

REVIEW ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

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On George Gilbert's Radical Right in Late Imperial Russia

George Gilbert, *The Radical Right in Late Imperial Russia: Dreams of a True Fatherland?*, London and New York 2016, Routledge, pp. 258.

George Gilbert's *The Radical Right in Late Imperial Russia* presents comprehensively the history of Russia's radical right movement from 1900 to 1914. In those last years of the Russian Empire, promises of civil and legal rights for minorities, pronounced demographic and social transformations and the formation of a Duma were made. The author argues that a large right-wing movement was created in reaction to the changes in Russian society, culture and politics. Additionally, he assumes that it evolved separately from the autocracy and frequently in conflict with it (p. iv). These arguments are systematically developed throughout the introduction, six chapters and the conclusions.

The introduction puts forward general analytical assumptions scrutinising the subject of the study, the political thought and activity of right-wing groups, the Russian Assembly, Russian Monarchist Party, Union of Russian Men, Union of Russian People, and Union of the Archangel Mikhail. It aptly concentrates on the formation and development of an alternative image of Russia on the radical right formulating the following main research problems: what was the changing social dynamics of Russian right, and what was the specificity of the development of radical, populist, demagogical nationalist ideas and practice between 1900 and 1914 in wide European context (p. 2). The subsequent chapters introduce specific research problems which support dealing with the main research problems. This methodological approach is well-thought and highly efficient because it helps the author explore the research field more thoroughly. Notwithstanding, in the subsequent chapters, the author sometimes merely adopts a descriptive approach

to characterise the research field rather than critical discourse. Employing research methods, techniques and tools to the study would allow the achievement of more analytical, intersubjective and verifiable view on the research subject. In addition, it would be informative to introduce criteria of the sources selection in order to determine precisely the research scope. Yet, the book offers the elaboration of the most relevant and the newest scientific descriptions of the issues covered by the research problems as well as it provides the discussion on the thus far unpublished and unexplored sources from the Russian State archive, such as the Russian right's pamphlets. The discussion is careful and reliable because the author avoids jumping to conclusions and drawing far-fetched conclusions. In doubtful cases, he comprehensively introduces arguments and counter-arguments and then assesses to what extent they are correct and accurate.

Examining nineteenth-century influences and an early right-wing group, the Russian Assembly, the first chapter concentrates on the rise of the Russian right. Gilbert traces the history of the Russian right and he claims that Rightists adopted the following principles of nineteenth-century Russian conservative ideology: an idea of separation from the West; the sanctity of the tsar's divinely ordained power; a belief in the estate system as a foundation of social hierarchy; support for the peasant commune as the source of economic development; and criticism of liberalism, parliamentarism, and socialism (p. 17). Importantly, the author knows well the character of the research field and, therefore, felicitously identifies its nuances, such as the transformation of Slavophilism into Pan-Slavism in the 1860s and 1870s as the analytical context of the expression of militant views among Russia's conservative factions (p. 22). Much as the author's research intuition accurate is, it should not have replaced the application of tools because some conclusions are implausible. For instance, intellectual influences are stated but not justified (p. 19) and the sources of political thinker's inspiration are taken for granted rather than studied (p. 19). Thereby, the correlations between the suggested variables are sometimes elusive. Then, he analyses a series of vital crises including the Kishinev pogrom, Bloody Sunday, and the Russo-Japanese War to deal with both how these laid the groundwork for a bulge in a new radicalism emerging during the revolutionary period of 1905-1907 and why Rightists acknowledged the period to be a new "time of troubles". This argumentation delves into the very inspiration of the movement to emerge.

The second and the third chapters throw light on the right's altering ideas and activities between 1905 and 1908, the phase when the influence of the right-wing movements peaked. They focus on the considerable challenge posed by right-wing radicalism to the tsarist status quo (p. 53). The second chapter specifies the rise of populist nationalism, which distinguished the right from other conservatives, represented by the creation of groups during the revolutionary period. It would be interesting to present the framework of those political groups to show systematically their ideological differences. Indeed, Union of Russian Man

(URM) and Union of Russian People (URP) are of the paramount concern of the analysis. Their approaches towards the peasant and worker questions, violence and radicalism come under close scrutiny, which reveal the crucial distinctive features of the right-wing movements in Russia, such as the consideration of urban workers to be a key component of creation of an effective answer to the challenge of mass politics in the Russian Empire (p. 174). Yet, the author assumes that a central essential feature of all the right-wing groups was their constant look for enemies and he presents the list of those enemies: socialists, students, minority nationalities, freemasons, capitalists, merchants, the Russian government, liberals, and other Rightists (p. 69). Nevertheless, the presentation of approaches towards enemies is limited to anti-Semitic ideas (pp. 69–73) whereas a framework of strategies towards enemies is worth applying¹ to identify the diverse ways of the construction of individual groups' images.² The processes of the construction of enemies are also worth taking into consideration because they indicate the far-reaching tensions between relative deprivation fields.³

