

EUGENE M. AVRUTIN

Racism in Modern Russia. From the Romanovs to Putin

(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 161 pp.

Eugene M. Avrutin is an essayist and professor at the University of Illinois. His book *Racism in Modern Russia* provides a chronological overview of racism and xenophobic manifestations that connect the Tsar period, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia under Vladimir Putin. The book is included in "Russian Shorts," a collection of specialized publications on Russian historical and cultural studies. This volume traces a clear trajectory of racism in key periods of Russian history, especially in the post-Soviet period. The analysis is divided into four short and easily readable chapters.

The first chapter, entitled "The Empire's Races," presents a series of scholarly papers such as "On the Goals and Methods in Anthropology," written in the early twentieth century by a famous anthropologist, Dmitrii Nikolaevich Anuchin,¹ an important author on the topic of racism approached by extremist movements in order to understand the racial composition of the population of Russia.² This section of the book focuses on human distinctions (skin color, hair, eyes, and other physiological traits) and is equivalent to a credo on variety within the Russian Empire's borders. Avrutin highlights the shift in Russian thinking on race, moving from a focus on tribal distinctions to a more nationalistic perspective. This transition reflects broader societal changes and the development of a unified Russian identity, which played a significant role in shaping attitudes towards race and ethnicity in post-Soviet Russia.

¹ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 200-201.

² Eugene M. Avrutin, *Racism in Modern Russia. From Romanovs to Putin* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 9.

The term *race* first appeared in Russia in the second part of the nineteenth century, and it had two meanings. On the one hand, the importance of color and the five variants created by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach a German researcher³ who depicts that there are white, yellow, red, and black races. On the other hand, it represents various ethnic groups (Slavs, Caucasians, Turko-Tatars, and Ukrainians) as races, types or ethnicities based on physical features.

The second chapter, "Boundaries of Exclusion," focuses on evaluating discourses centered on the concept of race and distinguishing between peoples residing in the Great Empire's domain, as these discourses are intended to promote order and stability among this diversity. They encouraged government institutions to only support true Russians, while having the freedom to express themselves and, of course, publish whatever they wished. The talks also addressed the Jewish question and urged to restrict the expansion of Jews and other ethnic minorities. In this section, the author discusses the image of Jews that was pervasive in the Russian society, and how the Black Hundred movement's speeches spread ideas and images that presented a distorted image of Jews in particular.

The third chapter, "The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth," concentrates on the Soviet Union's approaches to the concept of race, as well as on Soviet officials' attitudes towards racism. As in earlier chapters, issues of racism during the Tsar period are examined, with Avrutin clarifying the Soviet approach to the idea of race, stating: "Soviet racial logics, in other words, were part of broader ideas, practices, and policies in circulation at the time" (63).

The last and fourth chapter, entitled "White Rage," serves as a watershed moment for post-Soviet Russia, which has seen a surge in violent ethno-nationalism under Putin's leadership. The essential point raised is that the disintegration of the Soviet Union plunged the country into turmoil and disorder, all due to economic concerns and instability. Minorities who moved to Russia (non-Russian population) from the Caucasus and Central Asia developed at a rapid pace, adding fuel to the fire for the Russian population, which ultimately led to violence by the so-called white supremacists. One of the most important aspects of the analysis

³ Ibidem, p.10.

elaborated by the author is the fact that this concept of race implies a much deeper understanding, which must go beyond the border of past concepts to

“explore a dynamic process known as racialization, how racist attitudes and perceptions of inferiority build a hierarchy of human differences in everyday experiences.” (3)

Avrutin provides a very clear image of the relationship between imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet beliefs regarding race (both local and international groups: Ukrainians, Asians, Tatars, etc.) and the multiethnic and multicultural Russian state, interconnecting elements of official policy, intellectual thought, media representation, and popular opinion that resulted in the rapid rise of Russian racism.

The phrase “Russia for Russians,” which the author mentions from the introduction, plays an essential part in Avrutin’s analysis, as it had been used not only during the demonstrations in Biryulevo, but also on several other occasions such as, for example, the Russian March, shouted by extremist movements to highlight the idea that Russia is not for immigrants or other non-Russian people. The slogan “Russia for Russians” has a significant recurrence which highlights the genuine nature of racism in post-Soviet Russia, as the phrase was tied to the Black Hundred movement’s doctrine; nevertheless, some publications state that the Monarchist Party adopted the “Russia for Russians” motto. Eugene Avrutin story focuses on this slogan, which has sparked multiple confrontations and assaults against immigrants in Russia.

Post-Soviet Russia has witnessed a significant increase in racial violence and xenophobic sentiment; as previously stated, economic problems, and anxieties about the large influx of immigrants who have settled on Russian Federation territory were key factors in inciting these feelings and actions from the far right. According to Avrutin analysis, the authoritarian policy promoted by Putin’s regime has only fueled a stronger wave of white supremacy. The far-right movements on the territories of both Russia and the West support each other, providing a leadership model of white supremacy, in which the white race is superior to the other ones. Discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, and other factors has become a way of life in modern Russia. According to the author, as Putin

began his third term in office in 2018, most Russians had no trouble making a distinction between themselves and the population known as “blacks.” This book is an exceptional investigation into the history of racism and xenophobia in the Russian Empire starting from the Tsar’s reign, during the Soviet period and the formation of the Soviet New Man, followed by President Putin’s authoritarian administration, during which the author witnessed an increase in racist feelings and actions.

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