Janet M. Hartley, *Siberia: A History of the People*

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REFERENCES

Janet M. HARTLEY, *Siberia : A History of the People*, New Haven – London : Yale University Press, 2014, 290 p.

- 1 This book presents a history of Siberia and its people as part of successive Russian states governed from far-off Moscow and St Petersburg. The book begins with the start of Russian conquest of the lands beyond the Ural mountains in the late-sixteenth century and brings us right up to the present day. The author includes regular vignettes that seem to encapsulate this history. In 1591, Ivan the Terrible's youngest son was murdered in suspicious circumstances in the town of Uglich north of Moscow in European Russia. The bell was rung to raise the alarm, provoking riots. Who was punished? The bell. Its clapper, i.e. its tongue, was cut out and the miscreant was banished to Siberia. Later human exiles, before the construction of the Transiberian railway at the end of the nineteenth century, were forced to walk all the way to their place of banishment. It took them two, three or more years to get there. Their sentences started only when they arrived. Distance had other implications. In 1765, for example, in Gizhiga on the Sea of Okhotsk in the far east, an investigation was held into a case of "word and deed of the sovereign" (denunciation of the ruler). This archaic procedure, involving torture, had been abolished three years earlier, but news had yet to reach this distant outpost. These and many other such incidents related in this book serve as evidence for popular perceptions of Siberia as a land of exile, of extremes. The harshness and cruelty reached new peaks in the twentieth century when the Soviet regime banished far larger numbers of people, including independent farmers ("kulaks"), criminals, political opponents to remote parts of Siberia. In labour camps in the Kolyma region of northeastern Siberia, prisoners worked long shifts in forests,

mines, or construction sites, struggling to survive on meagre rations in temperatures that fell to 45 degrees below freezing.

- 2 Janet Hartley's latest book is more than a chronicle of cruelty, harshness, sub-zero temperatures and the problems of distance. She sets out to challenge popular preconceptions of Siberia as a vast, frozen, empty land, and instead presents a broader, and richer, picture replete with nuance, diversity, changes over time that to varying degrees relates how people, both Slav immigrants from west of the Urals and an ever-diminishing minority indigenous peoples lived in the lands to the east. An immediate challenge to preconceptions of an empty land is that the Russians conquered Siberia to exploit its riches. The initial aim was to hunt and trade the furs of the mink, sable, foxes, hares and other animals of the Siberian forest. Contrary to the stereotype, southern Siberia contains vast reserves of fertile land that attracted farmers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Siberia's mineral wealth, gold, other metals, coal, and in particular oil and gas remain major sources of wealth for present-day Russia.
- 3 At the heart of the book are a series of chapters on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reflecting the author's own particular period of expertise, that focus on the lives of the peoples of Siberia in rural and urban communities, remote garrisons, of exiles and convicts, and the administration. These chapters benefit in particular from her research in Siberian archives, where nuggets of information she has gleaned are used to good effect. The discussion of the twentieth century is not so detailed, but identifies key issues. Hartley sets out to investigate the extent to which Siberia has differed from European Russia. But she is also sensitive to many points of similarity as settlers from the west took their language, culture, religion, ways of life etc with them and sought to reproduce the familiar in their new homes. Whole passages in the book, for example on housing, farming methods, belief systems, indicate how successful they were in doing this.
- 4 There were also differences. Again challenging the stereotype, for some settlers, Siberia was a land of abundance and freedom. There was more land available and, crucially, the near absence of nobles and serfdom meant that most peasants were free before 1861 as well as afterwards. The standard of administration in tsarist Russia was not high, but seems to have been worse in Siberia since, for the most part, officials were of poor quality as it was an undesirable place to work and officials tried hard to secure more salubrious postings. An exception was one of tsarist Russia's greatest statesmen, Mikhail Speransky, who reformed the administration after he was banished to Siberia in 1812. Other exiles who raised the level of life in Siberia were the Decembrists, the aristocratic rebels banished after their failed coup in 1825. Otherwise, Siberia lagged behind the rest of the empire in terms of the development of education and literacy in the nineteenth century. Siberia's first university, at Tomsk, was founded only in 1878. There were other differences in Siberia's experiences as part of the Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet states. It was far from the fighting in the First and Second World Wars, but was affected more badly by some of extremes of the twentieth century, such as the Civil War of 1918-21, when it became key area controlled by the Whites, the horrors of the Gulag system of forced labour camps, the economic collapse that followed the demise of Communist Party rule in 1991. And native Siberians seem to have suffered more than other sections of the population.

- 5 Hartley's book on the history of the people of Siberia nicely complements other books on Siberian history, for example more specialized works, such as: François-Xavier Coquin's major monograph, *La Sibérie: peuplement et immigration paysanne au XIX^e siècle* (P.: Institut d'Études Slaves, 1969); James Forsyth's *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), which focuses on the indigenous peoples; W. Bruce Lincoln's rather longer and more detailed narrative, *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007; and Alan Wood's more recent *Russia's Frozen Frontier: A History of Siberia*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), which covers similar ground, but differs in areas of emphasis. All these books suggest further areas for exploration, in particular the environmental history of Siberia, on which an important start has been made by Ryan Tucker Jones in his recent, fine study of Russia's far east and American colonies, *Empire of Extinction: Russians and the North Pacific's Strange Beasts of the Sea, 1741-1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 6 In conclusion, Janet Hartley's book on Siberia can be recommended to a wide public. It is accessible, and would serve as a good introduction to general readers and undergraduate students. It is enlivened by references to her own personal experiences on her visits to Siberia. This reader will remember her encounter in Irkutsk with Irish-themed pub named after the highly controversial White general Kolchak, whom she deems "unworthy" of such recognition! The author has already published articles, based on her archival research, on Siberia, and it is to be hoped more will follow, that will be of particular interest to a more specialised readership.
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