

Volha Piotukh, *Biopolitics, Governmentality and Humanitarianism: "Caring" for the Population in Afghanistan and Belarus*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. 165 pp.

This is an intriguing book. It brings together disciplines and cases that may look too different, too complicated and controversial on their own to be bound together by one book cover. Some readers may not agree with the comparability of the cases or, perhaps, with some of the theoretical aspects, but they are certainly up for an interesting critical account on a wide range of issues. And since few may consider themselves experts on such broad topics, if not theoretically then cases-wise, the book promises something new and thought-provoking to many in the reading audience.

The research presented in this book roots itself in the inter-space of Foucauldian accounts of governmentality and biopolitics, and the ideas associated with the "new humanitarianism" manifested in war/disaster contexts as a transnational or, as the author suggests, globalizing regime of governing. One of the leading ideas of the book is to demonstrate that, and reveal how, this "new humanitarianism" is shaped by globalizing neoliberalism and thus becomes a dominant regime of humanitarian governing. This new regime is best understood as a biopolitical regime which, although context-specific, relies on a standard set of technologies that are much too often chaperoned by sovereign, disciplinary, or biopolitical violence (such as containment, invisibility, abandonment) disguised as a promise of care.

What is particularly important for Volha Piotukh is that her (effectively, genealogical) investigation is evidence-based, and that the theory she is building is instrumental for the evaluation of real policies and practices. That is why her book not only pushes the boundaries of a theory but uses her theoretical account to analyze two real-life and recent historical cases: the humanitarian relief and the war on terrorism in post-2001 Afghanistan, and the international assistance effort in post-Chernobyl Belarus.

Thus the book is divided into two main parts: theory building and analysis of the cases. Each of these two parts is, in turn, two-fold. In the first part of her theory building the author maps out the conceptual terrain of her book, outlining the concepts that

are most crucial for advancing her main argument. In effect, the first chapter is a short overview of, mostly, Foucauldian accounts of biopolitics and biopower placed and understood within a broader context of power, knowledge, governmentality, and sovereignty. The importance of thinking in terms of “global” biopolitics and international governmentality is also discussed; special attention is paid to positive or productive biopolitical concerns of “care” for the population. Although this chapter does contain some mildly critical suggestions regarding Foucault’s theorization, it could be described as earnestly Foucauldian. For a book about biopolitics and governmentality this focus on Foucault is understandable, of course, given the latter’s status as the author of these concepts. Still, some more critical distance would have been welcome here.

The second theoretical part is devoted to the idea of the new humanitarianism as a regime of governing. Despite some variations, the concept of new humanitarianism is often understood in relation to multiple developments in the field of the global humanitarian action or intervention since the end of the Cold War. This chapter brings together and analyzes a number of post-Cold War developments in the international environment associated with the new humanitarian practices, such as the increase in the prominence and intrusiveness of humanitarian action; the proliferation of humanitarian actors; the growth of funding, aid privatization; and “professionalization”; the institutionalization of humanitarian action; or global inequality. This analysis not only illuminates how dynamic, complicated, and ambiguous the emergent humanitarian enterprise is in terms of challenges and opportunities, but also demonstrates the ways in which the field represents the fascinating result of various shifts and convergences that have taken place there as a consequence of post-Cold War trends.

In order to better understand the nature of humanitarian governing, Piotukh embarks on an impressive study of two cases, either of which could make for a separate book. The two cases selected for the research, the international assistance efforts in Afghanistan (2001–2011), and in Belarus (2000–2011), seem to be different in almost every respect. They are dissimilar geopolitically; in the nature of the humanitarian need (war/ecological disaster), and

the environment (conflict/non-conflict); and in the scale of the international response (one of the most expensive and extreme interventions/a forgotten emergency).

Piotukh's justification for the case selection is exactly their uniqueness, originality, the fact that the two cases are "as different as possible," and the variation of analysis which they thereby allow. Although personally I was not entirely convinced that the two cases in question were the best choice (due to difficulties in comparability and, perhaps, a consequent feeling of randomness and uneven presentation in the book), the author makes a fair case for their selection criteria via a discussion on the advantages and limitations of her choices.

The question of the case selection aside, the case studies themselves are interesting and informative. One of the most engaging aspects of the scholarly investigation is how the "speaking with one voice" of the humanitarian assistance was made possible, as well as how the biopolitical divide, one of the effects of the new humanitarianism, simultaneously created and relied upon a particular construction of the assisted.

Piotukh demonstrates that, in the case of Afghanistan, the discourse of the "war on terror" and the way the dominant problematization of the assistance effort was constructed, created conditions for further securitization and militarization. In Belarus, by contrast, the Chernobyl-related assistance effort made the affected communities vanish from the radars of the international aid community through the consistent insignification of the radiation effects advocated in many international reports. Despite the differences, in both cases, according to Piotukh, the biopolitics of invisibility and abandonment were significant for the aid policies and practices, obscuring the suffering of individuals and emphasizing "the population," whose collective body was created as an outcome of this biopolitical violence.

Given the emphasis placed on the importance of a bottom-up perspective, the sample of interviews conducted with the Chernobyl "liquidators" (clean-up workers) seems rather small. It would also have been useful to address the topics of reproduction and sexuality after Chernobyl, topics which were extremely significant

for the local population. In the book, the views of the (inter)national experts seem to be constructed in opposition to those held by the liquidators; yet some of the expert views cited in the book were also supported and promoted by some of the liquidators themselves (for instance, Sergii Mirnyi) in their struggle against stigmatization. This fact seems to be overlooked here.

On the whole, however, this is an insightful read that will be welcomed by scholars and intellectuals interested in Afghan and Belarusian politics and society, and/or the topics of biopolitics, international governmentality, and international humanitarian action.

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Evgeniy Chernyshev, *Kaliningrad—An Ambivalent Transnational Region within a European-Russian Scope*. Kaliningrad: Kaliningradskaja kniga, 2016. 220 pp.

Kaliningrad is a distinctive part of the Russian Federation, an enclave/exclave territorially separated from mainland Russia, situated on the Baltic Sea and squeezed in between the European Union and Schengen member states Lithuania and Poland. These geographical determinants are quite decisive for the evolution and characteristics of Kaliningrad society.

This book is a revised version of a doctoral dissertation by the same name, defended by Kaliningrad researcher Evgeniy Chernyshev in December 2015 at the Institute for European Ethnology of Humboldt University in Berlin. The study focuses on the “self-understanding” of Kaliningrad’s youth. It is an empirical examination of two major groups: “experts” and “ordinary” respondents. The experts are identified as “public people,” specifically “scientists, leaders of public initiatives, entrepreneurs, leaders of NGOs, government officials, and journalists,” up to 35 years of age. The second group is more numerous, but characterized merely as “ordinary people.” There is no quantification of reply patterns and no questionnaire is included. Questions and answers are merely quoted as illustrative examples.