Taming the Wild Field

Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe

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Introduction

Steppe Building

For close to a thousand years, the most important fact about the relationship between the agricultural peoples of the Russian forests and the nomadic pastoralists of the southern steppes was that the forest peoples did not stay where they were. Whether they moved to farm, trade, or serve their state, in small parties or in mass relocations, at their own initiative or that of their government or lords, migrants from the forests were almost always coming to the steppe. Settling at first in the forest-steppe fringes north of the European steppe, then in Muscovite times along the rivers, and by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along lines of forts, the migrants rapidly colonized the open steppe itself, changing everything in the process. Grasslands were replaced by fields and agricultural pasture; nomads were replaced by peasants (or turned into them); "free" Cossacks became the Cossack estate; and a place once considered by the Russians' most learned spokesmen as the very antithesis of Russia became reinvented as one of its essential parts. No other originally non-Russian part of the old Russian empire was affected by the settlement of Russians and other outside migrants, and the related dynamics of Russian political and cultural appropriation, so completely for so long. This book is a study of this process, a history of how a region was created on the ground and in the imagination through the changing phenomenon of colonization itself.

The book's coverage extends from the period of early Rus', when the Eastern Slavs first started writing about their settlements in the forest-steppe, to the late nineteenth century, when major new agricultural settlement in the European steppe region ended and the Great Siberian Migration began. Despite this broad framework, however, four-fifths of the book is devoted to a study of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
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when settlement on the steppe proved most intense. With the emphasis on the period of major Russian "incorporation" come three basic implications. The first is that the book is indeed a study of the Russian incorporation process, and, as such, it focuses on the Russian state and its colonists. That is, it treats the colonization of the steppe largely through the minds and experiences of the colonizers rather than those of the colonized because the central story being told here, a story of appropriation, was one in which the colonizers' terms ultimately prevailed. If frontiers are "middle grounds," appropriation is a mutual business practiced by both "natives" and "strangers," and "power by itself is too crude an instrument for measuring all the subtleties that make up cultural interaction," it is still true that "middle grounds" (as frontiers) invariably "close," that all sides do not come out ahead in the equation, and that traditionally the one with the most "guns, germs, and steel" has been able to appropriate the other in ways that bring more drastic consequences. Though it took centuries, and was never predetermined, Eastern Slavic agricultural society, with its greater aggregate wealth and larger population, eventually overtook and then eclipsed steppe nomadism; the agents of centralized state power eventually conquered or bought out the independent "peoples of the frontier"; and the "spirit of the nation" eventually insisted on claiming the nation's "empty spaces." This book begins with times when outsiders and natives were either broadly equal in their ability to affect the other or when the natives' power was greater, but it ultimately emphasizes the way that outsiders made the natives' region their own. This does not deny the history or agency of the steppe peoples or diminish the mutuality of colonial encounters. It simply acknowledges the full enormity of the change that the coming of the outsiders entailed.

Second, my work proceeds from the recognition that the outsiders who came to the steppe were diverse and that the appropriation they carried out unfolded on multiple levels and changed over time. At once physical and symbolic, material and imagined, steppe colonization was an evolving process in which rural migrants, landlords, kind speculators, "gentlemen travelers," poets, scholars, and bureaucrats all played their necessary roles. In other words, my work begins with the premise that the steppe was appropriated not merely through the physical occupation of its land, the displacement or reorganization of its (traditional) inhabitants, the elabora-


4 Prominent exceptions to this general rule are Michael Kohnhokovskiy and Andreas Kappeler, both scholars whose works have greatly influenced this study.
colonization is thus either elided altogether or, more commonly, treated as a natural process, part of Russia's supposedly natural national development. Much as in China, where it is more common to see Qing expansion as a process of "unification" rather than conquest, or in the United States, where visions of a Euro-American frontier ("a zone of free land and opportunity") are still more powerful than notions of La Frontera ("borders . . . of trade, violence, conquest, and cultural exchange"), the proposition that Russian colonization was imperialist sounds at best unusual. Colonization, as the historian Vasilii Rikhsiaevskii famously put it, is the "basic fact" of Russian history, but it has rarely been interrogated as a basic fact of Russian imperialism.  

