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Vera Shevzov. *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 358. \$49.95.

[1] Within the last twenty years a revolution has occurred within the scholarship of pre-1917 Russian Orthodoxy, a religion either long ignored by political historians or portrayed in traditional modern studies as the reified puppet-church of the tsarist regime. Continuing a line of inquiry begun by historians such as Gregory Freeze, Vera Shevzov's present study of Russian Orthodoxy between the years 1861 and 1917 underscores the "lived" dimensions of Orthodox Christianity as it played itself out in the variegated practices and discourses of its believers. In her deft examination of Orthodoxy as a multifaceted, highly adaptive "sacred community," Vera Shevzov actively contributes to this conceptual revolution of listening to individual voices and discerning the complexities of a Russian Orthodoxy that pushes beyond the confines of doctrinal pronouncements.

[2] Shevzov approaches prerevolutionary Orthodoxy precisely through this lens of "sacred community," a notion employed to overcome a key weakness she identifies in many studies of popular religion, namely a tendency to dichotomize institutional and individual religious experience. Studies of folk and popular religion too often set the "people," with their extra-institutional traditions, in opposition to the "church," cast as the domain of ecclesiastical elites. This bifurcation of experience, Shevzov argues, distorts the actual interrelations of clergy and laity within Russian Orthodoxy. While emphasizing lay religious practices and attitudes in her work, Shevzov considers them within the fabric of the "church," the ecclesial community, which can only be understood in Orthodoxy as the complex nexus of lay, clerical, and episcopal concerns. The Russian Church was not a static structure imposed and maintained by imperial and synodal decree, but rather an arena of dialectical movement between individually and institutionally-generated views and practices.

[3] It is this interaction, manifested at the parish level of Russian Orthodox life, that becomes the focus of Shevzov's examination, which begins with a larger contextualizing discussion of the competing visions of the nature of the Church dominating Russian theological discourse at this time. The first break in conceptualizing Orthodoxy as a monolithic institution occurs in this recounting of debates over the ecclesiastical essence of

the Church as either a centralized, episcopate-dominated structure or a decentralized federation of independent parishes brought together in Christian love. Interestingly, even ideational standbys such as *sobornost'*, the Russian philosophical notion of Christian conciliarity often presented by scholars of Russian thought as wholly synonymous with the latter vision, were appropriated by both factions.

[4] Shevzov explores the aforementioned dialectical movement through chapters devoted to pre-1917 conceptualizations of sacred place, time, iconography, and Marian devotion. Culling archival materials such as letters drafted to provincial and synodal officials and the wealth of devotional literature produced in prerevolutionary Russia, Shevzov offers carefully chiseled portrayals of the attitudes and tensions running through lay/clerical/episcopal considerations of these aspects of religious life. Sacred place, for example, mapped as it was by the construction of Orthodox temples and chapels and fostered through liturgical worship, often served as the location for a “relational dialectics” [94] between village believers, with their sense of entitlement to church structures and life, and officials, with their attempts at religious oversight. A similar dialectic in the marking of sacred time, with its intricate, unevenly practiced feasts and fasts, along with conflicting opinions as to their appropriate commemoration, receives extensive treatment in the work.

[5] True to her aim of giving voice to the historically overlooked, Shevzov focuses on the practices and views of lay individuals, especially villagers, who offer another layer of meaning and tension to these relations. Individuals affected sacred place and time through the undertaking of personal religious vows, a ubiquitous feature of prerevolutionary Russian life not infrequently involving acts such as chapel construction and the extension of religious fasts, offered by persons in gratitude to God. Furthermore, new, often unauthorized, icons and Marian devotions, springing from personal and local circumstances, circulated throughout the country. By examining these individualized acts of religious devotion, Shevzov effectively cuts through the people/church dichotomy she rightfully finds so problematic.

[6] Shevzov’s consistent use of dyadic structures does pose some minor problems. Although Shevzov demonstrates pre-1917 Orthodox ecclesial thought and practice to be far more heterogeneous than conventionally supposed, her discussion tends to outline this heterogeneity in terms of neatly packaged dyads, for example the identification of two opposing camps in ecclesial debates or two themes prevalent in Marian visions [242]. This setup necessarily lends itself to dialectical interpretation. The prevalence of these dyads at nearly every turn of the analysis raises questions of the extent to which geographical, social, and economic variation among and within the studied populations has been downplayed in favor of a more uniform presentation of these groups. Aside from the occasional stray comment, Shevzov does not fully explore, how urban dwellers may have differed from villagers in their perceptions of and practices within the Church. Likewise, relatively little mention is made of the fine-tuned social and economic stratification defining prerevolutionary peasant life and its potential impact on Shevzov’s dialectically-formulated ecclesial tensions. Indeed, these elements may yield additional dimensions to Shevzov’s formula, cut so consistently in her work along the lines of a village/outside-world duality.

[7] Although framing her material within these rather wide categorizations, Shevzov remains highly sensitive to the historical details illuminating her discussions. The wealth of lively anecdotes sprinkling the text presents Russian Orthodoxy to the reader as a lived religion. Lay practices and attitudes show forth in the work with a vibrancy rare in historical studies of Orthodoxy, Russian or otherwise.

[8] The work's apparatuses include detailed textual notes, an index, and an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary source readings - all of use to other scholars. The book lacks a map and timeline of the featured era, both of which would be helpful to non-specialists, but this is in keeping with her tendency to mute the wider political and geographical differentiation and context.

[9] Aimed at audiences with some prior knowledge of Orthodoxy or Imperial Russia, Shevzov's work is at the same time a significant contribution to the recent trend among Russian historians to consider Orthodoxy a "lived" religion. Shevzov's fine scholarship only furthers the conceptual revolution within Russian Orthodox studies of recognizing that power does indeed partially rest with the "people," a variegated laity no longer to be ignored in future studies of the Church.

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