A Colonial Empire Without Colonies: Russia's State Colonialism in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACTS

Dieser Aufsatz vertritt die These, dass das Russische Reich ein sich selbst verleugnendes Kolonialreich war. Ähnlich wie bei anderen europäischen Imperien besaßen auch Russlands Politik und Herrschaftspraktiken einen kolonialen Charakter. Dies trifft in besonderem Maße auf die asiatischen Teile des Imperiums zu, wo sich die russische Expansion von einem Nicht-Siedlungs- zu einem Siedlungskolonialismus hin entwickelte. Allerdings leugnete der russische Staat im Gegensatz zu den anderen europäischen Imperien konsequent und absichtsvoll seinen kolonialen Charakter. Das Russische Reich unterschied sich von seinen europäischen Entsprechungen durch die dominante Rolle des Staates und einen Typ von Staatskolonialismus, den die europäischen Imperien erst zu einem viel späteren Zeitpunkt praktizierten.

This paper argues that the Russian empire was a colonial empire in denial. Similar to other European empires, Russia's policies and practices were colonial in nature. It was particularly so in the Asian parts of the empire, where Russian expansion evolved from a non-settler to a settler form of colonialism. However, unlike other European empires, Russian authorities consistently and consciously denied Russia's colonial nature. What distinguished the Russian empire from its European counterparts was the dominant role of the state and a type of state colonialism that European empires began to practice at a much later stage.

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This essay seeks to recover the traces of the colonial discourse in Russian imperial historiography and place the history of Russian expansion in the south and east in the colonial framework usually reserved for the West European empires. Russia's expansion into the regions populated by various non-Christian peoples presented Russia with a similar set of colonial challenges that were confronted by the European powers. But in contrast to most of the European colonial experiences, in autocratic Russia it was the State that first and foremost managed the colonial affairs, while at the same time denying the empire's colonial nature. If one considers that European colonial empires evolved from ones largely reliant on their commercial private arms to ones mostly administered by the state, Russia's state colonialism, from this vantage point, preceded the European one. In fact, it was an unprecedented role of the State that distinguished the Russian empire from its European counterparts.

During the mid-sixteenth century, Moscow's rapid expansion into the regions of the mid-Volga and Siberia with their animist and Muslim population transformed Moscow from an insignificant principality into one of the first early modern empires. At the same time as the Muscovite state was expanding eastward, the Spanish empire was increasing its possessions in the New World. Later, the Spanish imperial conquests would be characterized as "colonial", while the post-sixteenth century Muscovy is neither referred to as an "empire", nor its conquest and rule over a large non-Christian population are commonly considered "colonial".

How does one account for such a conceptual difference? Traditional views hold that Russia was different from the European overseas empires because it expanded into the contiguous territories, with the exception of its short-lived American colonies, and therefore Russia was a continental empire. I suggest that beginning from the mid-sixteenth century Russia was both a continental and colonial empire. The undoing of the rigid classification of Russia as a continental empire helps to consider Russian historical experiences alongside European overseas empires.[1]

We shall consider later how the myths of the Russian empire came into existence and why, throughout the centuries, the imperial government officials and Russian historians consistently refused to see Russia as a colonial empire.

1. Defining Colonial in Russia

But first what is an empire and which empires can be considered colonial? Any short discussion cannot do justice to the enormous literature on empires and colonialisms that continues to be a burgeoning field.[2] Suffice it to say, however, that empire by defini-

1 W. Sunderland approaches the same topic with the thesis opposite of the one I offer below. He maintains the argument for the absence of colonial institutions in Russia but speculates that a Colonial Office might have emerged by the early twentieth century (W. Sunderland, The Ministry of Asiatic Russia: The Colonial Office That Never Was but Might Have Been, in: Slavic Review 60 [2010] 1, pp. 120–150).

2 For a succinct summary of the evolution and applications of the term "Colonial", see B. Badie / D. Berg-Schlosser / L.

tion requires a political structure in which one dominating political entity conquers and rules the other. The resulting political structure is conceptualized as a multipolar entity with the centre and one or several peripheries. The line of separation between the centre and periphery is usually political but could also coincide with the ethnic, national, or religious boundaries. Thus, Napoleon's conquest of the neighbouring Spain, Italy, and Germany made France an empire.

While all conquests could produce empires, not all empires are colonial. A colonial empire is defined by possessing a specific periphery whose inhabitants are conceptualized as inferior, primitive, barbaric, or generally "the Other" that can be both exploited and improved. Conceptualizing an empire as colonial requires a perception of difference between the metropolis and periphery that is articulated in terms of religion, civilisation, race, or a lack of sovereignty. Returning to the previous example, Napoleon's conquests in Europe created an empire but not a colonial one. By contrast, the result of his short foray into Egypt was a colonial empire, not because his troops crossed the body of water but because they faced a non-Christian society perceived as radically different and inferior.

