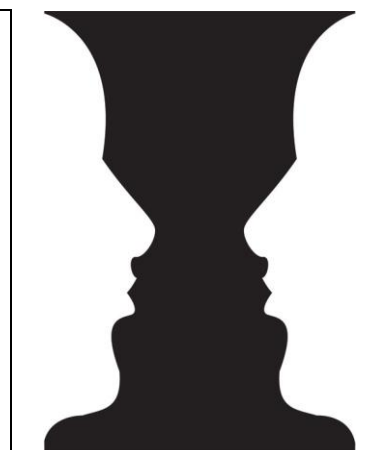


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**Roland Czvetkovski & Alexis Hoffmeister, *An Empire of Others: Creating Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2014**

*Book review*

Alin Constantin

Since the onset of de-colonization, scholars have begun to question the role played by anthropologists and ethnographers in Western imperial projects. Similar analyses of the role played of these disciplines in Tsarist Russia had to wait for the end of the Cold War to take place. Multiple causes impeded such efforts. For one thing, Russian anthropology and ethnography received relatively low attention during the epoch, despite the fact that scholarly exchanges between researchers from the West and those from the USSR proved fruitful for both sides. Furthermore, in the black & white world of Sovietology, and works that challenged the status quo, as the case of the revisionist historians prove, were vehemently challenged on non-academic grounds and their authors subject to ad hominem attacks. If one was to compare the Soviet regime with that of other countries, it was to be with either that of Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, not with those of the West. The fall of communism, however, made it possible for authors to approach Soviet history in a new light.

In recent years, works by authors such as Slezkine (1996), Hirsch (2005), van der Oye (2010), Kan (2009), and Northrop (2003) have greatly improved of our understanding of Soviet policy regarding minorities and the role played by scholarly knowledge in its implementation. A number of questions continue to linger in the field as various scholars tend to question whether one can apply or not ideas and concepts from post-colonialism to Russia and the Soviet Union.

For those interested in the future of this kind of studies, the volume edited by Roland Czvetkovski and Alexis Hoffmeister is an essential read. Comprising thirteen

essays thematically split into three categories (“Paradigms”, “Representations” and “Peoples”), the present volume approaches themes such as the role played by anthropologists and ethnographers in imperial policy, the manner in which minorities were affected by their efforts, or the state of these disciplines in the Soviet Union.

As stated in the introduction, the point of the book is not to provide a history of Russian anthropology *per se*, but rather an image of the discursive patterns that developed during the Imperial and Soviet period within the discipline (though some essays, such as the ones by Marina Mogilner and Roland Cvetkovski are far more historical in character and require from the reader a certain familiarity with Russian ethnography, ethnology and anthropology in order to fully appreciate them).

A number of essays directly address the applicability of Edward Said’s theories regarding Orientalism to Russia and the Soviet Union. Sergey Abashin, in his essay on the scholarship of Uzbek ethnogenesis developed during the Stalinist period, expresses his desire to display a complexity that is veiled behind designations such as those used by Edward Said (p. 147). But theoretical complexity should not amount to lack of clarity: switching back and forth between names, ethnicities and historical periods, the reader gets lost in this informational muddle without fully grasping anything. Much more successful in this attempt is Christian Dettmering, who focuses on the involvement of ethnographers in Tsarist Russia’s conquest of the Caucasus. Dettmering reveals the following: when ethnographical advice that was more likely to contribute to the Russian military effort it was ignored, while when authorities followed their lead, the improper theoretical understanding of the zone made things worse, which brings him to conclude that “ethnography impeded rather than enhanced policies towards the Vainakh people” (p. 367). This example forces us to carefully note the modes and means of communications between those who study a population and those who rule over them when looking at about situations placed at confines between the history of anthropology and the history of colonialism.

Along these lines, Sergey Glebov’s essay on the role played by exiled narodniks enlisted in imperial investigations in the production of ethnographical knowledge regarding Siberia. Waław Sieroszwski, a Polish political exile to Siberia turned ethnographer and novelist, became in his own right an object of detailed investigation for the Russian authorities, as “the imperial police compiled a medical file on the exile, which contained information on his diseases [...] and measurements of Sieroszwski’s own skull” (p. 308). Finally, Roland Cvetkovski finds that Said’s theory of orientalism is of no use in the analysis of Tsarist ethnographic exhibitions, as they were “no mirror of the imperial self” (p. 251).

Before being able to compare the role played by ethnography and anthropology in the case of Tsarist/Soviet imperial policy and that of Western empires, it is important to understand their specificities in order not to superimpose our conceptions on the Russian example. Alexis Hofmeister’s comparison of the development of ethnographic theory in Russia and Britain offers an important starting point for such effort, but towards the end the essay feels rushed and would make the object of a stand-alone study rather than a piece in an anthology. Sergei Alymov’s piece on Marrism makes a

convincing case for reconsidering the impact of Marxist theory on Soviet ethnography, by concentrating on the lives and works of several of its practitioners.

Despite the fact that the pre-1917 period is well represented, by “Soviet” the editors of the volume only seem to refer to the periods of Lenin’s and Stalin’s rule: despite fleeting reference in some essays of the period following Stalin’s death, no full essay addresses the period. Thirty-six years of Soviet history are thus left out. It would have been interesting to see how Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign was seen by anthropologists and ethnographers, how they responded to the changes in population, or how those in the discipline acted during the invasion of Afghanistan.

Despite this lacuna, and the weakness of certain essays, the volume as a whole is an important contribution to everyone interested in the history and practice of Tsarist and Soviet ethnography and anthropology.