

## *Russia's Orient, Russia's West*

In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, but in Asia we are masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we, too, are Europeans.

—Fedor Dostoevskii<sup>1</sup>

Any attempt to grapple with Russia's "Orient"—or, in today's terms, with the empire's Eastern peoples and with Asia, in the realms of interactions and representations—gains immensely from consideration of the related problem of "Russia and the West." If the former has only recently attracted much scholarly attention, the latter has long been recognized as central to Russian history, for the relationship with Europe in the wake of Peter the Great's Westernization molded Russians' evolving sense of identity as both European and non-Western. Put another way, Russian *Orientalism* has always been intimately related to Russian *Occidentalism*. Like the two-headed eagle, as the chapters of this volume demonstrate, they were joined at the hip; like Janus, they also shared a common head. The contributions to this book suggest just how fruitful it can be to look at the Russian empire's "East" and "West" simultaneously.

Just as the "East" included lands and peoples in Russia and Asia but also an elaborate *imaginaire*, so the "West" meant not only the countries of Europe (as well as Russia's western borderlands, including 19th-century Poland with its growing nationalism and industrialization, or the "internal West" of the Baltic states after World War II) but also shifting ideas about the Western world as a construct. Several chapters in the present volume illustrate what might be called the dialectics of empire—the interpenetration between the way Russians treated and imagined the East and their relationship with the West. A similar interconnection holds for the historical study of Russian imperial practices. The "western borderlands," which were perceived as more

---

"Russia's Orient, Russia's West," *Orientalism and Empire in Russia*, ed. Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander Martin, *Kritika Historical Studies* 3 (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2006), 3–19.

<sup>1</sup> Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii, "Geok Tepe: Chto dlia nas Aziia," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Leningrad, 1972–90), vol. 27, 32–40, as translated by Adeeb Khalid for this volume (29 n. 14).

“advanced” or whose development recalled that of Western Europe, should be considered alongside southern and eastern regions that Russians viewed as Oriental, backward, and in need of Russian “enlightenment.” Policies and practices generated in one space affected the others and reverberated within the imperial whole, or at least are better understood when considered together. The sentiment that Dostoevskii famously expressed in the last pages of his *Diary of a Writer* can be read as distilling not merely a classic idiom of superiority and domination but also Russia’s symbiotic, dialogic relationships with the West and the East.<sup>2</sup>

This book gathers together within one cover articles from the new historiography of the Russian empire, most of them first published in the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. Like the other volumes in *Kritika Historical Studies*, this third book in the series brings together works with special consideration for scholars in the Russian field and outside it and—something especially appropriate for the present study—advanced classroom use. The chapters by Vera Tolz and David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye are published here for the first time, as is the concluding piece by Daniel Brower. The chapters are structured into three sections. The first is a wide-ranging debate over the concept of Orientalism as applied to the Russian empire, taking as its starting point the link that Edward Said and his successors in postcolonial studies perceived between imperial domination and stereotyped knowledge. The second part focuses on Russia’s engagement with the East, starting in the 18th century, and the Russian discipline of Orientology or Oriental Studies from its origins through the early Soviet period; it also includes a methodological think piece on the present-day study of empire in the post-Soviet historiography. The third and largest section showcases this new historiography in action with case studies from three of the principal “borderland” regions: the Northwest, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. If the first two sections consider the nature and study of empire, the third presents recent work on imperial practices, providing a succession of complementary views on how the empire functioned in non-Russian and multi-ethnic areas. It is followed by a concluding essay in which Daniel Brower reflects on the nature of Russia as a multi-ethnic imperial system. This compilation, then, offers both a broad analytic lens and a set of in-depth empirical studies.

The volume at once reflects on and participates in the great transformation of Russian studies since 1991, in which previously marginalized issues

---

<sup>2</sup> The impetus to view the empire as a specifically imperial phenomenon, aggregating territories from both East and West, can be found early on, in the works of Baron Boris Nol’de, culminating in his important *La formation de l’empire russe: Études, notes, et documents*, 2 vols. (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 1952–53). For a later treatment that transcends the 1917 divide, see Alfred Rieber’s compelling “Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay,” in *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Hugh Ragsdale (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press, 1993).

connected to empire have moved to the center of historians' attention. A spate of work on state policy toward nationalities, on ethnicity and nationalism, borderlands and non-Russian groups, the views and depictions of these groups and of Russia as an empire by elites and others, and the study of the empire in comparative context—this is just a short list of the themes that have shaped one of the most dynamic fields in the scholarship on Eurasia. It is worth reflecting on why this has been the case. There is the much-invoked breakup of the USSR into 15 independent countries, which graphically illustrated the need to look at Russia and the USSR as multinational states. The historiographical turn prompted by *perestroika* and 1991, however, also came on the heels of a quantum leap in the general theory of nationalism and ethnicity in the human sciences. Fundamental works like Benedict Anderson's 1983 *Imagined Communities* and Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* of the same year, along with a wide range of other books in the 1970s–90s, inspired burgeoning spheres of research on the eve of, or alongside, changes specific to Russian and Eurasian Studies.<sup>3</sup> The investigation of Russia as a multinational empire exploded in the 1990s, a phenomenon that is the starting point of Alexei Miller's work in this volume.<sup>4</sup> In typical historiographical fashion the field went from (relative) famine to (relative) feast; and for well over a decade we have witnessed a boom in studies of borderlands, non-Russians, national identity, interethnic relations, settlement and colonization, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, religion and Russia as a multi-confessional state. Indeed, one important direction in the field of imperial Russia has been a renewed attention to confessional difference and how it inflected the emergence of national identity.<sup>5</sup> This book reflects the deepening of this small