It was in this sense, reflecting the European sense of superiority over the non-Christian peoples and the confidence in their destiny to bring them Civilisation and Christianity, that in the nineteenth century the term "colonial" began to be applied retroactively to the early European overseas conquests.[3] From this vantage point, with the mid-sixteenth century conquests of the large animist and Muslim population, the Muscovite state, like Spain and Portugal but long before England and France, became an early modern colonial empire.

Throughout the centuries that followed, Russia's Asian territories presented successive Russian governments with the typically colonial challenges: ruling societies with vastly different social organisation (nomadic, semi-nomadic, tribal and clan structures), confronting linguistic diversity and legal pluralism, and devising policies to convert, educate, and civilize their colonial subjects. The fact that Moscow and later St. Petersburg had never conceived of themselves as the colonial empires is another matter to be considered below.

2. Russia's Imperial Sonderweg

To understand some of the reasons for a lack of a political articulation of colonialism and the endurance of the imperial myths in Russia, one needs to begin with a brief survey of the historiography and ethnography in the Russian empire. No Russian intellectual of the nineteenth century could avoid addressing the core issues of the Russian identity:

Morlino (eds.), International Encyclopedia of Political Science, 1st edn, London 2011, pp. 302–306. For a comprehensive overview of the subject, see J. Burbank / F. Cooper, Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference, Princeton 2011.

3 J. H. Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830, New Haven 2006.

what was a Russian state, Russian nation, and Russian empire? Were these notions synonymous? If not, what was the relationship among them?

Writing in the wake of Russia's triumph over Napoleon, Russia's first official court historian, Nikolai Karamzin exalted Russia as a great European empire, and he lionized the alleged conqueror of Siberia, Yermak, as "the Russian Pizarro". But it was an influential writer and historian, Mikhail Petrovich Pogodin, who was the first to address the issues of the Russian empire in earnest. Writing in 1837, while a professor of Russian history at the Moscow University, he compared the conquest of Siberia by Yermak in 1581 with the conquest of South America by Hernan Cortés: "We have discovered one-third of Asia. Is that not worthy of a celebration similar to America's discovery by Christopher Columbus?"[4]

But if the Russians observed the obvious parallels between the Russian conquest of Siberia and the Spanish conquest of the Americas, they also noticed how a series of wars of independence ended the Spanish rule in the Americas and brought about the sovereign states of Latin America. If Russia's conquest of Siberia was similar, would the Russian empire follow the same path?

No, argued Pogodin. This was where the Russian experience diverged from the West. The Western states, he claimed, were founded on conquest, which resulted in enmities and divisions. In Russia, by contrast, a peaceful union of different peoples emerged because the empire came together through a voluntary unification (*prizvanie*).[5] In other words, similarities with the West were welcome as long as they confirmed Russia's equal greatness, but when it came to the perceived weaknesses of the West, Russian experiences offered emphatic contrasts.

A historian and a government official, Pogodin was a controversial figure: some contemporaries considered him a Slavophile, others saw him as a Westerniser. Yet his views captured the cognitive dissonance of Russian historiography: Russia was both similar to the West and different. In other words, Russia was unique. The Slavophiles wanted Russia to preserve the difference and uniqueness, the Westernisers wished to erase the difference and make Russia similar to the West.

What is remarkable that whether liberal or conservative, Westerniser or Slavophile, the overwhelming majority of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia accepted Pogodin's postulate. They maintained that Russia's expansion avoided the violence associated with European empires and that the Russian empire was fundamentally benevolent towards its imperial non-Christian subjects. This imperial paradigm conveniently excluded millions of the indigenous people who were killed by Russian arms and expelled through Russian policies as the empire expanded into Siberia, the North Caucasus, and Central Asia. Such cognitive dissonance was not in itself unique to Russia, and many European empires also believed in the munificent nature of their colonial enterprises. What was

4 P. Miliukov, Glavnye techeniia russkoi istorii mysli (The Main Currents of Russian Historiography), reprint, Moscow 2000, p. 363; Y. Slezkine, Arctic Mirrors. Russia and the Small Peoples of the North, Ithaca 1994, p. 77.

5 Ibid., p. 364.

different, however, that Russia juxtaposed itself to the Western empires and denied the colonial character of its own.

For conservative historians, such as Sergei Platonov, there was only one Russia populated by Russians. But even for liberal historians, Russia was either a reluctant empire destined to expand and colonize available lands (Vasilii Kliuchevskii) or one that pushed towards its natural frontiers (Sergei Soloviev). All concurred that Russia's expansion was inevitable, and that the mission to civilize the savage and perfidious peoples along the imperial frontiers demanded conquest and eventual russification.

