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What is 'Colonisation'? An Alternative View of *Taming the Wild Field*

*There is something very characteristic in the indifference which we show towards this mighty phenomenon of the diffusion of our race and the expansion of our state. We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.*¹

There are now a number of extremely valuable monographs in English produced by scholars (almost all working at American universities) on the history of Russian imperialism, most notably those by James Forsyth, Mark Bassin and Yuri Slezkine on Siberia and the Far East,² Moshe Gammer, Austin Jersild, Michael Kemper and Nicholas Breyfogle on the Caucasus³ and Daniel Brower, Adeeb Khalid and Jeff Sahadeo on Central Asia,⁴ and Robert Geraci and Paul Werth on the Volga-Kama Region.⁵ So far

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¹ Sir John Seeley. *The Expansion of England*. London, 1883. P. 10.

² James Forsyth. *A History of the Native Peoples of Siberia*. Cambridge, 1992; Mark Bassin. *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Far East, 1840–1865*. Cambridge, 1999; Yuri Slezkine. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Ithaca, NY, 1994.

³ Moshe Gammer. *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar*. London, 1994; Austin Jersild *Orientalism and Empire*. Montreal, 2002; Michael Kemper. "Adat against Shari'a: Russian Approaches towards Daghestani "Customary Law" in the Nineteenth Century" // *Ab Imperio*. 2005. Vol.3; Nicholas Breyfogle *Heretics and Colonizers. Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus*. Ithaca, NY, 2005.

⁴ Adeeb Khalid. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform. Jadidism in Central Asia*. Berkeley, CA, 1997; Daniel Brower. *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire*. London, 2002; J.F. Sahadeo. *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923*. Bloomington, IN, 2007.

⁵ Robert Geraci. *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia*. Ithaca NY, 2001; Paul Werth. *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905*. Ithaca, NY, 2002.

there have been three major studies of the Steppe region pre-1917, with Allen Frank bringing a trained orientalist's approach to the history of the Novouzensk district in the Ural river region, Virginia Martin writing about how Kazakh customary law changed in response to pressure from the Imperial state, and Michael Khodarkovsky examining the Steppe as a frontier region where '*peace was impossible*'.¹ Willard Sunderland's excellent new book builds on Khodarkovsky's work to some extent, and has a similarly lengthy and ambitious chronological sweep (c1100–1900), but it is geographically more tightly focussed on the European Steppe, stretching roughly from Orenburg to the Dniester, and comprising the North Caucasus, Kuban, Don and Tauride regions.

On modern maps most of this vast swathe of territory appears uncomplicatedly Russian or Ukrainian, with only the 'autonomous' republics of Bashkortostan and Kalmykia to suggest that earlier civilisations have been partially obscured. Sunderland's achievement is to lift the curtain on the process which turned a territory once largely populated by Turkic nomads into one overwhelmingly dominated by settled Slavs, the creation of Russia's most successful, because most invisible colony (pp. 227–8).

Where Khodarkovsky's approach is more that of the social historian, examining the points of conflict and cooperation between settled and nomadic societies, Sunderland is more concerned with state structures, in particular the gradual bureaucratisation of the process of resettlement (*pereselenie*) into the 'empty' Steppe. Drawing upon archival sources from Orenburg, Simferopol and Odessa as well as Moscow and St Petersburg, *Taming the Wild Field* is a rich mixture of administrative, environmental and intellectual history, showing how ideas about the nature and usefulness of the Steppe and whether or not it was a 'colony' of Russia shifted over time. The names of well-known academicians such as V.N. Tatishchev (pp. 37–9) or Petr Semenov Tian-Shanskii (pp. 195–6) mingle with those of more obscure scholars such as the soil specialist V.V. Dokuchaev (pp. 203–4), bureaucrats such as P.D. Kiselev, first head of the Ministry of State domains (pp. 137–8), and the footsoldiers in the colonisation process, such as the 'model Menonite' Johann Kornis (pp. 117–8). The change in the appearance of the Steppe as nomads gave way to peasant agriculture, and official concerns over its subsequent environmental degradation (pp. 196–206) are also examined in detail.

