Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Gail Lenhoff and Ann Kleimola (eds.)
“The Book of Royal Degrees” and the Genesis of Russian Historical Consciousness.

The Stepennaia kniga or Book of Royal Degrees has seen a boom in interest in recent years, in large part a result of the new critical edition of “Russia's first narrative history” (p. xiii) by N.N. Pokrovskii and Gail Lenhoff. The volume under review is the product of a 2009 conference organized by Gail Lenhoff at UCLA. The book contains twenty-two articles, divided into five sections, and includes information about the dating, context, purpose, authorship, and readership of the Stepennaia kniga. This review will attempt to do justice to the themes of the many articles here, even if there is not sufficient space to address each individual article.

The most striking feature of the collection is that, unlike so many edited volumes, it is truly a unified work by scholars who have come together to address one specific topic. This, most likely, grows out of its origin as a conference volume; but it is clear that the authors know one another, have read each other’s work in this volume, as well as outside of it, and in most cases, genuinely listened to one another’s perspectives in shaping the current articles. Footnotes to the work of Lenhoff, Pokrovskii, Keenan, Zhivov and many other contributors abound, displaying the widespread knowledge of Russian history in general and the Stepennaia kniga in particular.

The interconnectivity between the pieces is most apparent in Section 1 (“Manuscript History, Sources”) where the date of composition and authorship are debated. A.S. Usachev sets the tone here with a discussion of watermarks in the earliest editions of the Stepennaia kniga, highlighting the broader European world of paper production and usage in which Muscovy participated. Usachev also challenges N.N. Pokrovskii’s dating, putting the composition of the text in the middle of the 1550s. Sergei Bogatyrev complicates this picture though, pointing out that many of the other authors’ arguments about dating the...
Stepennaia kniga are made “from silence.” He then offers a corrective with an analysis of when the text stabilized, focusing on the strong influence of the Compilation of 1560, which moves the date back into Pokrovskii’s mid-1560s. Charles Halperin concludes the section by asking the fascinating question of what constitutes an “official” Muscovite source. His analysis of the various available sources and their degrees of ‘official-ness’ is persuasive and could be applied outside studies on the Stepennaia kniga.

Sections 2 (“Models, Function, Language”), 3 (“Narratives and Counternarratives”) and 4 (“Culture of Commemoration and Patronage”) develop the context of the Stepennaia kniga, discussing the preconditions for its creation, the world it was created in, and what its impact on that world was. The articles by David Prestel and A.V. Sirenov connect the text elsewhere in time and space. Prestel argues that the compiler of the Stepennaia kniga used the Kievan Caves Paterikon as a way to connect the rule of Ivan IV to that of Vladimir Sviatoslavich, creating a “sacred history of the period” (p. 109), a view which Viktor Zhivov’s article later in section 2 seems to echo. Sirenov, who is countered immediately following by Wolf-Heinrich Schmidt, suggests that the Stepennaia kniga’s construction is reliant on a larger world of Orthodox traditions specifically in Southeastern Europe.

Gail Lenhoff begins Section 3 with her own dating of the Stepennaia kniga, with reference to its implicit purpose, the commemoration of the conquest and conversion of Kazan by Ivan IV. This essay is fascinating, and refers to the articles on dating in Section 1, weaving the larger volume together. Elements of her analysis are brought out by both A.A. Gorskii and Janet Martin who develop additional themes related to the steppe connections of Rus’ and Muscovy, discussing the relationship with the original ‘Golden Horde’ and their Muslim successors as neighbors, partners, and enemies of Muscovy. The articles of Section 4 continue a variation on that theme, building the picture of the world that the Stepennaia kniga was written in, specifically the world of monasteries and faith culture that would have informed the reading of such a text.

The volume concludes with Section 5, and it is one of the most interesting and provocative sections of the book. Robert Romanchuk and David Goldfrank develop their respective métiers, talking about monastic readers of history and Nil Sorskii and Iosif Volotskii respectively. These pieces are well put together and complement both the volume and one another, and the questions they ask are magnified by Nancy Kollman’s concluding piece. Ostensibly a response to Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter’s article, it pulls together the entire volume, referencing copious amounts of historiography on both the Stepennaia kniga and the period as a whole. Her observations are an excellent way to end the volume and bring out the points of others, such as asking who was actually