

DISKUSSION

MANFRED HILDERMEIER: *Geschichte Russlands. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Oktoberrevolution*. München: Beck, 2013. 1504 S., 11 Ktn., 36 Tab., 1 Graph. = Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung. ISBN: 978-3-406-64551-8.

“Geschichte Russlands” and Russia’s Internal History

With the support of a “Opus Magnum Stipendium” from the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, this massive tome provides a highly detailed, state-of-the-art history of Russia from its origins in Kiev Rus to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty in 1917. The goal here is to synthesize, in a highly readable narrative, the political, social-economic, and cultural history of the Russian heartland, with some attention to exogenous forces, whether from the East or (mainly) the West. Drawing upon the older classics as well as recent scholarship, this history will become the standard authority for Russian specialists and the fullest recent account available for Europeanists. It is a worthy prequel to the author’s magisterial history of the subsequent period, “Die Sowjetunion, 1917–1991” (2001).

Organizationally, the volume follows the traditional periodization (albeit with slight modifications), dividing prerevolutionary Russian history into six main periods: Kiev Rus (860–1240), Mongol dominion and early Muscovy (1240–1533), Muscovite Rus (1533–1689), the “long” eighteenth century (1689–1796), the prereform era (1796–1856), and a final section stretching from the Great Reforms to the February Revolution (1856–1917). To its credit, this history gives substantial attention to pre-Petrine Rus (which occupies more than a quarter of the text); the imperial period is roughly divided between the 1689–1856 and 1856–1917 sections. It is, to say the least, not only informative but inspiring to rediscover those “lost centuries” that most present-minded histories minimize and marginalize. Within each period, the narrative offers a symmetrical organization (with separate sections on political, social-economic, and cultural history), thereby making it easy to locate information and to make diachronic comparisons. The volume concludes with a more theoretical chapter, presenting speculative reflections on the backwardness and modernization paradigm, followed by endnotes, list of works cited, glossary of terms, and separate indexes of geographical terms, proper names, and subjects.

This monumental history makes a major contribution to the field – at two important levels. First, the narrative itself is both precise and comprehensive, hence especially useful for non-specialists, but even researchers will find a reliable guide to current thinking and recent scholarship as well as critical facts and figures (the latter conveniently compiled in 36 tables). Second, at various junctures the author stops to offer critical assessments of major historiographical issues – such as the magnitude of the Mongol influence, the impact and novelty of the Petrine reforms, the dynamics of serf emancipation, or developmental patterns in the post-reform economy. Third, “Geschichte Russlands” goes beyond the usual narratives to include some dimensions – in particular, material culture and religious history – that receive little or no attention in traditional histories of Russia, even the most recent. The sources and findings of such recent works as Carsten Goehrke’s valuable three-volume “Russischer Alltag. Eine Geschichte in neun Zeitbildern vom Frühmittelalter bis zur Gegenwart” (Zürich, 2003–2005) inform the accounts not only of pre-Petrine but

also Imperial Russia. Finally, and most important, this history situates Russia in a larger European context, shedding much light on its comparative and interactive development with the West. Although Russia remains the primary focus, the narrative demonstrates that country's deep Western roots (stretching back even to the era of Kiev Rus) and shows how, after the Mongol interlude, the Western connections and orientation resurfaced in Muscovy and Imperial Russia. This contextualization underlies the concluding reflections on Russia's "special path" to modernity and, especially, the proverbial "backwardness" that colored the perceptions of contemporaries and the representations of historians (most famously in the Gerschenkron paradigm about the advantages of "backwardness").

This tome's enormous length notwithstanding, in some respects the reader might wish for more. In terms of content, it would have been desirable to allot more space (precious as it is) to such matters as gender and family history. Although scholarship on these fields is relatively weak in Russian historiography (at least if compared to the standards of European historiography), some research has been done and probably merits as much attention as the detailed account of fratricidal conflicts among Kievan princes or political infighting at the end of the *ancien régime*. A second subject (treated at greater length in another contribution to this triple-review) is the question of borderlands and minorities; apart from the informative chapter on the Jewish question, "Geschichte Russlands" accords relatively little space to the minorities – who, indeed, came to constitute a majority of the population by 1914. To be sure, in sheer literary terms their inclusion is problematic; the individual histories of peoples in such disparate regions as the Baltics and Caucasus do not easily integrate into a readable narrative about Russia proper – even if they invariably figured in the multi-volume Soviet histories, such as B.D. Grekov (et al.), (eds.): *Ocherki istorii SSSR* (9 vols. Moscow 1953–1968). Nonetheless, the periphery certainly played an important, sometimes critical, role in shaping the policies and politics of the "center". As the burgeoning recent literature on the "periphery" has demonstrated, the questions of stability and assimilation – whether administrative, ethnic, or confessional – had a profound impact on St. Petersburg and sometimes precipitated and configured (or disfigured) reforms superimposed on the center as well. Although the dynamics of modernization were unquestionably critical to the ultimate demise of the empire, the periphery proved a fatal Achilles' heel, draining resources and exposing the increasingly transparent weaknesses of an obsolescent empire. Finally, the scholarly apparatus – the bibliography of cited works and endnotes – is understandably but regrettably conflated. Although such economies were inescapable in a book of such length, the bibliography would ideally include a "Guide to Further Research" that directs students and non-specialists to primary source collections, basic reference works, and key internet sites. At this point, the scholarly apparatus is inclusive and up-to-date, but it will quickly be superseded; a "guide to further research" could help readers locate the most recent, authoritative works that appeared since this book went to press in 2012.

