

9-2018

Threads of Empire: Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552–1917. By Charles Steinwedel.

Sean Pollock

Wright State University - Main Campus, sean.pollock@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Pollock, S. (2018). Threads of Empire: Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552–1917. By Charles Steinwedel.. *The Journal of Modern History*, 90 (3), 741-743.

<https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history/294>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact corescholar@www.libraries.wright.edu, library-corescholar@wright.edu.

Threads of Empire: Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552–1917. By Charles Steinwedel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv+382. \$45.00 (cloth); \$44.99 (e-book).

This book addresses relations between Russian imperial officials and the peoples of Bashkiria, in the southern Urals Mountains region, in the period between 1552 and 1917. Its purpose is to show the many ways that officials sought to weave Bashkiria into the fabric of Russian empire, as well as the ways that Bashkiria's peoples shaped the process of their incorporation into it. Steinwedel rightly emphasizes the protracted, negotiated nature of this process. Russia's "fundamental challenge" in extracting resources from the region was "to cultivate loyal servitors of the tsar who could represent and stabilize imperial authority" (4). As this and the book subtitle suggest, the concept of loyalty frames the discussion of Russian-Bashkir relations. Steinwedel understands that loyalty was a calculation made by diverse individuals seeking to advance their own interests—whether interests of dynasty, officialdom, clan, nation, or self. While he succeeds in demonstrating the importance of Bashkir loyalty to imperial officials throughout the period, the big story here is that efforts to incorporate Bashkiria into the empire—a project shaped at every stage by native elites and commoners—were largely successful.

How was Bashkiria's incorporation achieved? Though Steinwedel sometimes emphasizes the use of physical force, particularly prior to the nineteenth century (e.g., "little but quite visible force kept Bashkiria in the empire" [4]), he shows in every chapter that co-optation was the preferred approach: it was less costly and "easier to make local elites part of an imperial elite that could then be used to mobilize members of the local population with fewer direct links to imperial authority" (5). Steinwedel uses Russian and Bashkir chronicles to show that in the middle of the sixteenth century, Bashkirs' conflicts with the khan of Kazan in the north and the Nogai Horde in the south caused some Bashkir elites to turn to Moscow for protection and more: "Parts of the Bashkir elite, seeking to take Nogai land and prevent the Nogais' return, turned to Ivan IV as a new 'khan' who assumed the title 'Tsar of Kazan'" (17). In return for swearing allegiance, paying tribute, and supporting the tsar militarily, Bashkir headmen were granted the traditional privileged (i.e., *tarkhan*) status, hereditary land rights, reduced taxation, and, in theory, protection from rivals. Other local elites, including Muslim religious leaders, also received privileges. Borrowing a concept from the historian Karen Barkey, Steinwedel rightly presents such Russian-Bashkir agreements as examples of "bargained incorporation" (19). As the Russian presence in the region grew (often at Bashkirs' request), however, tensions sometimes escalated into violent conflict. Interestingly, such violence generally resulted in "greater legal recognition of Bashkir privileges" (32).

Bashkiria's negotiated incorporation into the Russian Empire continued in the eighteenth century. Steinwedel claims that beginning with Peter I, Russia rejected Eurasian steppe politics in favor of European absolutism. What he shows, however, is that many of Peter's protégés' grand plans to transform Russian-Bashkir relations along absolutist lines "remained largely on paper" (54), and that "imperial policies toward Bashkirs varied relatively little after the [Bashkir] war of 1735–1740" (56) until 1754. Indeed, one of Peter's protégés, Ivan Nepliuev, who served as Orenburg's governor from 1742 to 1758, continued the long-standing practice of "draw[ing] the Bashkir elite into the imperial elite" (56), and worked to ensure that religious toleration would remain in force in Bashkiria. The main source of conflict between imperial officials and some Bashkir elites was also long-standing: fort-building activities, which increased in this period (see the helpful map on 49), had the effect of dispossessing Bashkirs of land, limiting Bashkir free-

dom of movement, and cutting off Bashkirs from important pasture lands and trading partners in Central Asia.

Steinwedel examines efforts to apply what Robert Crews has called “enlightened cameralism” to the administration of Russia’s eastern Muslims in general and Bashkiria in particular in the period from 1773 to 1855. He shows how the establishment of the Orenburg Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Assembly and a cantonal system of administration largely succeeded in creating a multiethnic, multiconfessional political elite, transforming Bashkiria “from a center of rebellion to a relatively calm region where imperial authority had become normal and accepted” (79). It is surprising, then, that Steinwedel concludes the chapter by noting the “failure of the military organization of society in Bashkiria” (114). On the contrary, the cantonal system arguably paved the way for the implementation of the Great Reforms in Bashkiria. He also examines reforms aimed at deepening Bashkir participation in imperial institutions. In implementing the liberalizing Great Reforms at the local level, imperial officials, including many Muslims, aimed to cultivate a commitment to participatory civic consciousness not only in native elites but also in native commoners. Frustrating attempts to remake Russia into a state with a common civic order, however, was the country’s long history of differentiated rule: “The particularism of the estate order imprinted itself heavily on legislation” (117). In the end, reforms aimed at creating a more common civic order paradoxically “increased the imperial dimension of Russia” (145) by reinforcing the legal and cultural particularities of specific estate groups.