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). The same might be said of a work in a different area discussed at length below, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> To limit oneself solely to recent collections of work in this general area, see Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds., *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Catherine Evtuhov, Boris Gasparov, Alexander Ospovat, and Mark von Hagen, eds., *Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg: Multiple Faces of the Russian Empire/Kazan', Moskva, Peterburg: Rossiiskaia imperiia. Vzgladom iz raznykh uglov* (Moscow: OGI, 1997); Jane Burbank and David L. Ransel, eds., *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Robert P. Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky, eds., *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, eds., *Imperial Rule* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004); Marina Batalina and Aleksei Miller, *Rossiiskaia imperiia v sravnitel'noi perspektive: Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2004); and Pol Vert [Paul Werth], Aleksei Miller, and Petr Kabytov, eds., *Rossiiskaia imperiia v zarubezhnoi literature: Rabota poslednikh let* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2005), a collection of translated English works.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Paul Werth, *At the Margins of*

revolution focusing on how imperial regimes managed difference of various sorts, but it also provides a critical look for those who wish to evaluate the results by providing a window into what remains to be done.

Study of the Soviet Union as a multinational society has also proceeded apace, and after 1917 there was both a far more centralized and a more coherent nationalities policy. While much valuable work has been produced on the Soviet period, one might still conclude that the center of gravity in this subfield remained in the period before 1917—in contrast to many other subfields.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, and for reasons of coherence, this volume concentrates mostly on the imperial period from the 18th century to the Revolution, which we hope will prompt consideration of an important historiographical transformation in the Russian field and the state of knowledge in this area. In raising these questions, the compilation implicitly puts another question on the agenda: the potential contribution of Russian studies to more general theoretical and historical problems in the study of empires and multinational states.

#### THE ORIENTALISM DEBATE

The Russian field's place in this broader discussion is the focus of the three-sided forum involving Adeb Khalid, Nathaniel Knight, and Maria Todorova. First published in 2000, it can already be considered a classic debate over Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its relevance to Russian studies. East and West are again intertwined, for the issue is Said's relevance for Russia and his influence on the scholarship about how the "Orient" was simultaneously studied and dominated by Great Britain and France. Disagreement over Said's

---

*Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga–Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Robert Crews, "Empire and Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *American Historical Review* 108, 1 (2003): 50–83; and Robert Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University 2001); Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, eds., *Homelands: War, Population, and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918–1924* (London: Anthem, 2004); Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

controversial thesis, which linked Orientalist academic knowledge with imperial power, informs the 21st-century scholarly incarnation of the hoary debate over whether Russia's historical experience is unique or comparable to that of other countries.

As is well known, Said's study almost entirely omitted the German and Russian schools of Oriental studies. An engagement with Russian "Orientalism," in Khalid's view, can thus extend the Saidian connection between expert study of the East and the stereotypes that helped dominate it within the context of empire. His brief is to use Russia as a comparative case of European imperialism, to help clarify the concept and rescue postcolonial studies from their Eurocentric preoccupation with British and French imperialism. To Khalid, as for Catherine the Great in her famous Instruction to the Legislative Commission of 1767–68, it is (or should be) self-evident that "Russia is a European state." As Khalid puts it, underscoring the Europeanness of Russia, even Russian expressions of differences from Europe since the 19th century were "rooted in European Romanticism." His opening example, the 19th-century ethnographer N. P. Ostroumov, illustrates how political service to imperial authorities was combined with participation in the international venture of Orientalism.

Khalid's thesis invites us to consider whether Said's model, while informed by particular national cases, can also serve as a general template for others, and if so, what modifications are necessary.<sup>7</sup> If Said's model is applicable elsewhere, then Russianists—rather than merely learn at the feet of Western theorists—could draw on their own, highly relevant case to help shape the wider conversation.

