Cahiers du
MONDE RUSSE

Cahiers du monde russe

Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États
indépendants

49/4 | 2008

**Destins individuels et terreur. Jeunesse dans la société
post-stalinienne**

Juliette Cadiot, Le laboratoire impérial

Willard Sunderland

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/6988>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.6988

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 28 December 2008

Number of pages: 810-812

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2197-2

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Willard Sunderland, "Juliette Cadiot, Le laboratoire impérial", *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 49/4 | 2008, Online since 24 December 2009, connection on 02 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/6988> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.6988>

This text was automatically generated on 2 September 2022.

All rights reserved

Juliette Cadiot, Le laboratoire impérial

Willard Sunderland

REFERENCES

Juliette CADIOT, **Le laboratoire impérial. Russie-URSS 1870-1940**. Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2007, 266 p.

- 1 Who says that the census is dull business? In 1897 in a village in Kazan province, a group of irate Muslim Tatars stormed into a meeting of census takers, told the priest in the room to go perform an unmentionable act with his mother, and proceeded to smash up a portrait of the tsar, including “the crown, globe, and scepter mounted on top of the frame” (p. 48). In this case, the uproar was sparked by the Tatars’ fears that the census takers had come to convert them to Orthodoxy. But troubles accompanied the census almost everywhere in the Russian Empire. To advance its agenda in a statistical age, the government needed a full count of the population. But local people – Russians and non-Russians alike – saw the census as a nuisance or a threat and tended to be deeply suspicious.
- 2 Juliette Cadiot’s book is a thought-provoking study of the politics of counting and being counted in Russia from the 1870s to the eve of World War II. Historians like Ian Hacking have shown how modern biometrics emerged as a key arena of state activity in Europe and North America in the early 1800s. Cadiot’s book focuses on the next stage – the momentous period when population politics became an international tool of government. As she makes clear, Russia was a full participant in this global trend. The country embraced population politics with gusto, and the fixation with population carried over the revolutionary divide. Indeed, one of Cadiot’s basic arguments is that the late imperial and early Soviet regimes shared much in common as modernizing states. Despite their own ideological reservations, both governments were drawn to the new potential of identifying and reorganizing national groups as a means of “managing”

diversity. Both likewise devised ways to justify using nationality as a tool for murder and deportation. As Cadiot sees it, the late imperial decades – in particular, the crisis years of the Great War – were the hothouse that produced most of the dramatic national/imperial innovations of the Soviet age. The new revolutionary order was created by the old reactionary one.

- 3 At the heart of this story of imperial continuum are the “nationality specialists” – the ethnographers, statisticians, and demographers who devised the concepts and supplied the numbers. Cadiot presents us their experience in a series of tightly organized, chronological chapters. In the 1870s, we see them draw up the first rigorous ethnographic maps of the empire and defend statistics as the “objective measure” that will resolve the national tensions of the day. They work out the great imperial census of 1897. They establish ethnography as a discipline. During World War I, a key period of transition, they further “operationalize” nationality by putting their expertise to serve the cause of the war. They help the government to devise a new hierarchy of “loyal” and “unreliable” subjects based on national criteria. Poles, Jews, and Russian Germans are singled out as especially untrustworthy. The consequences for the members of these groups are murderous.
- 4 Then comes the revolution, and, by and large, as Cadiot shows us, the experts sign on with the new regime. Some do this because they are true believers, others because they believe in the higher cause of serving “the continuity of the state.” Once on board, they become key players in the “blossoming of national identities” in the 1920s. They add and subtract peoples from ever shifting lists of “Soviet nationalities.” They “Sovietize” ethnography. By the 1930s, however, with the rise in state repression and increasing anxieties about the vulnerability of the homeland, their influence begins to wane. Cadiot concludes her book with the census of 1939, which announces at once the “resolution” of the “nationality question” in the USSR and the experts’ own obsolescence. Having done their job to perfection, it seems, the “nationality specialists” put themselves out of business.
- 5 The broad outlines of Cadiot’s story are relatively familiar. Yuri Slezkine, Terry Martin, and especially Francine Hirsch have explored the work of late imperial and Soviet ethnographers and nationality planners. Peter Holquist, Eric Lohr, Joshua Sanborn, and Mark Von Hagen (among others) have identified the crucial importance of the Great War in establishing nationality as a new factor in Russian population politics. But Cadiot’s work makes a number of valuable and original contributions in its own right. I particularly liked the detail she brings to the problem of “nationality science,” which she examines not only as an evolving set of practices in late tsarist/Soviet administration but also as a mental construct of Russian intellectuals. Cadiot is especially good at making us see how the zeal of late tsarist experts flowed into the nation-building experiments of the early Soviet years.
- 6 Her book also reveals the full messiness of the work on the “nationalities question.” The vignette of the angry Tatars in Kazan is one of many examples of official practices and scientific categories butting up against real life. She reminds us that some of the experts she studies also had great reservations about the way their knowledge would eventually be used. She explicitly rejects the argument that scholars were the tame servants of the state. One of the book’s recurring motifs is the experts’ interest in holding onto and defining “their own way of thinking about social phenomena” (p. 210).

- 7 At the same time, Cadiot seems well aware that she is offering us a view of a slow-moving car wreck that will eventually have horrendous consequences. Some experts may indeed have worried about and resisted the way that state power would appropriate their insights. Yet many others were proud enablers of the process. To make sense of this complicated situation, Cadiot argues we should take into account the deep influence of European colonialism on the morphology of Russian social science. Russian experts worked within a colonial world. They engaged with the colonial practices and prejudices of their time, adapting them first to the particulars of the Russian Empire and then, after the revolution, to the idiosyncrasies of Bolshevik ideology. In other words, she seems to be saying, there was no *Sonderweg* in the Russian imperial experience. The tsars and commissars, for better and for worse, were very much in step with the world around them. Some of the book's most interesting passages are those that show us Russian and Soviet experts borrowing from and reacting to an international field of concerns about nationality.