Karsten Brüggemann, *Licht und Luft des Imperiums, Legitimations- und Repräsentationsstrategien russischer Herrschaft in den Ostseeprovinzen im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018. 536 p. ISBN 978-3-447-10820-1

Historians are well aware that the Baltic provinces in the 19th century that are discussed in the book under review by Karsten Brüggemann covered the area where the independent states of Latvia and Estonia later developed, before being incorporated into the Soviet Union and then again reinstating their independence after 1990. Lithuania only became recognised as 'Baltic' (in Russian *Pribaltika*) in the Russian and then the Soviet mental map in the 20th century. Nonetheless, this study by the German historian working at Tallinn University is important not only for those who are interested in the history of Latvia and Estonia, or more specifically, the region that became Estonia and Latvia in the 20th century, but for anyone who has an interest in the general transformations in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, and the longevity of particular types of clichéd thinking that functioned in the Russian discourse at the time concerning the empire's peripheries into the 20th and even the 21st centuries.

This study by Brüggemann is about how, in the 'long 19th century', especially between the 1840s and the First World War, the perceptions of the Russian ruling elite changed towards the Baltic Sea region, which had been incorporated into the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 18th century, and its smaller part, the Province of Courland, at the end of the 18th century. Moreover, the book is about how these perceptions changed in the discourse generated by the socially active section of the public. Thus, this study falls into the cultural research field (pp. 17, 29).

The book presents a critique of the regional approach that is typical of the traditional Baltic German interpretation and Latvian and Estonian historiography. The problem explored in the research fits into the general imperial context, that is, Brüggemann claims that perceptions of the three provinces (Estland, Livland and Courland) changed depending on how the very concept of the empire changed within the ruling elite itself, but also among the intellectual Russian elite. The German historian applies the classification of Mark Bassin, who identifies three visions of

the Russian Empire: *European*, *anti-European* and *national* (pp. 31–32).¹ These different visions changed the perception of the Baltic provinces, but the events in these provinces and the successes and failures of Russian nationality policy also influenced the concepts of the empire that were dominant at its centre. Brüggemann has on numerous occasions shown the connection between one or another projection of a Baltic province and the Romanov state's vision. One circumstance that could perhaps have deserved a little more attention is the different timing of the mental incorporation of one or another borderland into the Russian discourse, that is, its transformation not just into part of the empire, but also to be considered as Russian 'national territory', or at least which has the potential to become that kind of territory, as well as the metamorphoses of nationality policy (the gradual adoption of 'Russification'). If we say that a fateful role was played by the changing visions across the whole empire, then these changes in the perceptions of different borderland regions would have had to happen more or less simultaneously, yet, as we all know, quite a few decades passed between the beginning of 'Russification' in the Western Region, and, for example, in Finland. Thus, other factors must also have been very important (the 'challenges' posed by non-Russians, the changing international situation, etc). The aforementioned categories of Russia as an empire and Russia as a 'national territory', borrowed from Aleksei Miller, offer another important approach (p. 28).

This study is structured on both chronological and problematic bases, which explains why some of the more important episodes appear on several occasions in the book. In Chapter I, Brüggemann discusses the Russian perceptions of the region over a long historical perspective, up to the beginning of the 19th century. The inclusion in the book of this chapter is also argued by the condition that in the second half of the 19th century, various Russian figures based the Russian character of this region on historical arguments (pp. 42–75).

¹The *national* vision of the empire alleged the existence of 'national unity' which could have been understood in both multinational and supranational senses, and could have allowed for the acculturation and even the assimilation of non-Russians. Thus, this concept appeared to suggest that the Romanov empire should potentially be turned into a Russian national state. A more popular thesis in contemporary research claims that in the Russian ruling and intellectual elite, such projects did not exist at all: A. Miller, 'The Romanov Empire and the Russian Nation,' in: *Nationalizing Empires*, eds. S. Berger, A. Miller (Budapest, New York, 2015), pp. 309–368, especially pp. 310–311.

