
H-France Review Vol. 18 (August 2018), No. 170

Vladislav Smirnov, *Obrazy Frantsii: istoria, liudi, traditsii*. Moscow: Lomonosov, 2017. 248 pages. ₪ 375.00 (hb). ISBN 978-5-91678-399-5.

Review by Alexander Mikaberidze, Louisiana State University-Shreveport.

Russia has long boasted a vibrant community of historians of France. Vladislav Smirnov is one of its most prominent members. He has worked at the Lomonosov Moscow State University since the 1950s and has spent the last six decades exploring the history of modern France with a particular focus on French experiences during World War II.

Smirnov's latest book differs from his earlier scholarship. It "is not an academic study or travel notes [and] does not contain a systematic account of history of France" (p. 5).^[1] Instead, it is an attempt by a seasoned historian to cast a broad look at the French past and introduce a Russian reader to the evolution of French society and state over the last two millennia and to explore "national peculiarities, national psychology, and national character of the French" (p. 5). The current book is, in fact, a new, completely revised, edition of an earlier publication, *Frantsia: strana, liudi, traditsii*, that appeared in the Soviet Union in 1988.^[2] At the book presentation in 2017, Smirnov noted that the last three decades have witnessed so many changes in Europe that it prompted him to reevaluate his earlier assessments and conclusions. The collapse of the Soviet regime removed ideological and political restrictions that hampered his earlier publications. More crucially, both France and Russia experienced profound transformations and, if Soviet citizens had a vague, and skewed, notions about French society, modern Russians have ample opportunities to personally explore France. The book is, thus, designed to serve as an introduction to the French past and present.

The book is divided into three parts and fifteen chapters. Part one, "Country and People," offers a broad look at the French history and geography. Smirnov takes his readers on a quick dash through French history, starting with the Oldowan (Abbevillian) sites and the famed Lascaux wall paintings. Celts, Gauls, Greeks, and Romans all make a hurried entry onto the book pages before being replaced by the Merovingian kings and their successors. Smirnov devotes considerable attention to the events of the French Revolution (pp. 36-47) and highlights the impact of Napoleon (pp. 47, 104, 111). Chapter three introduces readers to the geography of France, chapter four is devoted to Paris, while the last section of part one examines the French "national character." Smirnov speaks of "sharp wit and rationalism" of the French, of their "attraction to a clear, precise, logical, and elegantly formulated thought" (p. 92). He notes that among key elements of French character are "a skeptical mindset" and "affinity for *fronde* and opposition to authorities," as well as keen individualism, expressiveness, cheerfulness, and a certain frivolousness (pp. 93-95).

Part two, "The Past in the Present," is a socio-political analysis of modern history of France. Smirnov highlights key moments of the past—the Avignon captivity of the popes (1309-1376), the Calas case (1762), and the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), to name just a few—that played important roles in the evolution of French political, social and religious traditions, and the creation of modern political,

constitutional, and legal systems. He then delves into French cuisine, both traditional and haute, assuring the reader that “the French like to eat well and to discourse about food” (p. 127). Chapter eight, the last in part two, examines relations between Russia and France, underscoring deep, centuries-long ties and connections between the two cultures.

Part three opens with France on the eve of World War I. It then takes the reader on a journey through the turbulent French history of the twentieth century. Chapters nine through fourteen offer a quick survey of the devastation that WWI had inflicted on France, the subsequent post-war turmoil, France’s nascent relations with the newly established Soviet Union, the disasters of 1940 and Vichy France, the Free French and Charles de Gaulle, the Fourth and Fifth Republics, the turmoil of the 1960s, etc. The last two chapters contain concise discussions of the French presidents from Georges Pompidou to François Hollande, highlighting their key accomplishments. In his conclusion—entitled “Is the Talk about the ‘Decline’ of France Warranted?”—Smirnov brings to light challenges that modern France faces: its industry “falling behind the US, Japan and Germany,” “many key scientific and technical breakthroughs of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries made outside France,” “English language replacing French” in international politics, diplomacy, trade and science, and foreign entertainment dominating French cultural scene (p. 235). But he rejects the notion of the French “decline.” Instead he points to continued vibrancy of French economy and culture. “Our discourse should be not about ‘decline,’ but rather about the change in France’s place in a transformed world,” states Smirnov in the concluding paragraph.

In short, this is a well-crafted book that seeks to introduce a new generation of Russians to France, its history, people, culture, and traditions. There is little in it that will interest scholars but a general reader will undoubtedly enjoy the book’s concise nature and vast breadth. Smirnov is a talented wordsmith and his narrative is highly readable and full of lively and quaint descriptions. Considering the nature of this book, it is only surprising that the publisher had failed to include any maps or illustrations (aside from Irina Tibilova’s charming doodles in the margins) to aid the reader in following the author on this fascinating voyage into the French past.

NOTES:

[1] This reviewer made all the translations from the original Russian cited in this review.

[2] Vladislav Smirnov, *Frantsia: strana, liudi, traditsii* (Moscow: Mysl, 1988).

Alexander Mikaberidze
Louisiana State University-Shreveport
alexander.mikaberidze@lsus.edu

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