But those are minor quibbles: this magisterial volume not only provides a sweeping, synthetic account of Russian history to the revolutions of 1917 but also situates it within a larger comparative framework. And herein lies its principal analytical contribution: "Geschichte Russlands" places the country within a larger European context, reminds specialists of the deep pre-Mongolian (not to say pre-Petrine) roots in Europe, and – most important – reflects on the complex patterns of influence and isolation over many centuries. This work also places a thousand years of Russian history within the larger context of

“modernization”. By analyzing the backwardness paradigm that dominated contemporaries in Europe and Russia (a backwardness, that inspired, as the author notes, a cascade of the reforms, Petrine and subsequent ones), the sophisticated, nuanced approach here situates Russia within the larger comparative and interactive history of Europe, medieval and modern. While affirming that every historical development has its own “Sonderweg” (p. 33), this insightful volume argues that one can only understand Russia’s development, indeed the initiatives and perceptions of state actors, by locating Russia within its European context. That process, and perception, neither commenced with Peter nor ended with Catherine and, as is amply demonstrated here, played a critical role in the sequence of events that would eventually lead to the very demise of the *ancien régime*.

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What Is Europe to Us?

Russia and the World in Manfred Hildermeier’s Geschichte Russlands

When Fedor Dostoevskii famously asked “What Is Asia to Us?” after General Skobelev stormed the Central Asian fortress of Geok Tepe in 1881, he was really musing about his country’s relationship to Europe. Despite having first been posed nearly two centuries ago, the question of Russia and the West continues to intrigue. Indeed, during the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union it has become all the more urgent as its heir continues to seek its place in the world. Even “Snob”, the crossbreed glossy monthly lifestyle magazine cum “thick” journal targeted at well-heeled Russians, recently entered into the fray with Nikolai Uskov’s column, “Why Russia Lagged behind Europe” (NIKOLAI USKOV: Pochemu Rossiia otstala ot Evropy, part 1, in: Snob (26.12.2013), <http://www.snob.ru/selected/entry/69908>; part 2, in: Snob (03.01.2014), <http://www.snob.ru/selected/entry/70174>). While it draws a different conclusion, the new history of pre-revolutionary Russia by Manfred Hildermeier likewise contributes to the discussion – albeit more exhaustively.

Manfred Hildermeier is a professor at Göttingen best known for his histories of the Soviet Union and the Russian Revolution, although he has also written prolifically about earlier topics. Aimed at the non-scholarly “layman”, his “Geschichte Russlands” is the first important survey of Russia’s past in German since the late Günther Stökl’s authoritative “Russische Geschichte”, which initially appeared in 1962. Given the momentous changes in Russian historiography after 1991, its publication is timely; “Geschichte Russlands” may well take the place of its predecessor as the standard textbook for his compatriots. At the same time, its considerable length – over 1300 pages of densely-packed text – is likely to limit its appeal to only the most determined and patient readers outside of the classroom.

Hildermeier makes his intention clear from the outset. His key question (“Gretchenfrage”) concerns Russia’s continental affinity, especially with regard to its “backwardness” vis-à-vis the West. The author’s answer is unqualified: “Russia’s past predominantly belongs to European history.” Rejecting any *sonderweg*, Eurasian or otherwise, he adds, “Despite more or less permanent peculiarities, the tsardom became a European power.” (p. 24) It is in this context that Hildermeier discusses Russian foreign relations up to 1917.

