

The Settlement of a Region as a Historical Phenomenon: The Middle Volga and Transvolga Regions in the Development of the Russian Civilization and Nation

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A review of Kabytov, P. S., Dubman E. L., and Leontieva, O. B. (Eds.) '*Finding Homeland': Society and Power in the Middle Volga Region (from the Second Half of the 16th to Early 20th Centuries)*'. Vol. 2. *Regional Settlement and Ethnic and Demographic Situation*. Samara: Samara University, 2014. *Original version in Russian* (Кабытов, П. С., Дубман, Э. Л., Леонтьева, О. Б. «Обретение Родины»: общество и власть в Среднем Поволжье (вторая половина XVI – начало XX в.). Часть 2. Заселение региона и этнодемографическая ситуация. Самара: Самарский университет).

In the last few decades, the historical science all over the world has turned its investigative eye to the subject of government and life in empires (especially the continental ones).

Gone are the times when ‘empire’ meant ‘a prison of nations.’ Nowadays, ‘empire’ means a complex public administration system in a culturally heterogeneous society, where the central gov-

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ernment rests upon local elites. Amid globalization processes and the crisis of the ‘nation-state’ concept, there is an emerging trend for establishment of new and reactivation of old and obsolete supra-ethnic formations, which makes the concept of the empire’s value increasingly popular. We find it crucial to answer the following question: what kind of mechanisms allowed such a complex system like the Russian Empire with its ethnic, cultural and confessional diversity to preserve its stability for centuries?

In 2012 Samara’s research and educational training center for national history, historiography, source studies, archaeology, and ethnology supported by the special Federal program ‘Scientific, academic and teaching staff of innovative Russia for the period from 2009 to 2013’ conducted a comprehensive study directly related to the above-mentioned subject matter. This project was entitled ‘Finding Homeland: the Middle Volga and Transvolga in the development of the Russian civilization and nation from the second half of the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries’ (Kabytov *et al.* 2013). A common issue running through this study is the formation of regional identity and the growing perception and awareness of social, psychological, and historical community, both at the regional level and nationwide. This approach is determined by the hypothesis that the region under study was a peculiar territory, an ‘internal periphery,’ which became home to a variety of social and ethnic groups which migrated to and settled down across this region throughout different periods of history. The authors argue that this state of ‘internal periphery’ actually triggered in migrants the feeling that they had found a new home, a new identity, and new ties which tightly connected them to Russia as their homeland. In other words, finding homeland meant that the mosaic made up of different groups of people who arrived to the region for different reasons and in different periods of time eventually created a new social and cultural entity.

By now two parts of the multi-authored monograph covering the results of that project have been released (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2013, 2014). The preface to the first volume contains two methodological remarks explaining that this publication comprises a series of essays whose genre implies a variety of subjects, which the authors chose in order to study the regional issues. The geographic area under study is rather expanded, too. It is signif-

icantly wider than the Middle Volga region in its contemporary administrative boundaries, and includes the territories known as the Transvolga region (in Russian ‘Zavolzhye’) including parts of Bashkiria, Kazakhstan, and Orenburg regions. In the preface the authors emphasize that ‘such an approach allows evaluating the processes that occurred in this region in a much broader historical perspective’ (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2014: 6).

Aside from its scientific value, the volume also possesses a significant cultural and educational potential. It offers a comprehensive concept of the Middle Volga as a long-standing ethno-confessional region. Hence, the monograph looks into the cultural, ethnic and social profile of the Middle Volga population.

Analyzing the poly-ethnic structure of the region, the authors apply the situational method which supposes identifying all actors involved in the ethno-cultural and ethno-confessional relations and focusing on actors' interactions via the study of the logic of their behavior and their reactions to other actors' circumstances (Miller 2008: 29).

From the very first page the reader delves into the intricate world of the frontier interactions between ethnic and social communities, which chose the Middle Volga and adjacent territories as a permanent or temporary place of settlement, where hordes of nomads would live next to the groups of Cossacks. On the threshold between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fishery and agriculture emerged in the South Middle Volga region. However, according to Eduard Dubman, the author the first chapter, all those settlements were pretty small and would not last long, since they quite often changed their location. At the time, there was not much the government could do, so its role was reduced to monitoring the general situation in the region (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2014: 17).

