"The Touch of Civilization"

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American and Russian internal colonization of the plains and the steppe were phases in a broader national history of expansion. The contiguous expansion occupied different rostra of nineteenth-century European imperialism and colonialism, but the processes of American and Russian expansion and internal colonization illustrate a common set of assumptions and expectations about the land and the indigenous peoples being incorporated also exhibited by contemporary European empires. The American expansionist ideology engendered by its European ancestors—chiefly Britain—amalgamated Lockean liberalism rooted in a philosophy that emphasized private property, individualism, civil liberties, hard work, and contracts. It evolved to coalesce into a purposeful, almost messianic sense of divine mission to conquer the North American continent and to civilize and Americanize the natives. Initially, Russian expansion had no such mission; it was driven by trade and security. By the late nineteenth century, however, Russia’s mission evolved to unveil a comparable civilizing agenda designed to integrate non-Russians into an imperial, but not national, framework and identity.¹

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the US government insisted that the Sioux completely assimilate in language, dress, and work—a process euphemistically described as Americanism. During the same period, the Russian government simply desired loyal subjects faithful to the empire; it did not want to turn Kazakhs into Russians. It was desirable for Kazakhs to adopt the Russian
language, culture, and religion but not required. The Russians wanted the Kazakhs to integrate, not assimilate; however, Russia also wanted Kazakh land, increased trade, and enhanced security, which the Kazakh Steppe supplied in abundance. These imperial colonizing traits manifested in numerous other colonial contexts, such as the British in India and Africa and the French in Algeria. In that sense, the United States and Russia mimicked their imperial contemporaries. As with other empires, the United States and Russia depicted the Other—the people on the frontier—as the savage or barbarian. The Roman Empire, as historian Bernhard Maier observed, viewed the Celts from the perspective of a “military adversary” that “goes hand in hand with unceaseless propagandist intent, which places disproportionately strong emphasis on the wild and warlike aspect.” The American, Russian, British, and other nineteenth-century European empires used comparable prisms to observe, conquer, and colonize. Americans and Russians did not concoct the prisms, typologies, and images to view their colonized peoples. Instead, they merely inherited the caricatures and fashioned them to suit their nineteenth-century sensibilities.

Americans and Russians characterized the Sioux and the Kazakhs as locked in a time capsule of sorts, capable of civilized behavior but separated from the society and culture the colonizers expected them to imitate. The Sioux settled on reservations, attended government-sanctioned schools to learn English and a trade, and were expected to adopt Christianity. The Russian government forced most Kazakhs to settle; school was expected for only some to serve the empire; and conversion to Christianity was anticipated by the Russians as only a tool to combat their increased fear of an aroused Islam.4

What made the United States and tsarist Russia different from their European counterparts was obvious: the contiguous nature of the empires and internal colonization. The civilizing mission was internal rather than external, but it shared comparable objectives. By the start of the twentieth century, the United States and Russia erected the primary mechanisms to fulfill internal colonization of the Sioux and the Kazakhs. Allotment and education posed the twin pillars to civilize them. By the 1890s, the Sioux and the Kazakhs resisted, not with guns and rebellion, but in print and adaptation. Sioux and Kazakh intellectuals—educated to assimilate or integrate—adapted, adopted, and challenged American and Russian civilizing ideologies. This was contrary to many contemporary expectations, expressed by nineteenth-century sociologist John S. MacKenzie, who observed,

When a people is conquered and subjected to another, it ceases to be a society, except in so far as it retains a spiritual life of its own apart from that of its
conquerors. Yet it does not become an integral part of the victorious people’s life, until it is able to appropriate to itself the spirit of that life. So long as the citizens of the conquered state are merely in the condition of atoms externally fitted into a system to which they do not naturally belong, they cannot be regarded as parts of the society at all. They are slaves; they are instruments of a civilization of which they do not partake. Certainly no more melancholy fate can befall a nation than that it should be subjected to another whose life is not large enough to absorb its own.

The British and French constructed civilizing ideologies to elevate and sustain external imperial identities, which the colonizer designed to civilize the colonized people of the empire. For the British and the French, this process was empire building; but due to the contiguous expansion of the United States and Russia, the process was both an empire and, differently from other nineteenth-century empires, simultaneously a state-building process. Americans accepted state-building—they considered expansion across the continent to be an organic process—but many Americans rejected the idea that continental expansion was also imperialism. Russia’s expansion was equally organic but unabashedly imperial. The lands and peoples were subjects of the tsar, the societies that remained barbarous and backward. Consequently, Americans and Russians considered the Sioux and the Kazakhs to be expendable exteriors to the dominant society and the state. Russia embraced the imperial concept, but the United States rhetorically rejected it.