Nathaniel Knight, by contrast, uses Russian history less to extend and modify Said than to critique him and the method he inspired. To Knight, the patterns of scholarly participation in the imperial venture in the East matter less than the exceptions that show how knowledge did *not* always serve power. Such exceptions, he argues, exist across the range of Said's own subject matter, but even more so in the Russian case. Knight implicitly takes one of those famous Russian peculiarities—the oft-noted alienation of the late imperial intelligentsia, which built on Russia's powerful tradition of state service but arguably redirected its service ethos from the state to the "people"—and amplifies it into a challenge to a universalistic model. Specifically, he argues that the disciplinary dynamics of Oriental studies are not identical to a prejudiced Orientalist discourse that stereotypes and subordinates the

---

<sup>7</sup> The debate that Laura Engelstein began over the applicability of Foucault's work to Russia and the USSR should in many ways be read alongside this discussion: Engelstein, "Combined Underdevelopment: Discipline and the Law in Imperial and Soviet Russia," *American Historical Review* 98, 2 (1993): 338–53, followed by commentaries by Rudy Koshar, Jan Goldstein, and Engelstein's reply (*ibid.*, 354–63, 364–75, and 376–81, respectively). See also Jan Plamper, "Foucault's Gulag," *Kritika* 3, 2 (2002): 255–80.

“Orient.” Responding to Khalid’s notion that Russia encountered the East as a European empire, Knight denies that Russia had to be either fully European or not European at all; instead, it was both simultaneously.

Maria Todorova, following Khalid and Knight, elaborates on how this debate touches on the “timeless question of Russian history: how unique is Russia?” (47). In her view, this latest debate over particularism and universalism hinges on “optics” and differing epistemologies. Both approaches offer benefits and drawbacks, and Todorova forcefully argues that both ultimately depend on the broader political conjuncture. Today, Russia is not part of “Europe.” By comparison, the celebrated historians’ debate over Germany’s “special path” or *Sonderweg* (a term that has recently had a Russian analogue, *osobyi put’*) was resolved when Germany rejoined “Europe” and the sense of urgency about explaining the uniqueness that had spawned Nazism faded. Perhaps “resolved” is not the best word, for interest in German particularism continues, perhaps in more subtle ways, to influence readings of German history. Still, Todorova’s point is clear: our sense of Russia’s uniqueness, fueled by the country’s Stalinist past as well as its generally ambiguous relationship with the “West,” has never been offset by any experience of a Russian equivalent to Germany’s firmly Westernized and democratic Federal Republic.

For Todorova, whether or not one modifies Said, the universal idiom opens up the field, so she ultimately comes down in favor of methodological linkages as a release from the self-imposed exile of intellectual parochialism. This release can carry the price of subordinating the field to the methodological desiderata of others, a problem she discusses in terms of Gramsci’s cultural hegemony and Lotman’s semiotic inequality. Viewed from another perspective, while particularism imparts greater value to the “local,” it comes at the price of that same parochialism. As long as Russia’s place is unresolved, Todorova concludes, the methodological dilemma will persist.

The debate over Russian Orientalism among Khalid, Knight, and Todorova revolves around the question of whether the Russian imperial enterprise was essentially unique or comparable to others. Accordingly, their debate deserves to be read alongside studies of peculiarities that scholars have identified in the Russian empire’s historical development and that inform our thinking about its place among empires and imperialist ideologies. These peculiarities include the blurring of core and periphery as a result of long-term overland expansion;<sup>8</sup> the relatively minor role of racialist ideas in Russia’s imperial practices and intellectual traditions;<sup>9</sup> the role of an intelligentsia whose

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the recent literature here, see Daniel Brower, “Peopling the Empires,” forthcoming in *Kritika*.

<sup>9</sup> *Inter alia*, see Daniel Todes, “Darwin’s Malthusian Metaphor and Russian Evolutionary Thought, 1859–1917,” *ISIS* 78 (December 1987): 537–51; Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet

tradition of state service ended in a “parting of ways” and ultimately widespread opposition to the state;<sup>10</sup> and, not least, the specificities of Russian *vostokovedenie* (Oriental Studies).<sup>11</sup>

Vera Tolz’s study of *vostokovedenie* introduces a further lens through which to view this debate: she has uncovered Said’s indebtedness not only to Foucault’s discourse analysis, which is conventionally noted, but—via Arab Marxist commentators of the 1960s—to Russian Orientology and its critique of the West. Tolz describes how this critique emerged out of the institutionalization of Russian Oriental Studies after the mid-19th century and was furthered by major figures operating on both sides of 1917 such as the academicians Sergei Ol’denburg and Nikolai Marr. This Russian tradition, which had developed in the imperial period but intensified during World War I and after 1917, offered later scholars—including Said—a certain image of a unified Western identity stretching back to ancient Greece. Like his Russian predecessors, Tolz argues, Said essentialized the West even as he craved its approbation, but this does not mean he was wrong—as Isaiah Berlin pointed out in his essay on 19th-century populism, the experience of being the first country to “Westernize” could give Russians a head start in acquiring certain acute insights.

The debate over Russian Orientalism is thus more than an exegesis of Said and his legacy—it is also a window onto the broader political and methodological issues at stake in studying the Russian empire. In our next section, the focus shifts from Orientalism to Orientology and the history of Russians’ attitudes and knowledge about the East.

#### ORIENTOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF EMPIRE

*Vostokovedenie* can be translated as Orientology or Oriental Studies. While Said blurred the lines between the academic discipline, Western stereotypes, and the business of imperial domination—a point of dispute in the previous section—it is useful to distinguish, in the Russian context as elsewhere, between *Orientalism* as an attitude and *Orientology* as the discipline. Yet as David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye shows in his discussion of 18th-century Russians’ fascination with the Orient, particularly China, the distinction is

---

Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review* 61, 1 (2002): 1–29, with responses by Francine Hirsch, Amir Weiner, Alaina Lemon, and Weitz’s reply (*ibid.*, 30–43, 44–53, 54–61, and 62–65, respectively); and Eugene M. Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia,” forthcoming in *Kritika*.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966); Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801–1855* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976); S. A. Ekshtut, *Na sluzhbe rossiiskomu Levafanu: Istoriosofskie opyty* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See especially the chapter by Vera Tolz in this volume.

not yet applicable in that period because scholarly study of the East remained episodic. Much of his discussion deals with monarchs and their courts, particularly the “enlightened” ruler-intellectual *par excellence*, Catherine the Great; and the realms of fashion and literary imagination take precedence over the practices of imperial rule and diplomacy, not to mention academic knowledge. Schimmelpenninck shows how the cultural Westernization initiated by Peter the Great decisively influenced Russians’ thinking during this foundational period in their modern engagement with both their “external” and their “internal” East—that is, not only with East Asia (particularly China) but also with Crimea and other supposedly “Oriental” areas of Russia itself.

As Schimmelpenninck puts it, “Russia learned to look at the East through Western eyes” (82).<sup>12</sup> Not only did it have, in *kitaishchina*, an equivalent to *chinoiserie* (the European fashion for Chinese motifs and artifacts), but favorable views of China and the East more generally as a model for the West, and even the notion that Russia was uniquely positioned to understand the East, all derived from Russia’s connections with European culture. It was, moreover, in Russia’s first “Western” century following the Petrine revolution that the East was viewed most enthusiastically. When Russians began to see themselves as different from Europe in the 19th century, by contrast, attitudes toward the Orient became more equivocal. Schimmelpenninck’s contribution thus foregrounds the mutual interdependence of Russia’s ties to the West and the East that form a central theme of this volume.

What remains to be studied is how Russia’s imperial practices were affected by its history of direct engagement with “Eastern” peoples in this period, and how attitudes outside the court and elites may have diverged from this picture of Russian Europeanness.

Sara Dickinson extends David Schimmelpenninck’s analysis by examining Catherine’s involvement with New Russia and Crimea, “Russia’s first Orient.” She argues that the annexation of Crimea was a starting point for creating Russia’s Oriental “Other,” since the ideas that it inspired formed the basis for 19th-century attitudes toward the Caucasus. Dickinson uses the concept of “triangulation,” in which an absent third party conditions the interaction between two others, to clarify the East–West interconnections that were at play. Russia’s conduct toward Crimea was deeply affected by the West, a “third party” that was not in fact absent at all in the remarkable visit to Crimea that Catherine staged for European dignitaries and that forms the core of Dickinson’s study.<sup>13</sup> Catherinian Russia, in its pursuit of high cultural Westernization after the

<sup>12</sup> For how Russia later adopted Western Europe’s image of Islam as the “religion of the Turk,” see Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, chap. 1.

<sup>13</sup> See Aleksandr Panchenko’s marvelous discussion of the origins of “Potemkin villages” in European thought, also centering around Catherine’s Crimean pageant: “Potemkinskie derevni kak kul’turnyi mif,” *O russkoi istorii i kul’ture* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000): 411–25.

more utilitarian Petrine revolution, leapt at the chance to exoticize this newly annexed chunk of the East and claim the mantle of a Western-style empire. Dickinson explicates the simultaneous and ostensibly paradoxical project of linking Crimea rhetorically to ancient Greece, the cradle of Western civilization, for “the rhetorical construction of Russia’s first Orient was to provide compelling evidence of Russia’s Western pedigree” (87). Considered Oriental in the 18th century, Crimea today, as part of independent Ukraine, is increasingly viewed as part of Europe. This reversal vividly demonstrates the plasticity of “geographic” regions. Moreover, what Austrian and French diplomats considered “Oriental” in their Crimean sojourn could differ significantly from Russian notions. Dickinson thus shows how Crimea could be “orientalized” before becoming “domesticated” as European.