Chapter II discusses the dominant Russian perception of the region in the early 19th century, associated with the *European* concept of the empire (pp. 76–207). In this period, various Russian authors tried to describe conceptually the empire's variety, looking at it from 'reformist', 'romantic', 'ethnographic' and 'national' approaches. The first three approaches recognised that the empire's strength lay in its linguistic, confessional and cultural variety. The inclusion of the Baltic provinces in the Romanov empire was seen as a testimony of the state being European. Until the middle of the 19th century, the ruling elite looked on this region as an experimental field, where reforms could be implemented that could later be adopted in the rest of the empire. The fourth approach, meanwhile, prioritised a vision of the empire that was as culturally homogeneous as possible. However, the 'national' point of view of the Baltic provinces also created numerous problems, as the region exhibited (almost) no traditional attributes of Russianness, subjects who spoke Russian and were Orthodox believers, making the region foreign. The scale of the problem was further enlarged by the local social elite: the desire of Baltic Germans to retain the regional autonomy. The symbolic watershed moment when the perception of the Baltic provinces changed in the Russian discourse was, according to Brüggemann, Iurii Samarin's 'Letters from Riga' (*Pis'ma iz Rigi*), the conditions for their creation being the mass conversion of Latvian and Estonian peasants to Orthodoxy in the 1840s. This episode in the study is one of the few examples where the author devotes closer attention not to perceptions, but to '*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*'. The conversion of over 100,000 Lutherans to Orthodoxy did actually create more favourable conditions for Russian publicists to find more Russianness in the region, to make it 'their own' by using cultural, primarily confessional, categories. Resting on the 'national principle', Samarin not only denied the existence of any Baltic German claims on the region's autonomy, but also, albeit indirectly, questioned the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty. In this way, a region that had only recently been a such a source of pride turned into an arena from which a very real threat was spreading, and where reforms were necessary.

This new conceptualisation of the Baltic region, now in line with the *anti-European* vision of the empire, was spread by publicists constructing the Russian mental map in the 1860s, while in the 1880s the imperial government, based on this new perception of the region, implemented a whole swathe of administrative and educational reforms that came to be labelled as 'Russification' (pp. 208–268). It was also at this time that the region's name was 'Russified' in the Russian discourse: the German-sounding 'Ostzeiskii krai' was now known as the 'Pribaltiiskii

krai'. Thus, in this chapter Brüggemann analyses both the symbolic appropriation of the space and the various proclamations by Russian public figures and officials about changes to policy regarding the national groups in the region (Baltic Germans, Latvians and Estonians). He alleges that Miller's claim about how the Baltic provinces were never really conceptualised as a Russian 'national territory' needs to be corrected, as from the second half of the 19th century, Russian journalistic commentary quite frequently portrayed the region as historically and culturally Russian, yet not as Russian as the Western Region, where Belarusians and Ukrainians made up the majority (pp. 222–223, 441). The material presented in the study does indeed show that some of the nationalist-inclined Russians saw the Baltic provinces as potentially becoming part of Russian 'national territory'. This way of thinking had some basis in historical arguments, as well as in the significant increase in Orthodox believers, and theories about the kinship of the Latvians (and Lithuanians) with the Slavs. Nonetheless, in my view, the conceptualisation of a region as a Russian 'national territory' would also have implied that most of the population there would have to be Russians in both the confessional and linguistic senses, which would mean that, at least in terms of the Latvians and Estonians, the imperial government would have had to employ assimilation policies. We do see elements of a policy oriented towards acculturation (such as the introduction of Russian as the language of instruction in primary schools), but it would be difficult to claim assimilation existed at this point, as Brüggemann has also noticed. Thus, the Baltic provinces can be considered a kind of 'grey zone' on the Russian mental map from the middle of the 19th century. We should also note that most attention in the book is focused on the public discourse, whereas the visions of officials receive less attention, yet it was precisely for them that nationalist rhetoric was less of a concern than the goal of maintaining social order and stability, as is shown numerous times in this study. The achievement of this latter goal among officials up to the 1880s and after the 1905 revolution was most evident with the cooperation of the local social elite.

