BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS


Everyone who lived for a significant period of time in Soviet Russia is aware of the importance of blat — the informal exchange of favors — and the pervasiveness of bribery. Beyond their personal experiences, citizens and visiting specialists would have heard many first- and second-hand stories from resident friends about instances of bribery and the ubiquitousness of blat in daily life. Even those who know Russia mostly through its fiction would have encountered extensive evidence of these forms of "reciprocity" in every part of the last 200 years, often through characters who complained that they had always been serious problems in Russia. Media coverage of post-Soviet life assures us that "corruption" has not disappeared.

This book takes on the challenge of exploring territory that is familiar to readers who may think they already know all they want to know about the topic. The pleasant surprise is that there are surprises. Most of the articles have something interesting to say, some are quite fresh and provocative. Collectively, the essays, which are arranged chronologically, examine the history of reciprocity from the sixteenth century up to today through many different lenses. Contributors include specialists in language, literature, sociology, history, and psychology.

Cathy Potter's essay on "Payment, Gift or Bribe?" looks at the vocabulary used in law codes and other official documents from 1497 through 1714 that attempted to distinguish legal from illegal gifts to officials. She finds that at first the same words were used for both kinds of gifts and that corruption was only a matter of degree. Over time, however, efforts were made to define the limits of "excess" and to reserve certain words for "corrupt" practices. Meanings were still not consistently applied in 1714, however, when she finds the first use of the word vziatka. What clearly meant "bribe" by the nineteenth century then apparently meant "embezzlement." Potter finds that the effort to identify and criminalize bribery was part of a larger "shift ... in the religious understanding and ethos of spirituality of the Russian elite" that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. "The appeal and force of a religion centered on miracle cults and ritual waned in favor of a religion and spirituality that were ethically informed and emphasized virtuous action" (pp. 32-33).

Vadim Volkov looks at a similar stretch of time but comes to a different, possibly complementary, conclusion. Russia's problem with bribery stems, he says, from an effort to impose bureaucratic rationalism on patrimonial structures in an authoritarian manner. After describing the "traditional" ways in which Muscovite servitors were compensated, emphasizing the importance of "place" (mestnichestvo — physical and titular proximity to the tsar and other notables) and of "feeding" (kormlenie — living off the income produced by one's work or by those one governed), Volkov explains the intended outcome of Peter the Great's Table of Ranks reform. He then concludes
that bribery and corruption "are the legacy not of Russian traditional culture but rather of its historically specific patterns of rapid modernization" (p. 47).

Janet Hartley tries to figure out why bribery was rife in Russia's provincial judicial system in the time of Catherine the Great. She rejects the notion that bribes might have been seen as acceptable substitutes for inadequate salaries, at least for appointees to higher posts, who were relatively well paid. She thinks the "lower cultural level" that provincial (as opposed to central) officials possessed is a better explanation, but again one that applies less well to higher officials, who were presumably more often offered bribes and engaged in embezzlement. She concludes that legal procedures were inadequate, causing or allowing bribery to be useful, and that the situation could not be improved until "legal consciousness" took root and bribery came to be seen as corrupt. To make the first part of this argument more persuasive, it might have been useful to explain in greater detail what it was about legal procedure that led to corruption. As to the second part, a reader might wonder how to reconcile it with Cathy Potter's conclusion about changes that were underway in the two previous centuries. Is it possible that bribery and embezzlement were pretty clearly understood to be illegal by the mid-eighteenth century, but they were still easy enough for the relatively powerful to conceal and get away with and remained attractive modes of income?

In her essay on "Bribery and Etiquette in Late Imperial Russia" Catriona Kelly refutes an argument by Iurii Lotman that self-interested giving is a Western trait while only disinterested giving was valued in Orthodox Russia. Her examples from memoirs, fiction, etiquette books, and studies of peasant mutual help are persuasive, but this reviewer did not need to be persuaded and wonders how seriously scholars in any field take Lotman's opinion. Kelly agrees that generosity is "highly valued, not only in [Russian] religious culture, but also in secular culture," but asks in her conclusion if "the importance attached to self-denial and open-handed generosity derives less from the ubiquity of these patterns of behaviour than from the fact that, on the contrary, they fly in the face of customary behaviour..." (pp. 89-90).

Irina Davydova's essay asks why the bureaucracy had such an unrelentingly negative image in nineteenth-century literature. If corruption in the bureaucracy had arisen either as a natural consequence of Russian conditions or from some aspect of the "Russian soul," wouldn't Russian commentators have been more understanding of it? Davydova thinks that the explanation lies in the very different social origins of the bureaucracy and of the intelligentsia. Most bureaucrats, she explains, came from lower social estates and were looked down upon by the nobility. In addition, many of them came from rural origins, where "reciprocal giving" was considered normal. The intelligentsia arose from higher social strata and became, not a service class, but an oppositional group, antipathetic to tsarism in general and to the bureaucracy in particular as the vulnerable representative of the tsarist government. In short, the bureaucracy may have received negatively biased publicity and may not have been as bad as it was painted.

Andrei Rogachevskii looks at examples of bribery in nineteenth-century literature, concentrating on works from the 1820-30 period and from the era of the Great Reforms. He finds that the representations of bribery did not change much in that time,