

## Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

09 – *Cartographies of Tsardom* - Kivelson

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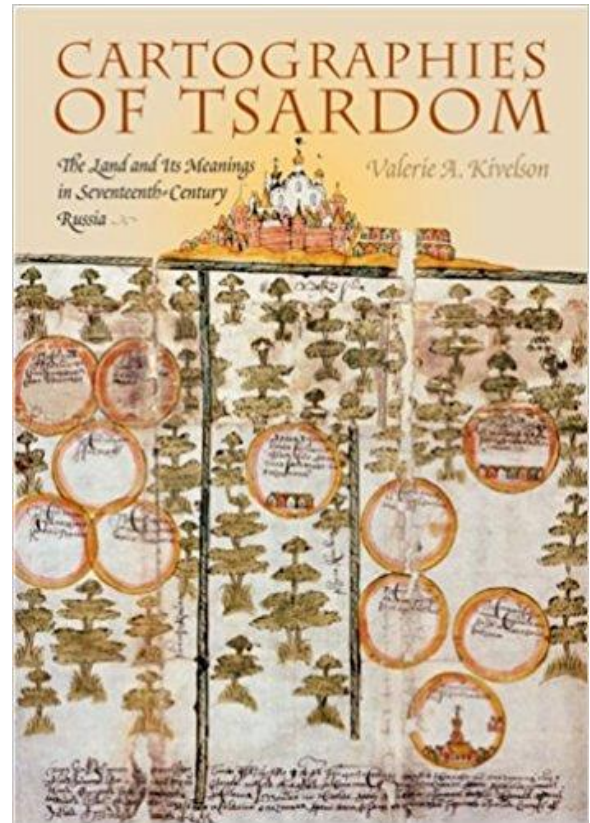
**Title:** CARTOGRAPHIES OF TSARDOM: THE LAND AND ITS MEANINGS IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY RUSSIA

**Author:** Valerie Kivelson

**Publication info:** Cornell University Press, 2006  
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

**Keywords:** Maps, colonialism, Russia, Orthodoxy

**Reviewer:** Ian Mitchell, 12 June 2018



**Reason to read:** Interesting view on the century in which Russia expanded from being a big European power to an inter-continental, Eurasian titan (if as yet only in potential). Many high-quality reproductions of beautifully-drawn, if largely illegible, maps.

### **Main talking points:**

1. By far the most interesting point to emerge from this study is that the Russian approach to the “hearts and minds” aspect of empire—the cardinal one if it is to last—was “Christianity without conversion”. Kivelson says: “According to Muscovite sources, God wholeheartedly supported the Russian enterprise, because it promised to spread His name and glory to the ends of the earth, but He was content with Christianising *the land and landscape* in ways that did not necessarily rely on conversion of the pagan population. At least in the first instance, dissemination of God’s word took place more through the extension of Russian settlement than through any concerted evangelical campaign.” (p. 150) (emphasis added)
2. Much discussion of Semen Remezov, the pioneering Russian cartographer who first adopted Western approaches to map making. He was the first to attempt a map of the whole of Siberia.
3. Russia, at least in Prof. Kivelson’s account, was not seriously behind Europe in its approach to both map-making and to the subject peoples whose territory was being mapped under them, so to speak. This suggests that the country was relatively well integrated into Western culture in the period between the death of Ivan the Terrible and the re-imposition after 1917 of Ivan-style rule—closed borders; closed minds; secret maps. In the seventeenth century, Russia laid the physical foundations for twentieth century intellectual Eurasianism.

**Thought(s) provoked:** Point 1 above suggests that Russia was surprisingly modern in that its way of establishing an empire far larger than it conceivably could control physically, at least until the nineteenth century, was one which presaged the American approach to the non-Soviet world after 1945. “Christianising without conversion” had something in common with “capitalism without control”—or at least direct control. By contrast, the Soviet empire in eastern Europe was “communism with complete control, if necessary by tanks”.

In the seventeenth century, Russians went east and settled where they wanted, traded with anyone who would sell them furs, usually on a certain amount of compulsion, and organised garrisons to make the forests safe for exploitation by incomers. But they did not try to impose morality in the way that, for example, Britain did in the late nineteenth century. Many historians have argued that the British Empire began to fail when missionaries and the women who settled “out east” managed between them to establish the principle that “what was not allowed in London should not be allowed in Bangkok”. That was a bolshevik rather than a tsarist approach.

When the United States started trying to go “bolshevik” with the countries it had traded and co-operated with on a “tsarist”, blind-eye basis since 1945, it began to lose its moral authority, especially after the Iraq “regime change” campaign of 2003. Imperial Russia was rarely so arrogant or so conceited as to aim deep control, or even at the Siberian equivalent of an “ethical foreign policy”. This book describes how, in the seventeenth century, the making of maps invaded the territory and resources, but not apparently the inner lives, of the peoples whose homelands were now set on paper as items in one of the Kremlin’s pictorial “databases”. As long as they paid the tribute and did not cause trouble, the natives were largely left alone. This was Mongol rule in the west updated and applied to the east.

**Incidental interest:** The general hostility to map-making in Russia, largely because it interfered with local power over land by bringing in state representatives who, then as now, Russians distrusted due to valid suspicions of corruption. In one case near Uglich, when town officials tried to settle a land dispute by investigating the location in person, they were “knocked from their horses... [The local objectors] injured the town clerk in the left shoulder and the back... They also beat monastic officials [the Church was the main landowner in pre-Revolutionary Russia] and peasants with cudgels and with stones and planks and hurled things at them as they ran away.” (p. 34)

**Surprising point(s):** The similarity of the Russian approach to colonial land-ownership to that of the early English and Spanish in the Americas. Possession depended on *work* (a practical example of the human principle governing legal precedent). If you tilled ground which others had abandoned or ignored, you had a right to it. Possession was nine-tenths of the law. This “sleeves up” approach is not often associated with Russians, who are too often seen as militaristic imperialists in the style of Bismarckian Junkers. “Like the English, Russians understood the validity of property claims on the basis of agricultural labour, construction and enclosure... Like the Spanish, they tended to announce the terms and conditions of their conquest to more or less comprehending indigenous audiences.” (p. 173)

**Negative issue(s):** Nothing major except, perhaps, length: this book could have been cut by 20% without losing much; the author’s non-subject-specific ruminations add little of value.

**Style:** Long on “academic rhetoric” but shorter on concrete interpretation.

**Author:** Valerie Kivelson, Professor of History at the University of Michigan. A breezy-looking lady who has written about witchcraft, but who concentrates mainly on Russian cultural history. She spent a year working in Russian libraries in the 1980s, so she must know. Among her fields of interest she lists “violence and visibility”. This book touches on both.

**Link(s):** Prof. Kivelson speaking in London about the Russian expansion into Siberia in terms of violence and visibility: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLuCAOvXWcI>

**Overall recommendation level:**

MEDIUM ABOUT RUSSIA – BUT HIGHER IF YOU ARE INTO MAPS AND THEIR HISTORY

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**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 Campbeltown and can be contacted at [ianbookrec@gmail.com](mailto:ianbookrec@gmail.com). For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>