¹ Allen J. Frank. *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia. The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde 1780–1910*. Leiden, 2001; Virginia Martin. *Law and Custom in the Steppe. The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*. London, 2001; Michael Khodarkovsky. *Russia's Steppe Frontier. The Making of a Colonial Empire 1500–1800*. Bloomington, IN, 2002.

Sunderland's initial section on 'The Rus' land and the Field' (pp. 11–15) offers a brief but vivid discussion of the place of the Steppe in the earliest Rus Chronicles, which emphasise its strangeness and difference from the lands of forest-dwelling Slavs. Without many trees, pools, berries or mushrooms, populated by non-Slavic, non-Christian nomads who periodically raided Rus towns, the *Pole* (the 'Wild Field' of Sunderland's title) was an alien and at times frightening place. This *Prostor* also had its attractions though, as a place where peasants could migrate to escape the exactions of the state, although they sometimes suffered from a lack of its protection. From a haphazard mixture of uncontrolled peasant migration in the 17th and early 18th centuries, with the state expanding its frontiers to regain subjects who had sought the emptiness and relative freedom of the Steppe (pp. 11–35), the later 18th century saw the Steppe turned into a field for the application of Enlightenment principles, almost a *tabula rasa* where, away from the messiness of *korennaya Rus*, new, rational types of agriculture could be introduced by means of hardy industrious settlers, exemplified by the German Mennonites, although there were also less successful experiments with Bulgarians, Bessarabians and Jews from the Pale (pp. 55–73). In the period of what Sunderland describes as 'Bureaucratic colonisation' (pp. 97–113) the number of foreign colonists went into sharp decline, as state serfs were resettled in large numbers instead.

As Sunderland makes clear (pp. 126–7), to begin with there was no overt policy of securing fragile frontier areas through settling them with Great Russian Orthodox peasants: as late as the 1840s questions of ethnicity or religion were of little importance in determining the suitability of internal migrants to the steppe, and all state peasants, regardless of origin, were eligible. This was subsequently to change. From 1837 onwards the Ministry of State Domains assumed responsibility for colonisation and the welfare of colonists, in some ways prefiguring the activities of the *Pereselencheskoe Upravlenie* which was set up in 1894 to resettle peasants to the Asiatic steppe and Siberia, and which Sunderland has examined in more detail in an earlier article.¹ In common with the other European Empires, by the latter part of the 19th century ideas of European racial and cultural superiority *vis-à-vis* Asiatics were becoming more prevalent, as was the use of the term *kolonizatsiya* alongside *pereselenie*. Sunderland makes repeated comparisons between the colonisation of the Steppe and settler migration in other European Empires, to considerable effect (e.g. p. 225), and in this he is taking his cue from contemporary Russian authors. Already

¹ Willard Sunderland. 'Empires without Imperialism? Ambiguities of Colonization in Tsarist Russia' // *Ab Imperio*. 2003. Vol. 2.

in 1866 Professor S.V. Eschevskii of Kazan University was referring to the state-led peasant colonisation of the steppes as part of the European triumph over Asiatic barbarism (p. 170). By the 1890s the President of the Imperial Geographical Society, Petr Semenov-Tian-Shansky, could write that Russian resettlement of the 'black-earth spaces' of the 'Sarmatian plain' was a part of the grander '*colonising movement of the European Race*', whilst Alexander Kaufman, an employee of the *Pereselencheskoe Upravlenie* made explicit comparisons with American expansion across the plains into the West (p. 195).

By the time these ideas were gaining ground, the Steppe region had lost its pre-eminence as a field for Russian colonisation in favour of the Northern Kazakh Steppes, Western Siberia and the Semirechye province of Turkestan. The European Steppe was now domesticated, with mud-baths at Astrakhan and koumiss-cures near Orenburg, and predictably enough, just as the old nomadic ways were disappearing, it was then that they increasingly came to be romanticised in fiction and painting (pp. 209–20). Although, as I discovered on a recent trip to Astrakhan, the Nogais have still managed to preserve the memory of an Islamic sacred geography of shrines to Sufi *Sheikhs*,¹ today the memory of earlier Turkic settled and nomadic inhabitants in the Crimea, Tauride Province and the Don region is all but submerged in the comfortable assumption that all these territories are, and always have been either Ukrainian or Russian — these are the only rival claims with any contemporary political significance. The sole exception are the Crimean Tatars, a small number of whom are trying to re-establish themselves in the land from which they were deported *en masse* by Stalin in 1942, but even their plight is largely forgotten in the midst of continuing acrimonious disagreement over whether Khrushchev's 'gift' of the Crimea to Ukraine in the late 1950s was legitimate or not. As Sunderland writes (p. 228):

By this time [c1900], it was clear that the grasslands north of the Black and Caspian Seas belonged to the outsiders who had colonised them, reinvented them, and so naturalised their possession that it seemed hard to believe that the plains could ever have belonged to anyone else.

