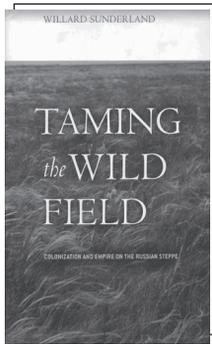


Igor Grachev, Pavel Rykin

A European's View of Asiatic History



Willard Sunderland. *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe.* Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. XVII + 239 pp.

This monograph by the American scholar Willard Sunderland devoted to the processes by which the European steppe zones came to be included in the Russian state over the course of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, is an expression of the interest shown by Western historians over the last few decades in the formation of the territory of the Russian state. Sunderland focuses his attention on the extensive area stretching from Central Ukraine to the Urals, including the northern shores of the Black Sea, the Volga region, and the Northern Caucasus, which in the sixteenth century was settled by various nomadic peoples (the Nogai Tatars, the Tatars, the Bashkirs, and later the Kalmyks), and which was a source of military hostility to the Moscow state, but which, by the late nineteenth century, had been transformed into a largely agricultural region, by now firmly under Russian control, and included in the 'Russian qua Russian' territories of the Empire. This transformation, and also the way that it was reflected in official political discourse and

Igor Grachev

Peter the Great Museum of
Anthropology and Ethnography
/Kunstkamera/, Russian Academy of
Sciences, St Petersburg

Pavel Rykin

Peter the Great Museum of
Anthropology and Ethnography
/Kunstkamera/, Russian Academy of
Sciences, St Petersburg

literature (both academic and journalistic), is the main subject of Sunderland's study. His monograph uses quite a large corpus of varied materials relating to the history of the relationship between Russia and her steppe neighbours, including some archival data (Sunderland worked in a variety of archives in Moscow and St Petersburg and in provincial Russia, and also in a number of archives in Ukraine). The monograph has an impressive-looking apparatus and takes into consideration a wide variety of concepts, and of views on the topic that it addresses.

The monograph is structured chronologically, following the process by which the steppe territories were absorbed by Russia. The Introduction (pp. 1–18) sets out the general principles and approaches behind Sunderland's treatment of his subject. The first chapter, 'Frontier Colonization' (pp. 11–53) deals with the pre-history of the relations between the Russians and the peoples of the given area, and also the first moves towards its political incorporation and agricultural colonisation (up to the middle of the eighteenth century). In the second chapter, 'Enlightened Colonization' (pp. 55–95), Sunderland looks at the changes that came about in official politics with regard to this geographical area in the reign of Catherine II, and which were provoked by the aim of intensifying and rationalising the process of absorption. Chapter Three, 'Bureaucratic Colonization' (pp. 97–134), covers the first third of the nineteenth century, when the dissemination of Romanticism intensified interest towards the nomadic peoples of the region and at the same time plans for their sedentarisation were drawn up, as were plans for the colonisation of the steppe by Russian peasants, assisted by bureaucratic 'supervision'. In Chapter Four, 'Reformist Colonization' (pp. 137–174), under discussion is the period after the creation of the Ministry of State Properties in 1837. The Ministry undertook a programme of reform to peasant colonisation in order to regularise this, increased material support to settlers, and imposed greater control on the absorption of territory, with an emphasis on agricultural needs. This chapter also considers the results of the increasingly negative attitude at government level to mass settlement that made itself felt in the 1860s and 1870s. Finally, Chapter Five, 'Correct Colonization' (pp. 177–220) is concerned with the final period of incorporation of the steppe region into the Russian Empire, which was accompanied by the evolution of new models of absorption, now with a scientific foundation. Sunderland argues (and it is hard not to agree with him here) that at the end of the late nineteenth century, Siberia started to play the central role in the formation of government policy towards land settlement, and that this was accompanied by a loss of significance of the steppe region, now considered part of 'core Russia', and hence attractive as a target for large-scale agrarian migration. In the Conclusion

(pp. 223–8), Sunderland draws together the threads of his analysis, compares the processes under study with colonial initiatives by Western European countries in the early modern era, and (as is fairly typical of Western historiography) also makes assertions about the obvious lack of sincerity in Russian official discussion of the processes that he describes. Sunderland's study ends with a short essay about the archival documents used in his discussion.

The topic that Sunderland discusses is without question of the foremost importance to Russian history. There are indeed many issues here that have yet to be properly researched, and every new book is an important event.

However, in our opinion, Sunderland, like most other writers who have discussed this subject, has not succeeded in freeing himself from certain cultural stereotypes, which in turn have had an adverse effect on the conclusions that he draws at the end of the book.

