

‘A Particularly Complicated Kind of Imperialism’:

The Imperialism of
Nineteenth-Century Russia

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The notion of what constitutes an imperialist power is a complex and nebulous idea; the term ‘imperialism’ has been distorted by its shifting historiographical usage and the ambiguity of its affiliation with related concepts such as colonialism.¹ Fundamentally, imperialism may be defined in behavioural terms as the process of establishing and maintaining an empire.² It would be myopic to limit this process to the material exercise of power. Rather, a holistic conception of imperialism is needed, one which considers the physical operation of imperialist rule through annexation and exploitation, the motivations upon which such power is predicated and the construction of an imperialist consciousness.

The problem of defining the parameters of imperial power is particularly acute in studies of nineteenth-century Russia. The imposition of hegemonic influence through administrative, political, religious and cultural intervention demonstrates the extent to which Russia acted materially as an imperialist power. Similarly, Russia’s underlying strategic, cultural and scientific motivations elucidate her imperialist intentions. Lastly, the dissemination of an ideological bifurcation between European Russia and the non-Russian ‘Other’ highlights the extent to which representations of Russia envisaged Russia as an imperialist power. Recognition of the imperialist dimensions of nineteenth-century Russia, however, must be integrated with an acknowledgement of the inherent diversity of and limitations to Russia’s imperialist policy. Such diversity materialised in divergent territorial policies; while imperialist involvement in territories in Central Asia was extensive, it was comparatively less so in Finland.³ Ultimately, the peculiarities of Russian

1 Norman Etherington, *Theories of Imperialism: War, Conquest and Capital*, (London: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 267-8.

2 Michael Doyle, *Empires*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 19.

3 Stephen Frederick Starr, ‘Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension,’ in *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, ed. J.R. Azrael, (New York: Praeger, 1978), 22-23.

imperialism attest to the inherent heterogeneity of the concept itself and the existence of a plethora of ‘imperialisms’ rather than a generic ‘imperialism.’⁴

Tsarist Russia’s annexation of its borderland territories, and subsequent extension of administrative, political, religious and cultural power within these territories, highlights the physical operation of Russia as an imperialist power. While comparable imperialist powers largely subjugated overseas colonies, nineteenth-century Russia annexed adjacent territories, thereby crafting a contiguous land empire stretching from Poland to the Pacific Ocean. This has precipitated claims of linguistic, historical and religious solidarity between Russia and her subject peoples. Indeed, Benedict Anderson suggests that a fundamental difference existed in the solidarity of Russia and the borderlands as opposed to what he terms the ‘grab-bag’ of peoples colonised by Western European empires.⁵ Yet, Anderson’s perspective underestimates the monumental racial, linguistic and religious diversities of the non-Russian subject territories.⁶ Further, the overland separation of the southern and eastern provinces from Russia was arguably more isolating than the maritime separation characteristic of Western European empires. This is because the sea facilitated transportation in the nineteenth century, rather than restricting it. Indeed, Alexander Morrison reveals that before the completion of the Trans-Caspian railway in 1888, it took longer to travel from Moscow to Tashkent than from London to Calcutta.⁷ In this way, Russia’s annexation of its frontier territories and subsequent implementation of an imperialist policy paralleled the imperialist enterprise conducted by other European powers.

Russia’s imperialist conquest was extended through pervasive Russian intervention in its borderland territories. Administratively, Russia modernised its territories through the development of infrastructure, irrigation – particularly around the so-called ‘Hungry Steppe’ – and by encouraging agricultural production through preferential tariffs.⁸ This was consolidated through grafting new European-style cities of tree-lined boulevards and squares onto native cities, thereby establishing a physical imperialist presence.⁹ The subordination of the borderlands was also achieved through political means.¹⁰ In the late nineteenth century, Russia progressively stripped Central Asian native rulers of their powers, disbanded native aristocracies and branded non-Russians as ‘aliens’, thereby denying them the privileges of Russian citizenship.¹¹ Such an eradication of pre-existing political systems was an orthodox practice of imperialist power; comparable, for example, to the British takeover of Burma in which the King of Ava

4 Etherington, *Theories of Imperialism*, 2.

5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), 92.

6 David Kenneth Fieldhouse, *Colonial Empires*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 1966), 334. Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 34. Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: a History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5.

7 Alexander Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868-1910: A Comparison with British India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4.

8 Fieldhouse, *Colonial Empires*, 335.

9 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 25.

10 *Ibid.*, 103.