At the very start of its recorded history, Russia's Kievan ancestor was closely linked to the West. After all, Varangian adventurers founded the state sometime during the ninth century in search of a trade route from their Scandinavian homeland to Byzantium. Conversion to Orthodoxy about a hundred years later put Kiev in Constantinople's Greek orbit, which would set it apart from its Latin East European neighbours in the coming centuries. Nevertheless, commercial and dynastic ties also bound Rus' to the West. According to Hildermeier, the East Slavic realm combined Swedish and Byzantine elements, thereby becoming a "hybrid" ... much like France was an amalgam of the relics of Rome's political order and Germanic personal ties." (p. 121) While Kiev's princes warred and traded with Pechenegs, Polovtsians and others to the East, their relations with the Orient at the time had little durable influence.

Of course, the cataclysmic Mongol onslaught in the early thirteenth century did have a major impact on Russia's past. Yet, taking issue with Eurasianist historians like George Vernadsky, Hildermeier does not detect many direct traces of the Mongol Yoke. Even before Batu Khan's onslaught, the Eastern Slavic political centre of gravity had been shifting from Kiev deeper into the forests north-east. Despite the principality's relatively humble origins, Moscow eventually came out on top thanks to its collaboration with the Golden Horde. Nevertheless, "the structure and character of the Muscovite state developed autochthonously – according to its *own* traditions." (p. 128) Hildermeier categorically rejects any notions of post-Mongol Russia as an Oriental despotism; There was no "legacy of Genghis Khan".

Foreign relations during the earlier period get short shrift, but Hildermeier does pay more attention to the subject from Ivan IV's reign on. The emphasis here is on Europe. As the author explains, "[Russia's] ambitions and *border* lay in the West, colonisation and the *frontier* were in the East." (p. 280) There are two pages about Ivan's conquest of Kazan, some mention of further expansion in Siberia through the age of Catherine II, as well as a brief section devoted to "compensatory imperialism" in Central and East Asia during the nineteenth century. However, aside from Ottoman Turkey, which after all until the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 was also a European power, tsarism's Eastern diplomacy gets little coverage. Even the latter discussion of Asian expansion is mostly concerned with comparing St Petersburg's colonialism to that of the other European powers during the era of high imperialism.

Beginning with Ivan's "lethal, indeed fatal" decades-long Livonian campaigns during the sixteenth century's second half, the treatment of relations with the West, both in war and peace, is refreshingly thorough. Whereas diplomatic history has long been the poor relation of Russian studies in North America, Hildermeier gives the topic the attention it deserves. It is the story of a state that emerges from relative isolation on Europe's periphery in the late Middle Ages to full membership in the "Pentarchy" (along with Britain, France, Prussia and Austria) of the most powerful states by the eighteenth century, thanks largely to the achievements of Peter I and Catherine II, and reaching its zenith at the start of the nineteenth as the virtual arbiter of continental politics after defeating Napoleon. Despite its humiliation during the Crimean War at mid-century, the empire continued to play a leading role among the chancelleries of Europe until its demise in 1917.

The basic pattern of Russia's relationship with Europe, as Hildermeier repeatedly stresses, is one from "transfer" to "integration" ("Verflechtung"). When Ivan III first invited the Bolognese architect Aristotle Fioravanti to help build the Kremlin's Cathedral of

the Dormition in 1474, Muscovy was an unschooled younger brother of the European family. By the last decade of its existence, Imperial Russia was a mature adult: Its vibrant culture was a major player in Europe's arts and letters. St Petersburg was a modern metropolis, in the same league as Paris, London and Berlin. Even the rigidly autocratic political order, which had initially set the tsardom apart from the West was modifying as a civil society found its voice and the Duma heralded a nascent parliamentary constitutionalism. While the course of Russia's reintegration into European civilisation was a little different, Hildermeier's schema recalls that of the traditional "liberal school", which saw the *ancien régime* as well on the way to becoming a modern state (in the Western sense) had it not been for the tragic accident of the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. The Western historiography of Russia, it seems, has come full circle, at least at Göttingen.

Hildermeier is careful to avoid clichés in his survey. Thus he is reluctant to exaggerate Russia's backwardness. As he points out, Western accounts of Muscovy described "customs, behaviours and norms that one or two centuries earlier ... they would have encountered in their own culture". The author suggests that in certain respects pre-Petrine habits were superior, such as "frequent visits to the sauna when in Europe's aristocratic courts perfume replaced bathing" (p. 382) or the fact that Russian gentlemen did not carry swords on the street, unlike their Renaissance counterparts. By the same token, he reminds us that Russia's turn to the West had already begun well before Peter's reign, while Nicholas I laid the groundwork for Alexander II's "Great Reforms".

