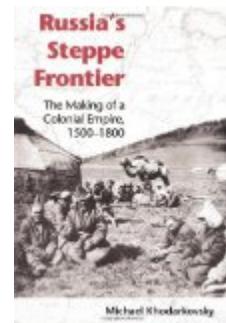


Michael Khodarkovsky. *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. xiv + 290 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33989-8.

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Native and Russian Voices on the Eurasian Steppe

When sedentary Slavs and nomadic peoples met, the early Russian chronicles speak with two voices. Due to the variety of sources from which they were composed, one entry might report a devastating barbarian attack on a river settlement in the language of carnage and Christian suffering, while a subsequent description of some prince's retinue might mundanely include, without comment, those same nomadic attackers. Chronicles describe the Mongol attack on the settled Slavs of the wooded Volga-Oka heartland as the senseless and violent shedding of Christian blood by godless pagans, yet in entries dated only a few years later, the same chronicle can matter-of-factly record that a Prince Iaroslav has gone to the Horde, lived there some years, and returned with honor.

The first type of passage, ideological, militant, church-inspired, and irreconcilably antagonistic, has long dominated the historiography of Russia's encounter with the steppe and the East. Since the eighteenth century, at home and abroad, although an alternate reading was always possible, historians preferred the chronicle-literalist approach which focused on religious conflict. The result was a national narrative in which the voices of the Eurasian nomadic peoples could scarcely be heard, their ultimate subjugation being preordained, their disappearance or cultural absorption inevitable.

In most historiography, they were relegated to passive-voice constructions, to a past in which they did not act, but were merely acted upon by enterprising

Russians or Cossacks. A generation ago, one could regard as typical, the descriptions of the Pugachev rebellion given by one respected but Eurocentric Russianist: "The Bashkirs had to yield their lands, grazing grounds, and fishing places under duress and at derisive prices, much like the American Indians selling Manhattan Island." "The Bashkirs were the main target of [a] conversion effort: their elders and tribal chiefs were promised rewards of rank, money, gifts, and medals." "The Bashkirs were put on the obrok." Indeed, the section of the essay devoted to the "relationship between the natives and the central government" allots one short paragraph to the "natives" and most of its space to more sophisticated Iaik Cossacks and "their profound aversion to everything Russian." [1] Slavs had voices, but a passive-voice treatment typified the dominant presentation of steppe peoples.

About the same time, however, a revolution was brewing. It had multiple origins: in Ned Keenan's seminars and classes, in the intrusion of anthropological perspectives into the writing of history, in revisionist bottom-up history, in the prejudices of an increasingly influential field of non-Western global history, and ironically, as Khodarkovsky notes, in Soviet policies which impelled historians to publish document collections illustrating the history of Russia's relations with other peoples. It reached its culmination in the breakup of the Soviet Union along ethnic lines and in Boris Yeltsin's short-lived federative constitution of 1993. It insisted that the Apaches had a history as meaningful as that of the set-

tlers, that Africans had a history before imperialism, that the Atlantic slave trade was conducted by African as well as European entrepreneurs, and of course, that Tadjiks, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs were not Russians. Slowly the historical megalith of the Tartar Yoke began to crumble until the unthinkable was asserted: Muscovy was an integral and interactive, if impoverished and therefore marginal, part of the Horde, not its implacable Christian foe, and the tsars were the successors to Chinggis Khan, [2] in ways never envisioned by earlier historians.[3]