3. Russia as a Frontier Society

To understand the dynamics of the Muscovite-Russian empire, I propose to look at Russia as a quintessential frontier society. Muscovy emerged on the fringes of several major civilisations: the eastern fringes of the Roman Christian one, the northern fringes of the Byzantine, and the north-western fringes of the Islamic civilisations. In the west, Moscow encountered sovereign states with clearly drawn territorial boundaries. But in the south and east, no similarly defined states and borders existed. Instead, along the vast expanse of Eurasian steppe and Siberian forest, Moscow confronted tribal alliances of various nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples.

These open frontiers were not easily delineated or defended. As a result, not only had Moscow found itself under the Mongol rule for over two centuries but even long after the Mongols, Russia was subjected to raids and depredations from the remnants of the Golden Horde and other nomadic newcomers. Unable to defend itself in the conditions of the open steppe, Moscow suffered considerable material losses and above all the loss of hundreds of thousands of people captured and sold on the slave markets of Central Asia, North Caucasus and the Crimea. It is estimated that between 1500 and 1700, over two million people in the East European periphery were captured and sold into slavery. This is more than a number of slaves transported from Africa during the same time. Raiding activity and slave trade were so profitable that keeping peace was all but impossible.[6]

On the other hand, the need to defend itself and the absence of the well-defined borders were a constant invitation toward further expansion and conquest. From the middle of the seventeenth century, Moscow embarked on the construction of the fortification lines, a combination of forts and natural impediments intended to stop the nomadic raids. This Russian version of *limes* became a major tool of Russian expansion. In time, the new fortification lines replaced the old ones followed by the peasant and Cossacks colonization, so that by the late eighteenth century the lines separated the newly conquered from the native territories in the North Caucasus and northern Kazakhstan.

6 D. Kolodziejczyk, The Crimean Khanate and Poland-Lithuania: International Diplomacy on the European Periphery (fifteenth – eighteenth centuries), Leiden 2011, p. XIV.

Historically, Russia was conquering new lands at a pace much faster than the government's ability to colonize them, and the peopling of the frontier regions often remained an insurmountable challenge. The empire was chronically short of people, in particular the East Slavs capable or willing to resettle and colonize the new regions. It was for this reason that Catherine the Great invited tens of thousands of colonists from Germany, Serbia, and other parts of Europe to settle the newly conquered lands of the Black Sea region that Catherine named, New Russia. It was also for this reason that the government allowed priests, merchants, and Cossacks to purchase, convert to Christianity, and hold in serfdom the non-Christians in the frontier regions. The fact that this decree was a remarkable violation of the exclusive privilege of the Russian nobility to purchase and own serfs spoke volumes of the government's priorities and intentions.[7] Regardless of these efforts, St. Petersburg could only boast of a limited success in the European part of Russia: in the mid-Volga, where by the late nineteenth century the number of Slavic settlers almost matched the non-Christian population, and in the northwest Caucasus, where throughout the 1860s and 1870s Russia ethnically cleansed the region by deporting the indigenous Adyge population to the Ottoman empire.[8]

While Russia's fortification lines were the de facto borders of the empire, Russia's claims of sovereignty over its numerous neighbours extended far beyond the fortification lines. The only modus operandi for Moscow in the southern and eastern borderlands was to insist that the native population immediately submit to the tsar and become his loyal subjects. In the mid-sixteenth century, in addition to assuming the mantle of the Byzantine emperors and crowning themselves as tsars, the Muscovite rulers also asserted their right to the title of khans of the Golden Horde. But claiming legitimate authority over the numerous non-Christian peoples, who previously formed a part of the Golden Horde, also meant adhering to the traditional Mongol political practices. Thus, it was not accidental that Moscow conceptualized its relations with the peoples in the eastern and southern borderlands in terms distinctly different from those used in the empire's western territories and that these terms were of Turko-Mongol origin. The suzerain versus subject relationship was the only way the tsar, who considered himself a universal sovereign, could conceptualize his relationship with the non-sovereign, non-state organized societies. In this regard, Russia's application of the concept of a universal sovereignty in its Asian borderlands was similar to those of the Ottomans and Chinese.[9]

7 Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi imperii (The Archive of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire), F. 119, op. 5, 1755g, d. 17, ll. 17–20; for a detailed discussion of the slave trade, see M. Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800, Bloomington 2002, pp. 21–26.

8 Memuary generala Musa-Pashi Kundukhova (1837–1865) (Memoirs of the General Musa-Pasha Kundukhov), in: Zvezda 8 (2001), pp. 100–123; C. King, The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus, Oxford 2008, pp. 73–91.

9 G. Karman, Sovereignty and Representation: Tributary States in the Seventeenth-Century Diplomatic System of the Ottoman Empire, in: G. Karman / L. Kuncevic (eds.), European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Leiden and Boston 2013, pp. 155–186; J. L. Millward / L. J. Newby, The Qing and Islam on the Western Frontier, in: D. S. Sutton / H. F. Siu / P. K. Crossley (eds.), Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China, Berkeley 2006, pp. 113–134; L. K. Shin, The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands, Cambridge 2006, pp. 62–63.