The remarkable success of this process, and the historical blindness which it has helped to induce, can be gauged from the heated tone of Pavel Rykin and Igor Grachev's review of Sunderland's book. They do not appear to have read much beyond the introduction to

¹ See Allen J. Frank. 'Muslim Sacred History and the 1905 Revolution in a Sufi History of Astrakhan' // DeWeese D. (ed.) *Studies in Central Asian History in Honor of Yuri Bregel*. Bloomington, IN, 2001. Pp. 297–317.

Taming the Wild Field before flinging it down in disgust, and what they object to is more or less summed up by the fact that alongside the publisher's categories of 'Russian History' and 'Russian Territorial Expansion', Cornell have chosen to add 'Imperialism'. It is this word, more than anything else, which the reviewers cannot swallow as a description of the Muscovite, Petrine, Catherinean and later Tsarist state's expansion into the Eurasian Steppe. Rykin and Grachev accuse Sunderland of having a 'stereotyped' understanding of the terms *imperialism* and *colonialism*, and of applying them without qualification to the Russian case. This is particularly unfortunate because Sunderland's work is subtle, balanced, and fully alive to the ways in which Russian Imperialism differed from that of the Empire's western rivals. As he writes of late 18th century colonisation of the European steppe, in a passage (p. 89) seized on by Grachev and Rykin as representing 'strange logic':

The European steppe as a whole was never described as a colony, presumably because it was not geographically separated from the rest of the state, although in other respects — most obviously, the name of New Russia — the implication of a colonial status seemed clear. The inherent ambiguity of all this revealed a basic truth about the steppe that would not go away: at once different enough to demand exploration, dangerous enough to require the settlement of Cossacks and the rule of military viceroys, un-Russian enough to be conquered and appropriated, but still remote enough that it could seem to people in Petersburg as 'all but bordering China,' the steppe was not, for all that, defined as a region wholly distinct from Russia. The Russians this began the most intense period of steppe colonization by invoking much of the rhetorical style of European colonialism yet without clearly identifying the colony in question as a colonial place.

Grachev and Rykin have taken this passage in isolation in order to ridicule its contradictions, but it is precisely these contradictions which Sunderland is interested in exploring. As he notes on pp. 46–7, the earliest use of the term 'New Russia' appears to be by Ivan Kirilov, leader of the Orenburg Expedition of 1734–5 which was designed to open up the 'empty' steppe lines behind the new trans-Kama line; this led to the foundation of the fortress and city of Orenburg which would later become the starting-point for Russian expansion into Central Asia. The echoes of 'New England' or 'New Holland' are clear. When the title was formally adopted for the conquered steppe lands to the north of the Black Sea, Sunderland describes (pp. 69–70) how this was part of a process of conscious renaming of all localities in the area in order, as the historian A. N. Samoilov put it, to 'eliminate any memory of the barbarians' who had previously inhabited the region. By this he meant non-Orthodox nomads, viewed with the same mixture of contempt for their backwardness and admiration for their 'noble savagery' which

characterised the attitudes of North American colonists to the Indian tribes they were displacing (pp. 62–3).

Rykin and Grachev have seized on several examples cited by Sunderland himself to prove that Russia's expansion into the Steppe was not 'Imperialist'. Thus they write that if in the late seventeenth century the Kalmyk ruler Ayukha Khan decided for himself when to send aid to the Russians against the Crimean Tatars and when not to (p. 27), 'of what 'imperialism' can we be speaking'? To cite a late seventeenth-century example to prove that Russian policies in the Steppe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not 'imperialist' is, to say the least, disingenuous. Disregarding this however, do Rykin and Grachev seriously imagine that the British conquered India without assistance from Indian allies? As late as 1799 the Nizam of Hyderabad gave assistance to the East India Company in its fight against Tipu Sultan, and whilst by this date the Nizam's sovereignty was somewhat circumscribed, Robert Clive's famous victory over Chanda Sahib at the siege of Arcot in 1751 was only made possible by the timely arrival of 2,000 Maratha horse despatched by Muhammad Ali Walajah, the Nawab of Arcot.¹ He and other independent post-Mughal rulers sometimes chose freely to ally themselves with the British because it suited their short-term interests and provided an opportunity for striking at a local rival. That a Kalmyk chieftain did the same with the Russians proves nothing one way or the other.

