

Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), ISBN: 9780521881777.

Leonid Heretz's impressive monograph is a successful attempt to refocus the historiography of Late Imperial Russia. *Russia on the Eve of Modernity* pushes aside debates on the change and modernization of the peasantry, forwarded by Daniel Field and others, instead highlighting the continuity of a 'traditional worldview'. This traditional worldview is primarily the peasantry's traditional perceptions of the world, which are often expressed through religion. This view includes the idea of an ongoing fight between good and evil, where modernisation is seen as apocalyptic, the Tsar was a divine force and the nobility were evil. The period Heretz focuses on and describes as the 'eve of modernity' is between the assassination of Alexander II (1881) and the abdication of Nicholas II during World War One (1917). Heretz's epic final chapter describes the impact of the mechanized horror of the Great War, strongly illustrating how this was the strongest introduction of 'modernity' into the traditional culture. Heretz therefore dismisses Field's argument that 'Bloody Sunday' (1905) was the turning point for the peasantry's rejection of the Tsar and therefore the traditional worldview.

Heretz aims to reassess a number of other previous interpretations, engaging with and criticising the secondary literature on numerous occasions. His approach is attacking more than Field's progressive interpretations of the peasantry. Within his discussion of sectarians is a vehement attack on previous historiographical perceptions, describing a western 'tone-deafness' in its materialistic approach to the topic (pp 79-80). Heretz also attacks historians who treat the peasantry in a homogenous manner; however his own treatment of the peasantry lacks some vital distinctions. Whilst generational differences are discussed appropriately in the later stages of the book, local ties and regional differences were disappointingly left out. Also, whilst Heretz acknowledges those peasants who recently moved into towns and cities, his treatment of such groups is also limited. Discussion of the

endurance of traditional attitudes in the urban environment would have been useful in developing his argument beyond the villages.

The illustrative examples and choice of structure which Heretz employs enhances his argument greatly by explaining and then providing the real examples to re-enforce his argument. The first half of the monograph provides a foundation for understanding the traditional worldview, with Chapter One explaining the influence of Russian Orthodoxy. Chapters Two and Three discuss the traditional worldview from the perspective of Old Believers and Sectarians. A following chapter discusses folk eschatology, and examines the key perception of modernization as the apocalypse. The second half of the book illustrates the implications of the worldview by absorbing the reader into Late Imperial Russia, illustrating how traditional cultures perceived and comprehended social and political events. Heretz examines perceptions of the assassination of Alexander II, outbreaks of famine and cholera (1891-1892), the Russo-Japanese war, the 1905 revolution, and ends with the Great War and abdication of Nicholas II. These events are discussed chronologically, which allows Heretz to introduce modernization into his writing as it occurs, and therefore demonstrating how it creeps into the traditional worldview, particularly during the Great War.

Heretz's accessibility to sources from the peasantry is the reason why this monograph is so fascinating. His perceptions of traditional culture include, but also go beyond, previous ethnographic studies. He uses sources such as *bylichka* (accounts spread by word of mouth), contemporary songs and 'chain letters' (religious manuscripts that were seen as direct communications from God, which were copied and passed on). These sources punctuate the text and provide the grass-roots approach needed when studying a peasantry with limited literacy. They also provide fascinating insights when coupled with Heretz's impressive knowledge and explanation, producing an excellent manifestation of peasant logic.

Despite issues such as a slight homogenisation of the peasantry, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity* is an important book. This book is essential for postgraduate students with an interest in the peasantry and the role of religion in Late Imperial Russia. Heretz provides a genuinely fascinating examination of peasant perceptions, and rebalances the previous historiography. The themes of endurance and continuity are complemented by the chronological structure of the second half of the book so that Heretz avoids the depiction of the traditional culture as a stagnant group. Fundamentally, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity* is vital for re-emphasising the importance of religion in the historiography of Late Imperial Russia.

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