For almost three centuries since Moscow's early conquests in the 1550s the Russian government relied on several specific terms to define its relationship with the peoples in the south and east of the expanding empire. All of these terms were traditionally used in the Turko-Mongol world to describe a broad range of relationships. In time, Moscow succeeded in redefining these terms and suffusing them with the meaning of its own. Thus, a *shert,* traditionally understood as a peace treaty, became an oath of allegiance to the tsar, an *amanat*, an exchange of hostages with the status of eminent guests, became a one-way hostage taking, a *yasak*, a form of a barter transaction, became a tribute, and the Muscovite rulers' own traditional tribute to the native chiefs morphed into presents and annuities now generously bestowed by Moscow. Taken together with a systematic and deliberate mistranslating of the written and oral communications with the indigenous peoples, these terms became a set of colonial tools intended to turn the formerly independent peoples into Russia's subjects.[10]

The reality, however, was different. The native chiefs and their elites understood their relationship with Moscow in different terms. They projected onto Russia the conceptual framework of their own societies characterized by a high degree of political differentiation and independence of the elites from their nominal chief. Instead of a suzerain, they conceived of Moscow as their ally and saw their relationship with Moscow as that of a military and political alliance between the older (Moscow) and younger (local chief) brothers. Not surprisingly, misinterpretations and different expectations on both sides resulted in numerous conflicts.

Moscow's expansionist policies were marked from the very beginning by one overriding concern: securing the political loyalty of the local peoples. From Russian point of view this was accomplished through a ritual idiom of pledging an allegiance to the Russian sovereign. But the government's official rhetoric of self-aggrandizement and the ritual of allegiance, which portrayed the natives as the subjects of Moscow, persistently failed to recognize that the reality differed substantially from the official language. The government preferred to deny the uncomfortable fact that Russia's relationship with the local chiefs was more akin to a military-political alliance of unequal but independent rulers.

4. Colonial Incongruities

The contradictions were apparent. In reality, the Russian empire included colonial regions and peoples, which the government considered an integral part of the empire. To the Russian government officials, however, it seemed that the colonial empires were only the ones embodied by the European empires and their overseas possessions. In his proposal submitted to the Senate in the 1760s, a Russian general and senator, N. I. Muravev, advocated the expansion of Russia's commercial interests. To do so, he argued, Russia had to become a colonial empire like its European counterparts. With great admiration,

10 For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier, chap. 2.

Muravev described the sweat and sacrifices of the Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, and Dutch in establishing their colonies in the East. But the Russian empire was already in Asia, he insisted, and therefore, creating colonies there and expanding commerce the way the Europeans did, was only natural.[11]

How best to exploit and administer their colonies was on the mind of many European officials in the 1760s. Ironically, while the Spanish government considered how to transform its colonies into a model of the British commercial empire, the British were increasingly attracted to the centrally controlled empire on the model of the Spanish. Lord Halifax, the President of the Board of Trade between 1748 and 1761, presented successive administrations with the far-reaching colonial administrative reforms that would enable London to create a cost-effective empire. Madrid, on the other hand, wanted to transform Spain's American possessions into British-style "colonies".[12]

Only in the nineteenth century did various Russian officials begin to cautiously voice suggestions that the term "colony" could be applied to certain parts of the Russian empire. For example, the Russian Finance Minister, Egor Kankrin (Georg von Cancrin), argued in the 1820s that Georgia should be treated as an economic colony. Likewise, some nineteenth-century Siberian intellectuals and administrators insisted that Siberia was a Russian colony. Without denying the Russian roots of the Siberians, this "Siberian separatism" promoted an idea of the self-governing Siberian nation similar to Britain's Australian colonies. At the time, both Siberia and Australia had much in common as the penal colonies of their empires.[13]

But the most persistent voices, advocating the existence of a colony in the Russian empire, came from Russian officials familiar with the state of affairs in the recently conquered Central Asian territories. In the early 1870s, the Russian governor-general in Central Asia, Konstantin von Kaufman, compared the Russian Turkestan with the British India and concluded that Russian Turkestan too should be designated a colony. A generation later, the Russian Senator, Count Konstantin Konstantinovich von der Pahlen, dispatched from St. Petersburg in 1908 to review and write a comprehensive report of the region, similarly argued that Turkestan was "a colony within the empire". A few years later, the last governor of Turkestan, General A. N. Kuropatkin argued likewise. Yet, in all cases, the response from Petersburg was the same: the Russian empire had no colonies.[14]

11 Gosudarstvennaia Peterburgskaia biblioteka. Rukopisnyi otdel (The State Petersburg Library. The Manuscript Division) F. 87; Ermitazhnogo sobraniia, "Zapiska Senatora N. I. Muraveva o razvitii kommertsii i putei soobshcheniia v Rossii" (A Memo of the Senator N. L. Muravev Concerning the Development of Commerce and Communication in Russia), ll. 30–32. I am grateful to Guido Hausmann, who generously shared this reference with me.

