and renounce policies based upon the primacy of state and national interests. This put both in opposition to nationalist

ideology-building projects such as the

Serbinenko offers no analysis of contesting ideological constructions of the Russian Idea, nor of metaphysical conceptions other than those of Solov’ev and Dostoevsky (nor does he dwell on chauvinistic elements of Dostoevsky’s thought). His real thrust is aimed at contemporary politics (circa 1996), and at rejecting contemporary efforts to forge an exclusivist Russian national ideology, which he sees as another utopian dead end for a country that must create a democracy sensitive and respectful of Russia’s multicultural citizenry.

Bohdan Krawchenko’s “Agrarian Unrest and the Shaping of a National Identity in Ukraine at the Turn of the Century” reviews statistical data on population, land ownership, and agricultural technology and yields in late-nineteenth-century Ukraine to assert that Russia underdeveloped Ukraine (as an imperial metropolis underdevelops its colonial hinterlands). This created multiple grievances among Ukraine’s overwhelmingly peasant majority, which believed it could overcome poverty only by taking the land of the nobles and merchants, primarily Russians, Poles, and Jews. Krawchenko argues that Ukrainian peasants’ many grievances thus could “easily be articulated within the framework of a national demand” (p. 25). First, though, they had to learn to understand their predicament as members of a “national community” with help from the rural intelligentsia, and in particular through establishment of the Peasant Union in 1905. According to Krawchenko, peasant frustration at the failure of the 1905 revolution and the Stolypin land reforms to improve their condition convinced them that their grievances could be met only in the context of Ukrainian national autonomy. In 1917 all the “infrastructural” elements necessary to national consciousness fell

into place (the spread of newspapers, the return of soldiers to the villages, etc.), and the Ukrainian peasantry “en masse” supported the idea of national autonomy.

As evidence for this last point, Krawchenko cites “peasant” criticism for the Central Rada’s timidity on the question of autonomy in June 1917 and the overwhelming majority given to Ukrainian parties in elections to the constituent assembly. But can we infer complex understandings of grievances from raw social statistics? Were the outspoken delegates at peasant congresses in 1917 “peasants”? Did voting for the Ukrainian SRs necessarily mean support for national autonomy? And how did rural folk in Ukraine understand the meanings of “national autonomy”? Krawchenko notes considerable social differentiation in Ukraine’s villages, but never raises the question of how social tensions within village society affected the development of a shared “national” consciousness. Moreover, he implicitly treats the Ukraine’s peasants as sharing a single common “ethnos” (pp. 27–28), without addressing the problem of distinct regional identities that emphasized difference (Galicians, Bukhoviains, Lenki, Hutsul, etc.).[1] In sum, Krawchenko’s essay reminds us of the methodological complexity of discussing “social identity” (addressed more satisfactorily here in essays by Palat, Pallot, and Kolonitskii).

Hari Vasudevan’s “Identity and Politics in Provincial Russia: Tver, 1889–1905” addresses the “localness” of provincial liberalism. Vasudevan argues that provincial liberals framed their opposition to the central government’s encroachment on zemstvo prerogatives on the basis of supraprovincial identifications (e.g., with professional organizations, or the *obshchestvo* more generally) and not on the basis of any specific local identity or local issues. The local context did, however, provide them with a base in ties of sociability that allowed zemstvo professionals to form alliances with liberal gentry. Vasudevan demonstrates that the tsarist state encouraged local or regional identity (e.g., folkloristic projects, the collection of regional statistics, etc.) only to the extent that these reinforced a more general sense of Russianness, and that the state rejected any politicized conception of the “local” separate from or contrasting to the national. He shows that liberal zemstvo activists generally perceived their tasks in terms of national development, professionalism, ideology, or religion, not those of “parochial” local interests. During the counterreforms of the 1880s and 1890s, zemstvo liberals found themselves at odds with “Officialdom.” But counterreformers themselves also emphasized the importance of local flexibility; the major dividing line was over the principle of self-

government versus the “discretionary authority” of appointed officials. Again, the liberals’ attachment to devolution of power was conditioned not upon particular local needs, but on more generalized, suprageographical principles regarding what constituted good governance. Still, local social environments and networks—the backchannels of influence found at provincial noble clubs and country estates and the contacts facilitated by various circles of local progressives—structured what liberal zemstvo activists could and could not achieve.