11 *Ibid.*, 40. See also John Slocum, ‘Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of “Aliens” in Imperial Russia,’ *Russian Review*, Vol. 57, No. 2, (1998), 173-5.

was deposed and the administrative hierarchy dismantled.¹² Non-Russians were, however, often installed in lower administrative posts as a means both of appeasement and of exploiting non-Russians as clients of Russian rule. Herein, Russia embraced a policy similar to that theorised by Ronald Robinson as a policy of imperialist collaboration.¹³ In contrast to other imperialist powers, Russian imperialism was largely void of powerful charter companies.¹⁴ Instead, Russia's political imperialism was entrenched with a unique system of militarisation. This involved the military playing a surrogate role to government through establishing so-called 'Military-Popular Governments,' in which military officers occupied all executive and judicial positions.¹⁵ Consequently, as Stephen Frederick Starr notes, 'the army was ... the chief agent of the Russian imperial policy.'¹⁶

Russia also attempted to institute and maintain religious cohesion, thereby demonstrating an imperialist concern for religious uniformity. During the early nineteenth century, tsars such as Nicholas I undermined the practice of Islam through establishing provincial institutions of Russian Orthodoxy – such as the Kazan Theological Academy – and funding research into countering the theological foundations of Islam.¹⁷ This policy was strengthened by the use of material incentives for religious conversion, including tax and military service exemptions as well as the lessening of judicial sentences.¹⁸ Alexander II altered the policy to one of *ignorirovanie*, or the 'not knowing' of Islam. Through abolishing the position of the chief priest, known as the Sheikh ul-Islam, as well as the upper echelons of the Islamic religious order, Alexander II utilised more direct means of exercising religious imperialism in Central Asia.¹⁹ Linguistic and educational 'Russification' also aided the promulgation of Russian culture in the borderlands. Russian was established as the official language of local schools and political bureaucracies in 1864 and native city names were recurrently Russified.²⁰ Drawing on French approaches to colonial education in which schools for Algerian Muslims were founded, schools for non-Russians such as the Tatars were created by Russia as a means of propagating cultural imperialism. Although the success of such cultural intervention is questionable, it nonetheless exposes the extent to which Russia implemented an imperialist strategy.²¹

The adoption of political, religious, economic and migratory policies of non-intervention and syncretism underscore the limitations to Russia's imperialist power. Russia facilitated considerable

12 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 91.

13 Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration,' in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, eds. Roger Owen and Robert Sutcliffe, (London: Longman, 1972), 132-7.

14 Starr, 'Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension,' 9-10.

15 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 126.

16 Starr, 'Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension,' 13.

17 Geraci, *Window on the East*, 77.

18 Paul Werth, 'Changing Conceptions of Difference, Assimilation and Faith in the Volga-Kama Region, 1740-1870,' in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen and Anatoly Remnev, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 186.

19 Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzarini, 'Conclusion,' in *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzarini, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 313-4.

20 Geraci., *Window on the East*, 69. Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonisation and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 23.

21 See Fieldhouse, *Colonial Empires*, 338.

local political autonomy, both at a regional level, as in the initially self-governing regions of Poland and Bessarabia,²² and at a local level, as evidenced by the grouping of Central Asian villages into *volosts* of local officials with an elected head retaining minor judicial and administrative functions.²³ In this way, Russia implemented a form of restrained imperialism, in which its political influence was limited. The extent of Tsarist political imperialism was further constrained by the lack of a centralised ministry in overseeing the implementation of its imperial policy.²⁴ In terms of Russia’s religious involvement in the borderlands, the reigns of Paul I and Alexander I displayed continuity with the Catherinian policy of religious non-intervention.²⁵ Consequently, the Muslim spiritual assembly or *muftiat* in the Crimea was tolerated and the government exercised minimal intervention in the Islamic system of *waqf*.²⁶ Such non-intervention in the religious life of Russia’s territories exposes nineteenth century Russian imperialism as being largely devoid of traditional religious motivations. While analogies have been drawn between the role of the Russian Orthodoxy in eighteenth-century Russian imperialism and the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Spanish colonisation of the Americas, the vision of imperialism as an evangelising enterprise was largely absent in nineteenth century expansions into the Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia.²⁷ Indeed, Orthodox proselytising in Muslim territories such as Turkestan was prohibited throughout the nineteenth century.²⁸