Perhaps the most important of these stereotypes are expressed in the governing theoretical concepts of *imperialism* and *colonialism*. Sunderland's central idea is that the absorption of the steppe zone by Russians was driven by the imperialist policy of the government, and that the character and general direction of this were in no respect distinct from those that characterised the creation of colonial empires in America, Africa, and Asia by the Western powers. Sunderland considers that it is perfectly appropriate to use the term 'imperialism' with reference to the policy of steppe territory absorption in Russia, even though he himself notes that this policy was enacted in a single continent, and affected peoples who were well-known to those pushing territorial expansion — these were not 'natives' from a far-flung *terra incognita*. He opposes the interpretation of the absorption of the steppes as 'settlement' or population dissemination, or internal colonisation on the part of the Russians, an interpretation that he considers traditional both in Russian and Western historiography; in his view, the idea that the expansion into the steppes was 'imperial' is much more unusual (p. 4). Yet at the same time, as though recognising the controversiality of his assertions, he defines imperialism as '*the process... of establishing or maintaining an empire*', and empire itself as '*the effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinate society by an imperial [one]*' (p. 3). Both these definitions have been adopted by him from M. W. Doyle's 1986 study, *Empires*. It is not hard to work out that they would be applicable to any process of state formation in any society at any date. It stands to reason that Western European colonial empires and the Russian state would fit the bill equally well, but what is the significance of such an imprecise analogy? Where are the concrete and relevant characteristics that would allow one to demonstrate the unity in terms of principle between the political

structure of the Russian Empire and colonial powers in the terms that these are usually understood? They are absent from this definition, and the reader will not find information about them in Sunderland's book either, whether in the main discussion or in the conclusion, though the author repeatedly (and without giving any details) attempts to assure us of their real existence.

It is notable that Sunderland constantly has to resort to various forms of equivocation. On the one hand, he keeps insisting that his book is concerned with '*imperialism in colonization*', but on the other, he has to acknowledge that Russian governments themselves did not regard the absorption of the steppe regions of their country as colonisation in an obvious sense, and that they also treated the inhabitants of these regions, the so-called *inorodtsy*, with the same paternalism that they extended to the Russian population itself (p. 4). As a result, he cannot help admitting that '*The colonization of the steppe... reflected and produced a particularly complicated kind of imperialism, one in which empire building, state building, society building, and nation building [...] invariably intertwined*' (p. 5). Yet this is very far away from the imperialism that was practised by European states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in their colonies, since the population of these was completely excluded from the processes of '*empire building, state building, society building, and nation building*' and were reduced to the state of 'second class human beings'. Hence, one might question the usefulness of terms such as *colonialism* and *imperialism* to describe the process by which Russians absorbed the steppe regions, given that there were no adequate correlates of these within ideology, or in political and social reality. How, indeed, can one speak of 'imperialism', when, at the end of the seventeenth century, the Kalmyk Khan Ayukha himself decided when to send his subjects to the aid of the Russians in their struggles with the Crimean Tatars or not (p. 27)? Or when the population of Orenburg, '*the Eastern outpost of Russian colonialism*' included almost all the peoples in Russia, local Bashkirs and Kazakhs among them (p. 47)? Or when, at the high point of the sedentarisation policy, nomadic peoples were encouraged to take up agriculture by subsidies, hand-outs of free seed and equipment, and when the most successful new farmers received medals from the Tsarist government for their effort (p. 103)? Or, finally, when the conflict with the Kalmyks that led to their relocation in Jungaria in 1771 was provoked by intervention into their affairs because they were considered '*Russian subjects whose first obligation was to abide by the will of their sovereign,*' rather than dangerous natives who deserved merciless exploitation or annihilation, as the American Indians in English colonies at that time were treated (p. 57)?

Sunderland notes that he '*treats the colonization of the steppe largely through the minds and experiences of the colonizers rather than those of*

the colonized because the central story being told here, a story of appropriation, was one in which the colonizers' terms ultimately prevailed' (p. 2). Let us look at the force of these terms. It appears reasonably clear that they are supposed to represent the imperial and colonial drift of Russian government policy, the subject that this monograph sets out to address. Yet the reader is surprised to read further, '*Nothing in official colonization vocabulary expressed the larger political or economic acts of incorporation or the dominance of a metropole over a subordinate territory, even though these understandings were clearly embedded in European colonizing terminology*' (pp. 88–9). For Europeans, a colony was '*was a conquered region that was then populated with outside colonists*'. In Russia, by contrast, the term *koloniya* was applied '*simply to a nationally distinctive enclave or rural settlement, in particular of foreigners*' (p. 89). The phase of '*bureaucratic colonization*' (from the start of the nineteenth century onwards) did not witness any sense that settlement of the steppe constituted a *koloniya*. Quite the opposite — this region was regarded as part of the '*main territory*' of the Russian Empire, having formed part of the Russian state in ancient times as well (pp. 110–1). In turn, the terms *kolonizatsiya* and *kolonisty* began to be used only in the 1860s, and even at this period they had the same force as *pereselenie* and *pereselentsy* [settlement, settlers], being used principally for the peasant incomers to the border regions (pp. 156–8). Nevertheless, although '*the European steppe as a whole was never described as a colony... the implication of colonial status seemed clear*' (p. 89). Sunderland's logic is hard to fathom.