Taming the Wild Field emphasizes the imperialism in colonization, though this approach necessarily means highlighting what it is about the process that has allowed it to appear so unimperialist. Indeed, the ambiguities of Russian colonization were striking and persistent, and nowhere was this more obvious than on the steppe. The representatives of the Muscovite tsars conquered and encroached on parts of the grasslands but did not seek to appropriate them in any comprehensive manner; the imperial agents of St. Petersburg, by contrast, loudly claimed the entire region in the name of "science," "utility," European-style colonialism, and the "Russian way," but they never declared or treated the steppe as a clear-cut colony and for a long time preferred foreign to Russian colonists. Similarly, the coming of ordinary Russians, foreigners, and other migrants led to the appropriation of native lands and the eventual end of nomadism and the Cossack frontier—all effects comparable to the consequences of imperialism in European settler colonies—yet the migrants' arrival on the Russian plains did not give rise to a "ruder society" in which "attribution" was based more on race and ethnicity than on socioeconomic class. Indeed, until the end of the tsarist era (and beyond) the state displayed the same "colonial" paternalism toward its own Russian commoners that it displayed toward its officially colonized non-Russian "aliens," some of whom themselves doubled as colonizers. Furthermore, for longer than

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was the case in Western or Central Europe, Russia's "internal expansion" ("the intensification of settlement and the reorganization of society") and "external expansion" ("colonial conquest and immigration") proceeded together and were almost impossible to disentangle. The colonization of the steppe, as a result, reflected and produced a particularly complicated kind of imperialism, one in which empire building, state building, society building, and nation building (real and imagined, of Russians and others) invariably intertwined. Uncovering and explaining this process is the central purpose of my story.

The setting for the story is the western end of the great Eurasian steppe belt, also known as the Ponto-Caspian steppe, a vast area that once fell within the limits of so-called European Russia but today is divided between Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and Kazakhstan. The region's limit to the north is the front edge of the Russian forests, which bends gently upward, running west to east, from central Ukraine to the Central Urals; in the south, the foothills of the Caucasus and the northern shores of the Black and Caspian Seas; in the west, the Danube River; and in the east, the Ural River up to roughly the town of Orenburg. Along its northern edge on the border with the Russian and Ukrainian forests and in the south near the Caucasus, the region is marked by a transition zone of forest-steppe: stands of woods interspersed with prairie. Around the western Caspian, and between the Lower Volga and the Ural Rivers, the region edges toward desert and is characterized, accordingly, by another intermediary zone, the desert-steppe, consisting largely of salt flats and low-lying shrubs. Around the time of the first millennium, A.D., the environment that fell between these edges and transition zones—the steppe proper or the open steppe—was all grassland: a continuous, mostly treeless, dry (though not arid) plain, less elevated and flatter along the sea and more rolling and elevated in the northeast toward the Urals and in the south toward the Caucasian Mountains, but characterized throughg-


6 V.O. Khlebnikov, Sbornik rossiiskikh v-letnik (Moscow, 1874), v. 1, p. 90.

7 David Prochaska, Making Algebra French: Calculation in Rome, 1787-1920 (New York, 1995), pp. 9-10; Cathy Freivogel, Povestit Ispanii: Representation of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia (New York, 1996); Stephen S. Franklin, "Confronting the Domestick Other: Rural Popular Culture and Its Enemies in Finn-Swedish Russia," in Franklin


6 V.O. Khlebnikov, Sbornik rossiiskikh v-letnik (Moscow, 1874), v. 1, p. 90.
out by one-to-five-foot tall drought- and frost-resistant grasses and forbs, such as fescues, oat and rye grasses, sedges, sedgebrush, feather grass, and wild onion, as well as numerous varieties of seasonal wildflowers—perfumed lyciums, scarlet tulips, valerians, irises. The steppe's topsoils were chernozem (black-earth), in some places in the forest-steppe and much of the steppe proper up to three feet deep, with less fertile chestnut-brown and salinated soils more common as the plains approached the seashores and in the desert-steppe near the Caspian.