Sunderland also writes (p. 47) that much of the early population of eighteenth-century Orenburg consisted of 'local Kazakhs and Bashkirs'. Rykin and Grachev claim that this means that the city cannot be considered 'the eastern outpost of Russian colonialism'. Are they under the impression that there were no Indians living in eighteenth-century Madras, Bombay and Calcutta? No Javanese in Batavia? That the *Kasbahs* built by the French in the North African desert had no Arab inhabitants? If so they are sorely mistaken, yet I doubt if they would dispute the colonial nature of these outposts.

Sunderland's description of programmes for the sedenterisation of nomads (p. 103) as another aspect of colonisation also arouses Rykin and Grachev's ire, as they claim that the mixture of financial subsidies, Imperial medals, free seed and weapons used to encourage the Bashkirs, Kalmyks and Kazakhs to 'take up the plough' compare favourably with the mass extermination of the American Indians in British colonies in the same period. This is true, but it does not invalidate the essentially colonial nature of the enterprise, which was designed to 're-make' nomadic groups as more useful impe-

¹ Burhan ibn Hasan. *Tuzak-i-Walajahi*. Part I. Madras, 1934. P. xii.

rial citizens, and involved the settlement of much of their grazing grounds with peasant colonists.

The final example that Rykin and Grachev cite to demonstrate the non-‘imperial’ nature of Russian expansion — the departure of many Kalmyks for Chinese Dzungaria in 1771 — is particularly bizarre. Sunderland writes (p. 57) that, frustrated with increasing Russian interference in their internal affairs, over 150,000 Kalmyks, approximately three quarters of the population, migrated in order, as one of their leaders put it, to escape ‘the burden of slavery’ under Russian rule. Catherine the Great saw this rather differently, as an attempt to escape the obligations of service which they owed as Russian subjects. She sent an expeditionary force of Cossacks to round them up and bring them back, and when this failed appealed, unsuccessfully, to the Qing Emperor. Rykin and Grachev ask us to believe that the fact that the Kalmyks were considered imperial subjects rather than ‘dangerous natives destined for exploitation or destruction’, means that this is not an ‘imperial’ or ‘colonial’ relationship! The fact that Russian administrators on the whole set a greater value on the lives of non-Russians in the ‘empty’ spaces of the steppe than did settlers in North America is not attributable to altruism, or to a stronger sense of the brotherhood of man, but because the Russian state suffered from chronic manpower shortages and was constantly seeking to prevent population from haemorrhaging beyond its borders. The British in India also tried to prevent peasants from migrating to avoid the burdens of tax and service under their rule. They encouraged peasants to move from overcrowded East Punjab to newly-irrigated land in the west using similar incentives to those offered to nomads on the Russian steppe, but this does not alter the essentially unequal terms of the relationship: Punjabis, like Kalmyks, were equally imperial subjects.¹

The other section Rykin and Grachev take grave exception to is Sunderland’s conclusion (pp. 227–8), where he once again (successfully in my view) explores the ambiguities and ‘blurred imperialism’ of the Russian colonisation of the Steppe. Sunderland, quite reasonably, thinks a process whereby the nomads who had formerly inhabited the Steppe lost most of their land and all of their autonomy must be described as a form of *imperialism*. He acknowledges that, unlike the Russian colonisation of the Kazakh Steppe, it was rarely overtly acknowledged as such by the authorities, whilst there were no native reservations or mass exterminations as in North America. His concluding chapter thus begins (p. 223):

The great grasslands of southern European Russia provided the platform for the Russians’ earliest and most influential encounters with

¹ See Imran Ali. *The Punjab Under Imperialism, 1885–1947*. Princeton, NJ, 1988.