Worth stressing is that the third and the fourth chapters were published in a modified form in *Revolutionary Russia*⁴ but the main conclusions remain unchanged. The third chapter traverses examples of right-wing groups on the basis of the following case studies: Odessa, Kiev and Astrakhan. Gilbert plausibly shows that they produced a new set of tensions between the right on the periphery and the imperial regime in the metropolis by aggrandising their reach away from the capitals and across the empire. It interestingly outlines the research field which deserves to be explored by the application of theoretical frameworks based on the relations between a centre and peripheries. He draws the conclusion that Rightists had a more enduring presence in areas with great numbers of badly integrated national and religious minorities, which generated to activists a more tangible enemy presence to direct their appeals against (p. 87). The author indicates that a main component of the right's techniques and strategies of political activities was the manipulation of substantial local and regional identities (p. 87). If the second chapter had provided a more detailed review of enemies, the third chapter would have shown a more detailed view on giving the movement legitimacy (p. 110) and the consequences of social engineering. Furthermore, on the one hand, the author refers to political sciences theoretical categories, such as political movements, peripheries or the right, but avoids determining their semantic fields, which make

¹ R. Ottosen, "Enemy Images and the Journalistic Process", *Journal of Peace Research*, 32 (1995), no. 1, pp. 97–112: (doi: 10.1177/0022343395032001008).

² Sh. Mathur, "The perfect enemy: Maps, laws and sacrifice in the making of borders", *Critique of Anthropology*, 33 (2013), no. 4, pp. 429–446 (doi: 10.1177/0308275X13499384).

³ M.Á. Vite Pérez, "Mexico, the Construction of Enemies through Social Protest: Some Reflections", *Critical Sociology*, 42 (2016), no. 4–5, pp. 661–677 (doi: 10.1177/0896920515570500).

⁴ G. Gilbert, "Rightist Ritual, Memory and Identity Commemoration in Late Imperial Russia", *Revolutionary Russia*, 28 (2015), no. 1, pp: 22–47 (doi: 10.1080/09546545.2015.1037106).

the argumentation less precise. On the other hand, some valid categories should have been employed but they were not even mentioned. For example, the author traces claims to the fatherland expressed by individual and collective political subjects (p. 118) but fails to use the category of irredentism in order to show how the claims were being evolved.⁵

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters present the activity of the right between 1907 and 1914, when the right attempted to confront challenging tasks of renewing Russia. They aptly trace the remarkably diversified examples of their fulfilment which are the responses to the sources of Russia's decay: poverty, alcoholism and contemporary culture (p. 162). Gilbert reckons that after the revolution of 1905, striking differences disunited Rightists. They were divided between waging and anti-revolutionary war and developing concepts of reviving Russia. In the fourth chapter, the relations of the right with Russia's political police are assessed. Gilbert evaluates how an incompatibility with authority foisted limits upon their power. Then, analysing rituals symbols and identity commemoration recognised as all the central components of the expressed right-wing desires to communicate with a mass audience, the author thoroughly identifies right-wing attempts at popular mobilisation.

The author illustrates the transformative and independent vision of Russia's spiritual and moral renewal within civic associations, such as the Double-Headed Eagle and the Union of Russian Working Men in Kiev, by the cultural campaigns which consisted in involvement in the temperance movement, creation of student branches, engagement in workers' education and concentration on the role of women in society. Worth stressing is that this approach casts considerable light on crucial differences between the old and the new right. In addition, it reveals how conceptions of civic-mindedness and group identity performed within right-wing civic associations (p. 157). It contributes to the field exposing the means of the creation of the role model for the Russian right.

The fifth chapter takes into account right-wing strives to produce an independent civic society, including right-wing perspectives on morality, gender and culture as well as an increasing interest in education. Gilbert avoids adopting a biased liberal perspective to analyse Russian society by formulating theoretical assumptions based on the definition of civic rather than civil society. Importantly, he introduces the category of civic society defined as autonomous associations, non-political and political, acting outside of government control and operating to develop bonds of association between members united around central ideas (p 155). As he accurately proves, this approach underlines that the right disseminated their uncivil ideas throughout society and it demonstrates that mass politics in the Russian Empire had illiberal potentials and outcomes (p. 155). Worth mentioning is that Gilbert

⁵ S.M Saideman, and R.W. Ayres, *For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism, and War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

is aware of counter-arguments occurring in the subject scientific literature and he carefully verifies to what extent the ideas of civil society might have appeared in late imperial Russia. He supports Susanne Hohler's thesis that the elements of a right-wing civil society were manifested barely by the instilment of bonds of association, trust and shared ideals among the right group members (p. 155).

