Ilya Gerasimov, *Plebeian Modernity: Social Practices, Illegality, and the Urban Poor in Russia, 1906–1916*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018, 288 p. ISBN 978-1-58046-905-0

In this study, Ilya Gerasimov presents the story of plebeian society in four cities of the Russian Empire during the interrevolutionary period of 1906 to 1916. In the introduction, and throughout the rest of the book, this society is synonymously presented through the eyes of Gerasim, a famous character from Ivan Turgenev's popular story *Mumu*, who, incidentally, shares almost the same name as the author. This strong, hard-working deaf mute, who came to the city from the countryside, was immediately perceived by contemporaries as a symbol of the oppressed Russian people. Gerasimov adds that these people were like characters who existed in a semi-isolated world, largely unaffected by the ideas of the educated upper classes, incapable of expression in any language that is comprehensible to the elite. Symbolising the oppressed Russian people, he was a member of plebeian society, who expressed himself more accurately in social practices than in written or spoken words. Historians know that similar deaf mutes like Gerasim made up a majority, and how difficult it is not only to find some kind of vocal trace of this 'silent majority' or 'people without history', as they have been identified by researchers, but also to actually interpret these sources. Thus, Gerasimov's aim to try and engage these kinds of historical deaf mutes and understand them is immediately interesting and makes one read on.

Dedicated to plebeian society and modernity, the book consists of an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. The theoretical introduction describes what could be termed the silent majority in the Russian Empire prior to the First World War, and how many mute Gerasims there might have been. The literary character in this case is replaced by the term subaltern, suggested by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and arguments are given as to why subalternity studies could be applied in research into 19th-century Imperial Russian urban centres: 'Subalternity as an abstraction used in order to identify the intractability that surfaces inside the dominant system – it signifies that which the dominant cannot appropriate completely, an otherness that resists containment' (p. 3). By using

the approach of subalternity studies, the author states that it is possible for observers who are usually language-oriented to understand the speech of deaf mutes like Gerasim. This kind of interpretation adopts the idea of a thick description conceived by Clifford Geertz, which allows social gestures and practices to be read like a coherent text.

Like any other historian trying to engage the subalterns of Imperial Russia, Gerasimov is ultimately confronted by the question of sources. At this point, Michel Foucault's suggestion to speak about people reflected in criminal records without criminalising them retrospectively, but instead showing their authenticity, becomes especially appropriate. Unlike Foucault, Gerasimov does not look for 'hidden' or 'authentic' subaltern words in police reports, court records or local newspapers, but the actual authoritative discourses are seen as registers of subaltern acts and gestures. A register like this is of great value, as the mute 'gerasims' should be considered all those people who did not participate in Habermas' public sphere, while according to the author's calculations, they could have made up between 80 and 98 per cent of the population in Imperial Russian cities (p. 4).

As the author admits, he created this register over a period of 15 years working in libraries and archives across six countries. This is quite impressive, as is the geographical range of his research, four cities in the European part of Russia: Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Odessa and Vilnius. This seemingly random selection of imperial cities is based on the argument that they were typical imperial urban centres, and they were all very different. The first two were in the historic Russian heartland. Kazan was known for its large and constantly growing Muslim community, whereas Nizhny Novgorod retained its ethnic Russian (Orthodox) homogeneity. Odessa and Vilnius were peripheral cities in the Russian Empire, located in the Jewish Pale of Settlement, which is why it is no wonder that Jews formed large communities in them. Both cities had only become part of the Russian Empire at the end of the 18th century, but in very different ways: Odessa's development was determined by the empress' decree to colonise more land; while Vilnius, which had flourished since the Middle Ages, ended up being incorporated into the Russian Empire after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In his account, the author never loses sight of why these cities were different, but he also constantly reminds us what united these urban centres. He chose to research the period of the Russian Empire's existence when thousands of deaf and mute 'gerasims', driven by the crisis in the old serf estate economy in the countryside, flooded into imperial cities in ever increasing numbers. Their arrival

undoubtedly changed the established social structure of cities. In the last two decades of the 19th century alone, the population of Russian cities doubled, while the percentage of newly arrived peasants grew almost five-fold. This process was most intense in the Russian Empire just before the First World War, so it is logical that Gerasimov decided to concentrate on the years 1905 to 1917.