The limitations of Russian imperialism are perhaps most evident in terms of Russia’s espousal of a policy of economic leniency. Espousing John Hobson’s theory of economics as the ‘taproots’ of imperialism, Mary Holdsworth asserts Russian expansion was predicated on securing raw materials and a captive market for Russian manufactured goods.²⁹ Indeed, economic motivations did exist. For example, Russia undoubtedly perceived the economic opportunities of annexing Siberia for its exotic furs, musk and amber, Bessarabia for its agrarian potential, and Central Asia for its cotton supply.³⁰ Holdsworth overestimates, however, the role of the mercantile interests of the commercial classes in the apparatus of Tsarist Russia. As a result, while other European empires generally imposed extensive economic obligations on their subject territories, Russia derived comparatively minor economic benefits from its imperial possessions, often instituting less arduous taxation regimes than pre-existing non-Russian governments. Alexander Morrison provides an illustrative example of this in revealing that while Russian land taxes were fixed at

22 Starr, ‘Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension,’ 21.

23 Fieldhouse, *Colonial Empires*, 336.

24 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 39. Willard Sunderland, ‘The Ministry of Asiatic Russia: The Colonial Office that Never Was But Might Have Been,’ *Slavic Review*, vol. 69, no. 1, (2010), 120-122..

25 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 123.

26 *Waqfs* were permanent endowments of property within Islamic societies that often acted as sources of income for mosques and other Muslim institutions. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 58.

27 Starr, ‘Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension,’ 16-17.

28 Mark Raeff, ‘Patterns of Russian Imperial Policy toward the Nationalities,’ in *Soviet Nationality Problems*, ed. E. Allworth, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

29 John Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, (Unwin Hyman: London, 1988). Mary Holdsworth, *Turkestan in the Nineteenth-century: A Brief History of the Khanates of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva*, (London: Central Asian Research Centre, 1959), 51-3.

30 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 6. Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917*, (London: Fontana, 1998), 8.

roughly 10%, British taxes in India were 30-40%.³¹ The existence of such a policy of non-intervention was also reflected in migratory policies that restricted colonisation of the borderlands by Russians. Thus, while penal and voluntary immigration did occur to territories such as Siberia, a prohibition on Russian migration to Central Asia existed until the late nineteenth century.³²

While traditional economic and religious motivations for Russian imperialism were somewhat lacking, the primacy of cultural, scientific and strategic motivations expose the extent to which Russia acted as an imperialist power. Central to Russian imperialism was the notion of Russian expansion as a 'civilising mission' hinged on the perceived cultural superiority of the Russians themselves.³³ The scientific study of Russia's borderlands aided the development of such a cultural taxonomy and spurred imperialist expansion. This ranged from State-sponsored geological studies of the Ural Mountains, to the anthropological expeditions to Central Asia undertaken by the Russian Geographic Society.³⁴

The strategic incentives were equally significant in encouraging Russian expansion as Russia attempted to secure its trade routes, destabilise rival empires and promulgate imperial prestige. Just as France and Britain secured and maintained Mauritius and St Helena respectively as a means of bolstering their control over the Cape and Indian trade routes, Russia expanded into the steppe as a means of preventing the disruption of its Asian trade routes.³⁵ Similarly, Russian expansion in Central Asia displayed a characteristically imperialist desire to destabilise rival Empires by threatening the British Empire's Indian colony.³⁶ The uniquely contiguous nature of Russian expansion rendered such strategic motivations for expansion particularly significant. Indeed, domestic security concerns over the perceived vulnerability of Russia's steppe and southern frontiers proved paramount in the expansion into Georgia, the Caucasus and Central Asia in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁷ In this way, traditional motivations for imperialist rule acted as catalysts for the creation of a uniquely Russian land empire.

Representations of Russia forged a 'rhetoric of empire' that mobilised a distinctive Russian imperialist consciousness. Geoffrey Hosking suggests that there was an absence of racial presumptions within Russian discourse.³⁸ To the contrary, Russian self-representations recurrently constructed a binary opposition between Russia and the non-Russian aliens of the borderlands. Invoking Western European conceptions of imperialism as legitimised by pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies, the Russian scholar Konstantin Nevolin asserted that it was the duty of civilised

31 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 118.

32 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 109. Fieldhouse, *Colonial Empires*, 334.

33 James Cracraft, 'The Russian Empire as Cultural Construct,' *Journal of the Historical Society*, vol. 10, No. 2 (2010), 168.

34 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 301-3. Anatolyi Remnev, 'Siberia and the Russian Far East in the Imperial Geography of Power,' in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen and Anatolyi Remnev, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 436.

35 Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 30.

36 Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 33-34.

37 Raeff, 'Patterns of Russian Imperial Policy Toward the Nationalities'.

38 Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, 39.

Russia to assume hegemonic control over less advanced societies.³⁹ Such notions of the inherent degeneracy of the non-Russians entered the public discourse through exhibitions such as the 1867 Ethnographic Exhibition in Moscow in which both dead and live non-Russians were exhibited.⁴⁰ This reinforced the idea that Russia was an imperialist power while utilising the spectacle of empire to highlight the perceived paternalistic impetus for Russian imperialism.

