

From: dwaugh@u.washington.edu

Author's Subject: new title: Sevastianova, Drevnii Novgorod

Date Written: Sun, 20 May 2012 16:57:30 +0000

Date Posted: Mon, 20 May 2012 12:57:30 -0400

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-earlyslavic&month=1205&week=c&msg=cHWcT5UhbapTGvVOVP5IeQ&user=&pw=>>

O. V. Sevast'ianova. *Drevnii Novgorod. Novgorodsko-kniazheskie otnosheniia v XII-pervoi polovine XV v.* (M.-SPb.: Al'ians-Arkheo, 2011; ISBN 978-5-98874-062-9), 408 pp.

This provocative book, defended as a dissertation at the University of Zürich in 2008 (supervised by Carsten Goehrke and Nada Boskovska), deserves a detailed review. Sevastianova argues that essentially all aspects of what we think we know about Novgorod's political system (and the way it has been presented, starting back in the medieval sources) be re-examined. To treat it as a "republic" is wrong; to the degree that the city developed distinctive political institutions they can be understood only in the context of external princely political rivalries for control of the city. So we need to re-consider what "veche" really means, question whether there ever was such a thing as a "sovet gospod," re-interpret the treaties between the princes and Novgorod in the context of Golden Horde politics, re-consider what we have previously thought about the special status of the Novgorod Metropolitan, re-consider the meaning of the "White Cowl" and the origins and meaning of the cult of the Virgin as represented in the famous icon of the "Virgin of the Sign" and its evocation in the 15th-century icon of the salvation of the city from Andrei Bogoliubskii's attack in 1169...

I have barely skimmed introduction, conclusion and a few other pages here and thus cannot judge whether such a large agenda will hold up under scrutiny and really end up changing what a sensible reading of the existing literature might lead us to conclude about Novgorod's political distinctiveness. The subject obviously is of ongoing interest, witness the newly published article by P. V. Lukin (in *Drevniaia Rus. Voprosy medievistiki*. 2012/1) re-examining all the evidence for the existence of the "Sovet gospod"), a piece too late to be included by Sevastianova (whose book also was too recent for Lukin to cite).

Having set the treatment of Novgorod's political history in the context of the current political and other concerns of authors who have dealt with it down through the decades, Sevastianova concludes with a reminder to readers that one can learn from this story lessons which might question the views of those who argue in our own day that Russia needs authoritarian rule (albeit in the form of a strong "presidency"). That said, readers should appreciate that the book is in the first instance based on a close re-reading and analysis of the primary sources--it would be a mistake to politicize its intent. The author suggests at the beginning (correctly, I believe) that we still need a serious history of Novgorod (writ large) and hopes that this monograph might be a step in the direction of the eventual writing of one.