Creating Emperors: Catherine II, Nicholas II, and the Shifting Paradigms of Political Legitimacy in Imperial Russia

Edward Mahabir, 2015

The main objective of my project was to explore the theme of political legitimacy in Imperial Russia and answer the questions, “What was the source of imperial power in Russia?” and “How did tsars secure their legitimacy?” To answer these questions I specifically focused my research on the reigns of two iconic and characteristically different Russian leaders: Catherine II, The Great (r. 1762-1796) and the last tsar, Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917). Very early on in my research I realized that there was no single clear-cut answer to the questions I was posing. Each succession required the establishment of a new (or reassertion of an already-established) imperial myth that fit the incoming monarch’s ambitions, background, and personality as well as the Empire’s cultural and political landscape. Furthermore, even during the course of a single reign, the imperial power paradigm could shift drastically as a result of major events such as domestic uprisings and international conflicts. Thus, I found that my project quickly became more layered and complex than I had originally imagined. Rather than merely comparing and contrasting the imperial myths that dominated the reigns of Catherine the Great and Nicholas II, I also found myself tracing the evolution of these individual myths through each of these two epochs.

At the outset of her reign, Catherine’s power was sourced from a well-crafted combination of masculine projections, comparisons to classical deities, ties to Peter the Great, claims of “benevolent” rule, championing of European Enlightenment ideals, and the pre-nineteenth century Russian preoccupation with foreign rule. As her reign progressed, however, events such as the Pugachëv Rebellion and the Russo-Turkish Wars prompted Catherine to both accept and perpetuate new legitimizing strategies in addition to— or as replacements of— the various pre-existing myths. Among these were greater patronage of the gentry, increased central control over local government, and recognition as a competent military leader.

By contrast, Nicholas II’s reign was one in which tsarist authority was projected through a conservative imperial myth in which patrimony, Orthodoxy, tradition, and nationalism were the paramount components. Like Catherine the Great, Nicholas II was tested by a changing political and cultural landscape. However, the latter tsar failed to use landmark events such as the 1905 Revolution, Russo-Japanese War, and First World War as instigators of real and meaningful reform. As a result, Nicholas failed to keep the monarchy in sync with a rapidly evolving power paradigm, and in so doing, lost his legitimacy and mandate to rule.

Ultimately, I believe the most important lesson to be learned from my project is that no power is truly absolute. Even in a system as “absolutist” and seemingly invincible as the Russian Imperial Tsardom, political power was ultimately a construct— one that constantly needed to be reinforced by elaborate myths and realigned with the visions of individual monarchs as well as the political climate of the period in order to succeed and survive. This was a lesson that Catherine the Great seemingly understood; one that Nicholas II learned the hard way; and one that the leaders of the twenty-first century should be mindful of— both in Russia and the world over.

Faculty Mentors: Page Herrlinger, Leah Zuo

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Research Fellowship