Tolz’s contribution, mentioned earlier in its connection to Said, deals with Russian Oriental Studies after its institutionalization as a full-fledged discipline in the late 19th century. The two rubrics within which she analyzes its development—the twin trends of the “nationalization” and “internationalization” of science—represent a further variation on the East–West dialogics that shaped Russia’s relationship with the East. Internationalizing the field meant above all integration with German and European scholarship, while the trend toward a “national” conception was linked to that fateful 19th-century development, the construction of Russia’s own identity as non-Western. Tolz situates the origins of the professionalized field in the 1840s, when (not coincidentally) the classic Westernizer–Slavophile debate first placed Russian uniqueness at the center of speculative debate. Oriental Studies occupied a special place in Russian scholarship, she shows, because it was seen as key not only to Russia’s relationship with the East but also to its standing in the West. As the seminal *vostokoved* Vasilii Bartol’d put it, “The fulfillment by Russians of their historic missions in the West and in the East is closely linked to the situation of Russian scholarship” (108). Tellingly, in this formulation by a scholar whose life was devoted to studying the Orient, Russia’s “mission” in the West was listed first. Outspoken advocates of an independent tradition of Russian science, such as Baron Viktor Rozen, were almost obsessively concerned with Russia’s standing in Europe, while Ol’denburg and other Orientologists who developed strong critiques of Western academia before 1917 were also respected international figures who craved (and received) the West’s “approbation.” Tolz ultimately locates the peculiarity of Russian Orientalology—that is, its specificity within pan-European processes—in how scholars incorporated the Orient into Russia’s own identity and developed a critique of the West that only intensified during World War I and after 1917.

Alexei Miller’s chapter also deals with empire, but not in terms of Orientalology. His brief, rather, is to assess the boom in the historiography

of empire since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Coming out of a different context and material from the preceding chapters in this section, his contribution addresses scholarly methodologies that remain on our agenda today. He opens with a critique of “regional” studies in order to highlight the pitfalls and potential for political instrumentalization implicit in framing one’s object of study in an imperial context; his plea is instead for a “situational” approach that looks not at bilateral or even triangular multi-ethnic relations but rather at a “system of ethno-cultural, ethno-confessional, and interethnic relations” (143).<sup>14</sup> Miller’s model is a scholarship informed by local and archival expertise but one that also raises broad, comparative questions and looks both east and west.

Miller’s think piece on present-day historiography thus revisits the linkage of East and West, as well as the issue of history’s political uses, that recur throughout the present volume. Our earlier debate over Orientalism already problematized a Cold War Sovietology that arguably had analogies with 19th-century Orientology—except that there the USSR, not the non-Russian “Orient,” represented the East. In Miller’s view, historiography in the past thus represented Russia as an alien “Other,” but the current tendency to “normalize” the empire can have a similar political resonance (153).

#### IMPERIAL PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

Since the works in this third section provide a snapshot of current scholarship, they are thematically diverse. Collectively, however, they capture the importance that Russia’s character as a political and social system had for the history of the borderlands, and they offer insights into the empire as a lived experience.

The late imperial policies known collectively as “Russification” (*obrusenie*) in the western borderlands hold pride of place in this section, as Theodore Weeks, Darius Staliūnas, Mikhail Dolbilov, and Andreas Kappeler all discuss aspects of this same phenomenon. Such close attention to Russification reflects the importance it has assumed in a range of contexts: crucial to any discussion of the western borderlands after the Polish rebellion of 1863, it has loomed large in non-Russian national historiographies and discussions of tsarist policy toward non-Russians, and it also routinely enters into the grand narratives of late imperial Russia. The contributions in this volume represent perhaps the most significant recent statement on the topic.

All the authors here support and amplify the recent scholarly view of Russification as a less-than-coherent, often reactive, and largely unsuccessful

<sup>14</sup> Miller’s monograph has been translated into English: Alexei Miller, *The Ukrainian Question: The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003), originally published in Russian in 2000.

program. Theodore Weeks, who elsewhere has depicted Russification policies as fundamentally anti-Polish and a reaction to the vigorous Polish national movement after 1863, writes: "Where local non-Russian elites perceived a grinding machine aiming to stifle their national culture, Russian bureaucrats, in particular in the center, saw a more modest need to strengthen control over border regions and prevent separatist movements" (158).<sup>15</sup> Like the others, Weeks proceeds from the premise that Russification was not a carefully planned cultural offensive. Indeed, to be so, it would have needed a firm sense of what "Russian" constituted. Instead, the two key factors were the confluence of Russification with the beginnings of the Great Reforms (Alexander II's program of modernization and Westernization after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War), and the fact that categories of nationality—as opposed to confession and estate—were only beginning to assume importance in imperial Russia, and indeed far more among policymakers than in the wider population. Accordingly, Weeks notes that while Russification has historically been associated with repression against national minorities, its centralizing features were actually linked to reform, a phenomenon that does not appear unusual when seen in comparative perspective. The difference was that Russia did not begin its centralization in the early modern period—that is, before the age of nationalism (as in that classic "nation-state," France)—but when the Polish and other national movements were already active and in fact supplied the very impetus for the centralization. Yet, as Weeks points out, most non-Russian nationalities were only beginning to think nationally in this period, so that "the true national struggle in late imperial Russia, with few exceptions, was between non-Russian elites and the Russian administration" (158).

