

The Spirit of Hoddesdon in Strasbourg

John Randolph
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
jwr@illinois.edu

Review of: *Rodolphe Baudin, Alexei Evstratov, Paul Keenan and Vladislav Rjéoutski, eds. Russia, Europe, and the World in the Long Eighteenth-Century: Proceedings of the Xth International Conference of the Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia. Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2023. 336 p. + illustrations. ISBN: 9791034401581*

In a beautiful essay toward the middle of this collection, Roger Bartlett reconstructs the history of the Panoptical Institute, a modern school for shipbuilding designed by Samuel Bentham in 1810. Five floors tall with five wings, the building radiated out from a central observation shaft, from which the work of shipwrights in training could be watched. Located directly across from Smol'nyi Institute, Bartlett remarks, the Panoptical “must have been quite a sight” (163) (and should have been quite memorable). It contained 32,388 panes of glass, was powered by a central steam engine, and was equipped with an early elevator. Lavishly funded and large in scale, it was “the only Panoptical building anywhere in the world” (164) designed by Samuel and Jeremy Bentham themselves. It thus was among the first institutions to build out from their insights on the power of internal surveillance: a vision of discipline that has variously haunted or inspired modern theories of power ever since.

But then the Institute burned down in 1818. The Empire moved on, it was never replaced, and history contrived to forget the whole thing. Not even the most scrupulous local historian has been able to find much trace of it, in letters, memoirs, or diaries. What could have been a monument to the Russian Empire's early modern status as a place where European technologies and cultural fantasies exploded in scale—backed by autocratic wealth and given colonial authority over a vast domain—simply faded into dust and was built over. In that, it is an apt metaphor for what historical scholarship itself might look like, were it not for the fifty-plus-year efforts of the famous Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia whose founding in 1968 this collection celebrates.

For different reasons, neither the US nor the USSR had much interest in eighteenth-century Russia, at least through the late 1960s. It seems striking (and important) that the true gravitational center for the study of this era arose first in Europe and more specifically in the UK. In a short memoir appended to the end of this volume, Anthony Cross (one of the Study Group's founders) modestly refuses to make any big claims about the group's impact. Yet as he recounts decades of one and two-day seminars at High Leigh Conference Center at Hoddesdon, gradually yielding ten international conferences and most of the field's most fundamental modern works, it is hard to avoid a sense of a gradual, collective build-out of something that was hard to reconstruct and would otherwise be neglected.

What then does this research look like in the 2020s? The great theme, as before, remains the complex interplay between a Europe caught up with visions of Enlightenment and a Russian imperial state willing to entertain them. Fourteen of the eighteen monograph essays published here focus explicitly on European-Russian exchanges (of people, things, ideas). It includes sections on “State and Power Practices;” “Geographies of Contact and Trade Practices;” “Brokers and the Circulation of Cultural Practices;” “Personal Experience and Writing the Self;” “Being and Writing

Female;" "Literary Practices and Traditions;" and "Literature and Politics." The collection thus crosses back and forth between politics, culture, faith, economics, the self, and (literary) art. No one method predominates: both the editors' introduction and field surveys provided by Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter and Gary Marker note the influence of a number of different historiographical schools (social history, *Begriffsgeschichte*, microhistory, the history of religion, the history of gender, histories of imperialism and colonialism) but this reader was struck by the sense of (re)discovery still shaping the field. In true *histoire croisée* style, as Wirtschafter observes, every story seems to have a different timeline and open onto a different kind of historical space.

Take, for example, the histories of politics, education, and reading. In the section "State and Power Practices," we find histories that posit a growing mismatch between Russia's existing imperial arrangements and the European examples and philosophies Russia's rulers wished to draw on. Interestingly, this sense of mismatch is a sensibility developed in state papers themselves. Thus (as Elena Marasimova shows) Catherine II carefully considered European and specifically English precedent while trying to decide if she should reform (or even just affirm) the Empire's law of succession. Ultimately, deciding that question was too complex and threatening, she abandoned the project. Similarly, her trusted viceroy, Count Otto Heinrich Igelström, was inspired by Enlightenment visions of virtuous subjecthood, and sought to achieve the "civilization" (and colonial subjugation) of the Empire's Kazakh societies by creating new civilian structures for them. Yet his papers (as Ricarda Vulpius shows) are riddled by rising objections (from Kazakh khans, from his administrative rivals, and ultimately from Igelström himself) that good imperial order cannot be maintained in Russia this way. Rather than relinquish any imperial authority, those with power chose civilizational melancholy and absolute notions of cultural difference—a point of view that often, in turn, has shaped historical perceptions of Russia's alterity ever since.

Yet if one leaves the realm of governance and enters the realm of education and reading, the boundaries between the Russian Empire's long eighteenth-century and Europe's seem less clear. In her essay "European Sentimental Bestsellers in Russia," Hilde Hoogenboom shows that not only did Russians have access to pan-European fiction, but they also had among the most varied and cosmopolitan translation markets in the world. In the hands of Danièle Tosato-Rigo and Rodolphe Baudin, Swiss archives yield the story of educators who quite successfully found a living for themselves at the imperial court and on noble estates. Their cultural attainments were in demand and avidly studied. What they could not attain was lasting distinction: although the Russian princesses they helped train were married off into German and Dutch royalty and the common culture of Europe's aristocracy, Esther Monod and Jeanne Huc-Mazelet returned home to relative anonymity. Baudin draws a wonderful portrait of a Geneva patrician named James Galiffe who met a similar fate. As long as he was content to swim in the river by a rural estate, he could imagine himself as an intellectual in the Russian Empire, offering English lessons for a few hours each day and living like Horace. When he sought to rise up as a historian in Moscow, however, what he had to offer was in less demand, and he had to return to banking. The problems they faced were not of culture, but of occupation, status, and class.

A brief review does not allow space to summarize or synthesize all the contributions to this volume—and the editors' introduction describes many more presented at the conference itself—but I hope that this description of its main divisions and a few contributions will spark readers' interests. Numerous histories run across the Russian Empire's eighteenth-century, and the Study Group and the present volume's editors are to be congratulated in helping to find new vantage points from which they may be considered and described.