These imperial civilizing justifications, adopted not just by overseas empires such as Britain and France but the United States and Russia as well, exacerbated tensions between colonized and colonizer. As scholars have noted, the imperial colonizing goal to elevate a people from savagery to civilization also incubated the justification for its own imperial destruction. For the United States and Russia, however, the imperial ideology was as much about civilizing the indigenous populations as it was civilizing wilderness. The state uniformly assimilated the land but not the people. The people did not disappear—civilization did not exterminate them—but they adapted and survived. Nonetheless, the perception persisted well into the twentieth century that the indigenous peoples caught in American and Russian continental expansions seemingly evaporated in the onslaught of internal colonization. In a 1962 essay titled “Colonialism,” historian A. P. Thornton argued that indigenous populations that resisted “expansion of empire overland have . . . been expunged both from the map and the historical conscience—and this is true of the Red Indians of North America as to the Turkomans of Central Asia.”


Though Thornton’s observation was not a specific reference to the Sioux or the Kazakhs, the point is relevant to this comparison because it conveys the perception rather than the reality: the intrinsic notion that the United States and tsarist Russia exterminated the colonized indigenous peoples, the languages and cultures lost. Moreover, Thornton echoed nineteenth-century expectations of the one inevitable outcome of continental expansion: that the “touch of civilization” always overwhelmed indigenous peoples. Instead, in the early twentieth century, many well-educated Sioux and Kazakhs adapted and organized social movements that used print—newspapers, magazines, and journals—to validate their languages and cultures. These intellectuals emerged as spokesmen for their people at the very moment the United States and Russia confronted two very different crises of identity that followed America’s victory in the Spanish-American War and Russia’s defeat by the Japanese and the 1905 Russian Revolution.

THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

One of the most inherently comparative statements anyone can make about the United States or Russia is that they were, or are, exceptional. The United States and Russia expanded across continents; internally colonized indigenous peoples who lived there; incorporated those peoples into the political entity; allotted lands; and exercised political, social, and cultural control over those peoples with education, language, and religion to integrate, assimilate, or separate them from the dominant colonizing society. The United States and Russia exhibited all of the traits typically associated with nineteenth-century European imperialism in Africa and Asia; the only difference was contiguous expansion as opposed to overseas expansion. The processes might have differed; the consequences for the Sioux and the Kazakhs did not.

The comparative perspective reveals much about empires—their construction, their methods of conquest and administration, their typologies and perceptions, and their uniqueness and similarities. The United States and Russia were not exceptional; they were not unique empires. That does not mean, however, that these two empires did not develop idiosyncratic processes or share commonalities with one another. The Americans and the Russians used allotment and education to accomplish the same thing—compliant subjects of the empire—but the way the colonizers’ allotted land and the manner in which the American and Russian governments educated Sioux and Kazakh children was different.

The United States and Russia paralleled, though not precisely, each other in their continental expansion and internal colonization. They developed policies
and processes based on many common assumptions, expectations, ideologies, typologies, and consequences for those internally colonized. The United States and tsarist Russia were, as historians Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan noted, “quintessential” empires, “consummate producers of excepted populations, excepted spaces, and their own exception from international and domestic laws.” And yet, in the United States, the debate about American exceptionalism continues. In Russia, the Soviets rejected the idea of Russia’s imperial exceptionalism and replaced it with a new Soviet ideology, founding mythologies, and typologies to create a new Soviet exceptionalism. These exceptionalist arguments, whether American, Russian, or Soviet, often, as historian Mary Nolan argued, “promote their own silences and omissions” that mask “the complex nature of American society and its similarities with the interconnections to other nations.” The collapse of the Soviet Union ended its exceptionalist claims, forcing reinterpretations of the past—both tsarist and Soviet—in Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Georgia. Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis still animates debates among American scholars.

Comparative history ought to illuminate something about the subjects being compared that might not be clear and evident when examined in isolation because, as historians Frederick Cooper, George M. Fredrickson, and James T. Campbell argued, “Comparison suggests the multiple possibilities, pathways, and dead ends that exist within a broader history. A global, interactive approach to history needs comparison, and comparison needs interactive and global analysis.” The United States and tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century expanded their empires comparable to other European overseas imperial and colonial processes. Travelers to the American plains and the Kazakh Steppe saw the similarities—not just the geographic similarities but the consequences of expansion and internal colonization. In the nineteenth century, as David M. Wrobel argued in Global West, American Frontier, travelers “often placed the West in a broader, comparative global context, viewing it as one developing frontier among many and considering the United States as a colonizing power (like its European progenitors).”

