Review of Russian Entrepreneur: Publisher Ivn Sytin of Moscow, 1851-1934, by C.A. Ruud

James H. Krukones, John Carroll University

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However, Brower notes that mere figures tell us nothing of the subjective meaning of such mobility. Instead, he argues that more attention should be devoted to the conditions created by urban migration—especially since these newcomers personified poverty and disorder to tsarist provincial administrators, Westernized intellectuals and municipal leaders alike. Brower rejects efforts to analyze urban migration and behavior either in terms of the traditional polarity of peasant vs. worker or of their life cycle in terms of age, family and social ties. Instead, he sees the central issue as the manner in which the migrants occupied urban space for their own purposes and used what the French writer Michel de Certeau called “spatial practices,” i.e., the invention of behavioral skills to cope with the strangeness of the city and to become part of an alien territory. Central to this process, too, was anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of the “liminal period,” a time involving rites of separation, companionship and adaptation. Such concepts clearly indicate Professor Brower’s broad erudition and lend a certain social-scientific cachet to the phenomenon of migrant cities. Yet, the concrete realities behind them are already well documented in such studies of urban worker life as, among others, Bradley’s, Robert Thurston’s Liberal City, Conservative State, Robert E. Johnson’s Peasant and Proletarian, Rose Glickman’s Russian Factory Women, and Reginald Zelnik’s Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia. They were, quite simply, the social, public health, medical and educational problems of these new urban dwellers, along with their seeming potential for crime, their pauperism, their lack of adequate housing, their popular diversions, their alcoholism.

But just as the latter chapters represent a synthesis of the current historical literature on these problems, so too they take note of the emergence of efforts to counter them: educational and “culturist” attempts to raise the level of the urban migrants, the public health movement, public and private charitable organizations and the temperance movement. If the monograph does not deal as uniformly or as fully with these latter areas as it might, this in no way detracts from its ultimate value. Indeed, by focusing on them Professor Brower has identified them as topics for future research and has defined an agenda for their discussion for the foreseeable future.

However, there is one major cavil. The use of discriminant analysis to allow comparison of urban areas with widely varying populations to arrive at common traits shared by them is basic to the book. Yet this methodology, along with the basic assumptions affecting the author’s manipulation of the data, are included only in a highly technical, albeit tightly written Appendix. This discussion deserves a separate section of its own because its technical nature would detract from the smooth narrative flow of the rest of the book. However, one might wish for its placement at the front as a logical introduction to this fine work, rather than at the end almost as an afterthought.

George E. Snow

Shippensburg University of Pa.


Charles Ruud has been enriching our knowledge of the press and censorship in late Imperial Russia for the past twenty years. In his most recent book he examines the remarkable career of its premier publisher Ivan Sytin (1851-1934).

Of peasant origin, Sytin developed a flair for business while still a teenager. Apprenticed to a Moscow merchant who also printed and sold pictures for peasants,
Sytin learned the ropes of the publishing trade and familiarized himself with popular reading tastes. In 1879 he became an independent publisher, moving into quarters across the Moscow River from the Kremlin. Over the next four decades Sytin’s fortunes grew, along with the scope of his publishing activity. Targeting newly literate peasants as his audience, he turned out pictures, booklets, cheap versions of the classics, and a phenomenally successful line of calendars (by 1893, his company could take credit for 70 percent of all calendars published in Russia). Hoping to improve his reputation among the intelligentsia, he joined forces with Tolstoi to provide the masses with good books through the Mediator (Posrednik) series. He also began to publish school textbooks, eventually capturing more than one-fifth of the domestic market.

Sytin’s most challenging enterprise was the newspaper Russian Word (Russkoe slovo), which he founded in 1894 and gradually transformed into a large-circulation, progressive daily, edited for a time by the Marxist economist N. V. Valentinov. Its growing influence guaranteed official harassment. With a circulation approaching one million, Russian Word grew increasingly critical of the autocracy during the First World War and, according to the author, “unquestionably played a major role in spreading disaffection with the imperial regime.”

On the eve of the 1917 Revolutions, Sytin was responsible for printing one-quarter of Russia’s books. Within a few months, his publishing empire had ceased to exist. The Bolshevik government confiscated his property, turning the Russian Word plant over to Izvestia, and even briefly jailed his former owner. Lenin’s utilization of old-regime expertise enabled Sytin to work for Gosizdat and later undertake a couple of overseas fundraising missions. The post-Leninist Soviet state, however, had no use for Sytin. He endured its abuse until his death in 1934.

Ruud’s biography benefits from crisp writing and thorough research, much of it in Soviet archives. It tells the story of a Russian Horatio Alger, a canny muzhik who spiritually enriched his homeland while materially enriching himself. To what degree Sytin acted out of selfish motives, and to what degree out of altruistic ones, may well be impossible to determine, but the author carefully considers the possibilities throughout the book. Equally praiseworthy is his attempt to place Sytin within the context of a country, and an industry, that were experiencing the pangs of modernization, and indeed whose modernization Sytin himself advanced. (The publisher faced labor unrest as as his enterprises grew but defused it with policies wiser and more generous than those of his government.) Sytin’s relations with the celebrities of his era also receive due attention, including not only Tolstoi but also Chekhov, Gor’kii, Alexander III, Nicholas II, and even Rasputin, whom the publisher detested. Ruud might have done more in applying the concepts of Joseph Schumpeter to explain Sytin. Nevertheless Russian Entrepreneur assumes a prominent place amidst the growing scholarship on Imperial Russia’s social and cultural history.

James H. Krukones

John Carroll University


This is a fine collection of essays on peasant life in the period between the emancipation and the revolutions of 1917. All the essays have appeared previously as arti-