12 Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, pp. 302–303.

13 W. Pintner, Government and Industry during the Ministry of Count Kankrin 1823–1844, in: Slavic Review 23 (1964) 1, pp. 46–62.

14 D. Brower, Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire, London 2003, pp. 22, 37; A. Khalid, Culture and Power in Colonial Turkestan, in: Cahiers d'Asie centrale 17/18 (2009), pp. 413–447; A. Morrison, 'Sowing the Seed of National Strife in This Alien Region': The Pahlen Report and Pereselenie in Turkestan, 1908–1910, in: Acta Slavica Iaponica 31 (2012), p. 7.

At the same time as officials in Petersburg refused to consider a notion of colony within the Russian empire, they continued to rule over numerous non-Christian peoples and regions through the various arms of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs or the War Ministry. For example, throughout the nineteenth century, the empire's Asian territories were administered by the Asiatic Department, founded by the imperial decree of 19 April 1819 as a part of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs. The Department was charged with dealing in "matters related to Asia and the Oriental non-Christian population".[15]

The French too, among other European powers, ruled Tunisia and Morocco through the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs. But with the exception of Algeria, which was considered to be an integral part of France, Paris regarded its North African territories as protectorates and ruled them as such. Russia, by contrast, made no distinction between colonies and protectorates and considered all conquered lands as an integral part of the Russian empire.[16]

No wonder that denying the existence of colonies, Russia, of course, had to deny the existence of the colonial institutions as well. In reality, however, the Asiatic Department was similar to the colonial institutions of other European empires, which throughout the second half of the nineteenth century consolidated various colonial functions, previously dispersed among several government departments, into national Colonial Offices: the British Colonial Office, the French Ministères des Colonies, the Spanish Despacho Universal de Indias, or the German Reichskolonialamt. Prior to the emergence of the Colonial Departments, most colonial functions were given to the Departments of Navy and War in Britain and France, and the Council of the Indies in Spain.

The absence of clearly defined colonial institutions in Russia was in some ways similar to the dispersal of the foreign and colonial administrative functions among Russia's imperial neighbours in Asia. Like Russia, the Qing China too considered all conquered territories as an integral part of its empire and communicated and ruled the frontier regions through multiple means: the civil and military bureaucracy, individual officials communicating in secret code directly with the court, and the office of Lifan Yuan in charge of relations with Mongolia, Tibet, and parts of southern China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally appeared in China for the first time in 1901.[17] Likewise, the Ottoman empire lacked any official office in charge of the foreign matters until the mid-nineteenth century. While Re'is ül-küttab (literally "the chief scribe"), the head clerk of the Imperial Council, de facto presided over the Ottoman relations with foreign powers, the government did not formally recognize his foreign affairs responsibilities until 1792. After the establishment of the Ottoman Foreign Ministry in 1836, the position of Re'is ül-küttab was finally given a new title of a Foreign Minister (Hariciye Naziri). Thus, it

15 Upravlencheskaia elita Rossiiskoi imperii. Istoriia ministerstv, 1802–1917 (The governing elite of the Russian empire. The History of the Ministries, 1802–1917), Sankt-Petersburg 2008, pp. 74–75. For more on the Asiatic Department and Asiatic Committee in the War Ministry, see A. Marshall, The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1800–1917, London 2006, pp. 26–37, 176–177.

16 J. Ruedy, Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation, Bloomington 2005, pp. 45–78.

17 See D. Schorkowitz / C. Ning (eds.), Managing Frontiers in Qing China: The Lifanyuan and Libu Revisited, Leiden 2017.

was only with the establishment of the Western-style foreign ministries that the Qing and Ottomans would borrow and apply to their own experiences the Western concepts of "an empire", "a civilizing mission", and by implication "a colony".[18]

The Russian empire faced similar dilemmas as other European empires in controlling and governing the territories populated by the non-Christians. From early on, however, Russia chose a different approach. Some Western European empires relied on the privately financed companies to administer the colonies: the British and Dutch East India Companies operated in Asia, or the Hudson Bay Company in North America, to mention a few well known examples. Others, like the Spanish and Portuguese, relied on a combination of state, church and private governance. By contrast, St. Petersburg put faith solely in the state administration of the new territories. The only exceptions were the short-lived charters given to the Stroganoff brothers to explore Siberia in the 1560s and to the Russian-American Company in Alaska, which was founded in 1799 as the first joint stock company in Russia to survive for two decades before being disbanded and put under the government control.[19]

In short, while the colonial rule of most European empires evolved from the one administered by the private companies to the one placed under the control of the state in the nineteenth century, Moscow, similar to its imperial counterparts in Istanbul and Beijing, placed its colonies under a firm government control from the sixteenth century onward.

