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Nicholas V. RIASANOVSKY, **Russian Identities. A Historical Survey**. Oxford-New York : Oxford University Press, 2005, 278 p.

- 1 Studies of Russian 'identity' have boomed in recent years, yet it is far from clear just what this term means. Is it a synonym for 'mentality' or merely a constituent part thereof, or perhaps a substitute for that currently disparaged old favourite, the 'Russian soul'? Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, who is professor emeritus of European history at the University of California, Berkeley, cleverly sidesteps this problem by writing of 'identities' in the plural. He sees the national psyche as having developed through the accretion of successive historical experiences, with 988 and 1929 as the chief chronological landmarks. This approach is stimulating, and the author should not be faulted for failing to solve the conundrum of how these successive layers of consciousness fit together. For example, has the nature of Orthodox Christianity been affected by persecution under the Soviets? Did the ruler cult of earlier centuries influence its Stalinist successor? How deeply did Western rationalist thinking ever penetrate the mass mind? To all such questions only inconclusive answers are possible.
- 2 The focus here is mainly on intellectual history, with ample attention to educational progress and the cultural scene, and at times we are offered a straightforward narrative text. Riasanovsky is best known to generations of American students for his *History of Russia*, now in its sixth edition (2000), and he reproduces here insights gained from a lifetime of scholarly research. He made his debut with an authoritative volume on the Slavophiles (1952), and followed this with studies of the doctrine of 'official nationality' (1959), the breach between government and public opinion in Nicholas I's reign (1976), and Peter I's image in later Russian thought (1985). Not surprisingly, the early imperial

era fares best in these pages, but there are plenty of stimulating observations on other periods, too.

- 3 About pre-Kievan times the author somewhat self-defensively pleads for its inclusion on the grounds that it was then that the eastern Slavs acquired their basic linguistic tools, along with a hefty dose of paganism. 'Intellectual and psychological structures had a hold on human beings for... centuries and even millennia' (p. 17), which explains why the image of the 'great mother' fertility goddess can be found in modern peasant embroideries. Equally ancient are a strong sense of kinship and an enforced taste for warfare against foreign foes. The 'murderous struggle' against the steppe nomads became 'virtually a part of Kievan identity' – 'virtually' because the pious saw killing as morally wrong, at best an unfortunate necessity, and their 'high regard for human life' was reflected in the absence from *Russkaia pravda* of the death penalty (p. 31). Alas, the Mongol-Tatar onslaught indirectly brought about a new political culture, characterised *inter alia* by a more pessimistic *Weltanschauung*, a shift towards monastic values among churchmen, and eventually 'a new, overwhelming, in a sense magical concept of the all-powerful, just and benevolent true monarch' (p. 72). Exaggerated deference to the sovereign autocrat was rooted in the Orthodox belief in 'the sacredness ... of everything associated with the divine.' So far so good, but why was such self-abasement taken further in Russia than elsewhere in medieval Europe? Here one would have welcomed consideration of the political mentality of Russian dissenters, from *strigol'niki* to Old Believers, as well as to Ukrainians and Belarusians who, as the author notes all too casually, had 'closely related yet strikingly distinct identities' (p. 49). Regrettably, the west Russian lands remain a blank spot in traditional Moscow-centred historiography, and in these pages the Ukrainians drop out of the picture completely after 1700.
- 4 Valuable is Riasanovsky's insistence that the Petrine enlightenment, brought to fulfilment by Catherine II, was followed by a second wave under Alexander I, whose reign marked 'the culmination of the Age of Reason' (p. 110). Progress in education was now furthered by civic initiative, and even in respect of government administration the record was not as bleak as commonly assumed. In embarking on reform the tsar faced not only an 'inability to come to terms with himself' but also very real 'objective' difficulties, in that constitutional advance and serf emancipation were mutually incompatible goals (p. 123-124). Nicholas I's bureaucratic absolutism had fatal consequences in that both official Russia and its critics in the salons became divorced from contemporary reality and lived in, or for, a dream world. Slavophile teachings 'offered educated Russians a new identity' but unfortunately 'it led nowhere,' and since the doctrine of official nationality was eclectic and contradictory, Russians were left in a state of intellectual confusion (p. 155, 166).
- 5 After the Crimean War, so the argument goes, there was greater scope for debate but the ideas put forward were unfruitful, and even dangerous: on one hand, there was the would-be scientific rationalism of the *narodniki*, with their terrorist leanings, and on the other the chauvinist nationalism of Ivan Aksakov or Dostoevsky. The latter comes in for harsh treatment: although 'the most human of writers,' his ideas on Russian identity had a 'fragil/e/ and even entirely imaginary quality' (p. 193). Nor does Leo Tolstoy fare much better, since his religious credo was vitiated by naiveté and shallowness. On the left Plekhanov receives more credit than one might expect, for he presented Marxist ideas powerfully and effectively, but unfortunately in 1917 'Russia got Marxism according to Lenin, not according to Plekhanov' (p. 200). For its part the tsarist government embarked

on a foolish policy of Russification, and even dallied with support for the 'proto-fascist' Black Hundreds. It remains unclear whether the latter represented a valid, if only negative, facet of Russian identity. With a century's hindsight, and in view of the antics on the far right of the political spectrum, it would seem that they did. The author pleads instead for a moderate brand of nationalism, free of chauvinistic or aggressive tendencies, and compatible with western values. He finds nothing good to say for Eurasianism, which already when first formulated had a 'fantastic' quality and in its present-day version has 'abandoned all rhyme or reason' (p. 234-235). Thus today the options remain open. Presumably they include a reversion, at least temporarily, to a kind of latter-day sovietism?

- 6 Dealing with the USSR, Riasanovsky is more perceptive than many of his colleagues about the key role of ideology in the political system, and correctly underlines the Stalinists' cynical manipulation of popular national and religious sentiment. More surprisingly, he remains vague about the extent of mass support for the regime, a topic on which Vera Tolz, Sarah Davies, Jochen Hellbeck and others have recently thrown much light. In general he prefers to cite older authorities rather than the latest work: thus we have G. T. Robinson (1932) rather than R. T. Manning or G. M. Hamburg on the decline of the gentry, and V. I. Charnolusky (1911) rather than S. J. Seregny, say, on popular education before 1914. There is nothing intrinsically wrong here, and some may even account it a blessing in disguise. In any case Professor Riasanovsky has provided powerful incentives to future researchers into Russian identity (or identities). One hopes that they will approach the topic in a comparative international context.