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VIEWPOINT

Knock-Knock-Knockin' on an Open Door?

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Abstract

This "viewpoint" essay offers a response to the article by Catherine Gibson and Anton Kotenko, "Horizontal Threads." After recounting the article's main propositions, the essay assesses its argument and the potential that its program represents for the study of the Russian empire's spatial history.

Catherine Gibson and Anton Kotenko propose exploring more systematically "horizontal threads," that is, connections within the Russian empire across different regions. Placing themselves in opposition to a focus on center-periphery connections (with a presumed hierarchy of the former over the latter), the authors position their agenda within a broader range of trends that, as they show, have been productively complicating the writing of Russian imperial history for some time now. Providing "an overview of the state of the art of the spatial history of the Romanov empire" (5), they posit the benefits of what they call an "entangled spatial history" (1) that foregrounds "connections *within* the empire and *across* regions, which were not necessarily woven *through* the metropole" (3). As I see it, we need to ask three basic things of this approach: is it true? Is it new? Does it matter? The answers seem mixed.

The review of the literature here is quite impressive, and it demonstrates clearly enough that there were indeed multiple connections among different parts of the empire in often curious ways that bypassed the center. Protective horn covers for cattle, telegraph poles, market trade, matters of charity, Christian missionaries (placed here in the basket of things "harmful" and "dark"), and much else besides; all of this suggests that, to a degree at least, these horizontal threads have been hiding in plain sight, just waiting for someone to point them out to us. I suspect that other scholars could add their own examples to the list. To my knowledge, no one has made such a systematic case for these connections and their importance for understanding the empire's functioning, endurance, and (perhaps) destruction. It is hard to gainsay, then, that the authors' observation is generally true.

Assessing the novelty of the claims is more difficult. As the size and scope of their own footnotes suggests, much of what interests Gibson and Kotenko has been appearing in the literature for some time. Even so, some areas of inquiry seem a bit puzzling by their absence in the article. Consider ideas—whether hostile to existing authority, supportive of it, or indifferent—as a source for horizontal threads. Socialism is a good example in terms of oppositional thought. Though perhaps with hierarchical structures of their

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own, socialist and revolutionary groups could connect people across diverse regions in aversion to existing political and social structures.[1] Political parties, legalized after 1905, represent another example, with interests and outlooks uniting constituencies across multiple provinces and zemstvos providing organizational networks as a basis for early party formation.[2] Or do Gibson and Kotenko suppose that parties, too, would be characterized by a "vertical" structure, with local branches taking orders from a central organization? Religion—readily invoked by the authors in the case of cross-border ties—seems another source of connection within the empire. The literature on religious life in Russia reveals that pilgrimages to consult spiritual elders and to venerate holy sites, as well as popular icons traveling on tour, could bind believers across significant distances. Prominent madrasas could do the same for Muslims. Even pagans, like the Maris (Cheremis) of northeastern European Russia, forged ties of religious affinity across provincial boundaries.[3] To be sure: all of this, if largely absent from the article, actually reinforces the authors' point. This suggests that the novelty in their approach resides less in the investigation of such horizontal ties than in the act of conceptualizing them as such.

At the same time, I sense elements of conflation in the discussion that confuse the analysis and impede grasping the import of its claims. One concerns whether the "center" represents a model for emulation or a source of power (at points the essay moves glibly across these distinctions). Along the same lines, the "center" appears at times to be the autocracy itself in St. Petersburg; at others it seems to represent the empire's central provinces, which is to say a substantial portion of the country. The issues at stake are in my view different. It might in any event be fruitful to posit the existence of multiple centers in Russia, some of them coinciding with the political capital and others not. For pious Armenians of the Apostolic faith, the "center" was Echmiadzin, near Yerevan. In several capacities—missionary work, ethnography and orientalism, school policy—Kazan served as a center for a broad region encompassing the Volga-Ural and beyond.[4] One could multiply the examples.

Yet another distinction concerns state and society. The article's central analytical paragraph declares that "entangled history emphasizes multidirectionality and the proliferation of non-state circulations, exchanges, mobilities, and influences" (3). Yet despite the foregrounding of "non-state circulations," the state—or at least the issue of governance—seems prominent in the examples that the authors provide: the mobility of civil servants (who "homogenized the state" [17] with similar policies in different places); the sundry correspondence among governors on various issues; and the exchanges between diverse municipal authorities on urban affairs. It might be worth contemplating more systemically: what is at stake between state and non-state horizontal connections?

Further, threads are construed here as being either vertical or horizontal. But some, it would seem, could be both at once (or perhaps simply defy that dichotomy). The authors

[1] Maureen Perrie, *The Agrarian Policy of the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Party from its Origins through the Revolution of 1905–1907* (Cambridge, Eng., 1976). More recently—and with an explicit focus on non-Russian Marxist parties—Eric Blanc, *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-class Politics across the Russian Empire, 1882–1917* (Leiden, 2021).