otherness and their longest-running theatre of expansion and agricultural colonization. This book has been a study of how these two realities unfolded together over the course of close to one thousand years, influencing each other and creating an imperial region in the process. From the seemingly most alien of wildernesses to a touchstone of the nation, from a frontier zone of nomads and Cossacks to an imperial realm of farmers and bureaucrats, from a world of Turko-Mongolian cultures to a universe of Slavic-dominated multiethnicity, the steppe was gradually and persistently transformed into the opposite of what it was when it entered Russia's recorded history. Indeed, it was so thoroughly colonized by Russians and other outsiders and their economic and cultural practices that it evolved as Russia's most invisible and, in that sense, most successful imperial possession. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the steppe had been so profoundly transformed by Russian imperialism that it was difficult for contemporaries to determine whether it constituted a borderland, a colony, or Russia itself.

This passage on its own ought to be enough to give the lie to Rykin and Grachev's insistence that Sunderland does no more than apply crude western stereotypes of Imperialism to the Russian case. He clearly suggests that the process of expansion into the steppes, while objectively speaking a case of 'colonisation', was not seen as such subjectively by those who engaged in it; that we are dealing here with a case of absorption and assimilation, not with 'conquest' in the ordinary sense. Nevertheless, to claim that expansion which does not involve military conquest is not 'colonial' would be to deny the colonial nature of much European migration into the American West or the Australian interior, and this would clearly be nonsense.

The central justification offered for Russian Imperial expansion by Rykin and Grachev is that it was the 'power vacuum' left behind by the Mongol collapse which inexorably drew the Russians into the Steppe. This, apparently, means that the conquest of the region cannot be described as 'imperialism', or at the very least that its inhabitants should have been grateful to the Russians for saving them from the far more unsympathetic rule of the Chinese, Iranians or Turks. The echoes of Nikolai Danilevsky's Slavophile writings of the 1870s are clear enough; a parallel which might surprise Rykin and Grachev rather more can be found in the observations of Sir John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay in the 1830s, on the rise of British power in India:

The East India Company began to rise into political power and consequence, as a state, about the period of the downfall [sic] of the imperial house of Timour; when the different princes of India were contending for the fragments of the broken empire, every province of which

*was distracted by the their petty wars, or groaning under their temporary oppression.*¹

The 'power vacuum' argument is thus a very hoary old one indeed, and it is worth noting that Sir John Seeley, by no means a severe critic of British Imperialism, had rejected its application to India as early as 1883, instead attributing British expansion there to the aggression and avarice of the East India Company.² It is high time a similarly critical eye was brought to bear upon Russian Imperial expansion, and this is precisely what Sunderland has done for the European Steppe. Whilst sensitive to the fact that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries much Russian colonisation in the region was outside the effective control of the state (pp. 29–34), the evidence he adduces shows clearly that from at least the 1750s onwards there was a clear policy of expansion and colonisation directed from the centre (with varying degrees of success). The final securing of the Black Sea Steppes required two aggressive wars against the Ottoman Empire (pp. 55–60). The 'gathering of the lands of the Golden Horde', completed with the annexation of Crimea, was most certainly part of a conscious project of expansion.

Grachev and Rykin are able to maintain this comfortable distance between 'benevolent' Russian colonialism and its 'exploitative' western counterpart partly through a predictably rose-tinted view of the former, but also through an absurdly caricatured image of the latter. Not only was the Russian Empire not quite the paradise of colour-blind tolerance beloved of Soviet historians and Eurasianist thinkers; the idea of a stark East-West polarity in the other European Empires which was popularised by the late Edward Said is also something of a myth, or at any rate needs to be carefully qualified. It is not only Russian historians who make these assumptions of course:³ the recent debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid in the pages of *Kritika* about whether Said's 'Orientalism' can be applied to Russia was also slightly wide of the mark: Said's paradigm cannot be applied uncritically to any of the European empires.⁴ So far as their relationships with 'subject peoples' are concerned, all the varied forms of imperialism are to be found on one continuum: sometimes imperial orders may be near neighbours, sometimes distant from each other, but they always maintain certain features in common. However, this is a view which is widely, and sometimes fiercely rejected in Russia today.