To be sure, Michael Khodarkovsky acknowledges the established national canon of Russia's terrible suffering at the hands of barbarian infidels. His book contains two lengthy narrative chapters which mirror the subtitle, and thus echo the older dominant historiographic assumptions: "Taming the 'Wild Steppe,' 1480-1600s," and "From Steppe Frontier to Imperial Borderlands, 1600-1800." They detail the disintegration of the Golden Horde and the rise of local horde centers, Moscow's annexation of Kazan and Astrakhan, and subsequently the incorporations of the lands of the Nogays, the Kalmyks and the Kazakhs (and eventually the Crimea). A third chapter, "Concepts and Policies in the Imperial Borderlands, 1690s-1800," treats the period of integration, efforts to make farmers of herders, to extract taxes, to convert natives to Orthodoxy (the longest section), to manipulate native elites, to dictate land use, and to establish legal norms. In them, the author, an associate professor at Loyola University of Chicago, ably documents his subthesis, that "the identities of both Muscovy and Spain were shaped by their encounter with the Muslim world," and more importantly, that Russia was no less a colonial empire than any of the other Western European Powers, even though Russia's colonial possessions lay not overseas, but within its ever-expanding contiguous boundaries; that the empire-building process in Russia was as much a product of the metropolis and its various ideologies of expansion as it was a result of the interaction between Russia and the indigenous societies along its frontiers, and that the complexity of the economic, political, and cultural interactions between these two very different worlds accounted for specific dynamics of Russia's expansion and its eventual transformation from a vulnerable frontier society into a colonial empire (p. 6).

No other work treats Moscow's colonial expansion to the south and east so competently. The story of Slavic expansion and acquisition alone would make the volume indispensable to the early modern Russian historian.

What makes Khodarkovsky's book most significant,

however, is the voice he gives to the peoples of the steppe. In his first chapter, for example, using modern anthropological research on nomadic peoples, he reconstructs the lifestyle of tribal confederations, their social structure, their trading and raiding economy and effective military organization, their religion, and their complex systems of elites and leadership. He outlines which centers were relatively sophisticated (Kazan, Astrakhan, and the Crimea), which were seminomadic (Kabardians, Kumyks), and which were truly nomadic (Nogays, Kalmyks, Kazakhs), and explores the sociology of each. He notes their lack of a concept of ownership or territorial sovereignty over a particular piece of land in the European sense. He shows how the steppe tribes' lifestyle of raiding and warfare were inextricably linked to herding in a rational economy, difficult as it was for city folk to comprehend. He shows how slavery among steppe peoples lacked the moral dimension ascribed to it in the West. Just as earlier Rus' princes attempted, often unsuccessfully, to manipulate the court of the Khan of the Golden Horde in its choice of a *Velikii Kniaz*, so Khodarkovsky shows the active politicking of rival claimants in Moscow's selection of a local khan. He shows how all of the regional powers—the Russian, Ottoman, and the Persian governments—used religion for their own geopolitical purposes, a game at which local elites were no less skillful.

In terms of political encounters, Khodarkovsky argues that the rules of warfare and diplomacy, and the very language of treaty, submission, and peace, were understood very differently in the steppe and in far-off Muscovite urban centers. So different were their lifestyles and values that, short-term alliances notwithstanding, "peace was impossible": the interests of the two sides, Muscovite and tribal, urban and steppe, were "fundamentally irreconcilable and confrontation between them was unavoidable." Such insights would be impossible had the author not decided from the start to give equal voice to the native peoples and to grant agency to the peoples of the steppe.

In the long run, of course, "the natives were in no position to match the growing power of the Russian government," and were "unable to stop the machine of Russian colonization" (p. 223). Nonetheless, the centuries-long symbiotic interaction of peoples, rather than a religious interpretation of isolated encounters, finds clear expression in this book, already accepted as a classic in the field.

Notes

- [1]. Marc Raeff, "Pugachev's Rebellion," in *Precondi-*

tions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe, eds. Robert Forster and Jack P. Greene, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970, pp. 181, 183, 184ff.

[2]. See in general Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985; Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589*, Cam-

bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; and more specifically, the recent summary by Charles J. Halperin, "Ivan IV and Chinggis Khan," *Jahrbuecher fuer Geschichte Osteuropas*, Band 51 (2003), Heft 4, 481-497.

[3]. See, for example, Michael Cherniavsky, "Khan or Basileus: an Aspect of Russian Medieval Political Theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 20 (1959), No. 4, pp. 459-476.

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