Vasudevan makes use of his intimate knowledge of local society and politics in Tver province to illustrate these points. In the late 1890s Tver’s zemstvo liberals openly battled with a series of provincial governors who sought to erode the zemstvo’s sphere of competence by appointing officials to oversee (and control) zemstvo projects. Tver’s zemstvo liberals opposed these steps based upon a shared set of supralocal assumptions about governance (and a common lexicon of politics). Yet their ability to contest the governors’ actions (e.g., regarding zemstvo rates and budget allocations) and to assert their own claims depended upon their ability to “work” the local liberal gentry, i.e., on very local networks of sociability. Between 1895 and 1900, they effectively obstructed the efforts of provincial officialdom. The provincial administration, though, also learned to play local politics, and eventually mobilized conservative gentry and the peasant and merchant elements in the local zemstvo and *duma* assemblies against the liberals.[2]

A. V. Buganov’s essay “Historical Views of the Russian Peasantry: National Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century” asserts four main arguments. First, the spread of literacy and “secondary literacy” (being read to) supplemented oral traditions to advance a sense of national identity among Russia’s peasantry after the Great Reforms of the 1860s. Second, peasants built their conceptions of history around the lives and adventures of myth-like personages (Peter the Great, General Kutuzov, etc.) who had helped make Russia mighty. Third, peasant historical consciousness conflated mythic images with popular Orthodoxy, and so conceptualized the actions of historic figures as a working out of the will of God. And fourth, peasants imagined these historical heroes as champions of the common people “against the traditional ‘internal’ enemy, the ‘bad boyar’ and landlord” (p. 84).

Buganov offers interesting readings of folklore and folk memory of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and other grand historical figures, although his peasants are, on a whole, “naive monarchists” in the tradition of Soviet

historiography. Moreover, to plumb the depths of peasant historical consciousness, Buganov has relied upon the summary judgments of nineteenth-century ethnographers, without considering how the ethnographers' own ideologically fashioned iconography of the peasantry shaped the collection, interpretation, and presentation of such evidence.[3]

Madhavan Palat's "Regulating Conflict through the Petition," addresses the constitution of identities and the ordering of society through peasant supplications to the tsar in the Nicholean era. Palat examines dozens of petitions from serf communities contesting landowners' measures. Rural communities sought out clerks or other literates to put their supplications into writing, but Palat argues provocatively that the autocracy itself "wrote" these petitions by dictating their form. Petitions as a rule began by asserting that the landowner had somehow encroached upon or violated a traditional right or longstanding positive condition, so that by granting the community's request the tsar would be restoring the status quo. This in turn legitimated the autocracy. Petitioners always portrayed themselves as innocent victims, a position supported by their exhaustive rehearsal of the wrongs done in violation of the tsar's law. Supplicants thus framed their requests as acts of loyalty aimed at helping the tsar restore rightful order. Petitions always depicted the community's case in the most emotive possible form, so as to capture the tsar's pity by underlining their own passivity and helplessness, a strategic self-abasement that often clashed violently with officials' portrayal of peasants as aggressors. Palat points out that this strategy often proved successful: in a quarter of the cases Palat examined, the autocracy intervened in favor of serf communities. For Palat, this demonstrated that peasant supplication was not a manifestation of naive monarchism; rather, the very irrationality of autocratic practice gave peasants rational hope that the tsar might take their part.

The heart of Palat's argument is that we should understand the autocracy's practice of allowing such petitions (which the regime at once formally outlawed and encouraged) as an instrument of social regulation. Petitions allowed the tsar a safety valve with which occasionally to relieve rural social pressures; they provided the autocracy an alternative means of information about rural conditions; and perhaps most importantly, they reinforced the principle that all subjects of the autocrat, including nobles, were vulnerable to punishment and repression from the tsar, the "source of inscrutable mercy." This brings Palat back to the question of identity, and

leads him to the conclusion that petitions in fact tell us more about the identity and world view of the autocrat (their ultimate "author").

