"The Touch of Civilization"
Sabol, Steven

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Acknowledgments

This book is unlike any other project I have ever undertaken and, admittedly, it is the happy coincidence of fly-fishing and history. In fact, the book ought to be subtitled “a river ran through it,” but Norman Maclean beat me to it. My interest in this comparison started in 2006 while fly-fishing in Yellowstone National Park. I came across a road sign in the park by Nez Perce Creek that briefly described the flight of the Nez Perce and their incredible escape through the park. I was curious. I picked up a few books and started learning about the tragic fate of Chief Joseph and his people, but more importantly, I began to notice similarities between nineteenth-century American attitudes toward Indians in general and Russian attitudes toward the empire’s minorities living in central Asia and the Caucasus. These similarities sparked a comparative curiosity. I noticed similar attitudes, imageries, stereotypes, and consequences. I am not a disciple of Marc Bloch, considered by many to be the father of comparative history, but came to this comparative study only after reading literature outside of my studies in Russian and central Asian history. I am, essentially, an accidental comparativist.

Having spent years in central Asia—chiefly in Almaty, Kazakhstan, studying the region—I had already noticed the geographic similarities between the Kazakh Steppe and the northern plains. But until 2006 I had not made the connection between the American process of expansion and colonization and Russian expansion—in particular, the colonizers’ attitudes, perceptions, imagery, and typologies of colonized minorities. Donald W. Treadgold’s books and
articles—required reading for anyone interested in imperial Russian expansion—should have alerted me to the possible similarities, as he encouraged scholars to test Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis in the Russian historical context. It did not register with me, in part because Turner and Treadgold tended to neglect American and Russian indigenous populations; they focused instead on expansion and resettlement of pioneers and peasants but gave minimal attention to the policies implemented by the United States and Russia to delimitate spaces between settler and native.

As a student, I was keen to understand Russia and its historical relationship with the Kazakhs and never considered a comparative possibility, certainly not with the United States. What comparative works I read dealt with China and its relationships with minority nationalities—especially those living in Xinjiang, such as the Kazakhs and Uighurs. In fact, I only read Turner’s famous article once before, as an undergraduate, so I was somewhat blissfully unaware of the century-long debate about his thesis. Having trained in graduate school as a Russian and central Asian historian, I had a foundation for one side of this comparison, but not the other.

After thinking about the similarities and, perhaps more importantly, the differences between American expansion and colonization of the Sioux and Russian expansion and colonization of Kazakhs, I approached my American history colleagues to discuss the idea. Their enthusiastic response to this project frankly surprised me—or perhaps I was simply pleased they did not greet it with derisive laughter. The next test for this comparative study came at the 2009 Western Historical Association annual conference in Denver, where I presented a rough essay of this project. Once again, I was somewhat taken aback by the thoroughly positive response. The Western Historical Quarterly published a significantly revised version of that paper in 2012, which reinforced considerably my belief that this project had merit. This work is an attempt to elaborate more fully on the various themes and interpretations addressed in that article.

It was not possible to complete this project without the invaluable assistance, advice, encouragement, and good humor from so many friends and colleagues. This project expanded and improved, I hope, due to their support. First, my colleagues in the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte were amazing, patient, and sincerely interested as this book evolved. Most notably, John David Smith and Carol Higham read numerous drafts, listened to my complaints and travails, gave advice, asked questions, and consistently offered inspiration during its several years’ incubation. Several other colleagues offered advice and support along the way, including but certainly not limited to Jürgen Buchenau, Dan Dupre, Peter Thorsheim, and Benny...
Andres. In addition, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at UNC Charlotte, Dr. Nancy Gutierrez, made available financial research support and time to write. I also benefited tremendously from my university’s Faculty Research Grants Program, which provided further financial means to travel to archives in Kazakhstan and the United States. In addition, grants from the Charles Redd Center at Brigham Young University made it possible for me to conduct research in regional archives and libraries.

In Kazakhstan, my dear friend and colleague Sakhinur Dautova was always ready to help, and I am forever grateful. Many friends and colleagues provided welcome respite from the archives and libraries, especially the Between the Pillars Fishing Club. Thank you, Paul Roberts, John Strafford, Shahbaz Minallah, and others too numerous to mention, who seemed always ready with a smile, a beer, and good conversation.

Other colleagues offered incredible advice and support as well, and I would be negligent if I failed to express my gratitude to Clyde Ellis, Sheila McManus, Will Katerburg, Paula Michaels, and especially David Wrobel, who read the manuscript for the University Press of Colorado. Professor Wrobel identified numerous areas in the manuscript that needed reconstruction and reconfiguration. I am indebted to him for his meticulous reading and commentary. Two other anonymous readers also provided pointed and valuable comments. Any failings in this project remain, as always, with the author.

I must also thank Darrin Pratt and Jessica d’Arbonne of the University Press of Colorado. Their early interest in this project was critical to move it forward, and their steadfast patience as I worked through the various stages of research and writing was instrumental to its completion. Always they exhibited an enthusiasm and confidence in this book that just as frequently waned for me as I struggled to put the pieces of the puzzle together. To each, I offer my heartfelt thanks, though it hardly seems sufficient.

Finally, without the love and support of my family—Anita, Conor, and Sean—this project would have undoubtedly remained a work in progress. Now that it is finished, I am reminded of a seemingly innocuous conversation I had several years ago, one that makes sense to me in retrospect.

In 1996 I was in Almaty, conducting dissertation research. During a dinner conversation with leading Kazakh historian Mambet Koigeldiev, the topic turned to Russian imperialism and colonization and its consequences for Kazakh nomads. I was generally quite critical of the Russians, but not so my host. He surprised me when he commented that the Kazakh people suffered mightily under Russian rule, but he also said, “What we took from the Russians only made us stronger as a nation. We survived. Kazakhs have their own country now.
Where are your Indians?” I felt completely foolish; I mumbled something about reservations and that Native Americans too have survived, fully realizing how ignorant I was about the topic. Another friend joined the conversation, and she mentioned that the “Russians were not bad colonizers, better than the Chinese.” The conversation turned to China; I was grateful for the comparative reprieve. Looking back all these years later, that conversation planted the seed for this comparative study, and the rivers in Yellowstone gave it the chance to bloom.

NOTE

“THE TOUCH OF CIVILIZATION”