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Review of Raber's "Ministries of Compassion among Russian Evangelicals"

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Mary Raber, *Ministries of Compassion among Russian Evangelicals, 1905-1929*, Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016, pp. xii + 256, \$33.00, paper. ISBN 978-1-4982-8070-9.

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Focusing on the “Golden Age” of the evangelical movement in the late Russian Empire and early Soviet Union, Mary Raber’s *Ministries of Compassion among Russian Evangelicals* presents a thorough and detailed picture of the diverse compassion ministries practiced within a variety of evangelical communities. From famine relief to aid to retired pastors, urban rescue missions to Christian economic communities, Raber demonstrates that ministries of compassion were an essential part of their lives. Originating as a dissertation at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Amsterdam, this book sheds light on both the history and theology of Russian Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and (to a lesser extent) the Salvation Army. Raber scoured hundreds of memoirs, periodicals, and other primary sources to uncover details of this little-known area within the history of Russian evangelicalism. Her excellent research includes attention to specifics—exact dates, full names, addresses, numbers—allowing the reader to place events in both space and time. Her book is not written for scholars alone, however, but will be valuable to church leaders in these regions today, who carry on the traditions of their predecessors. One must hope that a Russian translation appears soon.

To clarify whom and what the book explores, a few definitions are necessary, which Raber helpfully provides in her introduction. She uses the term “evangelical” (lower-case) to refer to Christian communities from a number of religious backgrounds, many of which formed in the mid-nineteenth century, and—like evangelicals outside of Russia—are distinguishable by their focus on conversion, the cross, the Bible, and activism (12). During the period in question, these groups existed primarily within two unions: the Russian Baptist Union and the Evangelical

Christian Union. (She does not include Pentecostals in her study as they did not appear in Russia until 1921.) Raber uses the term “compassion” as a translation of the Russian *miloserdie*, which focuses on “reliev[ing] human suffering without any regard for compensation” (11). Under this umbrella, she includes both ministries reaching out into the world and mutual aid among believers themselves. Under the term “Russian,” Raber includes all Russian-speaking nationalities within the Russian Empire and, after 1922, the Soviet Union (12). She focuses on the years 1905 to 1929—the “Golden Age” of Russian evangelicalism—because at this time the evangelicals had freedom to operate legally and openly. In this period of turmoil—political upheaval and revolution, World War I and the Civil War, poverty and famine—Russian evangelicalism flourished.

The thesis of this book is simple: “from the early days of their movement, the Russian evangelicals believed that they were required to care for people both within and outside of their own circle, according to the example of Christ”(3). Beginning with Russian compassion ministries prior to 1905, Raber argues that such ministries were an “organic part” of evangelical activity from the very beginning (22), the high-society Pashkovites in St. Petersburg often participating in ministries such as prison reform, service in hospitals and military units, and caring for the poor. Their service, however—like that of their successors in the early twentieth century—focused ultimately on the spiritual transformation of the individual, which they believed would lead to transformation of society as a whole. While the focus of Russian evangelical ministries did not change, the 1905 law allowing freedom of conscience opened up opportunities to formalize their ministries, which Raber divides into three categories: mutual aid within the communities themselves, urban rescue ministries, and evangelical economic communities. Following the model of the early church, Baptists emphasized mutual support of

those within the congregation, while their focus on evangelism led naturally to caring in particular for preachers and evangelists. Church publications, newly legal in 1905, provided information on needs and opportunities to serve, creating a sense of collective responsibility for the Baptist community as a whole. Meanwhile in St. Petersburg (primarily), with the support of aging Pashkovites, William Fetler's *Dom Evangelii*, along with the Salvation Army, responded to specifically urban problems with dining halls, shelters, and temperance and other ministries. During the years of war, revolution, and famine (1914-1923), focus within Russian evangelical communities turned to caring for the wounded and the starving, those evangelicals in regions unaffected by famine generously supporting their brethren in the cities and famine-afflicted regions. Finally, during the 1920s, inspired by the example of the early Church, evangelicals formed economic and labor cooperatives with the goal of eradicating poverty and, ultimately, systematic transformation of society as a whole. These communes were dismantled in 1929 with the passing of a new law prohibiting religious activity other than worship within registered religious communities.

Several themes recur throughout the book, adding additional support to Raber's argument for the continuity of evangelical compassion ministries across time. While the book's title focuses on 1905 to 1929, Raber emphasizes that compassion ministry was not new in this period, but had occurred since the founding of the communities in the mid-nineteenth century, and indeed, remains a hallmark of Russian evangelicalism today. Evangelism was a key element of all types of compassion ministries explored—mutual aid, urban rescue ministry, famine relief, and Christian communes—as evangelicals felt social change would happen only alongside spiritual transformation of individuals. To Russian evangelicals, there was no conflict between evangelism and social outreach. Additionally, interconnections with European and American

evangelicals recurred throughout much of the book, as ministries were modeled on those encountered abroad, funds were gathered overseas, leaders were educated abroad, and Russian evangelicals participated in both the Baptist World Alliance and the Evangelical Alliance. Finally, while Russian evangelicals may often be viewed as set apart from the broader Russian/Soviet society, during this period many evangelicals lived openly among and shared much in common with their Orthodox and secular neighbors. Ultimately, Raber demonstrates the “complex, typology-defying nature of Russian evangelicalism” (206). Their emphases were both inward-focused and missional; they were international, yet self-sufficient; they did not separate faith and works; and they operated simultaneously within and apart from the broader Russian society.

One strength of this book—which may simultaneously be a weakness—is Raber’s own affinity toward the subjects of this study. Indeed, she has devoted many years herself to compassion ministries in the former USSR, and is active in the evangelical community there today. Unlike a secular scholar, who may seek external explanations for religious practices, Raber recognizes the role of “practical theology” (206) to an evangelical believer. She understands and can relate to these communities, and portrays them to us, her readers, with dignity and respect. Yet the overall picture she presents may be a bit too rosy. While she acknowledges disputes and disagreements—to the extent that they appear in her sources—the reader is left wondering if things were always as good as they seem. Were all believers as hospitable as sheep rancher Dei Mazaev, who opened his home to a stranger (1)? Was the humanitarian aid for famine victims distributed equitably? How well did the Christian communes founded by Ivan Prokhanov actually work? The answers to these and other questions are unlikely to be found in the evangelical publications perused for this research. Ultimately,

however, this is a study of evangelical identity, how the evangelicals portrayed themselves in their publications, and how they presented themselves to the world. These are their values and aspirations, the role they understood to be their own. Knowing this is essential for understanding evangelical Christian history, theology, and the culture of the late imperial Russian and early Soviet period.