

**Julia LEIKIN**

Robert E. Jones, *Bread upon the Waters: The St. Petersburg Grain Trade and the Russian Economy, 1703–1811* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013). 298 pp. Bibliography. Index. ISBN: 978-0-8229-4428-7.

In *Bread upon the Waters*, Robert E. Jones makes a strong case for viewing the daily activities of large social groups in imperial Russia in the long eighteenth century from an economic perspective. The book explicates the dynamics of the Russian grain trade over the course of the eighteenth century while engaging with major themes in Russian historiography: economic policy and commerce, estate management, and geographic determinism. Jones explores the implications of designating St. Petersburg, a strategically situated port, as the capital of an empire by demonstrating how this move created and shaped a grain market

that extended down into the Russian heartland. *Bread upon the Waters* lays out the entire supply chain, from the soil to the table, which formed in an effort to bring provisions to the capital, highlighting both the individual entrepreneurship in transporting the grain as well as government efforts to regulate the price of bread in the capital. Through this excursion Jones sets up his explanation for the sudden and nearly continuous rise in the price of cereals in the second half of the eighteenth century.

*Bread upon the Waters* builds on some of Jones's earlier work on the grain trade,<sup>1</sup> and while the combined narrative falls outside of recent historiographical trends in imperial and cultural history, the book is very much aware of them. Jones sees this work as complementary to recent narratives of Russia's expansion.<sup>2</sup> For him, the acquisition of new territories could be seen as part of Russia's economic policy, driven by a need for seaports and fertile land for a growing population (P. 72).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Jones. Getting the Goods to St. Petersburg: Water Transport from the Interior 1703–1811 // *Slavic Review*. 1984. Vol. 43. No. 3. Pp. 413-433; Robert E. Jones. The Dnieper Trade Route in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: A Note // *The International History Review*. 1989. Vol. 11. No. 2. Pp. 303-312.

<sup>2</sup> Jones specifically mentions Willard Sunderland. *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*. Ithaca, NY, 2004, but the historiography on imperialism is expansive. See, for example, Jane Burbank, Mark Von Hagen, and A. V. Remnev (Eds.). *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930*. Bloomington, 2007; Michael Khodarkovsky. *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800*. Bloomington, 2002; Mark Bassin. *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865*. Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Compare to John LeDonne, who argued that Russia's expansion was first and foremost strategic. John P. LeDonne. *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650–1831*.

Whereas recent scholarship has emphasized other lenses through which to view human activity, Jones's narrative emphasizes "need for money as a motivator for human behavior" (P. 5). In contrast to the spate of academic literature on the peculiarities of imperial governance in particular regions, this book instead shows how a unified St. Petersburg grain market formed across several regions of the Russian Empire. The Russian Empire governed regions differently, emphasized diversity, and practiced tolerance, but in some ways it also integrated the space it controlled. *Bread upon the Waters* shows that territories capable of producing grain and delivering the surplus to the waterways along the St. Petersburg supply chain became integrated into that market, while other fertile regions did not.

The book casts a wide net across imperial Russia's social and economic relations, but it focuses mainly on two, somewhat contradictory trends: the government's efforts to enable merchants to conduct the business of bringing grain to St. Petersburg while keeping grain prices low for consumers. In his approach to this broad subject, Jones draws on a variety of sources. He introduces statistics to calculate the demand for cereals, and rye in particular, in St. Petersburg and to demonstrate the

difficulties of transporting grain to St. Petersburg. The cost of transportation made up at least half the price of a chetvert (about 5.6 bushels) of flour in the capital. He also draws on the debates in Russian government to show the logic of Russia's policy. These are a particularly interesting reflection of Russians' understanding of political economy in the eighteenth century. Moreover, many government policies, particularly regulation, were based on stereotypes about merchants, who were seen as duplicitous price-gougers, while policies to increase production of grain sought to return peasants to their "rightful" place in the fields. Neither the imperial government's efforts to supply its subjects with affordable bread nor the debates over the role of exports in its political economy were unique to imperial Russia. Russia's particularism emerges in the delicate balance the government sought to achieve in its grain policy in St. Petersburg.

In the opening chapter Jones introduces the structural and policy changes that made St. Petersburg Russia's main port. St. Petersburg's main river, the Neva, was connected to Russia's interior riverine network through a series of canals. This water transportation system made the flow of goods and provisions to St. Petersburg possible, and poli-

cies regulating exports from other cities ensured that goods for export would be routed to St. Petersburg. In this respect, cereals were different: while various regulations, including a tax-in-kind, ensured that provisions that were staples of the Russian diet would get to St. Petersburg, export of grains from St. Petersburg was either banned outright, or conditioned on the price of grain in Moscow. As the restrictions on grain export demonstrate, the imperial government recognized that it would need to make a choice between using the cereals delivered to St. Petersburg to provision the city and letting merchants export them to the international markets. At first, the imperial government saw cereals as different from other commodities, and treated them as such. Jones's point is that the supply route and policies that were established in the first quarter of the eighteenth century for St. Petersburg as a port shaped its grain market as well.

