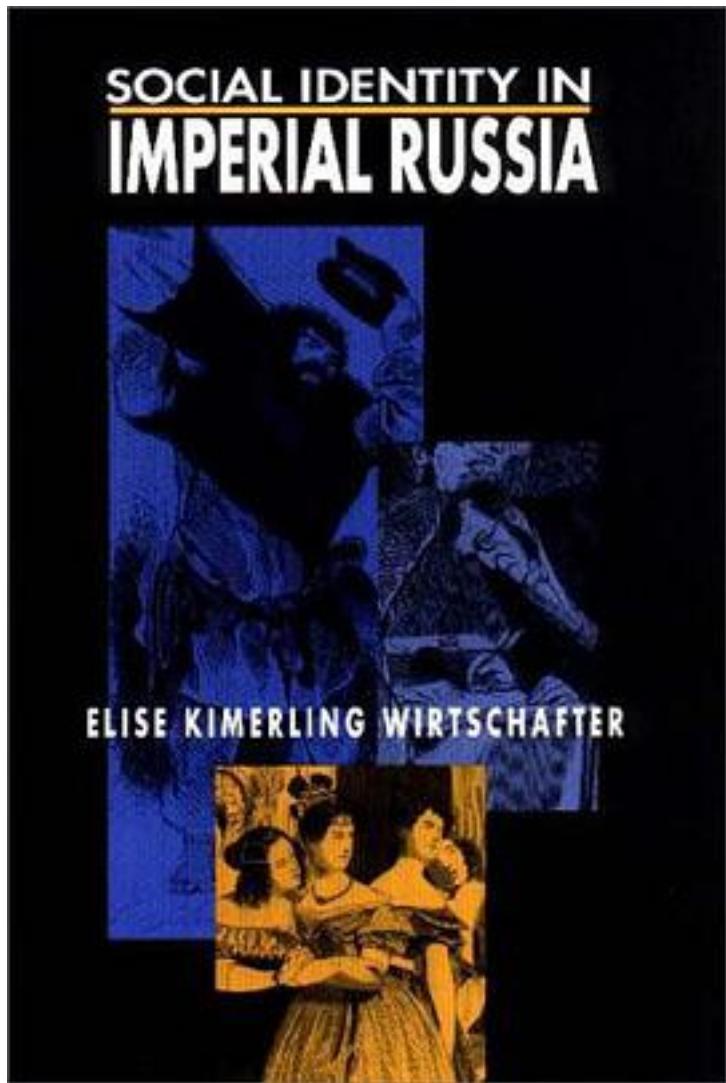


Social Identity in Imperial Russia



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How did enlightened Russians of the eighteenth century understand society? And how did they reconcile their professed ideals of equality and justice with the authoritarian political structures in which they lived? Historian Elise Wirtschafter turns to literary plays to reconstruct the social thinking of the past and to discover how Enlightenment Russians understood themselves.

Opening with an illuminating discussion of the development of theater in eighteenth-century Russia, Wirtschafter goes on to explore dramatic representations of key social questions. Based on an examination of nearly 300 secular plays written during the last half of the century, she shows how dramas for the stage represented and debated important public issues--such as the nature of the common good, the structure of the patriarchal household, the duty of monarchs, and the role of the individual in society.

Wirtschafter presents a striking reconstruction of the way educated Russians conceptualized a society beyond the immediate spheres of household and locality. Seeking to highlight problems of "social consciousness," she asks what Enlightenment Russians thought about social experience--and how their ideas related to actual social relationships in a society organized around serfdom and absolute monarchy. She portrays Russian Enlightenment culture on its own terms, while at the same time shedding light on broader problems of social order and political authority in imperial Russia.

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