Michel TISSIER, *L'Empire russe en révolutions. Du tsarisme à l'URSS*

Ekaterina Pravilova

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/12809>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.12809

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2021

Number of pages: 706-708

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2895-7

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Ekaterina Pravilova, "Michel TISSIER, *L'Empire russe en révolutions. Du tsarisme à l'URSS*", *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 62/4 | 2021, Online since 01 December 2021, connection on 03 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/12809> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.12809>

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REFERENCES

Michel TISSIER, *L'Empire russe en révolutions. Du tsarisme à l'URSS*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2019, 320 p.

- 1 Michel Tissier's book on the Russian Revolution appeared in the wake of the big celebration of the Revolution's centenary. After the torrent of publications in 2017 that included, among others, the magistral volumes by Laura Englestein, Mark Steinberg, and Stephen Smith, it may have seemed almost impossible to find a niche for another book on the Revolution. However, Tissier's work contributes to the growing body of literature in an entirely different way. *L'Empire russe en révolutions. Du tsarisme à l'URSS* is not archivally based research but a balanced and comprehensive synthesis of historiographical debates, including the most recent discussions provoked by the centenary feast. This is a book without footnotes that nevertheless draws on an impressive body of secondary literature, memoirs, and published primary sources.
- 2 Tissier's survey brings together three lines of inquiry: the analysis of "the relation between the peoples of the Empire," the dynamics of social relations, and the organization of political power. The main narrative focuses on the transformation of Russia's imperial domain from the early twentieth century until the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922. The book starts with an overview of the historiography, from the earliest accounts by memoirists—active participants in the Revolution—to the most recent works, and with an analysis of the Empire's territorial, national, political, and social composition in the late 1890s and early 1900s. In the introductory chapter, Tissier spotlights the main sources of tensions inherent to the imperial order, mainly the inadequate political structure that gave no voice to the representatives of social classes and nationalities in defining "the ways of their wellbeing" (21, 30). These tensions

resulted in the outbreak of violence in 1905. At the beginning of chapter 2, Tissier evokes the old question of whether the events of 1905 indeed represented a revolution. He responds affirmatively: the political reforms that followed the outbreaks of protests transformed the principles of imperial rule and reconfigured the modes of political relations between the Empire's non-Russian peripheries and the imperial center. Analyzing the radicalization of nationalist movements across the Empire in 1905-1907 (chapter 3), Tissier avoids generalizations; as he suggests, each of the "multiple and diverse" cases of national "mobilization" resulted from a unique combination of socio-economic, confessional, and political factors. In a multinational Empire with an asymmetrical political order, the Revolution was also an asynchronistic and polyphonous event.

- 3 The chapter on post-1905 developments entails the question whether the "constitutional way of the Empire's modernization" was possible. Could the government find a way to appease social tensions and strengthen the cohesiveness of its national and territorial organization? Analyzing both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios, Tissier seems to suggest that the political reform after the Revolution opened up space to maneuver and the possibility of glossing over social and national antagonisms. However, the analysis of the Ukrainian and the Finnish "questions" shows that the imperial government responded to the growing particularisms by tightening administrative control. As Tissier observes, most imperial administrators continued to think about the Empire in the old terms, as an autocratic space dominated by one nation. World War I proved fatal for the Empire's territorial and national integrity: violence and crisis exacerbated existing tensions between nations and classes and even unraveled the relations with those national groups and regions that had been previously seen as "loyal."
- 4 In the chapter dealing with the "fall of tsarism," Tissier assesses various interpretations of the February revolutionary events in the capitals and provinces to address the thorny question of revolutionary "spontaneity." Drawing on Boris Kolonitsky's study of revolutionary culture, he describes major changes in the language and rhetoric of revolutionary actions, the emerging "language of rights and democracy." As Tissier convincingly shows, the Revolution did not happen only in the capitals, nor did it merely concern the organization of central authorities; the main drama took place in the borderlands. The Provisional Government was willing to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of nationality and confession, but it put off the solution of the nationality question and the problems of territorial organization until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. The political crisis of the government and the "exacerbation of antagonisms" precipitated the collapse of state authority.
- 5 Following the logic of his analysis, Tissier divides the treatment of the October revolution into two parts: chapter 8 traces the course of political events in Petrograd, namely "the legitimacy conflict" among the political organizations of socialists, the "insurrection," and the organization of authority in October 1917. Chapter 9 tells the story of the Empire's "disintegration." Tissier again returns to the problem of historical possibilities and asks whether there was a chance to preserve the integrity of the former imperial territorial domain after February 1917 (207). Tissier writes that in the fall of 1917, there was still a great degree of uncertainty regarding the future composition of the state. He spotlights the popularity of the idea of a democratic federation but notes that the de facto disintegration of the state in 1918 made it obsolete. Tissier presents the Civil War not simply as a conflict between the Reds and the Whites but also as a process

of reconstituting the centuries-old “heritage of the Russian imperial domain.” (228) Tissier agrees with the historians who write about the Civil Wars in the plural, interpreting this phenomenon as a continuum of “the post-imperial wars for sovereignty.” The book ends with the analysis of the formation of the USSR or, as Tissier calls it, “the Soviet reconfiguration of the imperial domain.” In conclusion, he returns to the book’s main question about the essence of the Revolution and its inevitability. Tissier concludes that historians cannot with certainty judge the possibilities of resolving the antagonisms of the Empire, but he observes that the “peaceful evolution of imperial domain in 1917” would have required a profound transformation of the state.

- 6 *L'Empire russe en révolutions*, despite not presenting any new material, is a valuable volume: the text is lucid and concise yet very informative and well balanced.
- 7 Tissier spotlights, along with the analysis of events and processes, the main points of historiographical contention, such as the problem of revolutionary spontaneity, the problem of leadership in revolution, or the applicability of the concept of decolonization to the period of World War I. The book has a bibliography, a chronological table, and a glossary that elucidate the author’s choice of terms. One may wonder, for instance, why Tissier uses two terms (tsarism and autocracy) and what stands behind the choice of the former for the book title (both terms have provoked debates in historiography). Excerpts from primary documents included in the text compensate for a nearly total absence of people’s stories. Tissier’s book is a political history, and it pays little attention to the transformation of cultures or the experiences of people who lived through the Revolution. The focus on the political organization of the “imperial domain” is justifiable, but one may wonder whether the transformation of this domain could be analyzed from different angles—legal, economic, and financial. Indeed, legal and economic factors did not play the key roles in the “disintegration” of the imperial space, but they could serve as markers of the centrifugal processes. Shifting the emphasis from the most obvious political entropies to the less visible signs of the Empire’s decay could add more subtlety to the book’s argument.

AUTHORS

EKATERINA PRAVILOVA

Princeton University