

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Janet M. Hartley. *Russia, 1762-1825: Military Power, the State, and the People.* Westport: Praeger, 2008. viii + 318 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97871-6.

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Commissioned by Brian G.H. Ditcham

Very Small Dents

We have here that inevitable shadow twin, the book that the reviewer wishes he had read, obtruding on the business of the review. In this case, though, it is a pretty substantive shadow, all of chapter 8—"The Expansion of the State: Conflict, Assimilation, and Identity." There is, therefore, little reason not to lead with it. It is, following the inevitable invocation and rejection of the Turner thesis, a theoretically engaged, research-based discussion of scholarship on the Russian military frontier as a Eurasian "Middle Ground," with examples drawn from such appropriately exotic locales as Kamchatka. Alive to the literature, provocative and stimulating, a reply and an engagement with Bruce White, it is surely not just the reviewer who will see something of value in this chapter. There is a monograph here, an important one that we will all need to read, when and if it appears. If this chapter is meant to establish Janet M. Hartley's priority, it more than justifies the monograph itself.

This is rather harder to say of the rest, for here we have another of the Greenwood Publishing Group's now daunting shelf of slim blue contributions to military history. Like most others in the series, it is closely reasoned and well researched. It will do well as a footnote to a paragraph such as this: "By comparative standards, tsarist Russia at the turn of the eighteenth century was not a particularly militarized state. The financial difficulties that would become critical at the end of the Napoleonic Wars were already manifest, but again this is hardly exceptional. What was different was that

instead of leading to a revolution or a fiscal-military state, save in the very marginal area of iron production, this crisis provoked Alexander I's brief utopian experiment, the military colony scheme, which should therefore be seen as not only a project of long-term social engineering, but also as a response to a very real problem."

"Militarization" is a somewhat slippery concept, however. Both the strongest and weakest prongs of the argument are the demonstration that Russia had a lower military participation ratio in the eighteenth century than other European states. This is interesting and instructive, but weak in the sense that these are hard numbers to pin down, especially when paramilitaries are included. Hartley's elegant demolition of the notion that the rhetoric of the noble service class corresponds with the reality makes a stronger case. The Russian nobility did not live to wear the tsar's uniform. An evaluation of the role of conscription in peasant life shows its integration into daily life as a tool of social discipline, rather than as an external, disintegrating force. The industrial impact of militarization (an anachronistic and ideologically driven concern, anyway, one suspects) was minimal. Even the notion of the soldier as member of a separate social state, figuratively dead to the village of his birth, requires reevaluation. And everywhere that the military sphere overlaps with the everyday, the potential impact of Old Belief cries out for reconsideration, at least to the non-Russianist reader. While it might be argued that Hartley has not done full justice to recent work

on the Russian iron industry, this is the kind of footnote, and work, that closes down old escapes to cliché and moves the literature forward.[1]

Or it would if this book were read and cited. Greenwood/Praeger's industry is praiseworthy, but rapidly approaches the counterproductive with the sheer number of relatively short and highly specialized titles in the catalogue working against any individual one getting the attention of a busy academic. While the difference between a monograph of this nature and the massive studies authored by, say, Chris Wickham, is invisible on an academic C.V., its impact on the wider scholarship is very different.

None of this is meant to suggest that this book is a wasted effort. On the contrary, a call number search reveals Hartley in close proximity to Christopher Duffy's inevitable contribution but not much else besides. If a li-

brary is wise enough to add Hartley to the shelf, we can hope for an undergraduate essay or even a survey monograph that moves discussion past the point where the great pioneer of our field has left it. That is no small thing, and for this reason the review will close with one final complaint about the title. To be useful to the browser, the spine has to command some attention, and *Russia, 1762-1825* might have been composed to deflect it. There is magic in this book. I wish it had been in the title, too.

Note

[1]. Ian Blanchard, "Nineteenth Century Russia and Western Ferrous Metallurgy: Complementary or Competitive Technologies," in *The Industrial Revolution in Iron: The Impact of British Coal Technology in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Chris Evans and Gábor Gyöngyösi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 129-174.

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