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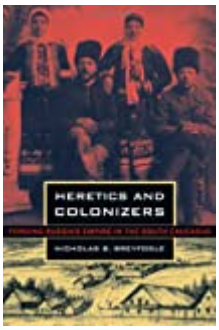

Nicholas B. Breyfogle. *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. xvii + 347 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4242-1.

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Religion, Ethnicity, and Empire on the Margins of Tsarist Russia

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent liberalization of archives led to an upsurge in research on religion that was accompanied by the nearly miraculous revival of the Orthodox Church after seven decades of atheist rule. Western scholars and graduate students turned their attention to the neglected topic of "lived Orthodoxy," while Russian ethnographers, folklorists, and historians of religion sought to define the role of the historically dominant faith as inseparable from Russian national identity. A third formidable group of students and scholars looked beyond the dominant Orthodox faith and instead sought peripheral experiences of religious and ethnic minorities beyond the main reaches of the Slavic parts of the empire. Nicholas Breyfogle's *Heretics and Colonizers* presents a conundrum–the use of ethnically Russian sectarians by tsarist authorities to facilitate the colonization of the Caucasian margins of the empire.

Breyfogle's main thesis, in an engagingly written book, is that "sectarian migration to Transcaucasia provides a window onto the growth and internal functioning of the tsarist empire, the role of frontier regions in Eurasian historical development, the characteristics of nineteenth-century popular religiosity and peasant life, and the changing parameters of identity" (p. 3). Breyfogle traces the nineteenth-century history of three "indigenous" sectarian groups–Dukhobors, Molokans, Subbotniks–who separated from the Orthodox Church in the eighteenth century. At times subjects of shifting tsarist religious and colonial power, Dukhobors, Molokans, and Subbotniks gradually developed a strong sense of independence that reached a climax in the mid-1890s when they used their pacifism to oppose Russian authorities. The reign of Tsar Alexander I (1801-25) was characterized by toleration of these sectarian groups as long as they did not actively proselytize among the Orthodox. Not satisfied with the policy of toleration, while searching for a way to resolve the problem of multiconfessionalism in an empire of a single state church, Tsar Nicholas I (1825-55) banished Dukhobors, Molokans, and Subbotniks to the peripheries of the empire in what Breyfogle perceptively calls "unintentional colonialism" (p. 19). The legal basis of internal exile was the Edict of 1830, whose main objectives were to weaken religious dissent in the "heartland" by exiling and isolat-

ing sectarians to the Transcaucasian region; engage these sectarians in activities beneficial to the empire; and initiate the colonization of Transcaucasia. Unexpectedly, before the edict could be carried out, the vast majority of sectarians voluntarily chose to resettle in Transcaucasia to join family members who had already moved, to enjoy religious freedom far away from Russian political and religious capitals, to seek economic fortune, and to follow their curiosity about the new territory. Among the unintended consequences of internal exile, the most important in religious terms was the spread of sectarian belief along the routes leading to Transcaucasia and the transformation of group identity.

The middle section of the book adeptly treats aspects of sectarian life in their new "homeland" and includes an ambitious consideration of their impact on local ecology. Higher death rates among sectarians, adaptation to local climate as well as animals and insects that harmed their crops, and new economic activities specific to the region (namely nonagricultural activities and commercial livestock) altered the traditional way of life sectarians brought with them. By the 1850s, the sectarians were established enough to provide essential secondary support to the Russian army during the Crimean War (1853-56) and then again during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78). The relatively positive relations between sectarians and tsarist authorities were encouraged by the liberalizing policies of Tsar Alexander II (1855-81), especially as they impacted religious dissidents. The assassination of Alexander II put an abrupt end to most progressive tendencies in elite government circles as Alexander III (1881-94) embarked on his Russification campaigns that were continued by his ill-fated successor, Nicholas II (1894-1917). Crucial to the relationship were the contested meanings of Russian ethnicity and its dependence upon Orthodox Christianity as a fundamental characteristic. Could ethnically Russian sectarians be considered fully Russian in the imperial sense?