Readers may be familiar with Judith Pallot's "The Stolypin Land Reform as 'Administrative Utopia': Images of the Peasantry in Nineteenth-Century Russia" from her impressive 1999 monograph.[4]. The essay's subtitle is a misnomer, as Pallot deals primarily with early-twentieth-century images. Pallot focuses on the utopianism of the Stolypin reform project, which she argues was about spaces and not people. Reformers took as gospel the idea that radically transforming the landscape would transform peasants into "rational," progressive farmers. In place of the chaos of the repartitional commune with its hodgepodge patchwork of scattered strips, the reform would bring the good order of the khutor, a socially engineered farmstead with no angles greater than forty-five degrees in their boundaries and a length-to-width ratio no greater than five to one. The peasant would be physically separated from the backward influence of the village, and his household dwelling located in the center of the farm so that, according to the instructions provided local land-reform agents, "the farmer's wife can call her husband for lunch" (p. 120). Reformers considered otruba and other forms of land reorganization as inferior; at best they might be transitional stages towards khutorization, in which life would conform to the geometry of perfect squares.

The reform's principle architect, A. A. Kofod believed that this physical organization of the land would create a new "strong" and literally "sober" peasant (hence Stolypin's famous "wager") who was more productive, more modern, and more easily controlled. Pallot applies theory to the nitty-gritty of history by linking the Stolypin reforms to Foucault's concept of the "discipline of enclosure." She concludes that while the reforms failed to remake the peasantry, they help reshape bureaucratic mentalities; "the assumptions on which it was based about the state's guiding role in agrarian change and the pursuit of order through the intervention of specialists, survived" (p. 131).

Dietrich Beyrau's essay "Broken Identities: The Intelligentsia in Revolutionary Russia" begins by discussing the late tsarist intelligentsia, but his main concern is the transformation of the intelligentsia in the first decade of Soviet rule.[5] The "broken identities" of the title does not refer to "fracturing" of identities in the sense of creating a multiplicity of competing identities; Beyrau points out in his introduction that social identity is by its very

nature multifaceted. Rather, he means that after 1917 the identity of the intelligentsia had been “broken away from” its late imperial moorings and transformed. Using a wide array of secondary sources, Beyrau argues that in the tsarist intelligentsia was a relatively “sheltered,” complex social conglomerate. Intelligently had “infected” the old regime administration and moreover maintained broad networks of solidarity that transcended social orders and professions (and often ideological distinctions), which afforded them a degree of psychological comfort (and sometimes actual protection) in the face of repression. Though they were often at odds, the revolutionary intelligentsia of various stripes and professional intelligentsia of various flavors could coexist; the late tsarist intelligentsia was, in a word, diverse.

The 1917-1921 period “broke” this condition; the triumphant revolutionary intelligentsia, drawn more and more from the lower classes of Russian society, sought to impose its particularistic vision of socialism on the country, and particularly on the professional intelligentsia, from which it “demanded obedience” and ultimately “conversion” (p. 154). The “old” professional intelligentsia could for a time function in this brave new world as “bourgeois specialists,” but this required that they renounce any claim to social influence and leadership, that they do their narrow technical jobs and keep their mouths shut. They had in effect been rendered impotent and monodimensional. The new regime had to “break” the identities of the professional intelligentsia to consolidate power and to advance its project of social reengineering, for which the new “Red” intelligentsia (which lacked both the qualifications and the diversity of the “old” professionals) acted as the “secular-religious” vanguard.

Boris Kolonitskii’s contribution is his excellent essay “‘Democracy’ as Identification: Towards a Study of Political Consciousness during the February Revolution.”[6] As Kolonitski shows, the term “democracy” was central to the political lexicon of 1917. Identifying oneself publicly with “democracy” or as a “democrat” was basic political correctness in 1917; Kornilov’s supporters, for instance, described the general as a “democrat.” Not only Lenin, but Kerensky and many others along 1917’s (narrowed) political spectrum described Russia as the world’s “most free” and “most democratic” state and desired to spread “democracy” by exporting the revolution.[7] In 1917 “democracy” had multiple meanings. It could refer to “all the people,” or the “broad masses”; more often it was filtered through (and subordinated to) the language of class, and meant the “laboring classes” or “toiling peo-

ple” - those who were not bourgeois. It could mean a system of power, most often implying “people’s power” (with “the people” as the class-exclusive “democracy”). It could refer to the parties represented in the soviets, the socialist parties (including the Bolsheviks), or more generally those groups and organizations “counterposed to the ‘bourgeoisie’” (p. 166). Like “worker,” it ascribed identity politically as well as socially, through exclusion as well as inclusion: defining someone as “outside the democracy” was to define them as “bourgeois” and exclude them from legitimacy in the political process.

