
A PORTRAIT OF
Catherine Evtuhov

BY RONALD MEYER



Philosophers (Portrait of Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov) by Mikhail Nesterov (1917). *Opposite page:* Catherine Evtuhov.

Catherine Evtuhov, professor of history, is now finishing up her second year at Columbia, after being lured away from Georgetown University—her first teaching appointment after defending her Berkeley dissertation in 1991—where she had been happily teaching and writing for a quarter century. Though to be fair, she was hardly a stranger to Columbia before her new appointment. She is a long-standing member of Richard Wortman’s History Workshop; a founding member of Valentina Izmirlieva’s Black Sea Networks initiative, run out of Columbia’s Department of Slavic Languages; and coeditor, with Columbia colleagues Boris Gasparov and Mark von Hagen, and Alexander Ospovat from UCLA, of the collection *Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg: Multiple Faces of the Russian Empire* (1997), the fruits of a conference held in Kazan three years earlier.

We met on a sunny February day, the light streaming into her Fayerweather office. The ponderous oak desk that had dominated the room previously had been banished in favor of a modern table just right for small groups and conversation. We talked about, among other things, her current projects, her books, and becoming a historian just at the time when the Soviet Union fell apart.

As Evtuhov is quick to acknowledge, she landed at Berkeley at a very good moment. Graduate school in the 1980s was still “open minded and open ended and a true learning experience.” Her dissertation was guided by Nicholas Riasanovsky and Martin Malia—the latter in many ways the intellectual inspiration for the dissertation. In fact, a decade later she would coedit with Stephen Kotkin *The Cultural Gradient: The Transmission of Ideas in Europe, 1789–1991*, dedicated to Malia’s scholarship. The research for her dissertation on the religious philosopher Sergei Bulgakov came at an exceptionally propitious moment, as she was able to reap the benefits of Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost in the form of newly opened archives. Subtitled “A Study in Modernism and Society in Russia in 1900–1918,” her dissertation—which she would rework into her first book, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890–1920* (1997)—represented an attempt to understand the cultural and spiritual movement in the Russian Silver Age as a historical phenomenon in its own right and to rescue this period “from the shadow of the Russian Revolution,” which for obvious reasons had dominated historical inquiry on that period. Evtuhov found the nexus for her study in religion, since

many prominent intellectuals had attempted to make social change through the church, which led her to the whole notion of religious reformation and the Church Council of 1917–18. The council’s documents had been under seal for decades, and she had unsurprisingly been denied access when beginning her dissertation research in the Soviet Union, only to have them become available some months later.

She defended her dissertation in 1991, and then the Soviet Union fell apart. “The ’90s were like a festival. I was able to go to Russia, pose new questions, talk and collaborate with colleagues in Russia in new and meaningful ways.” And it was in this almost giddy atmosphere that the seductive opportunity to write a post-Soviet history of Russia arrived. “My wonderful Georgetown colleague Richard Stites had this offer, and it seemed like an interesting project: to write the history of Russia at the moment when history itself had changed. Although we thought our idea of the Soviet Union would change a great deal with information from the archives, etc., it actually didn’t. Interpretations of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, changed dramatically. And I got to be one of the people doing that.” *A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces—Since 1800* came out in 2003; Evtuhov wrote the chapters on the long nineteenth century, ending in 1914, and Stites took the twentieth century. The volume ends with her other contribution: the first large-scale synthetic account of the three waves of Russian emigration in the twentieth century, by no means a standard component of a history of Russia but one which might be read as a tribute to her grandparents, who immigrated to the United States from the postwar displaced persons camps in Germany. The book includes a personal photo of a German mili-

tary barrack turned Russian Orthodox Church, the center of religious and cultural life, from the camp in Schleissheim, outside Munich. She had first approached the topic of the earlier interwar Russian emigration as a graduate student in Paris at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques, but she ultimately





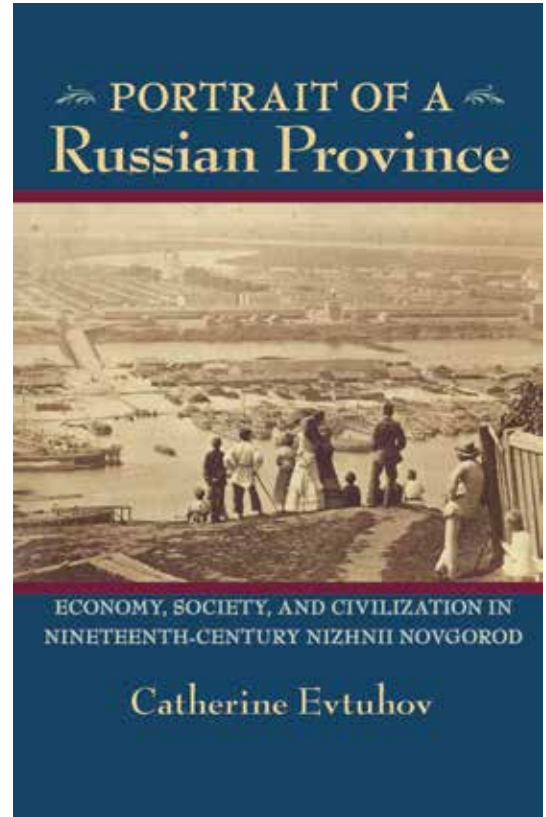
Nizhny Novgorod. Lower Bazaar by Alexei Bogolyubov (1878).

wrote her French thesis on economic relations between France and Indochina, which she researched in the New York Public Library.