Ethnicity and religion aside, beginning in the 1880s sectarians themselves refused to fulfill the fundamental military service obligation that had been part of Alexander II's attempt to democratize the army. Pacifist sentiments were deeply embedded in Dukhobor belief, but the death of their long-time leader, L. V. Kalmykova, in 1886, raised larger issues of the spiritual direction of believers. Having left no heir nor made any designation for succession, Kalmykova's death set off a crisis of leadership. The result was a splintering of the Dukhobors into two main groups, both claiming a blood connection to Kalmykova and both exhibiting strongly pacifist tendencies. Their refusal to fulfill their military service obligation was expressed in fiery burnings of guns and led to harsh injunctions by the tsarist authorities and widespread instances of physical abuse of Dukhobors. Once agents of the tsarist colonial effort, Dukhobors became enemies of the state whose emigration to Canada in the late 1890s signaled the miserable failure of an important aspect of the tsarist colonial effort.

Any book claiming to be about Russian peasants requires a definition of the peasantry and a discussion of typicality of experience, neither of which Breyfogle ventures to give despite the extensive literature on both topics. Following tsarist social categorizations, Breyfogle describes his sectarian subjects as peasants, but certainly these peasants were not typical in their levels of literacy, entrepreneurial activities, and mobility (regardless of the often forced nature of their movement). Most Russian peasants not only made sure to give, at least, the appearance of being Orthodox Christians in good standing, they remained strongly rooted to their natal villages and ventured away for brief trips to local markets and fairs. Many aspects of their peasantness were lost once Russian peasants began to engage in non-traditional labor away from their natal villages.

More problematic is the implication throughout Breyfogle's narrative that religious life in nineteenth-century Russia was characterized by conflict with authorities or among group members. Continuities that provide bridges from generation to generation and place to place fall into categories of sectarians' self-perceptions of being colonizers or victims of the imperial machinery. Although these were crucial to the historical development and emergence of group identity of the Dukhobors, Breyfogle offers little sense of the "normal" everyday "lived" religious experience. Conflict between oral, subordinate, and marginalized groups and their literate superiors is appealing to historians because it is more likely to be preserved in historical records than the mundane and ordinary way of life that ethnographers have helped to ossify in museum-like form. But what was Dukhobor religious practice like, and what different roles could women adopt in sectarian groups? Aside from what Breyfogle tells us about essential beliefs that motivated action or about the succession crisis following Kalmykova's death, not much is revealed about praxis or the progressive attitudes toward women.

To assert that sectarian and peripheral experience is central to our understanding of empire and national identity in Russia presents an inversion of the paradigm.

Extrapolating from sectarian experience on the imperial margins reveals less than Breyfogle claims about Russianness in the dominant Slavic parts of the empire that was overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian. The sectarian experience on the imperial margins and the use of sectarians by tsarist authorities to colonize geographic peripheries resembles a long-standing tradition of exiling undesirable elements from the political centers. The peripheral experience that Breyfogle describes pays little attention to the Caucasian peoples, societies, and cultures with which transplanted sectarians interacted. And, finally, Breyfogle does not place his study in the methodological context of regional specialists and microhistorians whose theories are still in the early stages of application in Russia. As a result, Breyfogle misses an opportunity to argue the validity of applying the findings of regional studies to the Russian whole, although he asserts this validity repeatedly. It would have been a far more persuasive response to the prevailing prejudicial preference given to a few regions (mostly St. Petersburg and Moscow) that frequently urges prejudices against the diversity of experience even among ethnic Russians within the European part of the empire.

These shortcomings, important as they are, do not diminish the contribution that Breyfogle makes to the field of religious history, empire, and national identity in Russia. Instead, they serve as provocative arguments about the most controversial aspects of contemporary Russian studies.