

Hittle, J. Michael. *The Service City; State and Townsmen in Russia, 1600-1800*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979. Pp. 297

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[See table of contents](#)

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"as much the product of dynamics of the interrelationship among miners, party, state and employers as it was the consequence of the static persistence of ethnic and religious divisions" (p. 220) is neither startling nor precise. Crew's weak conclusion does not draw together an important urban history. However, his history of the "modern" nature of industrialization in Bochum has successfully challenged the theory of uniqueness that Dahrendorf, among others, posited for German industrialization.

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The townsmen (*posadskie liudi*) of early modern Russia offer a striking contrast to their European counterparts. Few in number, poor, burdened by state fiscal and service obligations and lacking even proper municipal government, they were to play a far less important social and political role than the urban classes of the west. Dr. Hittle's book offers a fresh and revealing perspective on the origin and development of the Russian urban service estate. Historians have often displayed a predilection for measuring Russian townsmen against non-Russian criteria. Soviet scholars have in recent years produced much valuable research on urban society, but their chief interest has always been in the application of Marxist universals to Russian urban

economic life, rather than in the study of the service estate as a uniquely Russian phenomenon. Most western historians have been content to follow the pre-Revolutionary Russian liberal tradition of blaming the autocracy for inhibiting the development of a western-style bourgeoisie. Dr. Hittle describes the situation of the townsmen not as an aberration from foreign norms but as an organic product of forces within the Russian milieu. He argues convincingly that the service relationship between the townsmen and the state was the product of governmental weakness, not strength. The exigencies of state-building in a vast and backward country where trained civil servants were scarce at best required the autocracy to delegate certain local governmental tasks to the service estates; that is, to the gentry in the countryside and the *posadskie liudi* in the cities. For their part, the townsmen were never strong, wealthy or socially cohesive enough to seize control of urban government even against a weak state. In the townsmen's eyes local government was simply an onerous duty which they sought to shirk or avoid.

The late eighteenth century brought the breakdown and ultimate dissolution of the service system, but the old problems persisted. The author describes a modernizing state painfully aware of the inadequacies of the service city, a dilemma that became particularly acute in the aftermath of the Pugachev revolt. Yet the state was still unable to assume direct administrative responsibility for the cities. The solution proffered by Catherine the Great was to establish a form of town government theoretically in the hands of the wealthier strata of urban society.

This reform, in Dr. Hittle's estimation, served to illustrate Russia's social and political weaknesses. A reluctant state was forced to continue delegating a limited measure of local authority to the urban population, but the townsmen, still relatively poor and hardly the bearers of a strong tradition of real local responsibility, were unable to use the new institutions to their own advantage. The old problem of the service city merely resurfaced in a new guise.

The book is not entirely free of shortcomings. The author does not in all cases clearly differentiate between estate "rights" and "privileges," and the distinction is an important one in Russian legal and constitutional history. Dr. Hittle may also be guilty of over-stating the strength of the "estate mentality" exhibited by the eighteenth-century townsmen. These flaws, however, are minor and in no serious way detract from an important work of scholarship which sheds new light on an all too often neglected aspect of Russian history.

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