[2] For example, Robert Edelman, *Gentry Politics on the Eve of Revolution: The Nationalist Party, 1907–1917* (New Brunswick, 1980); Terence Emmons, *The Formation of Political Parties and the First National Elections in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

[3] The works are many, but consider: Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb, 2010); Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford, 2004); Paul W. Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca, 2002).

[4] Valerii G. Tunian, *Echmiadzkinskii prestol, XIX—nachalo XX vv*. (Yerevan, 2001); Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, 2009).

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set their invocation of "threads" in some contrast to those of Richard Wortman and Charles Steinwedel, and to an extent one can agree.[5] But in other ways the contrast seems false. Is it not the case that some vertical ties—for example those evoking loyalty to the monarchy—likewise bound people together horizontally in shared rituals and affinities?

Worthy of attention, in my view, is also the temporal dimension of the problem—namely, the degree to which the ties in question were (increasingly) the product of an emergent modernity. Many of the examples the authors provide, for example on urban development, seem distinctly related to this kind of modernization. They imply (or do they?) that horizontal threads were multiplying over the course of the nineteenth century. To what extent, then, were such ties a natural function of the increasing complexity of imperial society? And is it possible that growing horizontal ties were offset or countered by bourgeoning vertical ones, enhanced by new technologies and increasing degrees of state capacity? The authors deserve credit for inviting scholars of the eighteenth century to weigh in (I can only agree). But at some point, the question merits being addressed head-on: is the growth of horizontal ties a function of modernization?

Among the authors' summons is a call for more research to determine whether Romanov rulers were, like their Ottoman counterparts, "concerned about the development of horizontal links and considered them perilous or whether they were more indifferent and less interventionist in preventing them" (27).[6] In a lucky coincidence, an interpretive line of my own work might help to answer this question. I have in mind the provincial newspapers, or *gubernye vedomosti*, that began to make their appearance in Russia in 1838. Initially encompassing forty-two provinces of European Russia and gradually others as well, these newspapers emerged from a provincial reform in 1837, whose goal was to improve administrative efficiency: the publication of important information by provincial directorates would reduce the need for cumbersome correspondence and thus streamline governance. The 1837 statute accordingly required each provincial directorate (*gubernskoe pravlenie*) to send the official section of its newspaper to all other provinces, even those that did not yet have such papers. This makes for a substantial exchange of information across provinces and features a deliberate effort by the autocracy itself to foster horizontal connections, openly bypassing the capital. The papers' unofficial section likewise featured the sharing of articles among the provinces, as early editors were sometimes desperate for material. Although it remains unclear precisely how much exchange actually occurred, it seems safe to propose that the newspapers fostered new horizontal connections among provinces, and that tsarist rulers, while perhaps agnostic about how much to promote such ties actively, were less apprehensive about them than were their Ottoman counterparts.[7]

How much does all of this matter? I find it hard to tell. The authors make the point that, however seemingly "humdrum," these horizontal threads "could have more direct impact on many inhabitants' daily lives than grand matters of state or international relations" (24). True enough, I suppose. But the "bigger picture" into which the article consolidates its various insights remains hazy, for this reader at least. Can the authors point out, concretely in one instance or two, how "a series of increments" (24) added up to resilience or attrition for the empire? Or is this a task they leave to those following in their wake? Their approach, the authors insist elsewhere, "will not simply add another layer into a larger narrative of imperial history, but can provide us with one way of answering a key question in the historiography" concerning how the empire worked for as long as it did and how it functioned in

[5] Invoked by Gibson and Kotenko themselves, the works are Richard Wortman, "'Invisible Threads': The Historical Imagery of the Romanov Tercentenary," *Russian History* 16, no. 2–4 (January 1989): 389–408; Charles Steinwedel, *Invisible Threads of Empire: Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552–1917* (Bloomington, 2016).

[6] In this connection they refer to Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, Eng., 2008).

[7] See Paul W. Werth, *1837: Russia's Quiet Revolution* (Oxford, 2021), 85–104.

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a nuts-and-bolts sense (4). Without denying such potential, I would ask: how much do the examples provided in the article coalesce into an answer to that question? Here, it seems, the article merits further development, featuring an effort to illustrate more concretely how such ties allowed the empire to endure (or not). Is it possible, moreover, to relate these growing horizontal ties in Russia to the fact that this empire, in contrast to the Ottoman and Hapsburg ones, reappeared a short time after its destruction as the USSR? Or do the sources of that resurrection lie elsewhere?

In light of the many existing works that they themselves cite, the authors implicitly acknowledge that they are knocking on an open door. I doubt that very many people will say in response to this article: No, paying attention to such horizontal threads is a terrible idea. The door is thus already at least ajar. Yet I suppose it is true: if someone has not actually noticed our arrival, we sometimes have to knock on an open door to let them know that we are here.

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