

[A Comment on Russocentrism and Statistics](#)

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A Comment on Russocentrism and Statistics

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Publications on tsarist Russia, even today, rarely, if ever, separate figures for the Russian Empire from what is termed “European Russia” or “Russia west of the Urals.” This comparative categorization is commonplace in English and Russian language historiography dealing with Russian Empire, and in particular, by authors who use the 1897 census. [1] Instead of comparing the Russian Empire with other empires, Russian and non-Russian authors incorrectly compare it with European national states. They end up comparing the Russian Empire with France instead of the French Empire, while classifying “Russia” as a state with minorities instead of an empire with colonies. I am unaware of anyone classifying the French or British or Spanish empires as states with minorities. These are described as empires with colonies. This flawed approach in the case of the Russian Empire makes valid comparison of Russia or its empire with other countries and empires impossible and results in false analogies. It leads to absurd claims. For example, although there were 25,500 doctors in the entire Russian empire in 1911, it does not follow that “Russia” had almost as many as England. [2] A correct comparison in this case would juxtapose the total number of doctors in the Russian Empire with the total in the British Empire, or the total in “Great Russia,” however defined, with the total in England - specifying whether reference was to England or the United Kingdom.

Tsarist data was collected by province. But while non-Russian provinces are often grouped together for study, ethnic Russian provinces are rarely, if ever, identified and grouped apart from the rest of the empire. Individual authors may differ on which provinces specifically they include under the rubric “Russia”, and whether they include Siberia. Such delineation takes time and effort but it can be done. This, in turn allows valid comparison between “Russia”, understood as what is often termed “Great Russia” and France or Britain or Spain on the one hand, and the Russian, French, British, or Spanish empires on the other. I made such an attempt in articles that counted and compared the estimated total of public employees and government officials in ten Russian provinces and the entire empire, with estimated numbers of their counterparts in other empires and colonies. Counting administrators by national region provided quantitative background relevant to the

issue of imperial “undergovernment.” [3]

Demonstrating that the tsarist government had few administrators relative to total population provides evidence to illustrate it could not have been the ubiquitous omnipotent efficient monolith it is often imagined to have been. Few central officials, in addition, meant broad scope for local elites via clientism, nepotism, feuding patronage systems, inertia and corruption, to temper central authority and impede implementation of central commands and the integration central officials sought. Thus, the Russian Empire appears much like other empires whose administrators were also thin on the ground outside their national metropolises, but unlike them because it had few administrators in its national Russian metropole.

Notes:

1. A typical recent example is the otherwise authoritative B.N. Mironov, *Rossiiskaia Imperiia: ot traditsii k modernu*. 3 vols. (St Petersburg, 2014-15).

2. A.N. Sakharov ed., *Rossia v nachale XX veka*. (Moscow, 2002), 635. Other examples: V. Vyshnevskii, ed., *Demograficheskaia modernizatsiia Rossii. 1900-2000* (Moscow, 2006). After 1919, data was usually, but not always, classified by republic. The invaluable collected data in *Statisticheskie materialy po sostoiianiiu narodnoho zdравиia i organizatsii meditsinskoi pomoshchi v SSSR za 1913-1923* (Moscow 1926), for example, was not broken down by republic.

3. Stephen Velychenko, “The Size of the Imperial Russian Bureaucracy and Army in Comparative Perspective,” *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas* no. 3 (2001): 346-62; Stephen Velychenko, “Accroitre ou Reduire? L’administration des etats successeurs de l’URSS: Un point de vue historique comparatiste sur le niveau des effectifs.” *Revue d’etudes comparatives Est - Ouest* no. 1 (2002): 77-111; Stephen Velychenko, “Local Officialdom and National Movements in Imperial Russia in light of Administrative Shortcomings and Under-government,” in J. Morison ed., *National Issues in Russian and East European History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 74-85.

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