

The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia. By Mark Bassin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. xiv, 380 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$89.95, hard bound; \$29.95, paper.

doi: 10.1017/slr.2017.88

Mark Bassin's *The Gumilev Mystique* is a study of the work of the Soviet geographer, historian and ethnologist Lev Gumilev. In the post-Soviet period Gumilev emerged as the key figure in the postcommunist intellectual landscape, attaining both academic stature and public popularity. Gumilev's original theories of ethnicity and ethnogenesis, his unorthodox interpretation of Russian history and his reconstruction of the Eurasianist doctrine have made him the source of inspiration for the emergent nationalist orientations in the postcommunist political discourse in Russia and other post-Soviet states. Given the importance of Gumilev's thought for post-Soviet politics in Eurasia, Bassin's erudite yet accessible study will be essential reading for everyone interested in the post-Soviet ideological landscape, the origins of contemporary nationalist and Eurasianist doctrines, and the inspiration behind the recent shift of Russian foreign policy away from cooperation and integration with the west.

The book is organized into three parts. The first part is devoted to the reconstruction of Gumilev's theoretical corpus and presents his highly idiosyncratic theories of ethnogenesis in a lively and accessible manner. It also addresses Gumilev's interpretation of Russian history, paying particular attention to his still controversial reading of the so-called Mongol Yoke in almost benign terms. Part II addresses the sources of Gumilev's thought and politics in Soviet science and ideology. Countering the widespread view of Gumilev as an anti-Soviet author, Bassin demonstrates Gumilev's proximity to the ethnic essentialism of the Stalinist period that explicitly rejected the post-revolutionary ambitions for the fusion of Soviet nations into a new communist community. Gumilev's biologization of the ethnos category rendered it immune from political and economic transformation, ensuring the persistence of the ethnos even through the greatest social cataclysms. In part III, Bassin traces the postcommunist reception of Gumilev's thought in Russia and other post-Soviet states, demonstrating the hegemonic status of Gumilev's thought in Russian domestic politics and foreign policy. Rather than yield a single 'Gumilevian' orientation, his works have inspired a wide variety of ethnocentric standpoints, whose frequently fervent debates unfold within the basic coordinates of Gumilev's theory.

Bassin's book is an exemplary study in the history of ideas—meticulously detailed, attentive to context and animated by a genuine desire to understand the enduring appeal of Gumilev's thought despite the controversial, contradictory, and often outright preposterous nature of his ideas. Besides its evident importance for the field of Russian Studies, the book is also an important contribution to the field of biopolitics that has largely tended to ignore the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences. Bassin explains early on in the introduction

that his use of the concept of biopolitics is distinct from the more popular usage that dates back to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Instead, he goes back to the early 20th century theories of Rudolf Kjellen and other authors who sought to endow politics with a biological foundation and viewed the state as a biological organism that went through the life cycles of birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. While this line of reasoning is no longer credible in mainstream western political science, much to its advantage, it has enjoyed immense popularity in Russia, filling the vacuum left by the demise of official Marxism-Leninism.

While this reading of Gumilev's biopolitics is not incorrect, it consigns his thought a little too quickly to the margins of the western tradition, whereby it would appear irrelevant for biopolitics scholars in the more Foucauldian orientation. And yet, Bassin's study actually contains numerous resonances with the genealogy of the western biopolitical tradition undertaken both by Foucauldian scholars and those inspired by contemporary Italian theories of biopolitics. In the remainder of this review I will focus on three such resonances, whose consideration would both make Gumilev's theory more intelligible or less eccentric and illuminate some of the paradoxes that the theory of biopolitics presently grapples with.

