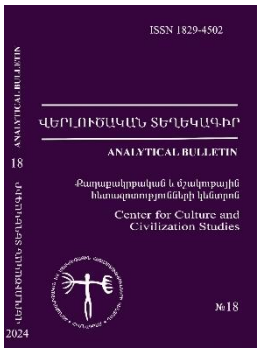

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"*Stephen Badalyan Riegg, Russia's Entangled Embrace. The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians, 1801–1914, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2020. xiv + 314 pp. $48.95 (Hardcover)*"

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BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Badalyan Riegg, Russia's Entangled Embrace. The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians, 1801–1914, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2020. xiv + 314 pp. $48.95 (Hardcover)

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There are few monographs available on the history of encounters between Russian imperial policies and Armenians. Stephen Badalyan Riegg's book is, therefore, a rare and valuable publication in English on this topic in recent years.

From the outset of his work, the author warns readers about the absence of Armenian sources in the analysis. It should be assumed that he recognizes the potential incompleteness of the picture due to this choice. The utilization of Armenian sources should not be pursued solely for the sake of vague impartiality; rather, it's essential for understanding the nature of Empire-Armenian relationships. Relying solely on tsarist materials risks leading to misguided conclusions. Armenian perspectives are underrepresented in the book, and even when Armenian literature is cited, references are made to the Russian translation (Khachatur Abovyan's, *Verk 'Hayastani*) or secondary English translation of original accounts ('Iron Ladle '*yerkat'e sherep'* speech of Khrimyan Hayrig).

Once the reader gets used to the absence of Armenian voices, it is an otherwise elegantly composed book which traces the century-long history of Armenians under tsarist rule throughout six chapters, arranged chronologically. Riegg is candid and clear in outlining the methodological and analytical frameworks utilized in his book. He aims to examine the impact of "strategic disagreements" and professional conflicts among tsarist agents on their interactions with Armenian clerics and merchants. He therefore "presents an intimate portrayal of the protagonists' actions and ambitions, allowing the

reader to appreciate the subjective, and at times even emotional, investments of the historical actors" (p.9). The sources used for achieving these tasks are primarily Russian.

Chapter one delves into the emergence of Armenians as the principal allies of imperial Russia during the early 19th century and examines the reasons behind this partnership. Chapter two reveals how statesmen categorized Armenians into different stereotypes such as diligent frontiersmen, opportunistic minorities, political allies, loyal companions, and influential intermediaries. Chapter three illustrates the struggles of the autocracy in integrating various segments of its Armenian diaspora during Tsar Nicholas I's reign (1825–1855), particularly in standardizing tax laws and religious statutes governing Armenian subjects. It also provides an intriguing overview of debates among tsarist ministers in the mid-19th century regarding whether the South Caucasus constituted a colony or an integral part of Russia.

Chapter four explores how imperial officials navigated sensitive discussions among Armenians regarding their national identity, the ongoing partnership between the state and Ejmiatsin in international affairs, and the initial signs of Russian skepticism regarding Armenian socio-political reliability. It also traces the earliest indications of political activism among Eastern Armenians. Chapter five outlines the growing apprehensions surrounding Armenian nationalism, often leading to stigmatization and comparisons with Jews. Chapter six demonstrates the tightening control exerted by the Tsarist Empire over Armenians until 1905.

The book elucidates a subtle yet seemingly consistent correlation between the usage of the term "minorities" and its almost invariably associated context. Minorities pose challenges. Their categorization as such, rather than simply as non-Russian or non-Orthodox subjects, appears directly linked to issues of rights and insubordination. The majority of instances where Armenians are referred to as minorities pertain to their portrayal as the Christian Armenian minority of the Ottoman Empire or neighbouring Persia. Within the context of the Russian Empire, the majority of references to Armenians as minorities occured during the late 19th and early 20th centuries – a period marked by a significant deterioration in relations between the empire and its

Armenian inhabitants. It was during this era that Armenians transitioned from being merely a minority to being labeled a seditious minority (p. 160).

From this perspective, this book (or rather the story it endeavors to convey) can also be interpreted as a chronicle of the trajectory of Armenians, evolving from partners and agents of imperial expansion, a relationship perceived as mutually advantageous, to becoming a distrusted minority in a modern empire as it entered the 20th century. Riegg contends that the tsars relied, or at least aspired to rely, on stateless Armenians, their clergy, and merchants to establish the empire's presence in the Caucasus, extend influence into the Ottoman and Persian Empires, and reap economic benefits from the trans-imperial network of Armenian merchants. While gauging the level of success of these endeavors is challenging and subjective, it appears that by the late 19th century, certain high-ranking tsarist officials grew increasingly skeptical, viewing the aforementioned policy as largely unsuccessful. Furthermore, instead of evolving into trans-imperial agents of Russian diplomatic and economic expansion, the Armenians came to be perceived as a disloyal community tainted by revolutionary and nationalist ideologies.

Throughout the text, some statements require a more careful critical analysis. One could challenge the assertion regarding the enduring strength of ties between the Armenian Apostolic and Russian Orthodox Churches since their adoption of Christianity in 301 by Armenians and 988 by Eastern Slavs. This assertion warrants reconsideration on several fronts. Prior to the 19th and 20th centuries, there is scant evidence of significant connections between the Armenian and Russian churches. Throughout the Middle Ages, Russian Orthodox clergy generally regarded Armenian faith as heretical. It wasn't until the period of tsarist expansion and the growing necessity for political reconciliation with Armenians that the Russian Orthodox Church began contemplating meaningful dialogue with their counterparts in Ejmiatsin and beyond.

Interestingly, there is also a notable absence of information regarding Armenians in Baku, the foremost industrial hub of Transcaucasia. Likewise, there is minimal mention of the tsarist

agency during the Armenian-Tatar (Armenian-Azerbaijani) conflicts in the early 20th century.

Riegg concludes that the "Empire's Armenian project yielded more triumphs than defeats" (p. 237). Crucially, for both this book and scholars of nationality and minority policies, Riegg asserts that imperial governance was not only characterized by inequality (a commonly discussed and recognized aspect) but it was also messy. Moreover, it was brimming with possibilities that extended beyond the success of individual representatives of a particular national group, such as the Armenians in this case. Riegg further argues that Russia fell short of transforming Armenians into not only loyal but also compliant subjects.

This argument, rooted in the examination of 19th-century history, will later prove significantly relevant for understanding Soviet policies in the 20th century, their successes, and their failures concerning the Armenian collective identity. Moreover, the book is a timely contribution to the evolving debate on the current Russian-Armenian affairs. Hence, Stephen Badalyan Riegg has made an important accomplishment, not only of interest to scholars of empires in general but also to those affected by ongoing transformations in Armenia and in the South Caucasus.

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