¹ Sir John Malcolm. *The Political History of India from 1784 to 1823*. London, 1826. Vol. I. Pp. 5–6.

² Seeley. *Expansion of England*. Pp. 305–7.

³ See for instance Orlando Figes. *Natasha's Dance*. London, 2001. Pp. 380–4; Geoffrey Hosking. *Russia, People & Empire*. London, 1996. Pp. 39–40.

⁴ Adeeb Khalid. 'Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism' and Nathaniel Knight. 'On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid' // *Kritika*. 2000. Vol.1. No. 4. Pp. 691–715.

Dr. Alexander Dugin, founder of the 'International Eurasian Movement', is fond of pointing out that the Russia is neither of the East nor of the West but somewhere in between, and that her identity therefore contradicts Kipling's lines of 'doggerel' verse about the twain never meeting, something which is only true of the materialist, rationalist, imperialist nations of the West.¹ In common with most of those who carelessly use Kipling's hackneyed phrase, he fails to complete the verse, which gives it a rather different emphasis.

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth

*When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!*²

The point is not simply that Kipling is a much more subtle and sometimes contradictory writer than he is often given credit for (in the opening lines of 'The Man who Was' he makes a remark about Russians which might suit Dugin's purposes rather better);³ it is that Dugin's misunderstanding is symptomatic of wider Russian ignorance of the nature of the Western colonial empires. Dugin, and other like-minded observers, would no doubt be surprised to learn that Lord Liverpool, British prime minister from 1812–1828, had a Gujarati grandmother, and that a good deal of cultural exchange and racial mingling between East and West took place in the British and French Empires, even if from the mid-eighteenth century this was on strictly unequal terms and boundaries had hardened by the 1830s. Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, the British commander in the Second Afghan and the Boer Wars, had an Indian grandmother and stepmother. Class was sometimes as important as race in determining British imperial hierarchies, meaning that Indian princes could attend elite schools and universities and gain admission to exclusive clubs which no white working-class male could dream of entering; that the first Indian member of Parliament at Westminster was elected in 1898;⁴ whilst in the 1890s K.S. Ranjitsinhji could not merely play cricket for Cambridge and England, but also captain Sussex County Cricket Club and have white Britons under his authority.⁵

¹ See <<http://www.evrazia.org/>> for some idea of the 'Eurasianist' programme.

² Rudyard Kipling. 'The Ballad of East and West' // *Barrack-Room Ballads and other Verses*. London, 1892. P. 75.

³ *Let it be clearly understood that the Russian is a delightful person until he tucks in his shirt. As an Oriental he is charming. It is only when he insists upon being treated as the most easterly of western peoples instead of the most westerly of Easterns that he becomes a racial anomaly extremely difficult to handle* (Rudyard Kipling 'The Man Who Was' // *Life's Handicap*. London, 1903. P. 97).

⁴ Dadabhai Naoroji, Liberal MP for Finsbury and a prominent Indian Nationalist.

⁵ See Kenneth Ballhatchet. *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj*. London, 1980; David Cannadine. *Ornamentalism*. London, 2001.

None of this is to deny that the British Empire was, at least from circa 1800, a racist enterprise where Britons were a privileged nationality: it does however suggest that it is too simplistic to suggest that there is a stark contrast between western empires based purely on race hierarchy and a Russian empire where *soslovie* was the sole determinant of rank and power. It is the idea that Russia had a *uniquely* assimilationist approach to conquest which has long allowed Russian historians and philosophers to deny that Russia is or ever was a colonising, imperialist power, that her expansion was somehow ‘natural’, organic, and did not require violent conquest or the shedding of (much) blood. This attitude was summed up by Nikolai Danilevsky when he wrote in 1871 that:

Never has the occupation by a people of the historical role assigned to it cost less in blood and tears [...The Russian people] either occupied wasteland, or united to itself by a historical route of unforced assimilation such tribes as the Chud, Ves and Merya, or as they are today the Zyryans, Cheremiss and Mordvinians, who had neither the germs of historical life, nor any striving towards it; or, finally, took under its shelter and protection such tribes and peoples who, surrounded by enemies, had already lost their national independence or could no longer defend it, like the Armenians and the Georgians.¹