Steinwedel explains how Bashkiria’s elites, Muslim and non-Muslim, used reformed institutions to mobilize against the Russifying policies of the center between 1881 and 1904. Not surprisingly, the Orthodox Church and the educational bureaucracy were the institutions chiefly interested in instilling in Russian subjects of diverse backgrounds a Russian national idea. As Steinwedel astutely observes, “the promotion of a specifically Russian national idea implied an attack on the principles of civic inclusion and participation characteristic of the Great Reforms,” and in any case, local officials were “less inclined to change their modus operandi with local society in general and with prominent Muslims in particular” (151, 152). Indeed, efforts to use schools to promote Russian language and culture achieved little success, but they did unintentionally encourage non-Russians, including Muslims, to think of themselves in national terms, which “contributed to a broad mobilization of society against autocracy” (179).

Two chapters discuss the political mobilization of Bashkir society in the period between 1905 and 1917. One focuses on the events surrounding the Russian Revolution of 1905 and provides a detailed account of how the revolution unfolded in Bashkiria. Since much of this material has been previously published, it suffices to note that neither Bashkirs nor Muslims played key roles in the events of 1905. Ufa’s Muslims did, however, dominate the electoral processes surrounding the First and Second Dumas, which is cogently presented as evidence of “local Muslims’ successful integration into the imperial system” (199). The other chapter focuses on rival visions of the body politic and shows that national themes were gaining prominence. Exclusive visions of Russian and Bashkir nationalism competed with inclusive visions of Russia as a multinational, multiconfessional empire. Interestingly, Steinwedel shows that the province’s Russian Orthodox and Muslim elites sometimes “collaborated to promote a vision of the empire as a place in which diverse peoples could find support for their national identities within a multinational state” (206).

This book makes an important contribution to the growing literature on Russian empire, but one that raises as many questions as it answers. Why frame Russian-Bashkir relations in terms of loyalty, when it was but one of the many dimensions of Russian sub-

jecthood (*poddanstvo*)? In discussing Catherine II's policy of religious toleration, why emphasize her debt to "cameralist thinkers" (81) when toleration in Bashkiria predated her reign? Why present three Bashkir rebellions in 180 years as evidence of "persistent hostility," and argue that collaboration characterized Russian-Bashkir relations "to a lesser degree than conflict" (41), when such rebellions were clearly episodic and collaboration so multifaceted and persistent, even in times of violent conflict? Indeed, what Steinwedel says about the sources on Russian-Bashkir relations in the early modern period can be extended to later periods: they read "much like a negotiation, leading to a bargain with which both sides could live" (38). Most of the time.

SEAN POLLOCK

Wright State University

A Prison without Walls? Eastern Siberian Exile in the Last Years of Tsarism. By Sarah Badcock.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvi+196. \$90.00.

A Prison without Walls?, by University of Nottingham historian Sarah Badcock, fills what had until very recently been a yawning chasm in the historiography of Imperial Russia: studies of the exile system in the late Imperial era. While Andrew Gentes has covered the earlier period extensively in monographs and articles, there was remarkably little work on the exile and *katorga* (hard-labor) system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries until the appearance of this monograph and Daniel Beer's *The House of the Dead* (2017). Unlike Beer's more sweeping history, which covers 1800–1917, Badcock chooses to focus on the much shorter period of 1905–17. In these final twelve years of Tsarist autocracy, the *katorga* and exile systems expanded dramatically as the state attempted to deal with the ramifications of the Revolution of 1905 and continued radicalism. Thus, it is a logical period to study in some depth.

The monograph is an unabashed social history, focusing primarily on the experiences of prisoners and exiles. In trying to reconstruct a picture of life in exile, the author focuses on the categories of class, gender, and crime (political vs. criminal). The number of prisoners and exiles increased significantly in the period in question because of the state's crackdown on political activity in the wake of 1905. At the same time, the profile of political prisoners shifted considerably, as citizens from more humble backgrounds faced *katorga* and exile. One of Badcock's most important conclusions is that the "combination of a more punitive state and less prosperous exiles" significantly changed living conditions, especially among the growing category of political exiles (4). Whereas previously many political prisoners had been able to rely on family fortunes to facilitate survival (or even escape), the new generation had no choice but to rely on state support for their subsistence. Given how woefully inadequate this support usually was, their suffering was considerably greater.

The book is clearly organized into four body chapters, covering the journey to exile, life in exile, work and escape, and illness and death. Within each chapter, Badcock balances discussion of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the exile experience. She frequently includes long passages from first-person narratives, allowing the reader to appreciate the subjective experience of imprisonment and exile. For example, the book includes several passages from the memoirs of Dobrokhotin-Baikov, a Moscow worker, illustrating various aspects of life in exile. The most powerful, which spans more than a page, describes his feelings of loneliness and despair during the long and isolated winter