Kolonitski stresses that workers, peasants, and soldiers “reworked” the democratic lexicon so as to express and fit into their own “traditions of power.” He gives us the voices of soldiers who wanted “‘a republic with a clever tsar’” not to indict them for their political ignorance, but to emphasize that in the conceptual/linguistic universe of ordinary Russians “notions of ‘state’ and ‘tsardom’ were synonymous” (pp. 168, 169). For Kolonitski, popular usages of “democracy” reveal deeply authoritarian and patrimonial conceptions of power; when the figure of the tsar fell from the center of common people’s ideals of democracy, his place was taken by “leaders of the people” (in particular, Kerensky). I agree entirely with Kolonitski on the refraction of political language through the prism of class. But I am less willing to concede that Russian popular political culture in 1917 was fundamentally authoritarian, or that “the very fact of the simultaneous functioning of various languages of politics objectively made the democratic development of the country difficult” (p. 170), if only because we find similar phenomenon in other, “successful” democratic revolutions.[8]

Gregory Freeze’s essay “All Power to the Parish? The Problem and Politics of Church Reform in Late Imperial Russia,” is this collection’s gem.[9] Freeze marshals an enormous body of archival evidence to examine conflict between Orthodox Christian laity and prelates over parish reform, so as to address the larger question of the old order’s ability to reform itself. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a broad consensus existed among the educated public, the government, and the church hierarchy over the need to revitalize the parish as the most fundamental unit of Orthodox worship and Christian life. A great distance, however, separated the church hierarchy and the laity on how best to achieve this goal. Laity demanded that the parish control its own funds, so that these might be applied to maintaining local institutions such as hospitals and almshouses rather than supporting diocesan schools that primarily served

the children of clerics. They also insisted upon local election of priests, as had been the practice in previous centuries. Freeze argues that the church hierarchy, including not only reactionary bishops but also most liberal priests, feared such reforms would put too much power into the hands of the “dark,” “backward” masses, whose low level of culture was inadequate to these new responsibilities. Thus the position of the prelates echoed that of liberals (and, I might add, socialist intellectuals) who also feared that the “dark masses” were not ready for self-rule. Thus the church did all it could to limit and then block state projects for parish reform.

In rehearsing debates and frustrated efforts at reforms over a period of nearly sixty years in impeccable detail (especially fine is the discussion of the church’s conflict with the Duma after 1905), Freeze advances five main arguments. First, the issue of parish reform reminds us that the interests of the church and of the tsarist state were often at odds. Second, the case of parish reform seems to justify the “pessimist” argument on the question of the tsarist regime’s stability. Third, conditions in the parishes (such as, for instance, the inability of urban parishes even to record their memberships before 1905), demonstrate that the church—like the state—if anything suffered from “underinstitutionalization” (p. 196). Fourth, and this is perhaps Freeze’s most strongly argued point, prelates’ opposition to parish empowerment rested not so much on grounds of canon law as on their deep fear “of giving the ‘dark masses’ autonomy and control over the local purse and priest” (p. 190). Ultimately, the Bolshevik regime settled the matter by smashing the power of the clerical hierarchy. And although its 1918 decree on separation of church and state denied the church juridical status, the Communist regime granted the parish *de facto* legal status as well as autonomy vis-a-vis the prelates. Freeze argues that the Bolsheviks’ satisfaction of such popular aspirations— even if unintentional—helps explain “why the Bolshevik regime, so fragile and weak in its early years, was able to survive” (p. 196).

We might note that Freeze’s essay never directly refers to “identity.”

In the volume’s final essay, “The Poetics of Eurasia: Velimir Khlebnikov between Empire and Revolution,” Harsha Ram argues that the symbolist poet’s work—and indeed, his life itself—was “caught between empire and revolution” (p. 209). Ram presents Khlebnikov as a sort of bridge between the “panmongolianism” of Solov’ev, symbolists like Blok, and later theorists of Eurasianism

like Trubetskoi. Khlebnikov sought to create an “epistemology of empire” by broadening Russian literature “systematically towards the geographical and ethnic confines of its own imperial borders” (p. 212). His tool was exploration of the “deepening gaps” between realms of “time” and “space,” in a series of manifestos in 1916-18. Ram argues that these constituted an explicit critique of the nation-state and that Khlebnikov equated freedom with the artistic manipulation of time freed from special constraints.

