Oleg Rudol'fovich Airapetov, The Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, 1801-1914/Vneshniaia politika Rossiiskoi imperii, 1801-1914

Main content

Article Preview:


Back in 1993, historian Hugh Ragsdale lamented the "sad" state of the study of Russian foreign policy and issued a manifesto of sorts, calling on historians and scholars of foreign policy in both the West and the former Soviet Union to join together in an effort to "revive" the field. (1) Ragsdale wrote, of course, in the heady days of the so-called archival revolution in the former Soviet Union, when doors were still being flung open to collections that had long been closed to foreign researchers, and when suddenly--and unbelievably for those taking their seat for the first time in the archives--the possibilities for research into Russian imperial history seemed without limit. In the intervening decade or so, what new things have we learned about the foreign policy of the Russian empire? Has the field in fact been revived? What have the archives revealed that the old sources (mainly diaries and hit-or-miss collections of published archival documents) could not? How has access to foreign policy archives changed the way historians understand Russian imperial history in general?

Foreign policy--unlike, say, empire or religion--has not made a big comeback as a topic of study by historians of imperial Russia since 1991. Although historians of the USSR have for years been discussing and debating how access to archival sources has changed their understanding of the Soviet past, the same cannot be said of historians of the imperial period. (2) Nevertheless, and in spite of archival closings and spotty access to foreign policy collections since the early 2000s, in recent years many historians have made new and creative use of previously unavailable documents on Russia's foreign relations, drawing connections between Russia's domestic and foreign policy, and in the process advancing out understanding of Russia as a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional empire that was also a major player in global imperial rivalries up until World War I. (3)

Recent scholarship related to imperial Russia's foreign relations can be divided into three categories. There is, first of all, a large and growing collection of works that situate events and historical processes in the Russian empire in broad regional, global, or comparative frameworks and explore the foreign and domestic policy implications of topics such as trade, migration, war, territorial expansion, and cross-border religious ties. Here I have in mind, among other things, Robert Crews's study of state regulation of Islam in Russia as consistent with the emergence of the Polizeistaat throughout Europe, Peter Holquist's work on the Bolshevik Revolution as part of the pan-European history of World War I, Michael Reynolds's work on eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus as focal points of Russo-Ottoman imperial competition, A. S. Morrison's comparison of Russian rule in Central Asia and British rule in India, Scott Levi's book on the...
The foreign policy of the Russian Empire covers Russian foreign relations down to 1917. All the main decisions in the Russian Empire were made by the tsar (tsarist autocracy), so there was a uniformity of policy and a forcefulness during the long regimes of powerful leaders such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. However, there were numerous weak tsars—such as children with a regent in control—as well as numerous plots and assassinations. With weak tsars or rapid turnover there was