At this time, the only people who had successfully adapted to life on the open steppe were shamanist, Turkic-speaking, horse-riding nomadic pastoralists, who, with the exception of the more institutionalized Khazar kaganate centered in the Lower Volga and Northern Caucasus, tended to be organized into loose tribal unions. 10 Though the nomads (to varying degrees) practiced vestigial or supplementary agriculture, wintering in semipermanent camps, their principal economic occupation was livestock production, which they ensured by moving between different pastures in regular seasonal migrations with their herds (horses, sheep, and, to a lesser extent, goats, cattle, and camels). 11 Dependent on their animals and with little surplus to spare, the nomads' economy was always precarious, which meant that they were never self-sufficient. They raided rival nomadic tribes on the grasslands or joined them in tribal confederations to increase their herds or expand or defend their claims to pasture, water supply, and seasonal migration routes. Politics among nomadic groups was also shaped by shifting configurations of power on the eastern end of the "steppe highway" near China, where large steppe-based empires would form, producing migrations or invasions that displaced or incorpo-


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rated the nomadic societies to the west. The formation of these eastern steppe empires was directly related to relations with the Chinese, a circumstance that points to an essential fact of steppe nomadic pastoralism: the people who practiced it were always tied to and dependent on the world of the sedentaries. This was as true for the nomadic societies of the European steppe as it was for those farther east. Through either trading, raiding, military service, or royal diplomacy, the western nomads were enmeshed with the agricultural societies and empires that bordered their territories with the Byzantines in the Pontic region, the outposts of Arab power in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia, the Turkic-ruled states of the northern Middle East, Central Asia, and Middle Volga (Volga Bulgaria), and, to the northwest, in an area where the forest and steppe ran together, with the people eventually known as the Rus.13


Chapter Five

"Correct Colonization"

Now I possess and am possessed of the land where I would be,
And the curve of half Earth's generous breast shall soothe and ravish me!
Rudyard Kipling, "The Prairie"

Colonizing Capacities and the Russian Element

The word "imperialism" made its debut in British politics in the 1870s. Just twenty years later, however, according to the critic J. A. Hobson, it could be heard "on everybody's lips" and had become the widely accepted term of choice to describe "the most powerful movement... of the Western world." If a new term was required, it was because the "movement" it described was indeed new. The Europeans had long laid claim to far-flung territories, but in the late nineteenth century, aid by the tools and products of industrialization, high capitalism, and science, their ability to conquer, occupy, and otherwise impose themselves on the world increased dramatically. Agents of European business ran rubber from the Amazon and tea from Ceylon; emisaries of European religion took their god to Zululand and New Zealand; and soldiers and servitors of European capitals fanned out to claim colonies from Indochina to the Cameroons. In the new Age of Empire, there was no question, it seemed, that "Europeans would invent, finance, and command" while "Africans and Asians would accumulate, labor, and obey." Even if certain imperialists like the young Winston Churchill acknowledged that there was a gap between "the wonderful cloudland of aspiration" and "the ugly scaffolding of attack and achievement," the imperialism of the day still seemed a necessary and justified reflection of Europe's higher condition. As

the French economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu wrote in 1874: "Emigration, that is, the acquisition of a new territory, of a virgin country... is a matter of instinct, one that occurs at all stages of social development; colonization [colonisation] [by contrast] is a matter of reflection bound by rules that can only emanate from the most advanced societies. Savages and barbarians will emigrate periodically—even often... Only civilized peoples truly colonize."