Weeks's chapter focuses on one test case: were attempts to introduce the Russian language in Catholic churches of the northwest territories an attempt culturally to Russify the local population? Polishness and Catholicism were, after all, increasingly conflated at the time as a "dual conspiracy" against "everything Russian" (161). Weeks finds that attempts to use Russian were intended not to promote Orthodoxy but to prevent the Polonization of peasants who were Catholic and Belarusian.<sup>16</sup> This policy shows how national categories were acquiring importance for elites and bureaucrats, yet its manifold failures in practice also illustrate the difficulty of using such categories to differentiate "Russian" and Polish Catholics. What was new in this policy was the acceptance of Catholicism and the effort to give it a Russian national coloring, yet the "connection in Russian official and public discourse between 'Russian' and 'Orthodox' was simply too strong to allow a whole-hearted effort to encourage the development of 'Russian Catholicism'" (180). The

<sup>15</sup> Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> "Catholic Russian," as Belarusian was not admitted as a national category.

policy's failures on the ground showed the persistent strength of religious rather than ethnic or national identity in the western borderlands.

More than merely a notorious set of imperial policies, Russification is thus a laboratory for studying the relationships among religious, social, and national categories of identity. Russia was a multi-confessional empire as well as a multinational one; Orthodoxy held pride of place, and policies on toleration and on the balance between religious and other (including national) identities were shifting. In his contribution, Darius Staliūnas takes Russification to mean "cultural assimilation" and tests this notion against the policies applied in the northwest territories, primarily toward Poles and Lithuanians. He focuses mostly on 1863–68, a moment often taken to mark a shift by Russia from collaboration with local elites to a policy of cultural assimilation. Like Weeks, he presents a case study to illustrate broader patterns in Russification policy: the focus here is on conversions, the moment when someone tried to use religion to change national identity.

Staliūnas emphasizes the continuing importance of religious categories and the prominence of anti-Polonism, two features that intersected but were not always identical. "Analyzing Russian nationality policy in practice, we come to understand that changing religion—that is, a Pole's converting to Orthodoxy—was a necessary precondition for that person's being able to qualify for 'Russian' rights and privileges in the Northwestern region ... [T]he basic indicator of 'Polish' Russification was conversion to Orthodoxy, but for certain Russian functionaries even a change of religion was not sufficient grounds to regard an ex-Catholic as a 'Russian'" (188, 190). Some measures taken in the wake of 1863 were not assimilationist but segregationist in nature, and the use of Cyrillic in Lithuanian was not so much assimilationist as a way of curbing Polish influence. The long-standing imperial concern with order also hampered truly radical action. For example, there was an unwillingness to take steps that would destroy Catholicism in the area, for fear of further unrest and undermining morality that religion was assumed to support. Staliūnas ultimately denies that tsarist policy was genuinely assimilationist in intent or practice, but not that there was an attempt to "alter the ethno-cultural status quo" in the region (197). Using discriminatory measures, tsarist policy tried to substitute Russian culture for the Polish culture that allegedly dominated the region, while Lithuanians as a rule were not considered civilized enough for cultural, not to mention political, independence.

Mikhail Dolbilov's approach is original and goes far toward explaining the inconsistency and peculiarities of imperial policy. Like Weeks and Staliūnas, he focuses on the northwest provinces in the 1860s, and his historical analysis of the anatomy of the "bureaucratic mind" is undoubtedly inspired by reflections on its modern legacy, the pervasive bureaucratization of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Dolbilov speaks of "an intrinsically bureaucratic way of

thinking: the habitual preoccupation with schematically presenting the results of activities rather than the process, and a symbolic emphasis on completion, not on the dynamic of change” (201). Analyzing this mentality, he shows how bureaucrats thought in binary ways, treating peasants as Polonized “others” and tacking back and forth between regional and imperial perspectives.

Imperial policy was thus shaped in multiple ways by the mindset and milieu of the *chinovniki* who implemented it. First, “many Russifying measures were designed to illustrate, even at the cost of conceptual incoherence, the ‘historic’ leap from a near ‘de-Russianization’ to the triumph of Russianness. These efforts were often disjointed and lacked any clear policy logic” (203). Second, as Dolbilov explains in connection with the Russification of Catholic services, the bureaucratic mind could not imagine the dynamic of change: “The cultural mechanism of making people Orthodox by means of Russian language services remained unclear. This was one of the plan’s chief flaws” (209). Third, the bureaucratic mind congenitally feared not only unrest (a point also raised by Staliūnas) but any independent social initiative at all, so that even would-be Russifiers met with distrust if they stood outside the bureaucracy. Above all, Dolbilov concludes, bureaucratic thinking engendered “an abnormal fixation on a single, arbitrarily and fancifully (and sometimes *accidentally*) chosen aspect of Russian identity.... The choice of this or that criterion was, to a high degree, subject to the bureaucracy’s concern about the symbolic representation of the ruled as a homogeneous, loyal, static mass. As a result, the Russifiers applied to the Northwestern region an esoteric and shifting notion of Russianness, while its ethnic dimension remained obscure” (226).

This emphasis on bureaucratic mentality has broader implications for the study of imperial governance; moreover, a further strength of Dolbilov’s analysis lies in his intriguing suggestions about the imperial ramifications of regional policy, or more precisely, how the regional intersected with the imperial. Dolbilov applies the “situational” approach advocated by Miller when he suggests that anti-Polonism influenced the construction of Russianness. For example, the abolition of serfdom in 1861 in the northwestern provinces was associated with a desire to “awaken” the Polish-ruled peasantry, and Dolbilov argues provocatively that “the Russification campaign can be seen as a discursive link between ‘borderland policy’ and various empirewide priorities of the Great Reform era (the agrarian question, educational reform, improvement of the Orthodox clergy’s composition, etc.)” (201).

