

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

15 – *Russia, Germany - Casteel*

RUSSIA IN THE GERMAN GLOBAL IMAGINARY – Imperial Visions and Utopian Desires 1905-1941

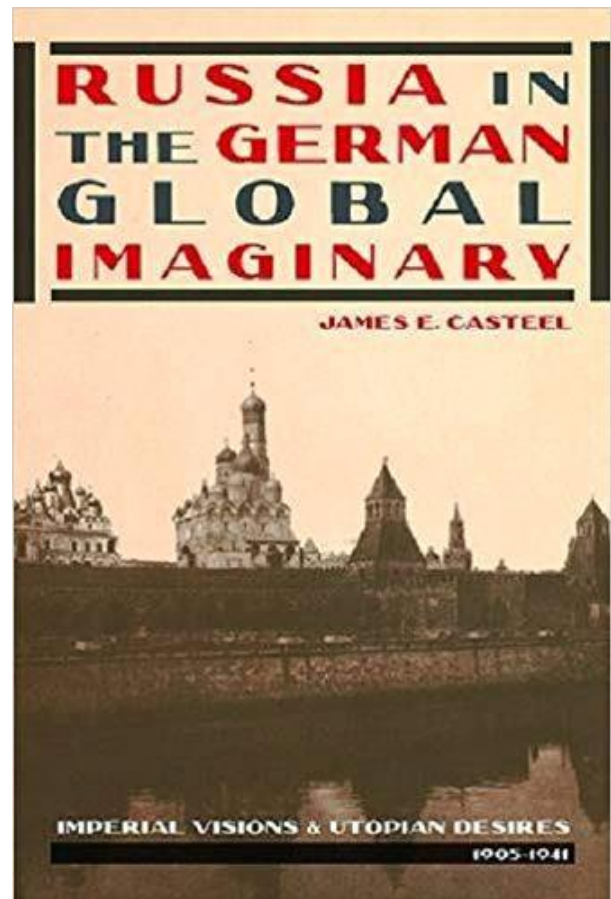
Author: James E. Casteel

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Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 22 July 2018



Reason to read: Since President Trump raised the issue of German dependence on Russian energy supplies at the recent NATO summit, it is fascinating to read about an earlier stage in the relations between the two countries. Contact has often been close and fertile. Since the seventeenth century, Russia *needed* Germany for modernisation, and since the late nineteenth century Germany *wanted* Russia, in order to expand her economic reach. Germans dreamed of all that space and all those resources. They enjoyed the sense of superiority they felt when dealing with a less organised and more easily exploited people than their own. If they had been more slyly intelligent (like the British) they could have achieved their dreams in 1918-9. But that was the British nightmare, and the Allies ensured that it did not happen, not least by re-establishing Poland as a buffer state between the two empires of the European east. In essence, Trump was reviving the Foreign Office fears of Bismarckian times and the 1930s.

Main talking points (in sequence):

1. “The rise of Prussia in the eighteenth century and German unification in the nineteenth century would have been unthinkable without the support of Russia. What united Prussia and Russia was their agreement of what Klaus Zernack termed ‘a negative policy towards Poland’.” (p. 26)
2. Leopold von Ranke recognised that “Russia’s victory over Sweden in the Nordic Wars at the beginning of the eighteenth century... helped create the conditions for the rise of the Prussian state.” (p. 29)

3. “During the Napoleonic Wars, when Prussia was reduced territorially to a small remnant of its former self, Tsar Alexander’s insistence on maintaining the state ensured its continued existence. This would soon turn out to have been a fruitful decision, for Prussia then joined Russia to defeat Napoleon.” (p. 26) Nonetheless, “180,000 soldiers of Napoleon’s Grande Armée had come from German lands.” (p. 29) (They were not all Prussian, of course, though many others were Polish.)
4. “The new German state owed its existence not only to Bismarck’s Realpolitik but also to Russia’s willingness not to intervene in Prussia’s affairs during the Franco-Prussian War [of 1870... They had] common interests in preserving monarchical rule and in suppressing Polish nationalism.” (p. 38)