In Chapter One, there is a continuation of the theoretical and source problems, revealing several ways that members of the lower orders reacted to higher-class standards through their social practices. This chapter also reveals another theme that is developed throughout the book: how strangers shared the urban space, and how doing so modified their behaviour. During the period discussed, the population of Kazan increased by 45 per cent (reaching 188,000), Lower Novgorod by 24 per cent (112,000), Odessa by 54 per cent (up to 620,000), and Vilnius by 20 per cent (190,000).¹ These cities did not stand out in the Russian Empire in this sense, as socialisation, communication and coexistence were complicated and complex processes in almost all growing imperial cities at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, where every third person in a city was an immigrant, and every second person had arrived in the last few years (p. 20). What is more problematic is that the subalterns who arrived in urban areas did not form a homogenous or statistically uniform mass, but were so different to each other to the degree that a vagrant and a shopkeeper's assistant might differ. Gerasimov overcomes this problem with his definition, whereby a member of plebeian society was someone who earned at least 35 roubles a month, i.e. financially, they belonged to the lower class of the urban population (p. 20). He convinces us that social practices, even if they are non-verbal, must be visible in the broader context as an interconnected sequence of actions which reveals a society capable of creating narrative texts. These texts, reconstructed from police, court and media sources from the time, show that plebeian society borrowed tropes and discourses from higher social classes that they could adapt and reconstruct to meet their own purposes (p. 52). Like E.P. Thomson's concepts of plebeian culture, so too in this case, Gerasimov finds it important to highlight the asymmetrical double system, whereby the 'patrician' part of society created cultural products and norms, and behavioural models, that would later be imitated and adopted in different ways.

¹ The author correctly notes that Imperial Russian statistical data in this case was unreliable, and depended on the institutions that made these records, such as city boards, police registers and parish data, so the data could have fluctuated by 25 per cent.

In the second part of the book, Gerasimov takes a closer look at the plebeians of Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan, trying first of all to distinguish his own and other *Ab Imperio* colleagues' earlier studies on how strongly ethnic, religious, confessional and economic variations could be felt in the Russian heartland and in its cities, and the degree to which they lacked a clear homogenous and normative foundation. As we can see from the author's image of Nizhny Novgorod, even if Russians dominated in a linguistic sense, that did not mean their norms and customs were imposed upon immigrants and minorities, as, generally speaking, there were no conventional Russian rules that would suit the needs of modern urban life (p. 58). As a result, the city, founded in the middle reaches of the River Volga, is presented to the reader by using Richard White's 'middle ground' concept. In line with the claim presented in this concept, where the 'middle ground' was meant to arise from systematic mutual misunderstandings, in this chapter, Gerasimov devotes a great deal of attention to what would then have been attributed to the criminal misbehaviour category, and is interpreted in this book as 'personal confrontations and making sense of cultural and social differences' (p. 60). Concentrating his focus on ethno-confessional groups, and analysing acts of violence that occurred in them, the author reaches the conclusion that conflicts in Russian cities in the late imperial period should be seen as strategies for coexistence, or the social practice of the middle ground at work. The examples Gerasimov provides also convince us that conflicts were pre-programmed in the rapidly growing cities, and yet each person could and did choose their particular cooperation tactic, and these cases of friendship are much more telling in the history of a modernising society.

Chapter 3 presents the history of Vilnius in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. As in other chapters, the chosen theme here is presented by revealing several, seemingly unrelated cases of social practices: city police chief reports, and a discussion of prostitution in the city. Using these sub-themes, Gerasimov seeks to work out how a patriarchal society coped with the challenges thrown at it by modernity, and the ways it managed to keep the mobilisation of intergroup confrontation (at least in Vilnius) relatively low. Unlike the other chapters, we are presented here with the greatest generalisations, claiming that the image of a patriarchal social order could be established and maintained in early 20th-century Vilnius through discourses encouraging religious orthodoxy, and the preservation of traditions and ethnic purity (p. 85). In this chapter, patriarchalism is presented as a social practice, or an effort to

avoid potential conflict, while the whole city engaging in this practice is like a patriarchal metropolis. These kinds of general statements, even if patriarchalism is seen as self-archaisation, i.e., the idealisation of everything that is archaic, are in this case based on a rather small and not very varied number of sources, which is not the case in the other chapters. This fact will disappoint Lithuania's historians, and especially those focusing on Vilnius, as this new historiographic suggestion of what the city was like will open up discussion on the hitherto prevailing image of Vilnius as one of the most European cities of the Russian Empire, a cradle of modern political practices (social democracy and nationalism). On the other hand, it may not be clear to researchers into late Imperial Russian history whether the case of Vilnius was an exception, and if so, why?