Evtuhov is best known for her prize-winning *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod* (2011). At a time when studies of borderlands, empires, and the non-Russian nationalities dominated historical inquiry, Evtuhov was consumed by the feeling that we really did not understand how Russia itself functioned. “I had the hypothesis that a study of the province would contradict many of the assumptions about how Russia works. The big narrative, which is centrally structured and linear, would fall apart, and we could put it together in new and interesting ways.” *Portrait of a Russian Province* is not local or regional history, the domain of *kraevedenie* in Russian, but rather it views the province as “an integral and indispensable part of a larger historical narrative.” In other words, the book presents a

slice—and it could be any slice, she says—to illustrate how connections work and how people interact and how the economy functions. Before Evtuhov, the standard view of the provinces had it that these were peasant lands, thus industry and artisanal trades were largely ignored. In nineteenth-century Russia, however, heavy industry was often located outside the cities; moreover, the stereotype of cultural backwardness seemed suspect to her, given many indicators, including the number of important cultural figures in the Russian Silver Age from provincial backgrounds. As she told a Georgetown University reporter, “While I was working on this book, I had a very strong sense of swimming against the current or wanting to undermine approaches and paradigms that had dominated the field of Russian history for many decades.”

Going to Nizhnii Novgorod in the early 1990s was an adventure. From 1932 the city had been known as Gorky (named for the author of *Mother*, a native son) and had



View of the Nizhnii Novgorod Kremlin from one of the streets that slopes down into the town. Photo by Catherine Evtuhov (2007).

become a “closed” city after the war, until it reassumed its original name in 1991. Andrei Sakharov and his wife, Elena Bonner, lived in exile there for much of the 1980s. Evtuhov went to the university, unannounced, and visited faculty members, who quickly offered to take care of all the permissions required for living and working in the city. They found her a place to live in accommodations outside the city, in Sormovo, a working-class neighborhood since the 1840s, from which she commuted via a sardine-packed bus. She had full access to the library and archives. During Soviet times regional studies, like so many topics, had been proscribed and difficult to publish; and so librarians had occupied themselves with the next best thing—namely, organizing and cataloging the archives. To a certain extent, the portrait of the province had been created for her in outline to find and interpret.

Evtuhov’s approach is entirely “space-specific”: “Human beings’ activities are played out in entirely concrete

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surroundings, and we must first understand specific, locally circumscribed interactions before proceeding to analysis in terms of sociological categories (class, status, civil society) or generalized historical processes (industrialization, modernization, urbanization).” As a result, one is immediately struck by the physicality and tactile nature of her descriptions of the “soil, forest, river: the ecology of provincial life”—categories then largely absent from the Russian historian’s arsenal of analytical tools. To this Evtuhov adds portraits in the more conventional sense; for example, the great and at the same time typical



Alexander Gatsisky
(1838–93). Photo by
Andrei Karelin.

Alexander Gatsisky (1838–93), who appears throughout *Portrait of a Province* and dominates the final chapter in particular. Gatsisky, like his counterparts throughout the Russian provinces, was responsible for organizing statistical investigations of artisanal production; published local guidebooks and histories; championed the provincial press; and came up with the principle of “province as total biography,” by which the history of a province can be captured through telling the stories of all the people who ever lived there. Following his example, Evtuhov interweaves his life story into the events of local history, thereby inscribing his personal biography into the larger story.

Sergei Bulgakov, whose *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* Evtuhov translated for Yale University Press (2000), reappears in this same chapter as another figure who contributed to the idea of province. As she explains, for Bulgakov “economy was conceived as the working, interactive relation of man and nature”; the essential economic functions are production and consumption. “The economic process itself—inspired by Sophia, the Divine Wisdom—becomes the creative essence of human existence.” Evtuhov credits Bulgakov’s philosophy of economy for setting her on the path to look at the province as a whole, taking into account the physical environment, and local administrative structures and services, and finally understanding economy as politics: “the transformation of material existence (*byt*) is politics or *becomes* politics.”

Portrait of a Russian Province was awarded the prestigious Wayne S. Vucinich Book Prize by the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) for her paradigm-shifting treatment of the Russian province.

“The book offers a deeply pleasurable reading experience and provides a strong impulse for scholars to rethink the dynamics and texture of Russian life in the late imperial era.”

—ASEEES

To quote an excerpt from the citation:

“She examines Nizhnii Novgorod both as a concrete space (soil, rivers, ravines, urban spaces, market networks) and as an imagined project for local intellectuals, professionals and activists in the post-reform period. . . . [The book] offers a deeply pleasurable

reading experience and provides a strong impulse for scholars to rethink the dynamics and texture of Russian life in the late imperial era.” (One does not read the phrase “deeply pleasurable reading experience” often enough in praise of academic writing.)

