

Happel, Jörn: *Nomadische Lebenswelten und zarische Politik. Der Aufstand in Zentralasien 1916*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2010. ISBN: 978-3-515-09771-0; 378 S.

Rezensiert von: Khodarkovsky Michael, Loyola University Chicago

This book is a welcome contribution to the growing trend in the historiography to put the human actors back into history and to „humanize“ our preoccupation with the social structures and processes. Whether it is called a microhistory or *Lebenswelt*, this kind of history attempts to see the larger events through the prism of one or several contemporaries, who are usually ordinary individuals unaware of their role on the larger world stage. Ideally, this approach helps to fuse history and anthropology and offers a rare opportunity of writing a history from below.

Happel's book belongs to this genre. The author relates a little known history of the 1916 Uprising, which broke in the Russian Central Asia during the World War I, by focusing his book on the lives of several individuals on both sides of the conflict. At the center of the book are two stories: one of the Russian secret police officer Valdimir Zhelezniakov and the other of the local chief, Kanat Abukin. Both characters offer fascinating insights into the everyday life in the region and the nature of the uprising. They allow the author to portray the events from two different perspectives, those of the Russian colonial rulers and the Kazakh nomads.

Yet here lies the first methodological challenge of this genre: how typical are the protagonists: a competent Russian officer sympathetic of the locals and conscious of the flaws of the Russian colonial rule, and the Kazakh chief who at first collaborated with the Russians before leading his people against them? To what extent do they represent the two sides in the conflict? Happel is aware of the problem but maintains that „das sie für Typisches im Untypischen stehen“ (p. 290). While Hegel himself might have been proud of this statement, it does little to address the issue.

After all, as Happel indicates in his overview of the Uprising, this was a chaotic event of enormous proportions resulting in 250,000

nomads fleeing into the Chinese borderlands and the death of 20,000 Russians and between 100,000-200,000 nomads. Locally, the Uprising is referred to as *Urkun*, which means exodus. Can several *Lebenswelten* in the book serve as a substitute for a broad and thorough examination of the Russian policies and the indigenous responses? Happel does offer a good and competent overview of the state of affairs in the region and the causes of the uprising (settlement policies, land disputes, the ideology of the Russian civilizing mission, draft resistance) but these are already well known issues. We hear less about other pervasive aspects of Russian colonialism, such as the increased indebtedness of the native population, the intrusion of the Russian legal system, the role of the Islamic clergy in the uprising, and the persistent fears of forced conversion to Christianity.

For Happel the 1916 Uprising symbolized the end of the Russian colonial policies and the beginning of the end of the empire (p. 56), just as the 1898 Uprising in Andijan was a symptom of the collapse of the imperial center. This is clearly a retroactive conclusion. The trouble in the colonies may not necessarily lead to the collapse of a center or a demise of a colonial rule. For example, neither the independence of the British North American colonies led to the end of the British empire, nor the 1859 Sepoy Uprising in British India led immediately to the collapse of the British rule there.

A very extensive and well-documented discussion of the two protagonists leads the author to conclude that there was no clear dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized, and that they all were a part of the colonial society (p. 325). This is an example of the problematic methodology. His „akteurszentrierte Kolonialgeschichte“ (p. 306) focused on two specific individuals whose stories may indeed point out to the porous boundaries between a colonizer and colonized. But to conclude that there was no dichotomy is surely to move from one extreme to another. Otherwise what was the Uprising all about?

Indeed, this is part of a bigger problem. In the end, we learn little about the nuts and bolts of the Uprising. After all, this was an enormously violent event, where the coloni-

zers suppressed the colonized with extraordinary brutality. By contrast, we know far more about the US treatment of the Native Americans or the German actions in Namibia. Clearly, one needs a better balance combining the micro and macro histories.

Three other larger issues deserve a few critical words. Two of them seem to be a peculiar affliction of the German academia. First, there is a love of a footnote. On most of the pages in the book, the text occupies less space than the footnotes. The footnote is there to substantiate the author's argument, not to quote everything and everyone marginally related to the subject. At this rate of publishing, there will be no text left among the obligatory quotations.

Secondly, there seems to be little if any filtering of a dissertation into a published book. Happel's book sometimes reads like a stream of consciousness. His chapters resemble the big cooking pots into which he throws many ingredients, which sometimes add the spice and character, sometimes are superfluous. Any good editor could have pointed out how to eliminate the unessential parts, to streamline the prose, and impose a more disciplined narrative.

Thirdly and this seems to be a more universal problem these days, there is a desire to validate one's work by showing how it fits into a trendy theory. Happel starts his book with a lengthy discussion of his methodology based on the ideas of Habermas and other conceptual approaches. Even his Conclusions are mostly devoted to justifying his approach and methodology rather than discussing the material. It seems to this reviewer that by and large the historian's task is to begin with the empirical data and only then to see whether and how it may fit into the existing theories or lead to the new ones, not the other way around.

In the end, all of the issues raised above should not distract from the fact that Happel wrote a very informative, competent, and important book on a little known subject. His writing style is fluid, his analysis is thoughtful and nuanced, and his approach is creative. It is a work of a diligent scholar with creative thinking and nuanced interpretations. As such, there is every reason to look forward to his future publications.

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