A common feature of empires was the ability of the colonizing society—in this case, Americans and Russians—to express a self-perception that justified expansion and colonization. The United States clearly did so through Manifest Destiny throughout the nineteenth century. Manifest Destiny was a concept rooted in the belief that the United States was a Christian nation that providence selected to expand across the continent, save the Indian from extinction, spread the agrarian ideal, and exploit the bounty that was heretofore neglected and wasted by a race incapable of progressing without the guidance and firm
hand of a benevolent American people. The Russians’ self-perception stemmed from a belief that the racism evident in American or British empire building was a malignant sort; many Russians believed that they possessed a unique ability to absorb alien peoples into the empire. They believed the conflict and opposition they encountered in the Kazakh Steppe, the Caucasus, and Turkestan was not a response to Russian expansion, but that it derived from an Islamic fanaticism—a social and cultural backwardness that repressed the peoples the empire colonized. Americans and Russians believed they had a Christian duty to save the Sioux and the Kazakhs from the very fabrics of their social, cultural, economic, and political structures that kept them living a nomadic and barbaric life.

The problem with both self-perceptions was that each served a single master: both demanded the land from the people already living and using that land. It was American and Russian self-delusion that failed to recognize that the Sioux and the Kazakhs fought for the land, not just for the ostensibly barbaric culture, society, and economies. The Sioux and the Kazakhs fought for the land that sustained the nomadic life, which existed in juxtaposition to the agrarian perfection Americans and Russians believed was necessary to survive. Americans and Russians believed the agrarian ideal was an essential process to elevate the Sioux and the Kazakhs above the nomadic barbarism they seemingly inhabited. The conflict emerged because the Sioux and the Kazakhs simply gave the land a different value—one that was economic, of course, but one intrinsically connected to their culture, society, and way of life. Moreover, Sioux and Kazakh societies were not stagnant, which contrasted with American and Russian perceptions. Sioux and Kazakh societies and cultures were always in transition, adapting new technologies and strategies to cope with the internal and external pressures that challenged their way of life.

Students of Russian and Soviet imperialism can be, by the same token, seduced by the uniqueness or exceptionalist view, based upon perceptions of tsarist autocracy or Soviet/Stalinist brutality. Moreover, when students of rich Russian history compare its imperial designs and extraordinary geographic expansion, the comparison is usually internal to the empire itself. For example, one might compare central Asia and the Caucasus, or Finland and Poland; even within central Asia itself the comparison might be between the steppe and Turkestan, or a sedentary-nomadic dichotomy. Rarely have students of Russian imperialism ventured outside, except, as Adeeb Khalid noted, to compare Russia with the British Empire. Yet, even an astute scholar like Khalid fell into the “uniqueness” trap when he wrote, “Colonial conquest transformed colonized societies, but colonial empires seldom used state power to transform societies, cultures, or individuals in the way attempted by the Soviet state.”13 But that is precisely what
the United States did to the Sioux, and certainly what tsarist Russia wanted to do to the Kazakhs, in the nineteenth century.

This study chiefly focused upon American and Russian central government policies—particularly in the United States, where the Sioux depended upon the federal government rather than individual states. That should not suggest, however, that the states played no role, but that policy typically emanated in Washington and was implemented on reservations or other federal lands by federal employees working for federal institutions. In contrast, in the Russian Empire, the central government in Saint Petersburg developed policies to operate in the various provinces and governor-generalships in Siberia, Turkestan, and the Kazakh Steppe. Russian government officials—in particular, the governor-generals—had far more latitude to execute policies as they saw fit. American governors had no authority to adjust or implement policies on reservations in their states. So Russia, the autocratic and despotic regime, manifested less oversight in local affairs in nationality questions than did Washington, the decentralized and democratic icon, with the “Indian Question.” This was, in part, due to constitutional authority in the United States to deal with Indians being vested in the federal government, not in the states; in Russia, no such structure existed. The tsar ruled, the tsar appointed, and the tsar governed; but the tsar relied on thousands of government officials to follow his decrees and that created a highly malleable environment for policy interpretation for those on the ground in the Kazakh Steppe.