5. Between Assimilation and Acculturation

The predominance of state interests in Russia's expansion meant that the Russian administration encountered traditional colonial challenges earlier than most European empires. Throughout the centuries of Russia's colonial expansion, the Russian government's paramount concern was how best to achieve the loyalty of the indigenous non-Russian elite. In the initial stages of conquest and annexation, the native elites usually enjoyed their traditional independence, but their ultimate integration into the empire eventually implied their Russification and conversion to the Orthodox Christianity. For this reason, in the late eighteenth century, the Russian administrators increasingly called for founding the schools for the sons of the local elite.

In time, the institution of hostages evolved to produce Russia's indigenous colonial elite. Russian authorities demanded that the native elites send their sons to the imperial capi-

18 S. Deringil, The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909, London 1999, pp. 150–165; C. P. Giersch, Asian Borderlands: The transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier, Cambridge, MA 2006, p. 209–211; H. Inalcik, Reis-ül-Küttab, in: Islam Ansiklopedisi (The Encyclopedia of Islam), vol. 9, Istanbul 1940–1986, pp. 671–683.

19 M. Khodarkovsky, The Non-Christian Peoples on the Muscovite Frontiers, in: Cambridge History of Russia, vol. 1, Cambridge, UK 2006, pp. 317–337; I. Vinkovetsky, Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire: 1804–1867, Oxford 2011. On an absence of trade companies and a tight bind between the government and Siberian merchants, see E. Monahan, The Merchants of Siberia: Trade in Early Modern Russia Ithaca 2016, pp. 111–144, 223–242.

tal to be educated at the emperor's court or in Russia's prestigious military schools. The formation of the special non-Russian units of the imperial guard in the 1820s sought to serve the same purpose – to educate and acculturate young men from distinguished indigenous families. By the early nineteenth century, the Russian authorities were increasingly relying on an acculturated indigenous elite, whom they brought to the imperial capital to be educated and groomed for service among their own kin. While the assimilation and conversion to Orthodox Christianity were preferred, a fully assimilated native – typically a young convert to Christianity, educated in Russian who also looked and acted like one – could have commanded little authority in his native society. Thus, the Russian government became increasingly interested in a different type of an acculturated native – one who could represent Russian interests and simultaneously remain influential in his own society. He might wear a Russian military uniform or a civilian dress of a Russian administrator but he remained a part of his native society, spoke the local language and practiced Buddhism or Islam. In other words, the Russian empire needed a greater number of the cultural interlocutors, who could serve as the conduit for transferring the Russian legal, political, and cultural idioms into the indigenous environment.[20]

This new colonial elite, consisting of men raised in their indigenous societies and then educated in St. Petersburg or Kazan, became a conduit for the modern ideas of ethnicity and nationalism. At different time, various representatives of this elite created the alphabets for the indigenous languages, collected and wrote down the local folk tales, compiled the codes of the customary law, and authored the embryonic history of their people.[21]

One finds a somewhat different evolution of the cultural mediators in the Ottoman empire. In the western borderlands, the Ottomans relied on the Phanariotes, wealthy Greek Orthodox families representing the Ottoman diplomatic and commercial interests in Europe, and on the institution of the *devshirme*, a levy in children from among the Christian population under the Ottoman rule. The *devshrime* were taken to the Ottoman court, educated, assimilated and made into the loyal servants of the empire. In the eastern borderland of the Ottoman empire, the Porte also made a belated effort to create a colonial elite but without much success. In order to train and educate the sons of the tribal notables from among the Arabs, Kurds, and later Albanians, the Ottoman authorities founded Mekteb-i Ashiret-i Hümayun (The Imperial Tribal School) in Istanbul in 1897. The school closed its doors in 1907.[22]

Earlier than European empires, Russia's policies intended to create the official Islam. Catherine the Great was the first to channel Islam into the governmental structures by

20 This is one of the central themes in M. Khodarkovsky, Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus, Ithaca 2011.

21 Among those who created the historiographic and literary tradition and therefore an embryonic national identity for their own peoples were Shora Nogma and Khan Giray for the Adyges of the North Caucasus, Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov for the Azeris, Dorzhi Banzarov for the Buriats, Chokan Valikhanov for the Kazakhs, to mention a few.