On the whole, Hildermeier's treatment of Russian foreign relations is balanced and contains few surprises. He makes the intriguing suggestion that, despite its shortcomings, Alexander I's "Holy Alliance" anticipated the United Nations as a means to avoid conflict through peaceful negotiation. My only reservation concerns the author's apparent nostalgia for the "Coalition of the Three Black Eagles" of St Petersburg, Berlin and Vienna. By contrast, he characterises Russia's growing intimacy with France and Britain in the years leading up to the Great War as "unnatural". The implication seems to be that, because of their similar political orders, the Hohenzollerns and Habsburgs made more logical partners with the Romanovs. But there was a clear geopolitical logic to the new constellation, even if the ultimate result was catastrophic. By the late nineteenth century, Russia was engaged in a bitter rivalry over the Balkans with the Dual Monarchy, while Wilhelmine Germany's growing military prowess inevitably aroused concern in its neighbour to the east. It is one of the very few quibbles I have with Hildermeier's magisterial "Geschichte Russlands".

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Centre and Periphery in Imperial Russia

The editors of JGO invited me to discuss, how the new book of Manfred Hildermeier addresses the issue of centre-periphery relations in imperial Russia. However, in his Introduction the author makes it clear: "Die hier verfolgte Absicht, die Grundlinien und -elemente der russischen Geschichte deutlich zu machen, lässt [...] nur eine Sehweise zu, die vom Zentrum ausgeht." Hildermeier declares that he plans to focus on "ostslavisches Siedlungs- und Herrschaftsgebiet". Certainly, he makes a caveat that the problems of heterogeneous Russian and Soviet periphery are important and deserve special study, "aber

sie passen nicht in den engen Rahmen einer einbändigen Gesamtübersicht der historischen Entwicklung des Zarenreiches und seiner Vorläufer” (p. 25).

That makes me violate one of the principal rules of writing book reviews, which prescribes to speak not about what is missing in the book, but about what is in it. I would prefer that the readers do not look at this text as a review, but rather as notes on the margins of the book, which address methodological problems related to the author’s choice of this particular research perspective. Of course, my own view is a partisan one, because exactly the issues of Empire and nationalism have been in the focus of my own research.

Hildermeier’s decision not to cover in detail the history of imperial periphery as a special subject is quite reasonable. It is, indeed, an unmanageable task for one volume, even if it is 1500 pages long. But should this mean marginalizing imperial issues altogether? Jürgen Osterhammel in his recent book characterized the long 19th century as the age of empires and nationalism (JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL: *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. München 2009). Similar perspective had been presented by Dominic Lieven (DOMINIC LIEVEN: *Empire. The Russian Empire and its Rivals*. London 2000). (Both books, and, actually all the other books mentioned in my footnotes, are missing from the long list of quoted literature in Hildermeier’s volume. Interestingly, all other books by Lieven are there.) If Osterhammel and Lieven are right, and I believe they are, then a sort of “insensitivity” to the issues of Empire and nationalism becomes a serious problem for a book which intends to speak about “main lines and elements” of Russian history.

First of all, any discussion of “Rückständigkeit, Transfer und Verflechtung” which Hildermeier considers to be central issues of the entanglement of Russian and European history should involve the problems of transfer of various patterns and know-how of *imperial rule and nation-building* (ALEXEI MILLER / ALFRED J. RIEBER [eds.]: *Imperial Rule*. New York, Budapest 2004; MARTIN AUST / RICARDA VULPIUS / ALEXEI MILLER [eds.]: *Imperium inter pares. Rol’ transferov v istorii Rossiiskoi imperii*. Moskva 2010). Many transfers in various other spheres, including technology, were also motivated by the reasons of imperial control and the tasks of nation-building.

Secondly, the chosen perspective makes Hildermeier somewhat “insensitive” to the issues of *Russian* nationalism and nation-building. In his analysis of the history of ideas he mostly focuses on the traditional dichotomy of Westernizers and Slavophiles, and also socialism for the later period. Nationalism as ideology and world-view appears in the book mostly in connection with the doctrine of “official nationality” ascribed to count S. Uvarov, the minister of public education under Nicholas I. But even in discussing this “official” nationalism Hildermeier fails to even mention N. Ustrialov who in the 1830s coined the scheme of the Russian historical narrative which postulated that Great, Little and White Russians belonged to one nation. Meanwhile, till the very end of the Empire this narrative not only remained dominant among Russian historians from Kliuchevskii to Ilovaiskii, but it had also informed the approach of Russian political elites to the issue of Russian nation-building.