The book describes the process and some specific features of the Middle Volga settlements in the chronological order. All historical facts and statistics are supported by references to previous studies and little-known historical sources (Korsunsk and Simbirsk cadasters ...).

Massive colonization of the southern territories of the Middle Volga region did not begin until the mid-seventeenth century. According to Dubman's periodization, the first military settlement

goes back to the 1640s and the 1650s. The main actors were military personnel mobilized for the new defensive lines.

The defense construction involved farmers, mostly the autochthonous population of the Volga Region, the Tatar, Mordvin and Chuvash peasants. Military and state colonization of the region featured different nations. The Russian Cossacks and soldiers alone were not enough to protect it from the nomad attacks, so they had to recruit outlanders – like the Mordvin, Tatar and Chuvash people. They were allowed to settle on the new territories in exchange for watch services to the Cossack villages (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2014: 42–43).

Moscow aristocracy emerged among local landlords in the period between the end of the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Dubman relates the process to the reassignment of noblemen to Azov and the following distribution of the released land to the new owners who petitioned for it. At the same time, big monasteries, like Ipatiev, Novodevichiy, Chudov, etc., also acquired lands in the region. As a rule, they were inhabited by peasants brought from Central Russia.

The author of the first two paragraphs of the second chapter Yuri Smirnov links the massive settlement of the Samara Volga region and Transvolga region in the second third of the nineteenth century with the inter-ethnic situation in south-west Russia and the adjacent territories. Thus, within the Volga Kalmyk Khanate more than 5,000 Kalmyk people embraced Christianity as a result of missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. The researcher emphasizes the fact that the baptized Kalmyk people were settled in between state peasants, in order to encourage farming and sedentary lifestyle (*Ibid.*: 78).

It is probable that this decision was supported by the head of the Orenburg commission Vasily Tatyshev and the Kalmyk princess Anna Tayshina's request to grant her the nearest villages, but the Senate declined her petition, pointing out that 'the Kalmyk people would devastate the peasants, they would use their work, avoiding to plough themselves' (Dzhundzhuzov, Tepikin, and Chetyrova 2011: 82).

The departure of the major part of the Kalmyk population from the Volga and Ural steppes to China in 1771 had a major impact on the Russian colonization of the Transvolga region. It facilitated the Kazakh raids on the Russian and German colonies of the left bank

of the Volga. The escalation in the Transvolga steppes produced by the imbalance of forces was temporary. According to Smirnov, 'the departure eventually contributed to a more rapid development of the Transvolga steppe by the sedentary inhabitants. Bashkyr and Kazakh minorities simply did not have enough people to occupy the released grazing lands, which were transformed into the ploughed fields and hayfields' (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2014: 86).

The study of demographic processes in the outskirt provinces of the Russian Empire from the 1780s to the mid-nineteenth century involves some major difficulties. Many archive documents were seriously damaged as a result of bad storage conditions, fires, *etc.* Besides, another adverse factor hindering the demographers' task is that administrative borders in the region were repeatedly changed throughout the period in question.

Yuri Smirnov proposes to use generalized indexes of the whole Transvolga region, and the statistical data of particular parts of that region which do not always conform to the administrative division. This method implies using a variety of different data sources for particular parts of the region, which allows making important conclusions about the colonization geography, its density and population change in the Transvolga region. Compared with the right bank of the Volga, the Transvolga territories were significantly underdeveloped. The further from earlier settlements, the lower was the population density (*Ibid.*: 95).

A big share of migrants in the North West areas were peasants who left their previous community without permission. Due to the shortage in official lands in Orenburg city, the migrants had to seek refuge in the Cossacks' and other private lands, whose owners would then try to banish them. As the migrants took hold of such lands, they aimed to retain them at any cost, and then secure them under the ten-year length of ownership principle (Dzhundzhuzov and Lyubichankovskiy 2013: 119).