22 E. Rogan, Ashiret Mektebi Abdülhamid II's School for Tribes (1892–1907), in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 28 (1996), pp. 83–107.

founding in 1788 a Muftiat, known at the time as the "Muhammedan Spiritual Assembly", followed by the similar institutions in other Muslim parts of the empire: the Crimea in 1831 and the Caucasus in 1872. By contrast, both Britain and France preferred to rely on courts and legal institutions to achieve the same purpose. Thus, at the moment when Catherine sought to harness Islam into the state institutions, the British in India under Warren Hastings attempted the same by translating the local laws and compiling them into an official legal code, while the French resolved in 1854 to create a centralized Islamic court system in Algeria.[23]

Yet, even if the Russian state became involved in colonial affairs much earlier, those who governed had a very limited knowledge of those whom they were governing. Despite the early contacts with the non-Christian peoples, Russia's knowledge of their customs, languages and laws remained minimal for a long time. By contrast, the European powers invested early in the studying of the local languages, the ethnographic accounts of their colonial subjects, and of their laws.

The pragmatic focus of the Russian state on how to rule the colonial population and the absence of a public discourse on the related issues meant that the idea of a *mission civilisatrice* articulated as a policy matter among the "savage peoples" emerged in Russia relatively late. In the minds of Russian officials this could be done in a variety of ways: settling the nomadic peoples and introducing them to farming, making the indigenous population dependent on Russian goods, counting on the Russian peasant settlers to expose the natives to a Russian way of life, introducing Russian law among the natives, and not least, encouraging the local elite to visit St. Petersburg, so as "to impress upon the half-savages the greatness of the Russian empire".[24]

Perhaps the ultimate way of civilizing the savages was converting them to Christianity. In Russia, the missionary activity from the onset was under the tight control of the state, which equated conversion with a political loyalty of the new subjects. Throughout the centuries, Russian missionary work vacillated between benign neglect and forced conversions. The state offered tax-exemptions and rewards, commuted criminal sentences, and bestowed privileges on the new converts. Conversely, those who refused to convert saw their land confiscated, privileges taken away, and opportunities denied throughout much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Periods of relative tolerance towards the non-Christians, during the reign of Catherine the Great and in a post-reform period in particular, were inevitably followed by a renewed pressure to convert into the Russian Orthodox Church.

Until the 1830s, Russia had no missions in the Western sense of the word, i.e. a religious settlement among the indigenous population with an intention to convert and educate

23 A. Christelow, Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria Princeton, NJ 1985, pp. 20–26; B. S. Cohn, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, Princeton, NJ 1996, pp. 57–75.

24 O. E. Sukhikh, Imperiia napokaz, ili imperskii opyt vospitaniiia vernopoddanicheskikh chuvstv v kazakhskoi znati v 18–19 vv. (Empire's showcase or the imperial experience of inculcating the subordinate feelings among the Kazakh elite in nineteenth – twentieth centuries), in: N. G. Suvorova (ed.), Aziatskaia Rossiia: liudi i struktury imperii (Asian Russia: people and structure of the empire), Omsk 2005, pp. 154–155.

the natives. Until 1870, when the Orthodox Missionary Society was finally founded in Russia, the Orthodox Church had no specific office in charge of the missionary activity. As a result, Russia's missionary efforts produced large numbers of nominal converts with superficial, if any, knowledge of Christianity.[25]

One of the problems was that in Asian parts of the Russian empire the imperial frontiers were amorphous and fluid; they did not always coincide with the administrative borders of the state. The imperial frontiers evolved into the stable borders only when Russia reached the borders of other sovereign empires and states: the Ottoman empire in the Caucasus, Iran and the British empire in Central Asia, and Qing China in southern Siberia and Far East.

No less difficult was it to draw distinction between a metropolis and periphery. Of course, such a border was a subjective product of the Russian mentality and kept moving further away from the centre. By the early nineteenth century, the mid-Volga region colonized for centuries by the Slavic settlers was seen as an inseparable part of the Russian metropolis. Likewise, the northwest Caucasus, whose population of the indigenous Adyge peoples was forcefully resettled or deported between 1860 and 1880, by the early twentieth century was seen as a true Russian region belonging to the Kuban Cossacks.

In 1914, on the eve of the First World War, government official publication "Asiatic Russia" proclaimed that the "lands of Asiatic Russia are an indivisible and inseparable part of our state and at the same time our only colony."[26] Nothing illustrated the cognitive dissonance of the Russian empire better than this statement. After centuries of denial and prevarications, the Russian officials readily admitted that Russia was a colonial empire, and that its territories in Asia constituted such a colony. Yet these colonial lands and peoples remained an indivisible part of Russia.

Russia's persisting contradiction between a colonial empire and a unitary state has never been resolved. Five years after the imperial government was swept away by the revolutions of 1917, the Bolsheviks offered their own radical solution by reconstituting the former empire as a new polity – the USSR. The Bolsheviks admitted the colonial nature of the Russian empire, condemned it as "a prison of the peoples", and promised the non-Russian peoples equal status within the new socialist union. But by the late 1930s, the revolutionary approach towards resolving the old interethnic and national rivalries was dissipating.[27] After the Second World War, the official references to the imperial Russia as a colonial empire were dropped. Instead, the authorities emphasized a historical role of the Russians in civilizing the empire's non-Russian peoples. Thereafter, until the

25 For more on these issues, see R. Geraci and M. Khodarkovsky (eds.), Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia, Ithaca and London 2001; A. N. Kefeli, Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy, Ithaca 2014.