The fourth chapter draws our attention to a discussion of what is probably the most obvious modern practice in a plebeian society, i.e., various forms of violence. Accidents, assaults, crippling and other similar crimes, could hardly be considered something new or exclusive to any city in the Russian Empire; however, Gerasimov suggests looking at multiple aspects of these crimes. The author highlights the political aspect of the crimes, talking about symbolic assassinations, or professional anarchists; the ethnic aspect of violence is linked to the limits that were or could not be crossed by Jewish and non-Jewish criminals, and about how a crime would become a basis for community links, or would entrench a fluid social identity. Having read through hundreds of criminal files, Gerasimov agrees that it is impossible to reconstruct all the circumstances behind a crime (p. 131); and yet in the cases he does present, he tries to show as broad as possible a context for the event, arguing that a social act or practice taken alone does not mean anything (p. 27). The author is also of the opinion that this social practice can be considered the most extreme form of an individual's self-expression in a plebeian society, which is why it is so valuable in the study of social formations beyond ethnic, confessional, legal or social groups (p. 132). In Imperial Russian cities in the early 20th century, this violent practice could also be considered a test of the strength of social relations, and the entirety of rules set down by plebeians themselves, which, as Gerasimov notes, alluded to the future revolution. Gerasimov is by no means the first to write about the dual nature of 'pointless' violence, and the meanings of such social gestures; however, in late Imperial Russian historiography, a study of such a scope, which oversteps the boundaries of one city, is unprecedented. Nonetheless, when reading

the book, one notices in places a lack of density of facts, creating the impression that over the course of many years of research, the collected material is sometimes excessively generalised and summarised down to theoretical interpretations. Perhaps it would have been better to think about a separate presentation of the statistical data in an appendix?

The last, fifth, chapter of the book is meant to show the extent to which plebeian society was rational and pragmatic in early 20th-century Russian cities. Gerasimov presents this argument in rather short yet concentrated sub-chapters, about trust, rationalism, opportunism, ethnicity, the practical implementation of punishment, religious norms, and the modernisation of sexual practices. As in the previous chapter, the social practices that are discussed here are not tied to one specific city. The plebeian social conventions and practices presented show how much all society in general changed and modernised in the last decades of the Russian Empire. On the other hand, readers should themselves draw a parallel between the worlds of modernising society and plebeian society. Apart from violent confrontations, the author only sporadically presents common points of contact (through the influence of popular culture or the modern city crowd phenomenon); yet, given a more consistent approach, this narrative would reveal that even educated society had to face the same challenges of modernity. By refusing to include actors from the text-based public sphere in this book, even those subalterns who ultimately strove to become participants in it are lost, as are the experiences of those who took this step, as well as the words written by individuals using opportunities to give themselves meaning through the use of culture and/or by participating in political life. Nor does the author include teenagers, for example, in the criminal and violent plebeian society, identified by contemporaries and Joan Neuberger as 'nobody's children', who not only formed a large but also the youngest and poorest part of the urban population in late Imperial Russia.² The lack of similar subalterns is not fundamental in itself, as it is less clear whether a 'plebeian society' exists at all. Gerasimov uses this term quite extensively in his book, even though he touches on the question only very briefly, arguing that his main goal was to reveal the multidimensionality and the multilayered nature of the imperial social space (p. 14). While this is indeed revealed very well in the book, it is worth discussing whether the social disintegration and urban instability, and the very

² Cf. J. Neuberger, *Hooliganism. Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1993), pp. 158–216.

fragmented social practices, could at least be considered institutions, norms and rituals defining a plebeian society? There is no doubt that the study reveals the vitality of the lower classes in late Imperial Russian cities, and through the text we hear and understand the speech of these 'gerasims', which was sometimes, it appears, surprisingly mature.

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