Whilst it is scarcely surprising to hear such sentiments echoed by a slightly loopy politician like Dugin, it is rather more disturbing to find them enthusiastically subscribed to by those in academic positions who work on the Russian, or other European, empires. Unfortunately the review of Sunderland’s book by Grachev and Rykin represents these tendencies in modern Russian scholarship in particularly virulent form. Their outraged response to Sunderland’s suggestion that Russian expansion into the steppe did indeed constitute ‘imperialism’, reflects just how thoroughly traces of the earlier ‘barbarians’, as Samoilov put it, have been expunged. The excellent work of V.O. Bobrovnikov and Sergei Abashin,² amongst others, and the existence of the superb Kazan-based journal *Ab Imperio*, shows that this is very far from being a universal phenomenon in modern Russia, but it is still quite widespread. For example, Dr Yevgenia Vanina, head of the South Asian department of the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, refers in the introduction to her most recent English publication to:

¹ N.Ya. Danilevsky. *Rossiya i Evropa. Vzgl'yad na kulturnye i politicheskie otnosheniya Slavyanskogo Mira k Germano-Romanskomu*. [Russia and Europe: A Look at the Cultural and Political Relations of the Slavonic and the Romano-Germanic Worlds. 1871]. M., 2003. P. 45.

² V.O. Bobrovnikov. *Musulmane Severnogo Kavkaza. Obychai, pravo, nasilie* [The Muslims of Central Asia: Customs, Laws, Violence]. M., 2002; S.N. Abashin. ‘Obshchina v Turkestane v otsenkakh i sporakh russkikh administratorov nachala 80-kh gg. XIX v.’ [The Local Community in Turkestan in the Assessments and Disputes of Russian Administrators in the Early 1880s] // *Sbornik Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*. Vol. 5. No. 153. Pp. 71–88.

*Russia's own tragic record of devastating intrusions from the West, the centuries-old traditions of contacts with the Asian peoples, the Eurasian character of the Russian civilisation as a whole that facilitated the sympathetic attitude of the Russian public towards India and the negative perception of the western impact upon it. Both our countries, India and Russia, were for centuries misunderstood, maligned and slandered by the West which sought to establish the superiority of the Euro-American way of life in contrast with the 'barbaric' India or Russia.*¹

Thus Russia, an Empire which at its height covered a sixth of the world's surface and which had an overwhelmingly European ruling class, an aggressive military power which at one time contemplated the conquest of India, is somehow cast into the role of victim. One does not have to look far for the source of such crude ideas of Russian exploitation by the west and international solidarity with similarly oppressed, toiling peoples of the world — the 'Great Friendship' between Russia and her subject peoples was a favourite theme of much post-war Soviet historiography.² However, the Soviet Union collapsed fifteen years ago, and academics are no longer obliged to produce politically tendentious commentaries resting on a dubious factual foundation. Presumably some continue to espouse the myth of uniformly benevolent Russian expansion because they like it and still believe in it.

Less egregious, but in some ways more worrying as it comes from two eminent scholars whose journal, *Vestnik Evrazii*, has published some fascinating work, is this quotation from Sergei Panarin and Dmitri Raevskii:

*The expansion of the Russian Empire had a decisive significance in completing the formation of historic Eurasia. It spread itself across lands directly adjacent to the 'metropolis', not separated from it by seas and oceans, as was the case with the other empires of the modern period. Together with this Russia in a way 'returned' to the bosom of a single government provinces which had previously been a part of former 'world' empires. Here is another distinction from the European colonial powers.*³

In fact the collection in the introduction to which this passage appears is admirably balanced and of extremely high quality, so that it is a shame this introduction does it so little justice.

¹ Eugenia Vanina (Ed.) *Indian History. A Russian Viewpoint*. Delhi, 2003. Pp. xii–xiii.

² See Lowell Tillett. *The Great Friendship*. Chapel Hill, 1969; Slezkine. *Arctic Mirrors*. Pp. 323–335; Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire*. Ithaca, NY, 2001. Pp. 432–61.

³ S. Panarin, D. Raevsky. 'Predislovie' [Introduction] // *Evraziya: lyudi i mify*. M., 2003.