The castigation of the non-Russian ‘Other’ as a means of crafting a unifying ‘rhetoric of empire’ was also utilised in Russian literary discourse. This literary discourse displayed commonality both in terms of diction – as in the emasculating use of the gendered noun for Georgia – as well as in archetypal tropes – as in portrayals of the non-Russians’ penchant for cannibalism, their inherent degeneracy, and the erotic exoticism of their tribeswomen.⁴¹ Moreover, Russian representations were often underpinned by European religious stereotypes.⁴² The adoption of European religious stereotypes within Russian representations is evident in an 1873 Moscow newspaper that referred to the ‘fanaticism of the Muslim people.’⁴³ In this way, Russia was equated to the ‘civilised’ empires of Western Europe. Such an equation allowed Russia to adopt and embody a Western conception of imperialism in which imperialism was claimed to be the preserve of only the most advanced societies.⁴⁴

It is imperative to note that representations of Tsarist Russia were not simply confined to Russian sources but also inherent within non-Russian discourses. Such a subaltern perspective reveals the extent to which Tsarist Russia was imagined as an imperialist power by non-Russians; from the writings of Crimean Tatar Muslims advocating Russian imperialism due to perceived Russian cultural superiority, to Cossack representations focussing on the limitations of Russian imperialism in failing to counter widespread smuggling.⁴⁵

This dichotomisation between Russia and the non-Russians of the borderlands was, however, disrupted by the extensive geographical, historical and cultural links between Russia and Asia.

39 Dov Yaroshevski, ‘Empire and Citizenship,’ in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 61.

40 Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, ‘Conclusion,’ in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 313.

41 Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: the Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36, 78, 175. Susan Layton, ‘Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery,’ in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997), 83. See also Geraci, *Window on the East*, 69-71, which explores the 1890s trials, based on fabricated evidence, of members of the Votyak community for claims of human sacrifice and cannibalism.

42 Robert Geraci, ‘Russian Orientalism at an Impasse: Tsarist Education Policy and the 1910 Conference on Islam,’ in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 152.

43 ‘Proekt novogo administrativnogo razdeleniya Turkestantskogo Kraya,’ *Birzhevye Vedomosti* No. 38 (1873), cited in Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, 53.

44 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 170.

45 Edward J. Lazzerini, ‘Local Accommodation and Resistance to Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century Crimea,’ in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 181. Thomas M. Barrett, ‘Crossing Boundaries: The Trading Frontiers of the Terek Cossacks,’ in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997), 244.

This blurred the conceptual boundary between Russians and the non-Russian ‘Other,’ therein confounding attempts to impose a monolithic representation of Russia.⁴⁶ As Robert Geraci notes, Russian writings were confronted by the paradox that ‘the East seemed a world away, yet was close by.’⁴⁷ The impact of this paradox is evident in the potential for Russian writers to articulate a sympathetic vision of the non-Russians. For example, late-nineteenth century Russian Romantic writers often imbued the borderlands with an aura of monumental heroism while constructing an archetypal image of non-Russian liberty.⁴⁸ This suggests that while Russian discourse carved out a vision of Russia as an imperialist power, this representation was often problematic.

Russian imperial power in the nineteenth century was manifested in Russia’s material extension of territorial power, the plethora of imperialist motivations upon which such expansion was based and popular representations of Russia as an imperialist power. Inherent within Russia’s imperialist programme was, however, a proliferation of restrictions and ambiguities as Russia responded to differing circumstances. Such fluidity within Russia’s imperialist policies is a feature characteristic of all imperialist powers; while nineteenth century imperialist regimes were shaped by comparable ideas and rhetoric, the need to respond to differing circumstances rendered them fundamentally heterogeneous phenomena. Thus, to suggest Russia was a ‘particularly complicated kind of imperialism,’⁴⁹ is to ignore the inherent complexity of the concept itself. The difficulty of defining the term with sufficient clarity in no way suggests, however, that the historical profession should abandon its use.⁵⁰ Imperialism as a prism through which to explore history exposes the significance of power relations within human history, relations that continue to mould contemporary events. In this, imperialism proves both problematic and invaluable as an historical concept.

46 Layton, ‘Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery,’ 83.

47 Geraci, *Window on the East*, 2.

48 Layton, ‘Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery,’ 83-85.

49 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 5.

50 William Keith Hancock, *The Wealth of Colonies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 1. See also H. L. Wesseling, *Imperialism and Colonialism: Essays on the History of European Expansion*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 74.