Chapter V deals with the arguments that Russians who worked or showed an interest in this region used to substantiate its Russianness (pp. 269–306). Alongside traditional arguments (the region's important strategic position and the fact it was an economically beneficial area for the empire) that could be used by supporters of all visions of the empire, new elements also emerged (historical legitimacy, the 'natural' geographic belonging of the land to Russia, cultural closeness) that now suited the anti-European and national visions of the empire.

Chapter VI is about Russians in the Baltic provinces (both representatives of the government and the Orthodox clergy, and the other social groups who arrived, primarily the Old Believers (pp. 307–422)). Part of this chapter is also about the empire's representation in the Baltic provinces (visits made by members of the ruling dynasty, anniversaries).

The Russian discourse that formed in the middle of the 19th century, or more precisely, discourses about the Baltic region and the people who lived there, did not disappear from the horizon with the end of the Russian Empire or the creation of the independent republics of Latvia and Estonia. In the last chapter (Epilogue), Brüggemann reveals how those 19th-century thinking structures were used in the Soviet Union in the interwar period and later, after 1940, when Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, were incorporated into the Soviet state, and even into the 21st century (pp. 423–436). While the terminology might have changed somewhat, the discourse practices have essentially remained very similar to those we find in the 19th century.

Brüggemann's study is important not only because it reveals in great detail the perception of the Baltic provinces in the 19th-century Russian discourse, especially highlighting the 'discursive traps' (as per Mikhail Dolbilov's thesis), where the image of Russian provinces clashed with the actual situation in the region, where there are very few attributes of Russianness; it is also an important work in a much broader context. The study makes a weighty contribution to a clearer understanding of how visions regarding the Romanov empire changed throughout the whole 'long 19th century', how the ideologemes created by public nationalism infiltrated bureaucratic thinking, and how the symbolic appropriation of space unfolded, etc. Many of these insights can be beneficial in research into similar processes in other peripheries of the empire. However, besides being important for its analysis of discourse practices, it also tells us about the importance of the empire's nationality policy. Brüggemann shows clearly that towards the end of the empire's existence, tsarist government policy in the Baltic provinces faced a number of unsolvable problems.² By the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, it could no longer expect that 'ethnographic material', Latvians and Estonians, would be successfully acculturated into Russian society. It became apparent

² Historians have reached similar conclusions when analysing Russia's policy in other peripheries in the empire's west: M. Rolf, *Imperiale Herrschaft im Weichsland. Das Königreich Polen im Russischen Imperium (1864–1915)*, (Oldenburg, 2015); *The Tsar, The Empire, and The Nation. Dilemmas of Nationalization in Russia's Western Borderlands, 1905–1915*, edited by Y. Aoshima, D. Staliūnas (Budapest-New York, 2021).

that the Latvians and Estonians who had converted to Orthodoxy did not become Russians in an ethno-cultural sense. Also, the revolution of 1905 showed that if 'infected' with socialist ideas, these non-dominant ethnic groups could even pose a greater threat to the empire than the Baltic Germans, who were the main target of criticism of adepts of the 'Russian cause' (in Russian *russskoe delo*) from the mid-19th century. The older practice of communication with the periphery's elites, the Baltic Germans, also became difficult, because the *national* concept of the empire played an increasingly greater role, not just in the public discourse, but in the bureaucratic mentality as well, while the Baltic Germans were only inclined to cooperate with the imperial government on condition that their privileges would remain in place, and that the region could retain a degree of autonomy (p. 268). With the outbreak of the First World War, basically all ethnic Germans *in corpore* became the empire's enemies. This is precisely why Brüggemann is correct in stating that at the start of the 20th century, the Russian Empire's policy in the Baltic provinces had reached a dead end.

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