

Central and Eastern European Review

Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians. Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2007. Pp.465. ISBN-978-90-420-2267-6. Hardback £68.00.

The fact that three independent Baltic States emerged after the First World War shows well enough that nineteenth century attempts to Russify the region in question failed; but what exactly had been the character and purpose of the policies pursued by St Petersburg towards its national minorities, particularly following the uprisings of the early 1860s? This is the starting point for *Making Russians*. At the outset Darius Staliūnas makes clear that a multitude of possibilities stood behind the word 'Russification'. Following the work of Benjamin Nathan, the term is said to cover at least assimilation (leading to the disappearance of given nationality groups), acculturation (changing the differences between groups) and integration (whereby imperial authorities tried to make minorities into loyal subjects). Given these different nuances, perhaps we should not be surprised that existing studies have not really done justice to the full complexity of what Russification entailed, particularly since conceptual difficulties have been supplemented by political and practical ones over the years. So, for example, during the inter-war period Lithuanian histories tended to take unhelpfully anti-Polish positions whenever nationality themes were debated; more recently it has been hard for academics to gain access to archives in St Petersburg. Taking everything into account, Staliūnas argues convincingly that this topic is ripe for re-appraisal, particularly since newer researchers seem, in some cases at least, prepared to attempt more sophisticated readings of the past than has too often was the case formerly.

Central to Staliūnas's fresh take on Russification is the desire to look at what Russian officials thought they were doing as they drew up and implemented related policies, not to say how these people actually understood 'nationality'. As *Making Russians* investigates this difficult terrain, it provides an absolute wealth of empirical material about a mass of themes

that can be both highly detailed and overlapping. As a result the study is certainly successful at displaying the multifaceted nature of the imperial quest to manage Russia's nationalities. In concrete terms, the chapter structure begins by looking at the pre-history of Russification (i.e. policy before the 1860s), how officials formulated nationality policy and the terminology they used in the early 1860s, the practice of discriminatory agendas at this time, and finally the implementation of policies in respect of religion and language after 1863.

Staliūnas takes time to explain clearly the administrative structures which applied to the North Western Province during the nineteenth century and how they changed over time. In the process he provides some good insights into the way Russian administrators reacted to the peoples of this key imperial region. So he quotes a governor from the late 1860s:

You can only look at Lithuania politically in two ways: either as part of Russia or as part of Poland. A third view—as an autonomous territory—runs counter to history and common sense. A purely Lithuanian population is scarcely visible and merges with neighbouring Belarusian, Polish and Lettish populations.(p.40)

And all such insights are underpinned by a narrative that develops consistently. Defeat in the Crimean War forced the Russian Empire to re-think its attitude to nationalities, but the uprisings of 1863-4 emerge as absolutely key. So whereas before these years there had been some moves to accommodate the demands of borderland nationalities such as the Poles, policy documents from the early 1860s show that the disturbances of the time made administrators question ever more the wisdom of such a line. Increasingly it was feared, for instance, that unless action was taken, even ethnic Russians would succumb to Polish influence.(pp.48-9) The interesting thing, then, was that the desire to weaken Polish influence actually opened up new possibilities for the Lithuanian national group, as was reflected in the following text from a pamphlet of the time:

...only the awakening and development of the Lithuanian nationality can tear the land between the Neman (Nemunas) and the Dvina (Daugava) out of the hands of the Polish gentry and the Polish clergy and bind it to Russia with the firm bonds of internal unity.(p.54)

As Russian imperial administrators struggled to manage a multi-ethnic region with a population that they did not even understand properly, the ambiguities of Russification became manifest in their work. For instance, they had to think about the relationship between Russian identity and Orthodox religion, relations between Lithuanians and Poles, even the nature of school books appropriate to different groups. So: should the Catholic catechism be printed in Russian? Would doing so draw other nationalities towards Russian culture, or would it pull Russians towards Catholicism? And, as far as Baltic peoples were concerned, could there be a difference between Russification and ‘de-polonisation’? And what would be the effect if Polish school books were published using a Cyrillic alphabet? Administrators were even challenged by what to do about Jews, when western groups (e.g. Sephardim) were viewed as constructive, but eastern ones (e.g. Ashkenazim) were understood to be parasitic—a rough and ready distinction if ever there was one.

Without question Darius Staliūnas has presented us with a richly detailed study that really does make plain the intricate nature of imperial policy for managing its North Western Province. His observation that Russification was always likely to fail so long as Lithuanians remained Catholic, also shows that his is presenting a study of a policy that was hopelessly unrealistic from the outset. It is only fair to add that Rodopi has done a good job producing the book. Not only is the hard cover nicely illustrated, but a considerable number of photographs are incorporated into the text. All in all, historians of nineteenth century Russia and the history of borderlands will want to read this study.

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