

## BOOK REVIEWS / КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Catherine Evtuhov. *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. xv, 320 pp. \$34.95 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-0-82296-171-0.

This is a landmark book in the emerging field of Russian provincial history, which takes the provinces seriously both as a place and an idea. Despite Russia's massive size, serious study of the Russian interior has been hindered both by literary traditions, beginning with Nikolai Gogol, that denigrate the provinces, and by the Russian academic hierarchy in which provincial topics are considered of lesser importance than ones dealing with the country as a whole or with its two capitals. A thriving but narrow tradition of local lore (*kraevedenie*) has produced many works without a broader context. Thus, Evtuhov's book, which is a sustained argument for the importance of the province that focuses on nineteenth-century Nizhnii Novgorod, is a major contribution to Russian history.

Evtuhov describes the work of one earlier scholar on Nizhnii Novgorod province as “the meeting point of statistics and biography” (p. 233), and this could be used as an outline for her own work. The first part sketches a detailed portrait of the realia of Nizhnii Novgorod province and the second part deals with the province as idea through the biographies of men and women who were important to it in some way. The methods and sources of environmental history provide a rigorous underpinning to the first part, from the description of different types of soil in the provinces – where Dokuchaev developed his theories on the origin of the black earth – to the types of artisanal work regimes that dominated in various areas.

One of the key metaphors of the book is an island in the Volga that appeared and disappeared in the nineteenth century, setting the tone for the book's emphasis on flux and constant change as a norm of provincial life and history and thus challenges traditional images of the province as a place of stasis and similarity. At the same time, Evtuhov or any historian must freeze a moment in time and place in order to analyze it. This tension runs through the book, which aspires to be a total history of the province, but even the exceptionally rich published statistical sources Evtuhov makes excellent use of, as well as locally and centrally published and unpublished materials, do not provide a complete picture of any group or place. Evtuhov compromises by using a mosaic-like structure of many brief sections dealing with specific aspects of the province as life and idea.

Certain key arguments run through the book. One of them is that Russia was not just or not primarily an agrarian country. She convincingly shows the importance of artisanal production throughout Nizhnii Novgorod prov-

ince as well as the variations in it influenced by environmental factors. This helps to break down the image of the provinces as a rural monolith. Another recurring theme is that taking the province seriously changes our periodization and understanding of Russian history. In particular, she notes the seminal nature of the era of Nicholas I for provincial culture and administration. Finally, she emphasizes the idea that there was a provincial culture distinct from that of the capitals. This culture is linked to the tradition of collecting materials related to the province and is related to the ideal of total history of the province found throughout Evtuhov's book.

The book begins with a short preface in which Evtuhov notes that she is moving away from an earlier focus on what went wrong to a look at what went on in the province. In the first chapter, she grapples with how to define the province. She is interested in what made provinces unique, rather than how they fit into a larger structure. This means that Nizhnii Novgorod is often presented as something rather more apart from larger movements than it really was. Still, the chapter's conceptualization of the links between people and their environment is subtle and convincing, and the biographies of important provincial figures show the richness of these links. The second chapter provides an environmental portrait of Nizhnii Novgorod by looking at soil, forest, and river and the third sketches portraits of the towns of the province. Chapter 4 shows the diversity of the local economy, which culminated in the famous fair at Nizhnii Novgorod. She goes more deeply into a case study in chapter 5, which looks at the southeast part of the province, suggesting that an artisanal path to modernity was a viable option. She notes the deep links between towns and villages in artisanal production, which partly brings into question her argument that Russia was not primarily an agrarian economy. If the artisanal alternative was so deeply tied to agriculture, does the existence of a vibrant artisanal economy show that Russia was not primarily an agrarian country? Still, opening this field to debate should help to revitalize an area of scholarship that has been relatively neglected recently.

In the second part of the book, Evtuhov moves to a rich and varied analysis of ideas of the province. In chapter 6, she discusses how statisticians, photographers, and provincial writers defined social space. She deals with the work of provincial statistical committees and newspapers in Nizhnii Novgorod, but does not cite work on these institutions in other provinces, which means that the larger context suffers somewhat. Chapter 7 is particularly important, as it convincingly shows that the era of Nicholas I was a turning point for local administration, noting that the 1837 reform of local administration was a forerunner of the *zemstvo* reform in that it devolved real authority over local matters to the governor. She intriguingly notes the possibility of "provincial scenarios of power" for each governor (pp. 138-140), drawing upon the seminal work of Richard Wortman. Evtuhov then turns to a case study of the links between local knowledge and local power by looking at the cadastral map and the *zemstvo* in chapter 8. The *zemstvo* gathered local taxes, and cadastral maps allowed for more effective levying and collection. In

chapter 9, Evtuhov looks at how religion interpenetrated everyday life, with a focus on the Orthodox and Old Believers but not Muslims or animists. In chapter 11, Evtuhov asks if the province was its own cultural system. Using the brilliant work of N. K. Piksarov on provincial cultural nests from the 1920s, Evtuhov looks at several such sites of the interconnections of people, institutions, and ideas: the provincial press, meteorology, the archive and the provincial scientific archival commissions, and the museum. A definition of provincial culture remains somewhat elusive, though. The final chapter looks at several instances of the provincial idea, beginning with A. S. Gatsiskii's vision of *provintsiia* as the "total description of the local environment in all its possible dimensions" (p. 231) and then turns to a consideration of the *zemstvo* as a living example of philosopher Sergei Bulgakov's idea of the world as household or economy (*khoziaistvo*) and argues that *provintsiia* and *khoziaistvo* are "at least as useful categories for the study of nineteenth-century Russian society as 'class,' 'soslovie,' and 'civil society'." (p. 247).

While the book overall is an excellent and important one, this reviewer does have some concerns. Many relevant works in Russian and English are not cited, and although the story of Nizhnii Novgorod is given in an engaging way, without comparison it is hard to know what is unique and what is just distinctive. This also ties in to Evtuhov's conception of provincial culture, which she implies ought to be unique to be worthy of study. Having read this book, I am not convinced that Nizhnii Novgorod's provincial culture was unique, although it was certainly distinctive due to the fair. It is true that the provinces of European Russia, along with the borderlands of the empire, must be studied and brought into the historical narrative, but is the idea of a unique provincial culture the most effective way?

The capaciousness of the term "provincial culture" also has attendant problems as well as possible strengths. It contains within it how the province was lived and how it was studied. And yet, the patterns found in both of these in Nizhnii Novgorod are not fundamentally different than those found in Vladimir, for example. Part of the reason for the similarity is that state institutions, such as the provincial statistical committees, newspapers, and archival commissions, provided an institutional framework for the study of provinces throughout European Russia. The biographical rather than institutional focus means that some individuals may get rather more credit for ideas than they deserve. At the same time, A. S. Gatsiskii is an individual whose ideas were original as well as important on an empire-wide scale and this book does rightly bring him to a wider audience.

Overall, this is a very important book and those interested in any aspect of pre-revolutionary Russia would do well to read it.

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