

## Zuzanna Bogumił

**Aileen Friesen. *Colonizing Russia's Promised Land: Orthodoxy and Community on the Siberian Steppe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 224 pp. ISBN 9781487531553.**

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*Colonizing Russia's Promised Land* is a book fascinating by its rich and detailed micro histories, such as the story of a priest, Grigorii (Poletaev), who at the age of 64 became the bishop of Omsk and Semipalatinsk and had to organize religious life in a new diocese's from scratch. He had no place to live, not to mention support to organize the diocese infrastructure. This and many other thick historical descriptions that the reader will find in the book bring closer the complexity of political, social, and cultural situation in Siberia at the end of the nineteenth–beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, however, the book offers generalizations that simplify the picture of colonization of Siberia. Moreover, the reader must believe the author and her interpretations, because the book lacks any description of its methodology, and only from the endnotes and the bibliography does the reader learn what kinds of documents constitute the basis for the book's argumentation.

The author shows how Siberian steppes had transformed from the living spaces of nomadic peoples into fields of wheat cultivated by Russian Orthodox peasants. On the pages of six chapters, the role of the Orthodox Church and Christian Orthodox faith in the colonization of multireligious and multiethnic Siberia is described. While the author's analysis of the uses of Orthodoxy and description of the Russian Orthodox Church's politics of colonization are very convincing, her attempts to show a power of lived religion of new settlers in transforming Siberia into promised land are much less persuasive. Moreover, Aileen Friesen focuses on a particular period of time—after the 1880s, when the number of migrants to Siberia significantly increased, and foremost on 1906–1914, when “migration from European Russia to Siberia became a flood” (Forsyth 1992:191)—which also significantly narrows considerations of the Siberian colonization and the role of Orthodoxy in this process.

Let us start with the book's strengths. One of them is Friesen's analysis of the institutional dimension of the colonization process and the uses of the Orthodox religion to nationalize, homogenize, and culturally integrate Siberia with the European center of the Russian Empire. Friesen shows that even if the colonization of Siberia started in the seventeenth century, it was Tsar Aleksander III who decided to integrate Siberia into the empire two hundred years later. Friesen gives a lot of details of the Russian politics of migration, which show how scrupulously this project of integration was developed. Particularly interesting is her analysis of the empire's institutions involved in this process. Friesen analyzes activities of such key institutions as the Siberian Railway Committee, which was responsible for building the

Trans-Siberian Railway and developing social and economic infrastructure around it. Supporting the Orthodoxization of the cities connected by the railway became one of its duties. To achieve this goal, the Emperor Alexander III Fund was established. Its role was to encourage Orthodox believers in the European part of Russia to donate money to help send new settlers to Siberia and thus transform this “foreign” and “barbaric” land into the “cultural extensions of the empire.” The fund’s publicity campaigns were so successful that, as Friesen writes, “over the course of twelve years (1893–1905), the fund collected more than 2 million rubles, the vast majority of which arrived from the donations made by the general public. The state only contributed 275,000 rubles to the cause. Using these donations, the Siberian Railway Committee built over 200 churches and over 180 schools” (p. 43). Another institution was the Resettlement Administration, which incorporated the religious needs of settlers into its plans for colonization. Finally, there was the Holy Synod, which supported the entire process from the beginning and which gained control over the Emperor Alexander III Fund when the Siberian Railway Committee was disbanded in 1905. The engagement of the Holy Synod in the colonization of Siberia was so great that in 1908 it established the Special Council on Satisfying the Religious Needs of Settlers. By reconstructing connections and cooperation between all these institutions, Friesen shows how logistically and ideologically challenging the Siberian colonization was for the empire. She also shows how key was the role that Orthodoxy played in the activities of all these institutions.

