

*Russia's Entangled Embrace: The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians, 1801-1914*. Stephen Badalyan Riegg. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. xiv + 300 pp. \$45. Hardcover ISBN-13: 9781501750113.

“Entangled” is the key word in the title of Stephen Badalyan Riegg’s *Russia’s Entangled Empire: The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians, 1801-1914*. In this fascinating work of new imperial history, Riegg takes the case of the Armenians of the Russian Empire as an example of the ways in which scholars’ understanding of empire can go far beyond the traditional tensions of metropole and periphery. The story of the Armenians, a people functioning simultaneously as members of a transnational diaspora, a privileged (at times) elite in a colonial setting, and as subjects of the Tsarist Empire, provides a multi-faceted way in which to showcase the ideas of the new imperial history. As a result, *Russia’s Entangled Empire* offers scholars of empire, particularly those of Russian or Armenian history, a very readable and accessible entry point to discussing the wide array of imperial relationships and the motives behind them; as such, it would suit graduate level audiences as well as specialists.

Riegg uses Russian government archival sources, including letters and reports from the Viceroys of the Caucasus, upper imperial statesmen, and even the Tsars, to describe chronologically the evolution of the Russo-Armenian relationship from the perspective of the Russian bureaucracy. His archives include the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), the Central Historical Archive of Moscow (TsIAM), the Russian State Archive of Military History (RGVIA), and the National Archive of Armenia (HAA); as Riegg himself admits, and as his archival choices show, this work is heavily focused on the Russian government side of the Russo-Armenian relationship. The book itself is organized in six chapters covering roughly fifteen years at a time, beginning with the early nineteenth century. By the dawn of the century, Riegg shows that the government of the Romanovs had decided to build a uniquely positive relationship with their transnational minority, the Armenians, whose population was stretched across the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. The Armenians simultaneously offered the Russian colonizers of the South Caucasus a people with transnational connections that could be maximized for trade, and a people of a religious and cultural background closer to Russian Orthodoxy than could be found in most of the empire. They had as well potential for use as a friendly intermediary power for colonial rule at the borders, as a loyal minority that could rise to bureaucratic prominence, and as a natural political connection with the inner workings of neighboring powers (specifically the Ottoman Empire). For the Armenians, the Russian relationship initially offered its own advantages, including rights, privileges, and stability not necessarily found throughout the geographic sprawl of the diaspora.

Just as politics brought the two together, Riegg ascribes the breakdown of this symbiotic relationship between the Armenians and the Russians to changing political needs. Initially, we can see this in the aftermath of the Crimean War. The government’s reformist legislation equated modernization with imperial standardization, effectively erasing the special position of the Armenians. Since standardization of rights threatened the privileges of the Armenians, the

Armenians, particularly the elite of its church and merchant community, and bureaucrats friendly to them, often of Armenian heritage themselves, waged a legal war to reverse the government's position. While they successfully argued to the Tsarist administration that the Armenians' contributions of trade and border stability merited exceptions to the legislation, the moment set a precedent—the goals of the Romanov government and the Armenian community were not necessarily the same. As the century waned, the government's harsh response to discontent across the empire accelerated the splintering of the Russo-Armenian connection, peaking with the 1903 government seizure of the Armenian Church's property. Although the Tsarist government would ultimately back off this action, Riegg shows, appeasing the Eastern Armenians of the Russian Empire was fundamentally less important to the Romanov regime than their fear of the political outcomes of Armenian nationalism. In particular, as the Eastern Armenians implored the Russian government to intervene in the Ottoman Empire's treatment of the Western Armenians there, the Romanov regime balked, going no further than to request the Ottomans abide by previous reform agreements. The benefits of the long-standing Russo-Armenian relationship simply did not outweigh the political impact of nationalist destabilization, if not outright war, on the borders.

This closing moment of the book captures its strength. The book very persuasively establishes the complexity of multiethnic imperial relations and the ways in which domestic and foreign political goals defined and redefined them. Riegg's work fits well among the work of new imperial scholars in Russian historiography—from Nancy Shields Kollmann's assertion in *The Russian Empire, 1450-1801* that flexible policies of governance were as important as conquest in holding together empires to Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Suny's depictions of empire in their work, *Russia's Empires*, as a flexible entity, inconsistent by requirement. As Riegg himself concludes, the inconsistencies throughout the Russo-Armenian relationship in the nineteenth century depict the essence of imperial rule: “messy, unequal, and full of possibilities and pitfalls” (238).

The very messiness Riegg mentions allows this book to suggest a multiplicity of comparisons that would provide interesting further steps for investigation. In particular, points of comparison throughout the text provide fascinating avenues for exploration. He describes how the resistance of one imperial group (the Polish people) influenced Russian strategy toward another (the Eastern Armenians). He points out how the Armenians' trans-imperial connections made them distinctly of interest to the Russian government in comparison to the appeal of other Christian groups in the empire, such as the Georgians. Riegg's work as well opens up more conversation about the role of bureaucrats and colonial elites—from rejecting Armenian groups' desire to form benevolent associations in the aftermath of the Crimean War (a theme familiar to students of the connection between the Russian middle class and the government) to showing how bureaucratic allies could be tremendously significant for a single ethnic group. Here Riegg provides us several examples, including the Viceroy of the Caucasus Count Ilarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, who had tried to protest the reactionary policies of Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin.

*Russia's Entangled Empire* is a very accessible entry point to discussing the intertwining relationships of empire a multi-ethnic state; although a work intended for historians of Russia and Armenia, it would suit any historian of empire, and could be useful for graduate seminar

discussion. Stephen Badalyan Riegg's case study of the Armenians within the Russian empire clearly demonstrates the fluidity and complexity of imperial policies and relationships. In so doing, this work provides a powerful illustration of the new imperial history's desire to understand empire as a myriad of tensions and inconsistencies, and challenges the reader to think comparatively about the relationships in a multi-ethnic empire.

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