We moved on eventually to discuss current projects, of which three are listed on her curriculum vitae: (1) *Russia in the Age of Elizabeth (1741–1761)*; (2) *New Directions in Russian Environmental History*; and (3) *This Side of Good and Evil: Vladimir Soloviev for the Twenty-First Century*.

As Evtuhov remarked, one can observe her creeping back in time, from the early twentieth century, then spending a long time on the nineteenth, and now happily ensconced in the middle of the eighteenth. She explained that she became aware of the very large blank spot between the two Greats, Peter and Catherine, and yet Elizabeth ruled for twenty years. And it had been a brilliant and important reign, which Catherine tried to obscure as much as possible. Evtuhov is modeling her work on Isabel de Madariaga’s magisterial *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (1981), hence the allusion to the title.

It should come as no surprise to the reader of *Portrait of a Russian Province* that Evtuhov has embraced the study of Russian environmental history. For over a decade she has been a member of a working group with scholars from Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, which in 2013 received a Leverhulme Trust Grant for “Exploring Russia’s Environmental History and Natural Resources.” The funding has allowed them to organize a series of conferences in places as diverse as Solovki, Lake Baikal, and Chernobyl. In July 2016, Evtuhov organized the conference “Industry, Mining, Transport, and Industrial Heritage Tourism,” which took the group to Ekaterinburg and Perm. Her “Postcard from the Ural Mountains”—detailing the group’s travels to the Romanov salt mines in Perm, which date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the eighteenth-century iron foundries in Ekaterinburg, which catapulted Russia into its place as the biggest iron exporter in Europe on the eve of the “industrial revolution,” not to mention underground lakes and magnificent wooden architecture—can be accessed on the website *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, published by the Ohio State University and Miami University.

Together with David Moon (York University) and Julia Lajus (Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg), Evtuhov received a Rachel Carson Center Fellowship and spent a month in the summer of 2017 in Munich



Clockwise from upper left: Stroganov residence at Usolye, 1720s; map of Nizhniy Novgorod, created from OpenStreetMap project data (2015); Factory-Museum of Nizhniy Tagil—a metallurgical plant that had functioned consistently from the first half of the eighteenth century up until the 1980s. Photos of Stroganov residence and Factory-Museum by Catherine Evtuhov (2007).

assembling a volume of articles from the group on Russian environmental history over several centuries, to be accompanied by a substantial, coauthored interpretative introduction, formulating the current “state of the art” of this relatively young field. She hopes to meet with her coauthors this summer to wrap things up.

She is currently completing a précis on Vladimir Soloviev for the *Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Philosophy* and also envisions a very brief book, written for nonspecialists, that highlights what is interesting about this poet and pamphleteer, who is best known for his religious philosophy but is also

an environmental philosopher and is considered by many to be Russia’s foremost academic philosopher. A signal feature of Soloviev’s thought is that it builds a philosophical system whose point of departure is not the isolated self but the self in productive, loving interaction with another person.

Evtuhov is the editor of the collected volume *Across the Black Sea: Russian–Ottoman Encounters in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, which will be published as a special issue of the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. Her engagement with Black Sea studies goes back to the late ‘90s, when she first taught what is now a staple course



on the Black Sea in history and politics. She started learning Turkish in the '90s and spent a Fulbright year in Turkey, living on the banks of the Bosphorus and teaching Russian history to Turkish students. As she explained to me, while she did not jump on the borderlands and empire bandwagon, what she found interesting was the idea of Europe and its peripheries; her particular interests were the Ottoman Empire and Spain. She even delivered a paper on the “Spanish *Anna Karenina*,” penned by Clarin (Leopoldo Alas).

In mid-May 2018, Evtuhov will convene a conference at the Harriman Institute in collaboration with *Kritika* as its

special projects editor. She hopes that this will become a regular event, every two years. The conference, “Information in the Russian-Eurasian Space,” is an attempt to introduce the notions of communication and knowledge as important historical factors.

For now, Evtuhov eagerly looks forward to her sabbatical next year, to forge ahead with Elizabeth and take a breather from the administrative grind. ■

Books (authored and coauthored)

Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. Wayne S. Vucinich Book Prize for “the most important contribution to Russian, Eurasian, and East European studies in any discipline of the humanities or social sciences,” Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), 2012.

A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces—Since 1800. With Richard Stites. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 2003. —Also published in full-length version as *A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces.* With Richard Stites, Lindsey Hughes, and David Goldfrank. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 2004.

—Turkish translation as *1800'den İtibaren Rusya Tarihi: Halklar, Efsaneler, Olaylar, Güçler.* Istanbul: İslık. Forthcoming.

The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890–1920. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Books (edited and coedited)

Across the Black Sea: Russian-Ottoman Encounters in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Special issue of *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History.* Forthcoming.

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Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household.* Edited, translated, and with Introduction. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000; paperback edition, 2014.

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