In the third paragraph of the second chapter Lyudmila Artamonova presents some interesting facts giving an insight into changes in the social, ethnic and confessional composition of the population of Samara's Volga region in 1851, a year which marked the establishment of the Samara province. The share of peasants drastically increased from the end of the eighteenth century, reach-

ing 89.1 per cent, where two thirds were state peasants, foreign colonists, and freedmen.

Colonization of the Transvolga region by peasants from Southern and Central Russia ensured the domination of Russians in the ethnic structure of the local population.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the southern part of the Middle Volga region was mainly inhabited by indigenous communities, including the Tatar, the Chuvash and the Mordvin. At the same time, by the mid-nineteenth century, the Orthodox significantly outnumbered other religious confessions, including the Christian ones. However, the official statistics classified all Russian subjects, who were baptized according to church books, as Orthodox. Artamonova also points out that the number of Orthodox population was also overestimated on account of Old Believers and other sects, heathens and Muslims, who were baptized only on paper (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2014: 104).

Chapter 3 entitled ‘Demographic Processes and Ethno-confessional Structure of the Volga Region in the Second Half of Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’ is preceded by a large historiographic section, which demonstrates that historical processes in the region under study have attracted attention both of the Russian and foreign researchers. According to the author of the historical essay Olga Leontieva, this interest can be explained by the geopolitical importance of the Volga and Ural regions which were ‘a zone of macro-regional interaction between the empire and the diversity of its subjects’ (*Ibid.*: 118).

Given the chronological range and the subject-matter at issue, this historiographical essay could also be included into Chapter I of the monograph.

The Volga region witnessed the highest population increase in the second half of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to the statistics, the leadership belonged to the Samara Province. Between 1858 and 1897, its population grew by 79.8 per cent. Such an impressive demographic breakthrough was mainly underpinned by high fertility rates. The railway construction played an important role in the economic and demographic development of the region. In that period, the Volga region becomes a donor of human resources for Siberia and other outskirts of the country.

Kabytov arrives at some important conclusions, concerning the peculiar demographic development in the Volga region and, especially, Samara, by comparing the same indicators in the regions in question against Siberia and European Russia. The most rapid population growth registered in Samara and Saratov regions was due to high fertility rates and peasant migration from other Russian regions (Kabytov, Dubman, and Leontieva 2014: 160).

The Volga region remained the agrarian outskirt of Russia, and the share of peasantry was even slightly higher compared with the western and central parts of the country. At the same time, the migration of peasants to towns fueled a notable increase in urban population in regional centers. Kabytov mentions that the peasants, who migrated to towns, would deliberately choose urban lifestyle and ‘incorporate themselves into urban environment and culture’ (*Ibid.*: 159–160).

The analysis of population dynamics and density in the Middle and Lower Volga of the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, is complemented by paragraphs covering its ethnic composition. The authors cite a wide range of social and economic parameters for 13 most numerous ethnic groups, which inhabited the territory spanning from Kazan to Astrakhan, including their territory of inhabitance, urbanization level, as well as economic and labor profile.

Tamara Vedernikova describes the interaction processes between ethnic and confessional groups in Samara in the final fifth paragraph of the third chapter. The author analyzes the migratory flows and settlements both with homogeneous and with mixed ethnic composition, as well as separate ethnically diverse communities, and assimilation and acculturation mechanisms in different ethnic, confessional, and communal groups. For example, the Mordvin and Chuvash were affected by the dominant Russian population, whereas some groups of the Chuvash converted to Islam under the influence of the Muslim Tatar. The author's conclusions have been confirmed by documentary sources, as well as the information collected by ethnographic expeditions.

One should also mention that the book consistently lays out a comprehensive picture of how the South Middle Volga transformed from a frontier territory into the internal periphery thus becoming a homeland for dozens of peoples whose ancestors had come to find their own ethnocultural niche there. The Samara pro-

ject not only allows gaining a glimpse into a distant past, but also brings to light the resources of stability for our contemporary society along with several fragile points, which the government needs to address in its policy.

In conclusion, we would like to congratulate the academic community on such a significant work, and praise the authors' attempt to investigate the empirical mechanisms underlying the Russian history.

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