Orthodox Travel and the Conquering of the Kazakh Steppe

Aileen Friesen's Noontime Scholars Lecture on 11 February 2014 described a complicated, multi-ethnic, and multi-denominational world of the eastern reaches of late Imperial Russia, where southern Siberia meets northern Kazakhstan. Based primarily on the analysis of the travel accounts of Orthodox Bishops published in Church gazettes, her presentation outlined what one can learn about the region from how these accounts represented their world, as well as where they fall short as historical sources. Chief among the limitations of these travel journals was the salient absence of information about the Kazakh nomads who were ubiquitous in this part of the empire, as well as the religion they practiced—Islam.

Dr. Friesen's talk was a presentation of a work in-progress that is part of book revisions to her dissertation, entitled “Building Orthodox Communities Outside Mother Russia: Church and Colonization in Omsk Diocese, 1885-1917.” She is a Post-Doctoral Fellow with REEEC, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Ph.D. from the University of Alberta, 2013).

Her lecture showed that, in 1895-1917, the Orthodox Bishops of the Omsk Diocese migrated throughout its territory conducting “visitations”—a practice that had mostly fallen out of practice in European Russia during the early 1800s. The vast eastern diocese included Omsk, Akhmolinsk, Tobolsk, Tomsk, and Semipalatinsk, with a population dominated by Cossacks, Kazakhs, and millions of newly settled Russians. These clerics' travels were meant to allow them to take stock of the character of religious observance in its diverse communities; as an opportunity to connect in-person with far-flung, isolated priests; and to give sermons to their flock.

In this way, Dr. Friesen explained, bishops created "spaces for organized piety" in a realm where neither the Russian Orthodox Church nor the Russian state were sufficiently established to be certain of the residents’ religious identities. In the period addressed, six successive clerics conducted visitations, usually traversing great distances by a combination of different forms of transportation. Bishop Sergei covered over two thousand miles in forty-six days, traveling by carriage and steam-ship, as well as on foot. His and other accounts spoke of usually excellent attendance at sermons (given sometimes in three villages per day). They also documented the common occurrence of peasants waiting by the side of a road for up to half a day during harvest, when they ought to have been in the fields, just to catch a glimpse of the bishop's carriage traveling past. Here, in the less supervised spaces between villages, the religious officials and their entourages observed instances of “improvised piety,” such as singing and praying to icons. Dr. Friesen asserted that these travel accounts contained a unique combination of adventure reportage and a very focused concern with Christian sects, which bishops worried might stray farther than improvisation. In addition to Orthodox parishioners, Omsk Diocese was populated by Dukhobors, Baptists, and other types of Christians with the potential to attract diocesan flock. Thus, bishops' tales of conquering difficult landscapes, as well as enduring harsh conditions and “backwards” people, were notable for their focus on ethnic Russians and Christians, to the exclusion of millions of others living in the region.
As Dr. Friesen observed, the bishops’ recollections of their travels into the Province of Semipalatinsk (present-day northern Kazakhstan) made little mention of vast Cossack communities, and virtually no note of the region’s majority Kazakh nomad population. Although published travel accounts were characterized by orientalist language, they were remarkable for the way they ignored non-Russian ethnic groups that would have been highlighted in secular travel writing. Dr. Friesen provided maps from the period showing that when bishops typically surveyed the province by steamboat on the Irtysh River for hundreds of miles, they moved past and to scores of primarily Cossack settlements in the river valley—just beyond which was a steppe filled with Kazakhs.

Friesen’s analysis of the recollections and anecdotes of the bishops’ travel accounts provided a glimpse of the surprising official views of life in Omsk Diocese. To the Church, evidently, the only parishioners and people worthy of mention were current and likely Orthodox flock. These mainly recently settled Russians lived among multitudes of others, including many longtime natives of the region who apparently were absent in the consciousness of the imperial religious establishment.

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