Thought(s) provoked: Nineteenth century German nationalism seems to me to have had much in common with Scottish nationalism today. “The 1890s saw the birth of radical nationalism in Germany... Radical nationalists viewed *the people rather than the state as the source of political legitimacy*... As Peter Walkenhorst has observed, radical nationalists’ success lay in providing a particular Germanocentric interpretation of the world that permeated German political culture.” (p. 38, emphasis added) The italicised words reflect the argument that has been going on in Scotland since George Buchanan’s time (late sixteenth century) that Scotland was superior to England because sovereignty lay with the people, not with “parliament”. In practical politics, the idea of “sovereignty of the people” came to stay with the American and French Revolutions. It seeped through to the Romantic movement, which translated it into German politics, with disastrous results later on.

Incidental interest:

1. Although it is common knowledge to Russia scholars, it is worth repeating how August von Haxthausen, the German agronomist and traveller in the 1830s, created the myth of the happy Russian *mir*, in which peasants (still serfs then) joyfully celebrated their compulsorily communal way of life. This was as much a myth as the contemporaneous one of Merrie England, or the post-1922 image of Irish country life in an idealised Gaeltacht, or Scottish official illusion-mongering about “vibrant communities” in the crofting counties today. “In travelling to Russia, Haxthausen hoped to observe rural Slavic institutions in a context untouched by European modernity.” (p. 31) Apparently, the Garden of Eden could co-exist with serfdom.
2. In the early twentieth century, more realistic German observers tended to approve the Stolypin reforms which were intended to dismantle the *mir* and replace it with individual, property-owning farmers on the west European model. “In the process, German observers believed, Russian mentalities would also be transformed, replacing ‘the spirit of comfortable carelessness and melancholy dreams’ with the ‘virtues of discipline and initiative at all levels of society’.” (p. 70)

Surprising points: An interesting question, which I have discussed before in a different context, is why Siberia never acquired the glamorous image that the Wild West did. “Before the railway [completed 1896], Siberia had been of only academic interest to ethnographers.” (p. 58) After that, the Russian state began to encourage immigration. “Over 3.5 million Russians arrived in Siberia between 1897 and 1911.” (p. 68) “Much like the United States after westward expansion, Siberia offered Russia the potential to

become a world power with global reach, one that could challenge the dominance of the British Empire.” (p. 71) All that is true, but it is important to ask why Siberia—the “Wild East”—never acquired a positive image in the world’s imagination in the way that the Wild West did, with its “cowboys and Indians”, the Chisholm trail, and the solitary righteousness of the gun-toting sheriff in the Lone Star state. Where is the Russian equivalent of the romantic world of the dusty, dangerous world of the “high plains drifter”, or the card sharp prospecting for gold in the rivers of the Rockies, or even the madness of a more modern writer who can begin a book with this sentence: “We were a hundred miles east of Barstow, on the edge of the desert, when the drugs began to take hold”? Why did the word “Siberia” not become a synonym for freedom in the way the (Wild) West did? If the Soviet Union had produced its own John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, it might have lasted longer.

Negative issue(s): Too academic in its approach. For example, the “Conclusion” is not a proper conclusion; rather it is a summary of the book. There are no wider reflections on the subject, which is a shame as it is an interesting one, competently described.

Style: Dull and academic, though without being unduly off-putting.

Amusing bit(s): Nothing amusing, but one noteworthy mistake: on page 20, Casteel says, “The expansion of Muscovy coincided with the decline of the Byzantine Empire and the Mongol Horde. Ivan II of the Muscovites expanded his power and attacked Sweden, Livonia and Lithuania while making allowances with European princes.” This must have been Ivan III. Ivan II was quiet man who lived a century before, and who tried to get on with his neighbours—which got him into trouble.

Author: James Casteel is a youngish assistant professor at the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Link(s): Nothing that I can find – another modest man!

Overall recommendation level: HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbelltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>