Another example of such “insensitivity” is the analysis of “*Ruskaia Pravda*”, one of the main programmatic documents of the Decembrist movement, written by Pavel Pestel. Hildermeier speaks a lot about this text, but ignores the second chapter, which was titled “All the tribes should be merged into one People” and presented the most radical program of nation-building based on the French model of aggressive cultural assimilation.

Russian nation-building was very much entangled with Empire in many ways (ALEXEI MILLER: *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism. Essays in Methodology of Historical Research.* Budapest, New York 2008). The same is actually true for all the projects of nation-building in Europe, especially in imperial core areas. (See more on comparison of imperial nationalisms and nation-building processes in the core areas of various European Empires in STEFAN BERGER / ALEXEI MILLER [eds.]: *Nationalizing Empires.* New York, Budapest 2014; forthcoming). In fact, any comprehensive comparative study of Russian history in the long 19th century and any analysis of entanglement of Russian and European history should involve the issues of Empire and nationalism.

In Russia the project of building an imperial nation was pretty successful in terms of demographic occupation of huge territories through agricultural migrations, particularly in the East and South. In fact, “ostslavisches Siedlungsgebiet” was dramatically broadened by the agricultural settlement of millions of Great and Little Russian peasants in the Volga region, in New Russia, in the Stavropol and Kuban areas. From 1782 to 1858, New Russia received 1,510,000 settlers, the Volga and Ural regions 968,000, and North Caucasus – 565,000. From 1870 to 1896 Volga and Ural regions got 358,000 new migrants, New Russia 1,045,000, and the North Caucasus, where the long war with the indigenous mountain people had finally come to an end in the 1860s, experienced the inward migration of 1,687,000. These developments transformed life of local inhabitants, influenced identity formation among the settlers, and allowed these territories to be claimed as part of Russian national territory within the Empire. Regrettably, Hildermeier mostly focuses on the late phase of migrations during Piotr Stolypin’s premiership, when the main destination became trans-Ural regions. There is no map of migrations in the book.

In the western borderlands the Russian nationalizing project mostly relied on assimilation strategies as well as symbolic and discursive appropriation of space. All the time through the long 19th century the western borderlands of the Empire remained a field of bitter rivalry between Polish, Russian, and later Ukrainian and Belorussian nationalisms (ALEXEI MILLER: *The Ukrainian Question. The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century.* New York, Budapest 2003; MIKHAIL DOLBILOV / ALEXEI MILLER [eds.]: *Zapadnye okrainy Rossiiskoi Imperii.* Moskva 2006.). The fact that the understanding of the borders (territorial, religious, cultural and racial) of the Russian nation was very much contested both within Russian elites and by some peripheral actors during the whole imperial period has not received proper attention from Hildermeier.

This brings me to my third point: in the Russian Empire the relations between centre and periphery were not a one-way road. The centre was very much influenced by migrants from periphery and events in the periphery. Let me take just one example. Hildermeier deservedly devotes a lot of attention to the history of the Great Reforms. However, he does not even mention (!) the Polish uprising of 1863–1864. In fact, this uprising began in the crucial moment of reforms, when the question about their limits and even nature had not yet been fully settled. The rebellion produced a colossal impact on the atmosphere in the Russian society. Usually this fact is illustrated by reference to Herzen, who ruled over the minds of the Russian educated class before the uprising but paid a heavy price for his support to the Poles and lost his influence in favor of Katkov. Maybe, even more important was the fact that the Katkov of the late 1850s – early 1860s, who fought for the abolition of preventive censorship, emancipation of the Jews and other liberal measures, gave way to the Katkov of 1864, who not only became a militant nationalist but also postulated a

close link between nationalism and autocracy. In other words, the uprising had destroyed the liberal momentum before the reforms went far enough.

Summing up – imperial agenda and nationalism influenced many spheres of Russian life. Directions of rail-road construction, the formation of entrepreneurial groups, mechanisms of elite recruitment, the formation of a working class – all these and many other processes were linked to centre-periphery relations, nationalisms and nation-building processes. And these issues were of crucial importance during the Great War and the collapse of the Empire. Unfortunately, Hildermeier devotes too little space and attention to the war altogether (S. 1119–1129), and says absolutely nothing about the factors which caused the mobilization of ethnicity and nationalisms (also in the “ostslavisches Siedlungsgebiet”) during this period. In the long 19th century Russia was an Empire and experienced a complicated process of nation-building which was full of contradictions. These big facts do undoubtedly belong to the “main lines and elements” of Russian history and would have deserved more attention in a book titled “Geschichte Russlands”.

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