The in-depth analysis of the processes of education and its promotion in late imperial Russia is a significant advantage of the book (p. 174). The outstanding description of the surviving list of the publicity materials of the Khar'kov branch of the URP uncovers how their pamphlets and leaflets were formulated and targeted (p. 174). It provides the original presentation of the usage of tools for teaching various social groups and giving them a profound grounding in the importance of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian patriotism (p. 174). Gilbert indicates that conceptions of education were primary to the activities of right-wing groups. It was reflected in the creation of youth wings of the right-wing movements (Academists) and conceptions of moral education as held by right-wing activists (p. 166). In fact, Russian Rightists considered students to be a main base of support and the resistance to revolution (p. 166). This approach corresponded with European tendencies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author notices the thematic overlaps between right-wing civic groups and other non-political civic organizations, such as associations (e.g., the Society of Friends of Natural History), which shared the Academist movement's interest in science and sources of civic patriotism (p. 182). The right's civic activity is characterised by the exclusion of other religious and ethnic groups. Indeed, membership was often nominally restricted to ethnic Russians (p. 179). Finally, Gilbert claims that the responses of the government to various social groups altered depending on whether national minorities, Jews, women or students were the demographic in question (p. 182). It exposes the configurations of variables usable to study relations between collective political subjects in the late imperial Russia's context.

The last chapter discusses major conflicts within the right, paying special attention to extended evaluations of corruption and factionalism, ideological divisions and the vexed Beilis Affair and its fall-out. It explains how the configuration of these factors contributed to the right's self-destruction, a process mainly driven from within (p. 189). Gilbert states that the extreme nature of Rightists responses to the revolutionary crisis had two meaningful results. First and foremost, the exclusionary nature of the extreme right undermined the potential for broader right-wing support from different parts of Russian society. The supposed menaces posed by national minorities and the widespread press coverage of the Beilis Affair produced a perception that Rightists were extreme and negative. They appeared as reluctant to provide any constructive solutions to the problems of Russia's present. Secondly, the autocracy's potential support base was fragmented by its incapacity to moderate and extreme Rightists to act together and generate a large and stable conservative group which was able to buttress the embattled Romanov

monarchy (p. 216). The explanatory framework presented is accurately tested. Finally, Gilbert assumes that these two factors would be of great importance before 1917, when Russia's Rightists were in increasing derangement and unable to efficiently counter the revolutionary threat (p. 216).

Conclusions introduce new issues which are, according to Gilbert, the attitudes of the right-wing parties towards other contemporary movements in Europe and later fascisms. The author maintains that in spite of the work's historical subject, it is topical. He claims that nationalism is the distinctive feature of contemporary Russia and research on the right is useful to assess development in the Russian Federation. Just like in the pre-revolutionary Russian right, an idea of protecting the supremacy of the Russian people is a subject common to contemporary nationalist groups (p. 230). Moreover, an idea of an impending social crisis is stimulating regardless of the actual sources of tensions. A set of factors in harnessing an idea of crisis and showing it to followers is still applied to formulate political strategies. Both in the past and nowadays, the myth of an idealised, usable past and its permanent corruption in the present period is a largely modal idea exploited to justify altering social, political and economic circumstances. Right-wing revolts claim to be responses to liberal elites which fail to represent ordinary people. They channel popular disaffection and anger against ruling classes of liberals and bureaucrats (p. 230). Overall, the author encourages researchers to take into account in their future search the people of the pre-revolutionary Rightists movement's ideas when study a right-wing resurgence today because of identifiable influences. Gilbert states that this appeal is visible in the current activity of the populist, anti-establishment right.

Summing up, the book reveals the process of creation and development of an alternative vision for Russia on the radical right. It distinguishes itself by its informative value and contributes relevantly to the historiography of the European radical movements by offering a comprehensive review of unpublished archival material from the Russian State archive. Gilbert approaches the radical right in late imperial Russia from historical perspective but also presents the research field worth investigating by political scientists and sociologists. Thus, although the volume contains several minor drawbacks and shortages, it is highly readable and recommendable to scholars interested in studying the Russian right political thought and activities. Indeed, it may interest a general reader as well because it introduces the specific period in Russia's history in vivid, clear and accessible way.