

Macalester College

From the Selected Works of Gitta Hammarberg, Retired

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Schönle, Andreas, *The Ruler in the Garden:
Politics and Landscape Design in Imperial Russia*

Gitta Hammarberg, *Macalester College*



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between individual deviance on the one hand and social disorder and political conflict on the other.

This collection is an important contribution to our understanding of the ways in which the shifting discourse of madness offers a rich and varied lens through which to explore Russia's troubled experience of modernity.

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Schönle, Andreas. *The Ruler in the Garden: Politics and Landscape Design in Imperial Russia*. Russian Transformations: Literature, Thought, Culture, 1. Peter Lang, Bern, Oxford and New York, 2007. 395 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. €70.00: £45.50: \$90.95 (paperback).

IMPERIAL Russian gardens provide fertile soil for Andreas Schönle to dig in, and dig he does, unearthing layers of imperial and local aspirations, 'choreographies' of power, ethical and aesthetic ideals, self-fashioning, leisure and theatricality. Gardens show the shifting borders between European and national allegiances, private and public, artifice and nature. These categories are fuzzy and the Russian estate embodies the creativity and ambiguity characteristic of mythical constructs.

Four chapters, following a cogent introduction, focus on individual landowners, aptly chosen to highlight different aspects of gardening. Schönle draws on archival and published accounts: landscaping manuals, memoirs, letters, visitors' accounts, newspapers, journals, as well as the inscriptions, signs, poems and directives physically present in gardens. Engravings, maps and paintings are nicely reproduced and analysed.

The first chapter concerns Catherine II's cultivation of empire. Her early projects at Oranienbaum and her English garden at Tsarskoe Selo are explored through her memoirs, correspondence, translation of and (more surprising) critical amendments to Thomas Whatley's gardening manual, which she intended to publish for Russian emulation. Her 'plantomania' is reflected in her 'legislomania' in Schönle's new reading of the *Nakaz* illustrations, and the famous Minerva-Catherine celebrations gain depth when he foregrounds Minerva as goddess of gardening. Gardening choreographed Catherine's imperial aspirations as a benign alternative to 'male' war. The semiotics of Eden fuse with 'Moscow the Third Rome' doctrines, Catherine's 'Greek Project' and Potemkin's 'Amazon regiments' to define Russia's annexation of Crimea.

In the second chapter gardening reflects noblemen's career ambitions. A. T. Bolotov designed wondrous garden conceits to surprise his guests. They were coordinated with his paintings, writings and oral performances of artistic credo and, though designed for display, they also concealed serfdom's cruelties. While Bolotov faithfully managed some of Catherine's estates, A. B. Kurakin's estate served as an antidote to his disgrace at Catherine's court and

expressed his oppositional politics. Like Catherine he was conversant with European gardening, and like Bolotov he obsessively inscribed his garden and documented it in engravings, maps and literary texts. His socio-political inclinations are particularly evident in the provisions he made for heirs and serfs, and their reactions. His reformist concerns surprisingly also confirm his sympathies for a social status quo.

Bolotov's and Kurakin's affinities for Sentimentalism and the picturesque (e.g., Kurakin's perusal of Claude-Henri Watelet) might have been better integrated with the chapter on N. M. Karamzin and picturesque aesthetics. Karamzin's travel discourse shows a picturesque intersection of painted and natural landscapes and is linked to self-fashioning and the progressive European Enlightenment values he envisioned for a new Russian culture, but also shows his ambivalent embrace of modernity. In his late fiction, set in Russia, the picturesque paradoxically allows him to reconcile progress and modernity with conservative politics. Might not the same logic hold for Kurakin and Bolotov?

The Aksakovs reacted against picturesque aestheticization of nature and history and the concomitant solipsism. They rebelled against the conflation of European and Russian values, fashionable gardening contrivances and Western melancholy so enthusiastically evoked earlier. They preferred unmediated immersion in nature (e.g. fishing and hunting) and a Russian spirituality, expressed in their benign neglect of landscaping. They nevertheless had to fudge their idealized Russianness when faced with the ethnic realities of the distant steppes they roamed or with their own economic needs for serf labour.

Ethical ambiguities and moral self-fashioning culminate in L. N. Tolstói's approach to Russian estates in *War and Peace* and at Iasnaia Poliana. Schönle proves that Tolstói was not the enthusiastic proponent of estate life generally presented. Through critical scrutiny, Tolstói was more apt to debunk than embrace the Russian estate mythology. The estate was for him a site for moral quest, work and struggle, erotic temptation, and social and political doubt.

Chapter six summarizes the fragility of the myth of the Russian estate as a blissful garden and the vulnerability of landowners, caught between autocracy, local concerns, and individual freedom.

The afterword fast-forwards to the current nostalgia for a usable Russian estate past (detailed in the preceding chapters), reflected in the distorting mirror of gardening publications and businesses, restoration projects, estate tourism, scholarship, films and the boom in private estates and dachas. It is jam-packed with information, yet it makes less sense as a reaction to *Soviet* gardening, relegated to sporadic references. That would warrant another book.

This book is a gem — and a felicitous choice for launching Andrew Kahn's new series, *Russian Transformations: Literature, Thought, and Culture*.

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