"Our Dear Kazan": Urban Initiatives and Imperial Legacies, 1774-1860


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This dissertation offers an early-nineteenth-century urban history of Kazan, a provincial capital located on the Volga River in the Russian heartland. Kazan was a city that encapsulated the Russian Empire in microcosm. Its past was colorful, dominated by the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan by the Muscovite army of Ivan IV in 1552. In the centuries that followed, it developed into a prosperous and celebrated provincial center, marked by rich ethnic, religious, and social diversity (encompassing Muslim Tatars, Orthodox Russians, German Lutherans, and “Old Believer” Orthodox dissenters, among others). It was linked into transnational trade routes and far-flung networks of European and Islamic intellectual exchange, and increasingly independent from the cultural and economic hegemony of the capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow. This project chooses Kazan as the ideal site to explore empire at the small-scale. It moves the bureaucrats and their edicts to the wings of the stage, in order to foreground the political, social, intellectual, and imaginative engagements of non-state actors—thereby re-conceptualizing empire as a web of relationships between imperial subjects and communities.

At the heart of this dissertation's narrative lies a 'turn to the city' among residents of Kazan, marked by the emergence of new urban initiatives that were organized by non-state actors and distinguished by their sense of public engagement. This turn developed between 1800 and 1860, and is further contextualized by events from 1774 to 1800. Some of the initiatives that residents were beginning to pursue at this time were eminently practical, aimed at the material needs of city dwellers. Examples included the efforts of elite merchants to serve the “public good” by improving Kazan's transportation infrastructure and social-services. Other initiatives were more conceptual, and wrestled with residents' emotional and ideological concerns. These included the joint efforts of merchants and intellectuals to write the city's history, and commemorate it with public memorials. And sometimes these two impulses came together, as can be seen in the dialectic between science-minded professionals who envisioned Kazan as a medicalized space that could be made healthy, and private citizens who sought tangible measures against endemic problems like polluted water and acute crises like cholera. The dissertation argues that residents' turn to the city emerged, in large measure, as a response to the rapidly changing ideological, technological, and economic conditions of early-nineteenth-century Europe. Yet as it examines the aspirations and accomplishments of Kazan's new urban initiatives, the dissertation is also careful to note their limits and failings, many of which sprang out of the legacies, both ancient and modern, that empire had bequeathed to the city. In this way, this project is able to shed light on the unique dynamics that resulted when familiar patterns of change in Europe were translated to the very different context of the contiguous, multi-ethnic Russian Empire.
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