Khlebnikov’s utopia was the realm of pure time, which he identified (or “territorialized”) as “Asia.” He developed this conception in poetic works and manifestos that elaborated a mathematical (actually, numerological) theory of imperial history. Khlebnikov believed that (largely random) numerical values and ratios assigned to events in Russian history revealed history’s laws. The central points in Khlebnikov’s history are the 1380 Russian victory over the Tatars at Kulikovo, the Japanese victory at Mukden in 1905, and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, all of which involve Russia’s relationship with and in Asia. Ram argues that this numerology constituted a “tentative epistemology of time” in which history follows cycles leading toward a “utopian moment” fusing time and space, which Khlebnikov named “Asia” (p. 218). Ram holds that in doing so “Khlebnikov merges absolute historical time with reterritorialized imperial space,” setting Eurasianism free of Russian chauvinism and making it instead a tool for considering epistemological categories (p. 223). Ram’s essay concludes with an appendix that presents a transcript and new translation of a hitherto-unpublished manuscript version of Khlebnikov’s 1918 manifesto “An Indo-Russian Union,” one of the texts central to Ram’s argument. One wishes that Ram had set Khlebnikov’s numerology more firmly into the context not only of symbolist poetry, but more broadly into contemporary pseudoscientific and cabalistic vogues among the artistic avant-garde.

It is unfortunate that this book does not cohere well as a whole. For the sake of generalists and students, it would need a more extensive introduction or conclusion examining the development of scholarly literature on “social identity” (in particular in the Russian context) and how this theme/problem of “social identity” functions in each essay. For specialists who have already read longer, more elaborate versions of the fine essays by Pallot, Kolonitski, and Beyrau, those by Vasudevan, Palat and especially Freeze make the volume worthy of attention.

Notes:

[1]. Krawchenko here takes a position in a long-standing scholarly dispute over the degree of national consciousness among peasants in Ukraine without making clear that such a debate even exists. The two sides of this argument were perhaps most clearly staked out in English language literature by John Reshetar in *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920: A Study in Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), and Steven L. Guthrie in "The Popular Base of Ukrainian Nationalism in 1917," *Slavic Review* 38, no. 1 (1979): 30-47. See also Andrew P. Lamis, "Some Observations on the Ukrainian National Movement and the Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1921," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*. 2, no. 4 (1978): 525-531.

[2]. It should be noted that Vasudevan, an outstanding scholar whose work has covered a broad range of topics and periods, also deftly translated the Russian-language contributions to this volume.

[3]. See Cathy Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[4]. Judith Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia 1906-1917: Peasant Responses to Stolypin's Project of Rural Transformation* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1999), Chapter Two. See my April 2000 H-Russia review at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=10543954955474>

[5]. A more expansive (earlier) presentation of Beyrau's thinking on the themes raised in this chapter can be found in his article "Russische Intelligenzija und Revolution," *Historische Zeitschrift* no. 252(3) (1991): 559-586.

[6]. Boris Kolonitski, "'Democracy' in the Political

Consciousness of the February Revolution," *Slavic Review* vol.57, no. 1(1998): 95-106. See also Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitski, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), Chapter Four and particularly pp. 122-126; B. I. Kolonitskii, *Simboly vlasti i bor'ba za vlast': k izucheniiu politicheskoi kul'tury Rossiiskoi revoliutsii 1917 goda*. (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin Press, 2001).

[7]. The old regime's collapse narrowed Russia's political spectrum, so that what had been the "center" (the liberals) now became the "right" and the moderate socialists now became the "center." Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapter Three.

[8]. The most familiar cases for most Russian and European world historians would be the English and French revolutions, but we might also note that the political lexicon of the American revolution contained very different meanings for Virginia planters than it did for Boston artisans. See, for instance, Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*. (Boston: Beacon, 1999).

[9]. Freeze's essay very nicely complements his "Subversive Piety: Religion and the Political Crisis in Late Imperial Russia," *Journal of Modern History*. 68, no. 2 (1996): 308-350.

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