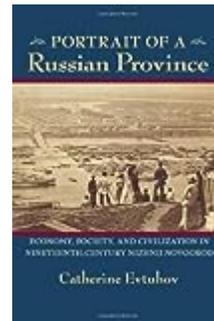


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catherine Evtuhov. *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. Illustrations, tables, figures. xv + 320 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-6171-0.



Reviewed by Michael Hamm (Ewing T. Bowles Professor of History, Centre College)

Published on H-Russia (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Randall Dills (University of Louisville)

Catherine Evtuhov's overarching thesis is that detailed study of Russia's provinces can enable us to move beyond the traditional image of Russia as a backward agrarian society weighed down by a sharply divided privileged elite and an impoverished peasantry. Provincial study will be aided by the fact that nineteenth-century officials and private citizens were obsessed with quantifying everything from fish species to commercial transactions to criminality. In Nizhnii Novgorod Province, the object of her study, local notables, such as Aleksandr Gatsiskii, conflated numbers with verbal description, with the result that statistic study merged into local ethnography (p. 101).

Nizhnii Novgorod functioned as a magnet for thousands of artisans, and life in the province impaled to the rhythms of the surrounding countryside, as well as the rhythms of commercial enterprise and those created by the religious calendar (p. 57). Entrepreneurial activity was often seasonal, as a successful crop could provide capital to spur artisanal production. Manufacturing facilities varied widely, but were mainly located in rural areas. In Sem'oknov District, famous for its wooden dishes and spoons, production was often a family affair: young children blocked out spoon shapes; older children and adults whittled and refined their contours; and teenaged

girls decorated the spoons with a chicken-feather quill dipped in kvas-based dye (p. 68). (Ultimately these spoons grew famous as objects of folk art.) In Pavlovo District, known for its scissors, locks, and knives, small scattered workshops prevailed, but steam-powered factories also existed. In Sormovo, a large shipbuilding enterprise fit the pattern of a company town, surrounded by workers' settlements. Lending facilities and commodity exchanges were absent, so local producers relied heavily on Old Believer networks for credit and for the distribution of goods (outside of the capital cities, these networks were essential to economic development, she asserts). Old Believer entrepreneurial success provided an economic incentive for religious conversion, and it accounted in part for the tenaciousness of a faith that had for three centuries been subject to persecution (p. 79).

In her chapter on provincial administration, Evtuhov argues that both under Nicholas I and in the post-reform era, the central government explicitly sought help from local institutions in administering space (p. 238). Thus, local institutions carved out a significant range of autonomy. Zemstvos had the right to levy taxes for local needs, and in Nizhnii Novgorod they presented a unique example of local management of social needs (p. 148). Confronted with numerous epidemics, zemstvos devoted an

increasingly high percentage of their budgets to health care. The Nizhnii Novgorod zemstvos emphasized access to medical assistance for all residents, including those who could not pay. "Remarkably for the late nineteenth century ... [they] arrived at a notion of medical care that aspired to universal coverage implemented at the local level" (pp. 153-154).

In examining "social space," Evtuhov provides biographical sketches of individuals who were neither aristocrats nor peasants but who "made up the backbone of local society." "Whether successful third-generation merchants, upwardly mobile *meshchane* [petty bourgeoisie], female professionals, or historically minded *popovichi* [priests' sons]," such individuals "gave life to the provincial environment" though they "have no place in the stereotypical vision of wealthy landlords and impoverished peasants" (p. 132). One such individual, the aforementioned Gatsiskii, perhaps the most ardent of the province's promoters, sometimes referred to himself as

a "provincialist."

Superbly researched, *Portrait of a Russian Province* contains soil maps, portraits of local notables and families, and a wide variety of figures and tables, though regrettably, despite references to "fantastically decorated mansions" lining the riverbanks, it includes no photographs or illustrations from the nineteenth-century city of Nizhnii Novgorod or the surrounding communities (p. 43). Evtuhov challenges traditional stereotypes, and she argues that provincial study can be as useful a category for the study of nineteenth-century Russia as class, *soslovie* (estate), and civil society. The scope and exceptional amount of statistical information and detail makes *Portrait of a Russian Province* something of a reference template for future provincial study. It is not a book for the casual reader; it requires concentrated study and will therefore find its primary audience in scholars with an interest in nineteenth-century Russian history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Michael Hamm. Review of Evtuhov, Catherine, *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38047>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.