In his commentary, Andreas Kappeler—one of the first scholars to investigate tsarist nationalities policy systematically as a major part of the imperial system—sums up the state of the scholarship.<sup>17</sup> The new international

<sup>17</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992), in English as *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, trans. Alfred Clayton (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001).

historiography, he writes, shares the “general assumption that there was no coherent, systematic Russification policy in the sense of cultural and linguistic assimilation and that the picture is very complex” (229). The intersection of the “traditional imperial ideology” of estate and dynastic loyalty with the rising force of modern nationalism, including Russian nationalism, accounted for many of the inconsistencies of tsarist policy (229). The Polish experience, especially after the uprising of 1863, undercut the tradition of co-opting non-Russian elites and brought a new focus on homogenization during the era of the Great Reforms. Kappeler also identifies an agenda for future researchers that includes studying Russification in comparative perspective, alongside assimilationist policies in France, Germany, Hungary, and elsewhere, but also with an eye to comparing the experiences of Russia’s own western and eastern borderlands. Thus he takes up Dolbilov’s suggestive comparison of imperial linguistic policies among the Lithuanians and in the Volga–Kama region: “There are parallels between the promotion of the Cyrillic alphabet and native languages against the Latin alphabet, the Polish language, and Catholicism in the west and against the Arabic alphabet, Turkic languages, and Islam (the so-called Il’minskii system) in the east of the empire” (233).

Shifting our gaze southward to the South Caucasus, Nicholas Breyfogle’s chapter brings into our angle of vision the intersection of three phenomena—war and its effects, settlement in a multi-ethnic borderland, and religious sectarianism. Russia’s acquisition of great-power status brought frequent warfare, while territorial annexations made settlement policies a necessary tool of empire-building. But the story Breyfogle tells involves an extraordinary reversal: ethnic Russian sectarians, expelled from the empire’s inner provinces as heretics, came to be viewed by the authorities as model settlers because of their services to the tsar’s army. In the Russo-Turkish conflicts of 1853–56 and 1877–78, sectarian Dukhobors, Molokans, and Subbotniks in the South Caucasus were drawn into the war effort, especially in the latter conflict, and gained many resources from fulfilling army contracts. Not only were they transformed in the eyes of the authorities—the settlers themselves found that their religious pacifism was undermined, their sense of Russianness was enhanced, and their relations with their Muslim neighbors had deteriorated. Breyfogle analyzes the available sources for the Dukhobors’ motivations: the desire for profit, fear of tsarist coercion, and perhaps most important for the history of empire, their rising attachment to Orthodox Russian power and ethnicity in face of the Turkish threat and their own interaction with local peoples. One outcome, Breyfogle shows, was pride in their own contribution to Russia’s imperial venture.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> For Breyfogle’s broader history of the sectarians, see Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia’s Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

Susan Layton and Daniel Brower also look at a singular imperial experience but through the biographical and microhistorical lens of an entrepreneurial Russian serf's cross-cultural and interethnic adventures. At the center of their attention is Nikolai Shipov's remarkable portrayal of his kidnapping by Chechens—deliberately provoked by Shipov himself in hopes of exploiting a legal loophole that emancipated Russian serfs who survived Chechen captivity—as a form of personal liberation. The chapter interprets this text as a literary and historical work and contextualizes Shipov's life. Shipov relished interethnic contact and displayed religious tolerance. According to the authors, his story brings to life “more vividly than any other published records” in pre-reform Russia the “multi-ethnic world of commerce and trade” in the southern borderlands (273)—a world in which trade became one escape from the burdens of bondage. What appears extraordinary about Shipov is his sympathetic portrait of the Chechens and a diversified mountaineer society, reflecting his openmindedness toward other peoples. At the same time, the energetic Shipov seemed to believe that Russians were entitled to rule the empire, and he was in no way politically subversive. To him, Brower and Layton argue, liberty did not mean “Western” political freedom, much less was it intrinsic to Russianness—indeed, when he was a serf, his oppressors were mostly Russian. Instead, liberty derived from the ability—particular to each individual but available to everyone—to prevail over adversity, which included overcoming ethnic and social barriers. At the same time, Shipov's work also expressed pride in empire and loyalty to the tsar.

Brower and Layton's analysis is placed into broader context in the commentary by James Brooks, an ethno-historian of North American borderlands with strong comparative interests as well as a specialist on captivity tales and capture-and-exchange systems. Brooks emphasizes that despite its unusual features, Shipov's story exemplifies the “local cosmopolitanism” of borderlands, something of concern to many imperial agents as they tried to consolidate control. Liberation through captivity may have been unusual, Brooks suggests, but the ex-serf was not unique in experiencing as emancipatory the emotional ties he developed in captivity.

