
By destabilizing old paradigms, the end of the Cold War has presented Russian historians with unprecedented opportunities to reenvision our field and has brought us into fruitful dialogue with one another and with historians who study other regions. Even though Gorbachev has faded from the scene, the imperatives of glasnost' and perestroika are alive and well in Russian history. The twelve essays contained in Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire constitute an important contribution to this endeavor. This collection, which grew out of Social Science Research Council workshops held between 1991 and 1994, focuses on the underworked period spanning the Muscovite era and the aftermath of the Great Reforms. Freed from Cold War narrative and political constraints, these works privilege an examination of the symbolics and practices of culture and the interface between material realities and representations. In so doing, their authors submit categories whose meaning has been taken for granted to explicit scrutiny.

The dialogic principle motivates the volume's essays, which are roughly chronological in arrangement and supplemented by helpful overviews by Burbank and Ransel that introduce each of the volume's four sections. In these overlapping dialogues, authors scrutinize Russia's relationship to the West, the interaction of the Russian center and imperial borderlands, the negotiation of power between rulers and ruled, the interdependence of public and private, and the applicability of various methodologies to the study of Imperial Russia.

Many contributors reevaluate the relationship between Russia and the West, rejecting the traditional conclusion that Russian elites were passive recipients of European practices. Only Douglas Smith deviates from this norm, suggesting that eighteenth-century freemasonry was indicative of the emergence of a Russian public sphere similar to that which developed in contemporary Europe. The other contributors take a more sophisticated approach to this issue, demonstrating Russian interactions with the West as multivalent.

Some authors posit that Western notions of civilization did not function as a benchmark according to which Russians measured their society. Nathaniel Knight asserts that, even as it drew on its scientific approaches, the Russian Geographic Society rejected the international ethnographic community's efforts to construct a hierarchy of peoples that transcended national boundaries in favor of producing a descriptive scholarship of Russia geared towards a Russian audience. One might also extend Kevin Thomas' study of proposals for a Russian national museum to conclude that the projects conceptualized by Prussian-born Adelung and Wichmann, a Riga, failed to gain widespread acceptance among Russian elites in part because their authors were unproblematically steeped in European discourse. Unfortunately, Thomas' failure to make more of this Germanic focus impedes his ad-
dressing the problem of the Russian elites’ relationship with the West in an explicit manner. This essay would have been considerably enriched had its author engaged the other contributions in this collection.

Other authors contend that the fact that Russians were not divorced from European traditions does not imply that they passively accepted Western viewpoints. Cynthia Whittaker and Richard Wortman maintain that Russian rulers and the image-makers and historians who represented them actively reshaped frameworks associated with the Enlightenment and Romanticism in ways that suited their Russian context. Likewise, Irina Paperno suggests that, while Western organicist views of suicide were influential in the Great Reform era, educated Russians refracted these through a particularly Russian lens, amalgamating medico-scientific approaches with communal and collective ideas rooted in Orthodox or populist traditions. Still others, like Valerie Kivelson, suggest that Western innovations went hand in hand with, but were ultimately less significant than evolving Muscovite traditions in hastening the demise of intimate rule and the growth of a centralized state. These authors all assert that it is essential to examine the context in which various Russians drew on Western ideas to fashion new discursive strategies to lend order to their distinctive Russian realities.

The authors thus suggest that it is impossible and unhelpful to construct a single, totalizing picture of the Russian imperial state’s and society’s perception of Western practices. A similarly complex picture of the practice of empire emerges from this volume. Several contributors focus on the dialogic relationship between questions of empire, nationality, and broader discourses. Knight demonstrates how Russian imperial ideology shaped scientific methodologies and their application. Thomas Barrett and Willard Sunderland examine how empire functioned on the grassroots level, maintaining that borrowings moved in two directions. These authors thus productively complicate our understanding of cultural transmission and transmutation.

Similarly, the authors underscore that power runs in multiple directions: problematizing a top-down approach, Kivelson successfully shows how the nobility shaped autocratic authority and practices in the late Muscovite era, Steven Hoch emphasizes that peasant communal practices constrained serf owners, and Gregory Freeze depicts how the centralizing Church encountered grassroots resistance and found it necessary to accommodate and coopt popular religiosity. While particular public spheres coalesced at key junctures, namely during the Catherinean era and the late imperial period, the atmosphere that pervaded imperial Russia was generally dialogic; throughout the long period covered in this volume, various social groupings and ruling elites understood and negotiated this reality. The authors thus conclude that the “public” was always interdependent with the “private”.

Most of the volume’s contributors explicitly engage the question of methodology. Applying various approaches, such as Carlo Ginzburg’s microhistorical techniques, Jürgen Habermas’s ideas about the emergence of the critical public sphere, cultural anthropology, frontier theory, and literary criticism, these authors privilege perspectives broadly associated with cultural studies. It is encouraging to see Russian imperial historians taking on and reformulating such methodologies;