

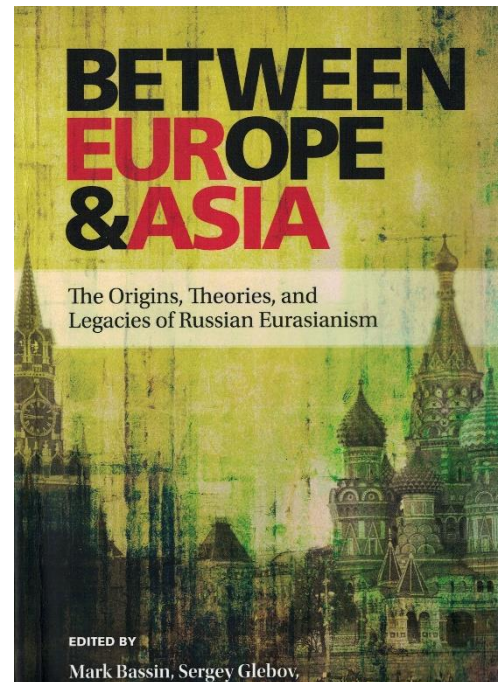
Ian Mitchell's Russia-related
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

42 – *Between Europe and Asia*
(14 January 2019)

BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA:
the Origins, Theories and Legacies of
Russian Eurasianism

Author: Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov, Marlene Laruelle (eds.)

Publisher: [University of Pittsburgh Press](#), 2017
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))



Descriptor: Story of the development of the political philosophy of Eurasianism, a form of extended Russianism that is based on the idea that it is a world apart from Europe, yet also not part of the “orient”.

RusRoL relevance: *Russian attempt to assert national STATUS over against “decadent” Europe in the context of defeat and disintegration after the First World War and the Revolution*

Reason to read: An very interesting book which hardly anyone will be interested in—sadly. It contains authoritative accounts of often highly questionable, and now rather dated, ideas on geopolitics. As such, it would make ideal bedside reading for the armchair Putin. It will interest those who would like to understand something of how Russians have seen themselves *vis à vis* Europe since Herten’s time. Eurasianists today are really Slavophiles with smartphones.

Main talking points:

1. For Putin: “For the Eurasianists, Russia cannot permit itself to participate in the global market and to be interdependent with other national economies. Rather, its essential nature impels it towards autarky.” (p. 81) That is the main purpose, as far as I can see, of the Eurasian Economic Union which Russia is promoting these days. However, it is also an important psycho-political point, one which the book as a whole elucidates with a longer-term view. It also, to my mind, explains a lot about many Russians on a personal level. The atomisation of society was not *only* a product of Stalinism and ubiquitous suspicion of neighbours, friends, colleagues etc. Many still have an “exceptionalist” complex (i.e. STATUS) which prevents them from treating others on the basis of CONTRACT (i.e. as legal equals).

2. For historians: George Vernadsky's interest in the specifically Ukrainian aspects of "Russian"—i.e. Eurasian—history is worth discussing. See pp. 113-116. This odd remark from Igor Torbakov, of the University of Uppsala, is worth contemplating: "Vernadsky appeared to view the history of Ukraine as a legitimate subject *per se*." (p. 115) If the history of the Campbeltown whisky distilling industry, or the evolution of the Lordship of the Isles, are legitimate subjects for historical study, as I believe they are, it is hard to see why the history of Ukraine should be implicitly questioned in this way—especially as Dr Torbakov himself writes interestingly about it all over the place. (see: <https://eurasianet.org/people/igor-torbakov>)
3. For those who wish to understand the roots of Russian political culture: Even more worth discussing is Lev Gumilev's idea that the Russians submitted voluntarily to the Mongols, who actually had another agenda when they attacked in 1237-41, namely revenge against the Polovtsy who had defeated them in the past. (See pp. 165-186) This is roughly the theme of chapter 2 of my book, *Russia and the Rule of Law*. I would only add that it was the *princes* who wished to co-operate with the Mongols, not the ordinary Russian people. They were the source of the wealth both Mongols and Muscovites wanted to extract from the territory by way of tribute in money and men. What else can explain why the position of the people deteriorated *after* Ivan III threw off the Mongol yoke? The best example of that is Novgorod, which the Mongols actually *protected* (as a source of wealth) but which Ivan (and his grandson) despoiled and ruined. He closed the "window on the West" which Peter the Great has been given such praise for heroically opening in the name of all Russia—quite needlessly of course if Ivan had been less "Mongol-like".

Thought(s) provoked: Geostrategic thinking on the basis of broad categories of or groupings in national terms is bunk. Consider this sentence, about the (usually interesting) writings of Prince Nikolai Trubetskoy: "Can it be objectively proven that the culture of Romano-Germans is more perfect than any other culture in existence now or in the past?" (p. 53) Yawn.

Negative issue(s): If you don't know what "tellurocracy" and "thalassocracy" are, you will not understand page 80. The same principle applies in several places.

Publishing quality: Fine, but unremarkable; a normal academic production.

Smile(s): The Ukrainian Eurasianist, Petr Savitskii (1895-1968, including ten years in the Gulag), wrote a Master's thesis which had the incomprehensible (to me) title: "Metaphysics of the Economy and Its Experimental Cognition" (p. 99). He wrote this between 1917 and 1920, during which period cognition of the economy hardly needed experimental cognition to understand its metaphysics. Essentially, the economy had ceased to exist beyond arms production and the theft of food and valuables. Indeed, you could say that the title illustrates the divorce from reality that is so strong a feature of the theorising that is described in this book. Savitskii did not leave it at that, either. He spent 1921 combing the Gospels for economic content as he believed that "acquiring economic knowledge was mandated by God." (p. 103) He went on to write, in connection with "the Transfiguration of the whole world", that "Russia's current spiritual task is precisely the creation of a new chemical combination, a combination of practicality and

mysticism. If it can do so, Russia will outgrow the world.” (p. 103) It would be cruel to laugh, but it is hard to avoid at least a furtive smile at such intriguing nonsense.

Overall recommendation level: HIGHISH – if you are prepared for quite a lot of necessary waffle

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).