Janet M. HARTLEY, *The Volga. A History of Russia's Greatest River*

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REFERENCES

Janet M. HARTLEY, *The Volga. A History of Russia's Greatest River*, New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 2021, xix + 379 p.

- 1 The longest river in Europe, the Volga, flows 3,500 km through central Russia into the Caspian Sea. In this socio-economic history, Janet Hartley analyzes the development of Russia and the peoples who lived in the Volga basin over one-thousand years, their trade, transport, agricultural and other economic activities, and also the politics and culture of the settlement of the Volga basin. Hartley's book consists of four parts: a shorter introduction on the rise of Rus' and the early history of the Volga; the Volga in the Russian Empire, roughly on Petrine Russia and through Catherine the Great; a third longer section on life and identity along the Volga River, roughly through the nineteenth century, that explores, among other things, village and town life, social conflict, the reforms (the end of serfdom) and Russification; and the Soviet and post-Soviet Volga.
- 2 Economic and social concerns direct Harley's attention. She explores the ways in which the Volga is "Mother Russia," the center of national prosperity from Astrakhan at its mouth with its fishing industry to forestry in the northern reaches of the river. She describes extensive and changing trade routes, with most of the trade along the river moved from the south to the north. It included silk from Persia, furs, leather, spice, tea, nuts and wine from the east. As a trade nexus, the Volga's importance began to decline with the rise of the railroads and changes in international trade patterns in the late nineteenth century. The Volga was also a carrier of disease, mainly plague and cholera and a site of scientific interest in peoples, flora, fauna and soil. The epidemics were a constant reminder of the inability of the state to pursue public health measures. But

Hartley does not focus on the environmental history of the Volga or its physical geography in a systematic fashion. In particular, the last 100 years have been significant for the river basin and its inhabitants because of the impact of two world wars, the rapid industrialization of cities along the river, the massive effort to rebuild it through hydraulic projects, and the resulting environmental impacts. These and other environmental subjects that might give more agency to the Volga have less place in the book.

- 3 The central part of *The Volga* is a study of social and economic life of the peasantry and of small towns, villages and cities that arose along the Volga. Hartley provides a thorough history of peasants and peasant economy, and of the legal and moral handicaps of serfdom. She discusses the limited contact of peasants with others, their daily life (their huts, dress and festivals), and their precarious and technologically-unsophisticated agriculture of rye, with oats and barley, some millet, flax and wheat, based on the three-field system with one fallow. Hartley presents the Volga region as case study of results of the 1861 emancipation. As elsewhere, the outcome of emancipation varied according to the quality of the land, the size of noble estates, the availability of water, the attitudes of landowners and peasants, and how the central government failed to deal with the differences in climate, lands, and harvests that left peasants impoverished and unhappy with the emancipation.
- 4 Hartley vividly discusses how, for much of its history, the Volga was a site of violence as a meeting place of different people, Slavs and Muslims, peasants and gentry, criminal bands and Cossacks, of migration and forced migration, a crucial staging point for Russian colonization, and a place peasant revolts, war and civil war. Hartley discusses the meetings of Orthodox Christians and non-Christians in this frontier region—especially Tatars, Chuvash and Mari, and also the lives of Volga Germans. If at times the Tsarist regime ruled through enlightened tolerance, for example under Catherine the Great, the state was mostly pragmatic and often vengeful and brutal to Chuvash, Mari and Tatar minorities.
- 5 Hartley vividly captures the impact of the Great War, the collapse of the Tsarist regime, the Bolshevik seizure of power and the resulting Civil War between Reds and Whites who failed to establish control along the Volga River (1914-1921). She notes that Volga towns were crucial to the outcome of the revolution because of the play of local circumstances – political parties, the presence of garrison towns whose soldiers were often Bolshevik sympathizers, and other towns at forefront of revolutionary movements, with factory workers instigators of strikes and demonstrations. During the civil war, peasants suffered heavily from violent Bolshevik grain requisitioning. With no seed to sow, a terrible famine and cholera epidemic hit the region like that of 1891-92 and others.
- 6 The civil war also set the stage for Stalin's violent collectivization campaign on the basis of long-term mistrust between peasants and Party. Collectivization was an intense process in the Volga region since it was a source of grain needed for burgeoning cities. As elsewhere, dekulakization was arbitrary and cruel, with widespread resistance – and with a wider purge of society following. Millions were displaced, exiled and murdered. In many places the local intelligentsia was beheaded, and church leaders were targeted as well.
- 7 The Volga continued its unhappy flow during World War II. Stalingrad (Volgograd) was nearly completely destroyed and had to be rebuilt, the city's infrastructure leveled, and of its residents less than 8,000 remained. But Volga towns also became major industrial

centers during and after the war since the Soviets rapidly evacuated what they could ahead of the Nazi blitzkrieg to the Volga and the Ural Mountains region. The industrialization of the Volga basin may be the most fateful moment in its history.

- 8 The rebuilding of the Volga from the 1930s into the 1970s is the least well covered events in this book. The effort to control and tame nature itself through a series of hydroelectric power stations, dams, locks, and irrigation systems forever changed the river ecology, but are given short shrift. We learn nothing of the Volga-Don Canal, nor will the reader find more than a brief listing of the eight major hydroelectric power stations built on the river, in part by massive Gulag operations, nor much detail about the significant environmental impacts. The dams slowed river flow, disrupted communications, increased salinity, destroyed fisheries and reduced the level of Caspian Sea significantly. Here, as elsewhere, there is little discussion of environmental concerns, the weakness of activists past and present in protecting the river, nor of the physical geography and agency of the Volga itself. Yet the purpose of *The Volga* is to reveal the major events of Russian history against the backdrop of the economic and cultural flows of Europe's largest river. The strength of *The Volga* is always its rich cultural and economic history, set forth on analysis of literary, anthropological, archival and other historical. Twenty-two illustrations, ten maps and a note on place names complete *The Volga*, and make it a welcome addition to other biographies of the world's rivers.

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