Another great strength of the book is the detailed portraits of key colonizers and ideologists behind Russian colonization of Siberia. Anatolii Kulomzin, who was responsible for creating the Emperor Alexander III Fund, Grigorii Glinka, head of the Resettlement Administration, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the lay chief procurator of the Holy Synod, were among the government officials strongly convinced of the necessity of a symbiotic church-state relationship in the development of the empire. Interestingly, Friesen’s analysis shows that secular state colonizers had shared views on the colonization process as well on the role of Orthodoxy in it. Readers get the impression that there were no conflicts among state colonizers. Only among the religious colonizers Friesen shows differences and nuances of views. One of the key Russian Orthodox colonizers was Archpriest Ioann Vostorgov, who closely cooperated with the Holy Synod and the Resettlement Administration, helped these institutions to formulate and operationalize plans for church building in Siberia, and developed the Pastoral Courses in Moscow, a new training method serving to educate and prepare priests to carry on Orthodox colonization of Siberia. Vostorgov was convinced that to achieve this goal, stronger centralization and management from Moscow were needed. This argument met with disagreement from Siberian priests, such as Bishop of Omsk Vladimir (Putiata), for example, who were more sensitive to the local context and opted for strengthening local infrastructure and supporting Siberian priests’ families as an endemic element of the local society. While Vostorgov was a modern state administrator working in the sphere of religion to achieve colonization goals, Vladimir was a religious activist trying to preserve the religious tradition. Friesen’s analysis of secular and religious colonizers clearly shows how much impact the per-

sonality and agency of these people had on the colonization process. Her analysis also shows that for all these state colonizers Orthodoxy was a political tool and not a religious duty. This idea brings us to the first weakness of the book.

Even if Friesen clearly shows how institutions colonizing Siberia used and abused religion to achieve goals of the Russian Empire, she primarily focuses on the Orthodoxization of Siberia as the state's answer to the spiritual needs of the settlers. In her analysis she does not distinguish between the Russian Orthodox Church as a strong political organization, Orthodoxy as an institution organizing the social life of the community, and the Christian Orthodox faith as an individual's need for contact with the transcendental (Halemba 2015). Lack of this distinction significantly blurs the boundary between secular and religious in Friesen's analysis. It is well visible, for instance, when she writes that by supporting the Emperor Alexander III Fund, the donors "created a deep spiritual bond" that united them with Siberian settlers into "a people of the church" (p. 33). There is no critical reflection on this ideological interpretation. It is clear to the reader that the Church's religious declaration of the role of Orthodoxization was one thing, while the reality that Orthodoxy was treated by the Russian Empire as a useful ideology was another. The state treated Orthodoxy as the national sacred and not religious sacred, as Friesen tries to prove. Friesen does not go into these nuances, and she reconstructs the colonization of Siberia as an objective historical process. As a result, she is not able to deconstruct the Russian Orthodox perspective on Siberia, present the oppressiveness of the Orthodox colonization policy, and explain reasons behind tensions between secular officials and religious institutions.

Being an expert in Mennonite studies, Friesen identifies the strong presence of sectarianism among *sibiriaki*, the local residents, as the main threat to the success of the Russian Orthodox Church's colonization of Siberia. Even in the last chapter, titled "An Anthill of Baptists in a Land of Muslims," Friesen looks to ignore what Yuri Slezkine called a main threat to Russian Orthodox Church in Siberia—the Pan-Islamic or Pan-Turkish ideas that threatened the security of the empire. As Slezkine wrote, "the incorporation of numerous new Muslims, the mass defections of baptized Tatars from Christianity, the intellectual ferment among Russia's Muslim subjects, and the Islamization of their animist neighbors seemed to require an immediate and forceful response" (1994, 19). Friesen does not analyze this threat as something that had an impact on the state-sponsored Orthodoxization of Siberia. Nor does she consider the fact that the changes in Russia's religious laws made after the 1905 Revolution deprived the Russian Orthodox Church of its monopoly; thus the Orthodoxization of Siberia was not simply a wish to convert the people, but an existential necessity to support Church's political capital.

Finally, Friesen does not present the perspective of *sibiriaki*, those who lived in Siberia before the state ordered and organized mass migration, on the idea of centralization and homogenization of their homeland. There is only information on differences in religious rituals of local residents and newcomers, but the political dimension of that encounter—the fact that many *sibiriaki* were the descendants of political oppositionists, insurgents, or war prisoners—is omitted. Similarly, the au-

thor does not discuss the impact of revolutionary views of the political oppositionists sent to Siberia during the reign of Alexander III on the political situation in the region and the implementation of the state's policy of colonization.

*Colonizing Russia's Promised Land* is not a comprehensive history of colonization of Siberia, but it is an interesting case study of Omsk region. In other words, Friesen's book does not give a complex picture of state and church cooperation in colonization of Siberia, but it offers many micro histories, which enable the reader to feel the atmosphere of those times. The book raises a lot of important questions and encourages further reading. Despite the obvious shortcomings of the book, I do feel encouraged by it to further explore the process of colonization of Siberia. Take this declaration as my endorsement to read this book.

## REFERENCES

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