The relationship between the imperial government and the merchants, whose operations from collecting surplus grain in the provinces to selling flour in St. Petersburg were essential to the cereals trade, is one of the novel aspects of *Bread upon the Waters*. For merchants to guarantee delivery to St. Petersburg, they needed to clear a profit on the grain they bought and transported to St. Petersburg. As Jones shows

in chapter 2, the city's government worked hard at managing the balance between attracting cereals to St. Petersburg and keeping the prices low enough for consumers to be able to afford them. Suspicious of merchants, the government heavily regulated the city's flour markets, down to the times when merchants were allowed to sell flour in bulk. This vigilance shows the city government's dual role as both a regulator and a consumer of grains, which it bought to supply troop regiments and stock the public granary. Still, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, many of the restrictions on merchants were lifted. Catherine II's attitude even in the final decades of the eighteenth century was to "trust the free markets but not the merchants, who will conspire against it" (P. 55). But participation in the cereals trade, unlike trade in other goods, was not restricted to the merchant estate. Peasants and noblemen were also essential providers of surplus grain, although it was merchants who bought up small amounts to achieve the sizable mass that would eventually set out for the capital. Anecdotal evidence shows that some enterprising peasants not only participated in the grain trade but also were able to change their legal status as a result of their newly acquired roles. As Jones shows, when it came to the grain trade, the social and legal categories of mer-

chant, noble, and peasant appear to be rather fluid.

Chapter 5 provides insight into merchant business practices more generally, including the financial and legal instruments available to them in pursuance of their trade. This is commendable because, as Jones points out, our ability to learn about the merchant estate is severely limited by a lack of sources from this social group (P. 124). We also know little of their business as most merchants did not keep written records until compelled by the government in 1800, and many of the subjects in this chapter such as merchant courts and bankruptcy have not been explored in great depth by historians. But Jones presents Russia's commercial culture as being defined by the merchant estate itself. Even while the government redefined the merchants' privileges and obligations vis-à-vis the state in an effort to encourage commerce, there was otherwise little information exchange between the two. The government left the resolution of commercial disputes to merchant courts and over the course of the eighteenth century empowered them with greater oversight and regulations to ensure fairer business practices. In contrast to Viktor Zakharov, who has argued that the imperial government failed

to provide merchants with necessary tools such as education and access to credit to thrive commercially, Jones sees the imperial government as having enabled merchants through self-government. He cites examples of the merchants organizing their own schools – initiatives that proved unsuccessful due to lack of interest, not lack of government support as Zakharov suggests.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Jones argues that the government was, in fact, responsive to merchant demands and took their interests into consideration when making policy (P. 144). The most prominent component of that relationship is the government-created instruments of exchange, without which much of the activity in the grain market would not be possible. As the economy had become more monetized, the government endeavored to release silver rubles and copper coins into circulation to allow peasants and merchants to conduct their business with one another. By the end of the eighteenth century, silver and copper coins, paper rubles (*assignatsii*), and veksel circulated in Russia. Throughout the book Jones actively challenges the assumptions that the imperial Russian government stifled commerce.

The liberalization of the economy is the second central theme in

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Zakharov. *Russian Trade Policy in the 18th Century* // Ferry de Goey and Jan Willem Veluwenkamp (Eds.). *Entrepreneurs and Institutions in Europe and Asia, 1500–2000*. Amsterdam, 2002. Pp. 55-70.

the book. For most of the eighteenth century, Russia's policymakers did not view cereals as they did other commodities, making every effort to keep rye affordable by regulating many aspects of its trade and, most significantly, its export. In this way the imperial government's efforts to control grain prices opposed the broader shifts in thinking about freedom of commerce. Under Catherine II, when Russian policy leaned toward free commerce through abolition of trade monopolies and promotion of free competition, cereals were nevertheless treated exceptionally because they were the basic foodstuffs of most Russians' diets. Catherine's Commission on Commerce, the Free Economic Society, and many members of the Senate pushed for a more liberal grain policy, but exports of cereals were the one factor that the imperial government felt it could best control. As Jones notes, "virtually all participants [in the debates over prices] assumed that exports would increase demand and raise prices" (P. 190). Despite many arguments for broader exports of grain from Russia – laid out in chapter 7 – Catherine II was reluctant to export cereals unless there was a guarantee of abundance and affordability at home. When the government did not ban exports of rye from St. Petersburg outright, it pegged exports to the price of cereals in St. Petersburg. Incrementally the

export policy on cereals was liberalized: ports other than St. Petersburg were permitted to export a limited amount of rye; wheat, a less crucial component of the Russian diet, was cleared for export from all cities; and finally, all ports were permitted to export all cereals, including rye. After the grain crisis of 1786–1787, permission to export rye was revoked, and the export policy was inconsistent for the next thirty years.