Austin Jersild and Neli Melkadze shift our attention from repressive measures (or “Russification”) toward “enlightenment” as an object of study in imperial policy and Russia's presence in the southern borderlands. The setting is 19th-century Tiflis (today's Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia), ruled by the tsar's viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov, an institution-builder *par excellence* who sponsored the Tiflis theater and library that form the focus of this chapter. Jersild and Melkadze bring us back to the ways in which Russian attitudes toward “Europe” informed empire in the “East,” this time through institution-building and cultural practice. As they put it, the “impulse to promote and foster rather than curtail cultural expression ... made perfect sense

for a Russia that was itself an eastern borderland of a Europe understood by many Russians since the 18th century to be the primary source of their own unfolding ‘enlightenment’ and cultural progress” (296–97). Russians thus promoted a version of European high culture to justify imperial rule and underscore their own “Western” identity. Tiflis serves as a case study for the resulting dilemmas: how much independence would the newly enlightened non-Russians have, and what “indigenous” elements could exist in the emerging enlightened borderland culture? Suffice it to say, “culture” in this context meant European high culture—not, for example, the long history of Persian influence on Georgia. The chapter also sheds light on the emergence of the Georgian national movement, for imperial policy gave rise to a generation of “enlightened” Georgians who were not content merely to receive Europeanized high culture by way of Russia.

Virginia Martin’s is the only chapter in this collection on Central Asia, frequently described as the region with which St. Petersburg had the most classically “colonial” relationship. Her analysis is of all the more interest, then, because it explores how imperial legal institutions and administrative practices were brought to the Kazakh steppe during the Great Reforms. The legal reforms of 1864 rank among Russia’s most promising moments for “Westernizing” reform, as they introduced trial by jury, “advanced” European legal practices, and a growing “legal consciousness.” Yet the reforms were planted in the harsh soil of Russian autocracy and failed to modify the principle of rule above the law.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, they were not extended to the Central Asian steppe at all, any more than the *zemstvo* (the elected “land council” that was created in the same era to embody the principle of all-estate local governance) was extended to non-Russian regions.

As Martin writes, order proved more important to officials than participation, so Russian law came to Central Asia only in the guise of “institutionalized judicial positions and bureaucratized judicial procedure” (328). Among these legal exports, Martin focuses on one imperial practice—the use of courtroom oaths—as it took shape within a non-Russian setting, the Kazakh steppe, where Kazakhs were henceforth required to swear on the Qur’an. Centralization, as we saw in the case of Russification in the western borderlands, accompanied reform and was integral to the era’s modernizing ethos. Uniform legal practices were at once a tool of empire-building, related to the kind of civilizing mission we observed in Tiflis, and part of the nascent civic ideal that gave the Great Reforms their liberalizing veneer: Muslim Turkic nomads (*inorodtsy*, or “aliens,” in official parlance) would not only become more settled and civilized but would henceforth participate in *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* (civil society) (324)—a striking phrase when used in conjunction

<sup>19</sup> For the most recent discussion, see Richard Wortman, “Russian Monarchy and the Rule of Law: New Considerations of the Court Reform of 1864,” *Kritika* 6, 1 (2005): 145–70.

with the *inorodtsy* of the Kazakh steppe. Oath-taking would spur honest testimony, whereas perjury symbolized backwardness, amorality, and disrespect for the law. Ultimately, observing reform-era centralization and reform at work on the steppe highlights the dark side of the Great Reforms—the use of the measures of enlightenment as an “instrument of control” and effective administration. A further paradox, and one that resonates with this volume’s wider theme of East–West dialectics, is that citizenship was a controversial and elusive notion even in the Russian heartland, while legal uniformity was notoriously absent from imperial law.

Principles embodying legal, civil, and ultimately political concepts unattainable in the Russian core were thus exported to the periphery along with a powerful empire-building impulse and a deep sense of Russian cultural superiority. But perhaps most interesting about Martin’s archivally based study is that it illuminates the local reception and probes just how flawed the measures turned out to be. The attempt to codify customary law and invent a tradition analogous to Russian procedure ran roughshod over Kazakh sensibilities, and the ensuing tensions merely aggravated Russians’ penchant for moralizing judgments about the nomads. The attempt to implement this centralizing project ultimately produced the polar opposite of what was intended—namely, greater legal polyphony and complexity.



With their broad range of thematic foci and theoretical approaches, the contributors to this volume have captured some of the richness and dynamism of a growing scholarly field. They demonstrate the possibilities opened up by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which has encouraged historians to pay greater attention to the perspectives and source materials of the former imperial borderlands. At the same time, tension between older and newer visions of Russia’s historical role in Eurasia—as oppressive hegemon or bringer of “enlightenment” or, depending on the angle of vision, both at the same time—has proved intellectually fruitful, as have discussions generated by Edward Said’s and other models of imperial domination. We hope that this volume will help deepen our understanding of Russia’s complex and historically fateful dialogue with Europe and Asia as well as with its own former imperial periphery.