26 Aziatskaia Rossiia: Izdanie Pereselencheskogo upravleniia glavnogo upravleniia zemleustroistva i zemledeliia (Asian Russia: A publication of the resettlement agency of the main agency of the agricultural affairs), St. Petersburg 1914, 1:viii, quoted in: A. Masuero, Territorial Colonization in Late Imperial Russia: Stages in the Development of a Concept, in: Kritika 14 (2013) 1, p. 52.

27 F. Hirsch, The Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union, Ithaca 2005; T. Martin, The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the USSR 1923–1939, Ithaca 2001.

collapse of the USSR in 1991, Moscow ignored any notion that Russia was a colonial empire and that, like many other empires, it too was forged in blood. Instead, the Soviet ideological machine produced an image of the Russian empire's benevolent rule over the numerous non-Russian peoples, who chose to submit to Russia voluntarily. Thus, it was only natural that the Soviet ideologists maintained that this "eternal friendship of the peoples" provided for a perfect union in the USSR. But the union, of course, proved less than perfect, when in December of 1991, the Soviet Union peacefully dissolved along the multiple national and ethnic lines.

Finally unshackled from the Soviet dogmas, the colonial historiography grew rapidly in the post-Soviet space in the last decade of the twentieth century. But almost immediately after Mr. Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, this line of questioning began to wither, replaced by the old Soviet canards about the friendship of the peoples, this time in one united Russia. More recently, in a continuous search for an ideology to fit the present-day Russia, the Kremlin resurrected the idea of Eurasianism.

First formulated in the circle of the Russian emigres in the 1920s and 30s, Eurasianism was an attempt to reconcile the old historic tensions: Russia was a nation-state in Europe and a sprawling colonial empire in Asia; Russians were a dominant ethnicity yet outnumbered by the non-Russians; the Orthodox Christianity was the state religion but in a country where one-third of its population belonged to other faiths. Eurasianism was a new vision of Russia that historically, geographically, and culturally belonged to both Europe and Asia.[28] Today, a refurbished Eurasianism serves the Kremlin to promote its own nationalist and anti-Western agenda, to tear Russia away from Europe's liberal democratic traditions, to resurrect Russia's presumed greatness, and to pave the way for Russia's Sonderweg.

6. Conclusion

In this essay I attempted to re-examine Russia's imperial heritage, to place it into a wider European perspective, and to show that both in theory and practice Russia was a colonial empire. I argued that Russia's conquest and rule over the vast Asian territories and their non-Christian population represented a form of European colonialism, that Russia practiced a state colonialism from the outset, and that Russia's statist form of colonialism preceded most of the European colonial empires, which evolved into the government-run colonial systems only in the nineteenth century. Yet in contrast to the European colonial powers, the Russian imperial authorities consistently refused to identify their empire as colonial. In this sense, Russian imperial rulers were more akin to their counterparts in Asia – the Ottomans, the Safavids and Qajars in Persia, and the Qing in China. While all these empires ruled over a large and heterogeneous population within their domains,

28 See M. Bassin / S. Glebov / M. Laruelle (eds.), Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism, Pittsburgh 2015.

they did not conceive of themselves as colonial empires. The term "colonial" was reserved for the European empires solely.

Russian tsars saw themselves as universal rulers with an autocratic power over each and every being within the imperial domain. Recognizing colonial territories, by definition, implied a different status within the empire, a form of self-rule and de-centralisation that could lead away from the state control, and thus was unacceptable to the authorities. And because Russia's expansion throughout the centuries was fundamentally driven by geopolitical objectives, occasional arguments by Russian officials in favour of a colony, as a more efficient commercial enterprise, were routinely dismissed.

Unlike the rapid colonization of the New World by the European settlers or China's borderlands by the Han Chinese (with the exception of Tibet and Xinjiang) Russia could never escape a daunting demographic challenge. Given the size of the empire, the East Slavic population was simply insufficient to settle and achieve a demographic dominance in the non-Slavic regions, particularly those with large numbers of Muslims. As a result, the imperial policies once again were riddled with ambiguities. While formally relying on the settler model of colonialism, the Russian government faced an incongruous reality on the ground.

The Russian empire was a diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious political body with large colonial populations. Such an empire demanded complex political, social and legal mechanisms that were not easily reconciled with the streamlining and homogenizing tendencies of an autocratic police state. Herein lies a historic paradox and dilemma of Russia as a nation-state and a colonial empire. Understanding the colonial nature of the Russian empire and the kind of state colonialism that it practiced provides new insights into both Russia's past experiences and present ambitions.