American and Russian colonization of the northern Great Plains and the Kazakh Steppe situates comfortably within the framework of nineteenth-century global imperial-colonial expansion. American and Russian colonization of contiguous territories compares well with the mainstream of the analogous phenomenon in Africa and Asia. As with British, French, or Belgian imperialism, the perceptions of uninhabited or underutilized land, backward peoples, or untapped resources justified the need to expand and colonize. The colonizers intended to bring agriculture and develop the resources that fueled and financed their industry. In addition, the imperial powers reconfigured the mission from one of economics to culture and society to elevate the seemingly backward peoples from their barbarism. Imperialism and colonialism was also, ultimately, about people: those who colonized with a self-conceptualized civilizing agenda and those who were the target of that expansion and subsequent colonization.

The process of incorporating the Sioux and the Kazakhs into the expanding country’s territorial and political structures was a comparable divide-and-conquer method. The Americans and the Russians used treaties and oaths to get
bands or clans to cede land, swear loyalty, or surrender their political and economic sovereignty. The United States and Russia recognized the political—perhaps national—sovereignty of the Sioux and the Kazakhs, but they never signed treaties or swore oaths with a single representative who legitimately spoke for, or had the right to speak for, the entire community. The Sioux and the Kazakhs did not have national leaders and did not have governance mechanisms to represent all Sioux or all Kazakhs; they did not have comparable political systems capable of behaving like a nation-state, nor did they necessarily want that structure. Each treaty or oath taken by one or a few Sioux or Kazakhs did not represent all Sioux or all Kazakhs. The US and Russian governments understood this fact but typically faulted the backward sociopolitical structures of the Sioux and the Kazakhs rather than acknowledge the tactic and policies of divide and conquer. The United States signed treaties with bands and the Russians accepted oaths from clan or even horde khans, but there was never an occasion when Sioux chiefs or Kazakh khans could legitimately claim to represent the nation.

The benefit of this comparison is that examining the internal colonization of the Sioux and the Kazakhs through the comparative prism demonstrates that the United States engaged in an expansionist agenda that differed little from the Russian experience. The internal colonization produced an overwhelming response and use of force to localized affairs, but it was clearly motivated by a desire to complete the colonization of land that was arguably controlled by a native people. Internal colonization provoked resistance and conflict, and these conflicts represented military resistance by a people whose political sovereignty the colonizers already determined lacked national unity or a national integrity to be treated as equals. In that sense, the American expansion west was not a unique colonizing exercise somehow separated from other nineteenth-century European colonizations. And yet, American and Russian perceptions of their continental expansions still maintain a powerful influence on their respective national imaginations.

NOTES

1. As historian Robert J. Kern described it in 1948, the “Russian people have been and still are a nation in movement. They used their unique river system to reach the seas . . . colonization in one river basin after the other and an advance eastward from one river system over easy portages to the next were the chief characteristics of the Russian movement of exploration and acquisition from the Urals to the Pacific.” “The Russian Eastward Movement: Some Observations on Its Historical Significance,” Pacific Historical Review 17, no. 2 (May 1948): 135–36.

2. See, for example, David Prochaska, Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870–1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Catherine Hall, Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867 (Chicago: University


4. By the 1890s, the Russian government started to fear the Pan-Islamic rhetoric that seemed to be coming from central Asia. The laws granting religious freedoms following the 1905 revolution heightened those fears. The Orthodox Church determined to accelerate conversion to Orthodoxy because, it was feared, that the hearts of the empire’s Muslims lay with Turkey, not with Russia. Critics charged that the government’s policy of allowing Tatar mullahs to operate among the Kazakhs actually worked against government interests, turning the Kazakhs from nominal Muslims into fanatical ones. Islam was no longer a means to civilize the Kazakhs; it was an enemy within the empire that must be eliminated. See Frank T. McCarthy, “The Kazan’ Missionary Congress,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 14, no. 3 (July/September 1973), 308–32.

5. John S. MacKenzie, *An Introduction to Social Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1895), 172–73. MacKenzie further argued, “In so far as there is growth in such a case, it is still a growth from within. The conquering society must be able to absorb the conquered one into itself; otherwise the latter cannot be regarded as forming a real part of it all, but at most as an instrument of its life, like cattle and trees. And similar remarks may be made of those who in any other way drop out of touch with the life of their people. In so far as they cease to be a part of the system to which they belong, and become only instruments of its advancement or impediments in its way. Such facts illustrate rather the disintegration than the growth of society” (173).


