

Sergei Antonov. *Bankrupts and Usurers of Imperial Russia: Debt, Property, and the Law in the Age of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 387 S. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-97148-6.



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This book about the credit system in Imperial Russia is full of surprises, insights and delightful episodes. Who would have known that creditors had to pay the maintenance fees for their debtors when they were in prison? Who would have known that in cases of bankruptcy female spouses' property was not to be touched? And who would have known that a substantial amount of debts was never paid back and creditors lived with it because they interpreted it as a Christian act of mercy?

In his fascinating study about late imperial credit culture, Sergei Antonov leads us into the worlds of provincial nobility, Moscow merchants and Petersburg pawnbrokers in order to analyze the impact of private credit relations. He wants to show what it was like “to borrow, lend and own property, and argue about it, in nineteenth-century Russia” (p. 313). His main thesis can be summarized in this way: Private credit relations encompassed a huge network of different estates. The culture of credit allowed for a vast network of personal relations which transgressed social boundaries. Those who lent money, those who

borrowed and those who brokered such deals could be found among all estates. Although the estate system in Imperial Russia is commonly described as a limiting factor in Russia's economic development, Antonov demonstrates the fluidity of those social boundaries when it comes to credit. In this sense, after having read Antonov's book one might even be tempted to say that credit was the “real community” (Karl Marx's *reelles Gemeinwesen*) in Russia.

Antonov does not limit himself to describing the societal influences of such credit networks. He contributes to scholarly debates about law as well as the development of capitalism in Imperial Russia by analyzing court cases on debt from roughly the 1850s to the 1870s. He not only provides us with new insights into the life worlds of ordinary subjects (in his case particularly the “missing middle classes”), but also profoundly re-considers long-standing notions of historical interpretation. His book substantially enriches our understanding of economic as well as social history for an era which is still understudied. Methodologically, Antonov participates in a new trend of historiog-

raphy in which economic and cultural history successfully merge. Ekaterina Pravilova, *A Public Empire. Property and the Quest for the Common Good in Imperial Russia*, Princeton 2014.

In terms of law and its development, Antonov wholeheartedly embraces evolutionary notions of law and dismisses the idea of Russian law as failing as too shortsighted. His aim is to understand how the Russian legal process administered debt. By analyzing court cases from the pre-reform era, Antonov demonstrates to which extent individuals – from nobles to townspeople – used law both before and after the court reform of 1864 for their interests as property owners and how fluently they navigated court procedures. Antonov concedes that pre-reform law might have been less well structured, yet insists that it nevertheless worked efficiently. The third section, for example, usually only known as the secret police dealing with mostly political cases, played a major role in settling civil law disputes, and thus often ruled in debt cases. The involvement of the third section in the everyday legal system is one of the many insights of this study. As one of the central continuities between the pre- and post reform law culture, he stresses flexibility and fluidity as many verdicts in Russian courts depended less on factual proof of an inquisitorial system but on individuals' agency and discretion. Antonov thus detects elements of the adversarial system in pre-reform Russia before its introduction proper with the jury courts in 1864.

The author repeatedly underlines the growing acceptance of bankruptcy and its legal regulation among the participants of the Russian debt culture since 1800 as crucial for interpreting bankruptcy less as a moral failure but as a potential result of risk-taking. Debt in his view was less the privilege (or fate) of irrational noble spendthrifts – a one-sided representation established by Dostoevsky and Tolstoi – but a feature of everyday life. Antonov claims that neither Russia's law nor its credit system differed much from

Western Europe. He thus takes issue with the never-ending history of Russia's backwardness stressing the functioning aspects of law and credit in Imperial Russia, which in many cases were unusual and thus peculiar to the Russian system. The fact that women in Imperial Russia were allowed to own and to manage their property is in his study extended into the realm of credit, debt and bankruptcy. On female property see Michelle Lamarche Marrese, *A Woman's Kingdom. Noblewomen and the Control of Property in Russia, 1700–1861*, Ithaca 2002. Although women officially were not allowed to issue bills of exchange (*vekseli*) unless they had a business in their own name, women often figured as borrowers, lenders, and brokers. Particularly interesting is the credit system within marital relations. The Russian law provided considerable protection for wives. Creditors were only allowed to seize the wife's property if she was indeed her husband's partner in business. If not, her property was not to be touched. Moreover, half of the family's moveable property belonged to her and was exempt from being confiscated by the state or taken by the creditors. When it comes to debt forgiveness Imperial Russia seems to be strikingly generous. Creditors could induce the imprisonment of their debtors. They did so in the hope of getting their debts paid back. However, there seems to have been a peak in imprisonment before Easter and Christmas or big festivities like coronations, because the debtors and creditors alike speculated on charitable redemption. Private individuals as well as societies spent considerable sums year after year to set the debtors free. Although creditors received only a small portion of their money back, they nevertheless helped filling the Moscow "Debtors Pit" with debtors regularly twice a year.

In his study, Antonov indeed succeeds in bringing back the lost worlds of lenders and borrowers by following the procedures of the Russian (private) credit system into every possible branch of Russian society, be it the prison, the household, the charity system, the pawnbroker shop or the

Senate. His indisputable contention is that private credit was central to the Russian economy. He takes issue with the long-standing notion of Russia's presumable economic backwardness by illuminating the widespread and accepted use of private credit. No doubt, the private informal credit sector by far exceeded the state credit system, which mostly relied on serf mortgaging. Antonov understands this informal system of private credit as an integral part of a developing capitalist economy. However, this statement seems a little too bold, considering that private credit was very often used exclusively for consumerist purposes. Although merchants relied to a large extent on this informal credit system (at Nizhnii Novgorod's annual fair, for instance), such credits are not exactly the same as capitalist credits. Commercial credit as at Nizhnii Novgorod's fair existed for centuries, in Russia as well as in other trading societies. Only a handful of Antonov's debtors used their credits for opening up production sites or financing their industries or manufactories. Credit for financing industrialization and thus capitalism has different characteristics and comes in other amounts than the credit networks so brilliantly described by Antonov. Without doubt, this book is a tremendous achievement, an engaging study and a treat to read. It advances a new understanding of nineteenth-century Russian society as we have known it.

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