The first concerns the question of racism. Throughout the book, Bassin takes care to dissociate Gumilev from racism in its most unpalatable form of German *Rassekunde*, while at the same time highlighting the contribution of his theories to the rise of xenophobia, ethnic intolerance, and discrimination that we tend to associate with the racist disposition. Was Gumilev then a racist or not? This question might be answered in a more nuanced manner with the help of Foucault's genealogy of racism in his 1975–1976 lecture course "Society Must Be Defended." In these lectures Foucault reconstitutes the 17–18th centuries "historico-political discourse" of the war of the races, which presented a binary vision of society divided between the two "races," the haves and the have-nots, the masters and slaves, the invaders and the indigenous. The concept of "race" did not have any biological reference but rather designated a "historico-political divide" between two groups that did not share the same culture, language, or religion and only formed a united polity as a result of conquest or subjugation. Foucault suggests that during the 19th century this discourse split into two strands: the Marxist discourse of class struggle that dispensed with races in favour of classes and the discourse of state racism, in which the theme of struggle between two races gave way to the imperative of protecting a singular race from contamination and degeneration. Yet, the split was never definitive, as Nazi state racism persisted with the archaic themes of race war while Soviet socialism first resorted to quasi-racist policies of class discrimination and eventually adopted an explicitly ethnocentric logic of enmity.

In terms of this genealogy, Gumilev's discourse occupies an interesting position at the point of fracture of primitive racism into state racism and revolutionary socialism. His theory of ethnogenesis largely accords with the primitive discourse of the war of the races, especially in his focus on the "negative complementarity" between ethnies and superethnies. Yet, it also resonates with the purifying orientation of state racism, particularly in its notorious concern with the "chimera" or "antisystem," which contaminates

the indigenous ethnos, threatening its survival. Finally, Gumilev's ethnic primordialism resonated with the Stalinist version of socialism not merely in its commitment to the persistence of ethnies after the revolution, but also in its hostility to cosmopolitanism and the preoccupation with the protection of society from internal enemies. It was therefore entirely possible for Gumilev to be a racist without necessarily being a Nazi, just as it was possible for him to partially endorse the Soviet project without it compromising his racism.

The second resonance pertains to the relationship between *biopolitics* and *geopolitics*. In Gumilev's thought, these two terms, both coined by Kjellen, enter into what another theorist of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben, termed a "zone of indistinction." The ethnos as a biological entity is determined primarily by the geographical characteristics of its natural habitat (as well as a dose of cosmic radiation that provides a "passionary impetus" for its emergence). Many studies of biopolitics continue to posit the relationship between geopolitics and biopolitics in terms of a temporal succession: while sovereign power was primarily oriented towards the control of territory, biopower operates through governing the vital processes of the population. Bassin's reading of Gumilev demonstrates why such an approach is inadequate: in Gumilev, geography only acquires political meaning through the features of the ethnos inhabiting the territory in question, which in turn are derived from the attributes of that territory itself.

Thirdly, this confluence of biology and geography in Gumilev's definition of the ethnos is actually of wider significance for biopolitics studies. The main paradox of Gumilev's thought, repeatedly remarked on by Bassin, is that while the ethnos as a geo-biological entity is explicitly defined in natural terms without reference to political, social or economic concepts, this very natural substance does not merely end up affecting political and social life but quickly becomes its entire content. After all, the entire political history of Russian and other ethnies is retold by Gumilev in his idiosyncratic geo-biological terms, leaving very little for political science "proper" to address. The ethnos is at once absolutely non-political and the sole content of any possible politics.

This is merely one of the many inconsistencies in Gumilev's thought that have precluded its reception in mainstream academia worldwide. Yet, this inconsistency is not that far from the western logic of biopolitics. The fundamental paradox of the western tradition has been the fact that the political order has repeatedly and persistently been founded on what apparently does not belong to it, the non- or unpolitical element of "life as such." What is excluded from politics proper as "merely" biological, physical, animal, or private paradoxically ends up included in it as its substrate, object and, ultimately, in the modern period, as its entire content. Gumilev's theory is only the most extreme formulation of the paradox of the relation of politics and life, whose admittedly outlandish character should not obscure its belonging to a much more general biopolitical tendency not restricted to Russia or even Eurasia. Bassin's book is therefore not merely an outstanding contribution to Russian intellectual history but also a timely intervention in the research of biopolitics that will hopefully bring these still disparate fields into greater contact.

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