Each of the chapters offers a peek into the socioeconomic world around each link on the supply chain: life on the estates, seasonal labor and wage work, the business practices of merchants. Peasants, noblemen, and merchants – all of whom were key participants at various stages in the grain trade – made decisions within the structural constraints of geography and legislation that affected the grain trade. As Jones suggests, these were often economically rational choices such as the form in which to transport the cereals: as grain, flour, or alcohol, as well as which river route the grain ought to take (chapter 6). Peasants decided in which wage-earning activity to engage in order to meet their obligations to the state, commune, or landlord. Unable to make a profit by growing surplus grain, many peasants in the northern provinces sought different forms of labor. Many entered the supply chain as transporters rather than producers of grain and at the

same time increased the demand for grain from surplus-producing black-earth provinces (chapter 3). Nobles managing their estates had incentives for higher earnings in grain production to meet their various financial obligations (chapter 4).<sup>5</sup> Cumulatively, these decisions added up to the production of a surplus of grain and the availability of additional labor necessary to deliver provisions to the capital.

Then there is the question of rising cereal prices in the second half of the eighteenth century, which have puzzled historians for centuries. For generations of Marxist historians, grain prices were a way to understand the evolution of Russia's market and development of capitalism in imperial Russia; for us, rising grain prices provide an excellent prism through which to examine Russia's views of its political economy. The rising prices were of vital interest to Catherine II, who established the Commission on Grain in 1786 to try to understand the economics of grain transport to the capital. Such questions were important to historians in the Soviet era, for example, Boris

Mironov, who suggested that it was, in fact, Russia's exports of cereals in the late eighteenth century that increased prices of grain and flour in Russia.<sup>6</sup> Jones disputes Mironov's assumptions that there was an all-Russia grain market that would reflect the exports of grain from one port in grain prices in St. Petersburg. Instead, he points to the increase of the money supply in the late eighteenth century and shows that the rise in cereals prices coincided with a simultaneous price increase in other goods and commodities (P. 133). While this explanation does not necessarily disprove whether the government's concerns about exports of grain from St. Petersburg raising prices were valid, Jones does point us to a new direction that could be studied by historians interested in the economics of the Russian Empire: the culture around the use of money and increased use of paper rubles.

But there are also limits to how far an economic analysis can take us, as the Russian Empire's activities were often not economically rational. Take Peter the Great's decision

---

<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, a considerable literature on the economics of agriculture in imperial Russia, including Jerome Blum. *Lord and Peasant in Russia: From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton, 1961; Steven L. Hoch. *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia*. Chicago, 1986; Michael Confino. *Domaines et seigneurs en Russie vers la fin du 18e siècle*. Paris, 1963; Nikolai L. Rubinshtein. *Selskoe khozaistvo Rossiii vo vtoroi polovine XVIII v.* Moscow, 1957, but in addition to presenting new data, Jones frames his discussion here to emphasize the monetization of the economy.

<sup>6</sup> Boris N. Mironov. *Eksport russkogo khleba vo votroi polovine XVIII–nachale XIX v.* // *Istoricheskie zapiski*. 1974. Vol. 93. Pp. 149-188.

to make St. Petersburg the site of the empire's capital. As Jones explains in the first chapter of the book, it was a strategic location for a port, but a poor choice for a capital. In fact, *Bread upon the Waters* provides a striking contrast between what Jones sees as the macro-level irrationality of government policy and the “microeconomic rationality” (P. 62) of individual actors, who react to that policy in efficient and economically viable ways. This places the book in company with other works that demonstrate that imperial Russia's activity was not always driven by purely economic concerns, but rather motivated by other values.<sup>7</sup> With this lingering question of rising commodity prices resolved, we can move on to investigate what those other values are.



---

<sup>7</sup> E. A. Pravilova. *Finansy imperii: den'gi i vlast' v politike Rossii na natsional'nykh okrainakh, 1801–1917*. Moscow, 2006.