H-Net Reviews
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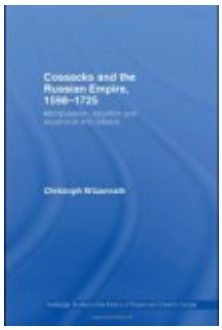
Christoph Witzenrath. *Cossacks and the Russian Empire, 1598–1725: Manipulation, Rebellion and Expansion into Siberia.* London: Routledge, 2007. 259 S. $170.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-203-96290-9.



Reviewed by Peter B. Brown

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Christoph Witzenrath's "Cossacks and the Russian Empire" joins a distinguished tradition of Anglophone scholarship on early modern Siberia. His volume supplements the pioneering efforts of the 1940s series, "California Studies in History", in publishing landmarks by R. Fisher and George Lantzeff on seventeenth-century Muscovy's fur trade and administration in Siberia and the works by D.N. Collins and J.R. Gibson from the 1960s to the 1990s on settlement and fur trade in the early history of Russian penetration into Siberia.

Witzenrath divides his study into seven chapters: "Introduction," "The Cossack Group," "The Economics of Siberian Service," "Integration of the Trading Frontier: the Sovereign's Affairs," "Kormlenie and Bribery: Local Influence and Administration," "Local and Central Power in the Baikal Region 1689-1720," and "Conclusion." He tackles the knotty issues of how the very distant center was able to control a huge and grotesquely underpopulated area with a minimum of local administrative and military folk and, second, was able to garner the loyalty of its remote officials. But he does so by upending traditional emphasis upon state-building and Muscovite centralism and examining, both through empirical and conjectural analyses, the role of small-group psychology as the agglutinative element fostering cohesive local government to ensure compliance with the capital's directives.

Not only that, Witzenrath zeros in and perseveringly excavates archival documents and published sources to portray how individual Siberian town cossacks' corporate solidarity was such that it created bargaining space for the cossacks to obtrude their own desiderata and interpretations upon the capital's directives to the town governors (voevody). He stresses the plasticity of these processes wherein local service cossack detachments were able to empower themselves and secure for themselves a niche of autonomy, at times more beleaguered than others. This involved for them no end of vigilance and haggling among the Siberian Chancellery (sibirskii prikaz), the military district governors (razriadnye voevody), their subordinate town governors, and the local clerks (pod'iachie), bailiffs (pristavchiki), and others functioning under the local governor's aegis.

How was such maneuvering accomplished in the face of long odds like isolation, material deprivation, and seemingly lopsided power differential? The answer lies in the "Personenverband," which Witzenrath asserts existed in the at least sixteen Siberian towns he investigated: Barguzuisk, Eniseisk, Iakutsk, Il'insk, Irkutsk, Itantsynsk, Kaban'sk, Krasnoiarsk, Narym, Nerchinsk, Selenginsk, Surgut, Tiumen', Tomsk, Udinsk, and Verkhotur'e, which were spread across three thousand miles from the Urals to the Lena River. This is a healthy sampling, a convincing cross-section of differently sized towns, with differing economic and defense preoccupations and official statuses.

The term "Personenverband," of course, is not found in any Muscovite source, and its meaning is something like "personal association," "personal alliance," or "intra-stratum affinity." The author follows along with Valerie Kivelson Varlerie A. Kivelson, Autocracy in the Provinces. The Muscovite Gentry and Political Culture in the Seventeenth Century, Stanford 1996. by ascribing to the thesis of local, incipiently autonomous actors, though that notion is probably overdrawn. Why not just come and say that through sheer force of numbers and remoteness from the capital, the Siberian Cossacks realized they could act presumptuously and get away with it?

The "Personenverband" was a de facto confederation of local, urban Siberian cossacks, whose congruent aspirations, demands, obligations, and gripes made these actors an effective and non-ignorable constituency. How the Siberian cossack "Personenverbände" visualized themselves, reacted to their environment, and interacted with other elements of the Muscovite state machinery Witzenrath recurrently addresses through intriguing use of military sociology, cultural anthropology, and a gratifyingly ample resource base from the "Russian State Archive of Early Acts" (RGADA) in Moscow (including the funds of the Siberian Chancellery, the Armory Chancellery, and the Irkutsk Administrative Office), twenty published sources, and 413 secondary ones. Beyond this, it would not have been a tall order to have dragged in complex organizational sociology to flush out more the implications of wayward bureaucratic behaviors on the spot and the cossacks dealing with them.

Witzenrath certainly introduces a plethora of fascinating case studies (which the reader is well advised to consult), the details of which he doggedly recounts. They reveal an engrossing complexity to his subjects' lives, and provide his readers a real sense of lived history. He proves his points and "gets there," though the narrator's prose at times is convoluted and trying.

The Siberian cossacks could wrest the initiative on their own behalf arguing, conniving, planning, manipulating, intimidating, and charming local town governors and their subordinate officialdom to bend to the cossacks' wishes on compensation, living conditions, taxation, service duties, judicial cases, commercial involvements, and others.

This reviewer found the term "Personenverband" an adequate conceptual tool, despite a tendency for it at times to be wielded tendentiously. He would have liked the author to address, front-and-center, how the Muscovite service ethos may have impinged upon the admittedly exceptional Siberian cossacks and the important role that the town governors' working orders (nakazy) played in setting the desiderata for provincial administration, regardless of location in Russia. Needed is a discussion of sluzhba (service), and a fleshing out more of the voevoda hierarchy from the several, Siberian military districts (razriady) downwards to the major towns and thence to the lesser ones.

If the Siberian town cossacks could be termed "Personenverbände," why not, by way of comparison, could their fellow, lower-service class castemates, the Siberian musketeers, artillerymen, and still others have had their own "Personenverbände?" How might these urban-based groups,

who knocked elbows with one another on a daily basis, have interacted? Bakhrushkin gives tantalizing evidence on how the Siberian town musketeers had "Personenverbände." Sergey Vladimirovich Bakhrushin, Ocherki po istorii kolonizatsii Sibiri v xvi i xviii vv, Moscow 1927; id, Nauchnye trudy. Tom 2. Ocherki po istorii Krasnoiarskogo uezda v xvii v Sibir' i Sredniaia Aziia v xvi-xvii vv., 5 vols. in 4, Moscow 1959. Might not a recounting of the daily inter-workings and interconnectivity of the Siberian urban service strata have altered the author's implied conviction of the cossack Personenverbände's uniqueness? (But in all fairness, this is a dimension awaiting another investigation.) Some of this emerges, for example, in his analysis of contentiousness between cossacks and deti boiarskie (middle-service class cavalrymen) over appointments of town governors and bailiffs in the Tobol'sk and Irkutsk regions in the 1660s, 1680s, and 1690s (p. 56-57).

In sum Witzenrath produced a commendable volume that joins the ranks of a swelling literature on seventeenth-century Muscovite local government. Not only Russian specialists, but scholars of the early modern Americas and the Eurasian and African peripheries will gain by reading his noteworthy investigation.