So what did the ill-fated 'Russian imperialism', that for so long determined the status of these steppe regions in the Russian Empire, in fact lead to? In Sunderland's words, it determined a marked decline in nomadism as a way of life in the European steppes, but '*this was not because of any coherent vision of assimilation on the part of St. Petersburg or its local representatives*'. Furthermore, '*The decline could not be attributed to the unblemished achievements of more plebeian bearers of Russian culture either,*' i.e. ordinary peasants (p. 215). It emerges that the decline came about, but that 'imperialism' in the person of the creators and main movers of this imperialist policy had, paradoxically, more or less nothing to do with this. In all, the actual phenomena mentioned in the book appear to have a distinctly dubious connection with Sunderland's mythical vision of 'imperialism', which in turn forces him to suspect the whole of Russian historiography, and along with this the entire corpus of Russian documentary sources, from the very beginning up to the present day, of deliberate prejudice and falsification of history. As Sunderland asserts, '*The inclination to view steppe colonization as a popular, natural, and mostly gentle movement that unfolded within an empire but was not itself imperialist was the product of myth, of wish-*

ful thinking, and of the Russian elite's complicated imperial-national identity' (p. 227). Acknowledging that the nomadic population of the steppes was not annihilated or even driven off into reserves; that the main mass of the settlers were peasants who enjoyed no especial privileges and who had much the same rights as the 'colonised' nomads; that 'Russian colonisation' was neither specifically Russian, nor even Orthodox, in character; that *kolonizatsiya* was understood as an agrarian process, and hence an economic rather than political one; that the government of these regions was organised according to principles that obtained on the entire territory of the Empire and not just in the so-called 'colonies', Sunderland still manages to assert that all this '*only further blurred the imperialist aspect of the colonization process*' and emphasised the Russian elite's '*tendency to ignore the imperialist aspect of their action*' (pp. 227–8). Thus, Sunderland's constant attempts to lay bare 'Russian imperialism' while ignoring the facts (which he, to give him his due, himself lays out conscientiously) recall someone's attempt to find a black cat in the dark — when the cat was never in the room anyway. As a result, the facts presented in the book stand at a distance from the overall argument — indeed, they actively undermine this, though, so far as one can judge, Sunderland does not notice this or does not want to notice it. The concrete facts presented in Sunderland's book have undoubted value and one reads them with considerable interest, but when the author moves on to generalisations and deductions, it is hard not to find these groundless and pretentious. To paraphrase Sunderland himself, we might say that his own interpretation of the events he describes is the product of mythic assumptions and (might one not also say?) of the complex location of the American academic elite in terms of its historical and political identity.

Among the other faults of the book is Sunderland's attempt to narrate events from the point of view of the consciousness and experience of the colonisers, and not those colonised. Of course, one can understand this, given that 'imperialism' is an ideology expressing precisely the views of the colonisers and not those of the colonised. But this leads to a one-sided interpretation of the processes discussed, an interpretation that emphasises the social, political and economic inequality of the two sides, one of which is represented here as active and dominant (i.e. the Russian government and the settlers), while the other is assigned a passive role, the role of the dominated. In our view, however, it is less the model of 'appropriation, than the model of *interaction*, which allows '*the native point of view*' to make its mark and any social process to be described as a confrontation of different symbolic strategies, each ready to search out the possibility of compromise or a 'common language' that would suit both participants in the discussion. In the framework of

this model, one might analyse the way that local nomad populations reacted to the events under study, relationships with the peasant settlers, the problems resulting in the interaction of these different populations, and finally, the formation of a new social order that allowed both sides to pursue their own interests with greater or lesser effectiveness.

In addition to all this, we should add that the larger geopolitical context of the events that Sunderland studies is left almost unexamined. Ignoring this aspect of the issue does not allow him to penetrate into the essence of what he is studying and deprives his analysis of historical perspective. The fact is that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a specific kind of power vacuum opened up in Eurasia as a result of the collapse of the enormous Mongol empire. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the interests of many different states bordering on the former territories of the Golden Horde came into conflict. Russia, China, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire, and other states began competing for control over the atomised groups of steppe-dwellers and tried to employ these groups to their own political ends. It is this context that one should bear in mind when attempting to interpret the politics of the Russian state with reference to the steppe peoples; the obvious parallels to its actions are to be found not in the colonial expansion of the Western powers, but in the relations of the Tsing Empire with the Jungar and the Khalkha Mongols, of the Ottoman Empire with the Crimean Tatars, of Persia with the Pashtun and the Balochi. Parallels of this kind, it seems to us, are more useful than the theoretical phantasms Sunderland himself raises — ‘Russian imperialism’ and so on.

In our view, Sunderland's book is of interest as an idiosyncratic case of how Russian history is interpreted by the Western mentality, with all the myths and errors that are characteristic of that mentality. But one still has to give the author his due. His own sincere doubts in the conclusions that he reaches, doubts that are honestly revealed to the reader, inspire equally sincere fellow-feeling. This European's view of Asiatic history is intriguing and in places entertaining, though it does also raise many questions.

Translated by Catriona Kelly