

Sammelrez: Ch. Schmidt: Russische Geschichte 1547-1917

Schmidt, Christoph: *Russische Geschichte 1547-1917*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag 2003. ISBN: 3-486-56704-7; XI, 261 S.

Hildermeier, Manfred: *Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917-1991*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag 2001. ISBN: 3-486-56179-0.

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The writing of textbooks and popular histories is a special art. Attempting to explain the Renaissance in 300 words or give the general reader some concept of Stalin's rise to power in three pages can defeat even the best informed and industrious archival historian. And yet everyone would agree that historical syntheses on a broad scale are indispensable, perhaps more important than ever in a world that never has enough time. The two works under review here attempt to summarize complex historical and historiographical issues in a minimum of words and on the whole their attempt is successful. The format of each work (obviously dictated by Oldenbourg Verlag) also makes these books extremely useful for students and beginning scholars who wish to plunge more deeply into the subjects briefly dispatched here. More seasoned scholars will appreciate these works for reviewing and - let us be frank - for cribbing when writing lectures on relatively unfamiliar periods. These are, then, helpful and scholarly volumes that synthesize a great deal of information, including recent historiography.

Schmidt's thumbnail sketch of Russian history from Ivan IV („Grozni“) to Nicholas II covers the entire story in just over a hundred pages. The book is designed for easy location of a specific time period or argument by printing on every page marginal subheadings (e.g., „Nakaz von 1767,“ „Erste Teilung Polens,“ „Blutsonntag“). The narrative proceeds in an unsurprising way, divided into four sections roughly on Ivan and the Time of Troubles; Peter and Catherine; 19th century; and finally „Strukturkrisen des Zarenstaats.“ In all of these sections coverage is accurate, up-to-date, and fair. While trying to compress

over three centuries of history into 114 pages, Schmidt has been obliged to limit his coverage of any given event, which leaves the reader at time unsatisfied – but this is, again, probably an inevitable problem with such a format. Cultural history is almost, though not quite, left out here, and social history creeps in mainly as an explanation of political events, e.g., Great Reforms, 1905, and the like. On the whole, however, this is a very competent - if not terribly exciting - rundown of main topics in Russian political history.

The second section of the book attempts to make up on this deficit. Here basic issues of Russian history (e.g., geography, ethnography) and major areas of research (e.g., roots of serfdom, nature of autocracy, Jews and national questions, modernization) are discussed in a bit greater detail. These short essays provide very nice outlines of the given problem. To be sure, it is very difficult – probably impossible – to do justice to „the Jewish question“ under the tsars in six pages, and similarly discussing the nationality issue in approximately eight will leave specialists unsatisfied (and, one suspects, beginners confused). Still, if a student were to express to me an interest in looking into historical issues such as „absolutism“ in Russia, urbanization, or nationality, I would first direct him/her to these pages.

Perhaps even more helpful for the researcher is the book's final section: a detailed bibliography carefully divided by topic. Nearly a thousand works are cited, ranging from general histories to published primary sources to legal and agrarian history. While one can argue about favorite works left out, it is hard to pinpoint any cited works that are truly superfluous. Schmidt includes works in a range of languages, published from the 19th century to 2002. The book ends with a detailed timeline, again of great utility for students preparing for comprehensive exams.

In format and approach, Manfred Hildermeier's short book on the Soviet period differs very little from Schmidt's (it should be noted that Hildermeier's was actually published first). The major events and social trends are covered in just over a hundred pages, from causes of the 1917 revolutions to a short discussion of Russia after 1991. Nearly every page has one or more subheadings in the mar-

gins („Stalins Abkehr von der NEP“, „nomenklatura“, „Erste Kolchosen“) making it easy to page through and find the desired topic. Once again political history is privileged, though social actors are not ignored. Culture is touched on, but only briefly. Like Schmidt, Hildermeier provides a historical overview which is scholarly, precise, and reliable, if not always exciting.

The short essays on „fundamental problems“ and research trends are also valuable. If you need a short condensation of major arguments on the end of NEP, the terror, perestroika, or Brezhnev, this is an excellent place to start. Again the bibliography is thorough (nearly 1100 works), full of very useful references, and well organized.

There remains the question of intended audience. The series editor writes that these volumes are meant not just for the specialist but also people from other fields, „etwa der Germanist.“ Certainly Germanisten need all the help they can get, and we can imagine even sociologists or (more likely, I think) historians of France and China finding these volumes enormously helpful. Indeed, this reader was happy to note that volumes on China and the Islamic world are also included in the series. But even specialists in Russian history very frequently feel a bit uneasy when venturing outside their own narrow specialty. These volumes will help us in such forays and also provide an excellent launching pad for beginning scholars' research projects.

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