Nobody would deny that, leaving aside the Caucasus and Central Asia (where the parallels with European overseas expansion are clear) the Russian Empire had some significant peculiarities. The fact that it was land-based rather than maritime; that it expanded steadily over a period of four centuries or so into contiguous lands that were already more or less well-known; and that there was often no clear distinction between metropolis and periphery, rendered it in many respects different from the other modern Empires. However, these are differences of degree, not of kind. There is a good case to be made for Russia's resemblance to her land-based contemporaries, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, or indeed for the parallel between Russian expansion and American expansion into the West.¹ The 'land/sea' distinction cannot be pushed too far. India and the Americas might be far distant from the European metropole, but can one necessarily argue that the small stretch of sea between Marseilles and Algiers renders French Imperialism a totally different beast from that in the land-based empires? In the Indian case, once the Suez canal was opened in 1869, journey times from Southampton to Bombay were less than half those of Moscow to Tashkent, let alone Irkutsk or Vladivostok. Naturally one can argue about the role of the sea as an imaginative barrier, providing a clear demarcation between metropolis and colony, but there is no doubt that before the railway age the sea was the world's highway, and a much less effective *physical* barrier than deserts, steppe or mountains.

The issue of 'succession' also needs to be carefully considered. Certainly, there is a case for saying that the Russians inherited the mantle of the Mongols (which is presumably what Panarin is driving at in the phrase 'returning to the bosom') but how does the existence of a precedent (and by no means an exact one) make their Empire any more peaceful or less imperial? It would be perfectly reasonable to argue, in any case, that the British in Asia not only consciously adopted the imperial heritage of the Mughals but were also the heirs to the mercantile empires of the Portuguese and the Dutch, just as the Russians were to the Mongols. Any narrative of the Russian empire which has it expanding by a process of peaceful, inevitable absorption necessarily has to ignore the siege of Kazan, Yermak's bloody campaign in Siberia, wars against the Kalmyks, Bashkirs and Kazakhs (all in the name of 'suppressing internal rebellion'), the wars against the Ottoman and Persian empires, the savage eighty-year conflict in the North Caucasus and the series of campaigns to conquer Central Asia between 1865 and 1885, which in 1881 saw General Skobelev massacre several thousand Turcoman at Geok-Tepe.

¹ The first two comparisons are explored by Dominic Lieven in *Empire. The Russian Empire and its Rivals*. London, 2000, the last by Sunderland.

Skobelev is a particularly interesting figure because of his recent rehabilitation as a 'Hero of Empire': since 2000 alone three new biographies of him have appeared, all praising him and his role in Russia's Imperial expansion in more or less unambiguous terms.¹ Thinly disguised as 'Sobolev', the General has figured prominently in two Boris Akunin novels, one of which has been turned into a film whose portrayal of the Turks would have had Edward Said turning in his grave if he had ever shown any interest in Russia.² My point is not a frivolous one: Russia can no more afford to be complacent and self-congratulatory about its Imperial past than any other European power. Niall Ferguson's recent simplistic apologia for British Imperialism, eagerly seized upon by American Neo-conservatives, shows that this is a significant problem in the West as well.³ Particularly at time when chauvinistic Russian nationalism is on the rise, when prejudice against the former subject peoples, particularly those from the Caucasus, is increasing, and when there are moves afoot to re-assert Russian dominance over the republics of the former USSR, it behoves academics to be more neutral, balanced, and critical of their country's imperial heritage, than many currently are.

¹ V. Kostin. *Zhizn zamechatelnykh lyudei — Skobelev* [The Life of Remarkable People: Skobelev]. M., 2000; E. Glushenko. *Geroi Imperii* [Heroes of the Empire]. M., 2001 (this jingoistic volume also contains uncritical biographies of K.P. von Kaufman and M.G. Chernyaev); V.I. Gusarov. *General M. D. Skobelev: Legendarnaya slava i nesbyvshiesya nadezhdy* [General M.D. Skobelev: Legendary Fame and Unfulfilled Hopes]. M., 2003. See also General-Major A.B. Kirilin. 'Boevye zaslugi M. D. Skobeleva v Turkestanе' [The Military Achievements of M. D. Skobelev in Turkestan] // *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*. Vol. 7. No. 507. July 2002. Pp.40–5.

² Boris Akunin. *Turetskii gambit i Smert Akhillesa* [The Turkish Gambit and the Death of Achilles]. M., 1998.

³ Niall Ferguson. *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World*. London, 2003.