Russia's ruling imperialists were no less convinced of their superior status, but their views of colonization were necessarily more complicated. If Continental commentators such as Leroy-Beaulieu could sing abstracdy about colonization as "the expansive force of a people, its reproductive power, its extension and multiplication across space, and the sublimation of the universe... its language, customs, ideas, and laws," members of the Russian government had to acknowledge that colonization in their country was largely premised on peasant resettlement, and permitting too much of the latter still seemed unwise. The broadly negative position on large-scale movement that prevailed in high places in the 1860s thus continued into the early-to-mid 1870s: Limited resettlement was permitted in specific instances, but the law of the land remained the Emigration Edict whose practical effect, in the words of a later government report, was "to deny the right to resettle to most of the peasant population." Yet much as before, prohibitions and threats of fines or the exile of illegal resettlement "inhabiters" to Siberia did little to dissuade needy and/or hopeful peasants from moving. Indeed, by the close of the 1870s, the combined pressures of rising population, rising land prices, and rising "land hunger" in the center produced such a surge of illegal migration that some high state officials began to reconsider their antiresettlement stance. Even the tsar's most conservative servants started to recognize that massive rural migration was prompted more by "extreme need" than simple "wildfulness," that "prohibitive measures" alone would never stop the flow, and that, consequently, the government was better off doing what it could to "actively supervise resettlement affairs." In 1881, reflecting this change in view, new "temporary regulations" on resettlement went into effect. Then, after a protracted process of drafting and redrafting by various commissions of high officials and "knowledgeable people," a permanent resettlement law was issued on July 13, 1882.3

4 Ibid., p. 65.
5 RGUD, f. 391, op. 3, d. 915, l. 13.
6 Ibid., f. 2 (105)-12.
7 On resettlement policy in the 1870s and 1880s, see A.A. Kaufman, Fremdenkolonisation in Russischem Staat (St. Petersburg, 1908), pp. 12-22; A. N. Aleksandrovski, Sotsial'noe obshchestvo v pervoi treti 1870-1910 gg. (Petrograd, 1910), pp. 60-65; Donald W. Treadgold, The
8 'Current Colonization.'

The law of 1882 was the first general decree on resettlement since 1845, and as such it marked a turning point. While "voluntary resettlement... by rural residents and townsmen" was still to occur only "with the prior approval of the ministers of the Interior and of State Domain," the new law at least made plain that resettlement was permissible and that petitioners with "reasons... meriting attention" were entitled to rent or receive state land and benefit from varying incentives and forms of assistance.9 The new law was thus proof that St. Petersburg had begun to conclude anew that it would be best for "social order" to let at least some peasants move rather than to require all of them to stay in place. It was also proof that the active pursuit of borderland settlement and population redistribution had once again become a pressing state interest. Though recognition of a relatively unrestricted right to resettle would not come until 1904-06, the law of 1882 put an end to the era of the broad discouragement of movement. Henceforth resettlement might be shut down occasionally in certain regions when things appeared to get out of hand, but overall it would be encouraged, and encouraged openly, even boldly. In 1892, the Committee on the Siberian Railway created a special subcommittee "to assist in the establishment of settlers" in "Asiatic Russia." Then in 1896, the Ministry of the Interior opened the Resettlement Administration (Fremdenkolonialdepartement)—the closest thing the tsars ever produced to a general colonial office—to coordinate resettlement within the empire as a whole.10 In March 1895, the members of the Siberian Railway

9 RGUD, f. 391, op. 3, d. 915, l. 13. Terms varied depending on where settlers were going. State assistance for migrants was greater in "Asiatic Russia" than in European Russia. Additionally, in European Russia, migrants were required to rent state land for six to twelve years before receiving title to a permanent allotment. In "Asiatic Russia," "permanent allotment" was to be granted immediately. As a rule, the term "Asiatic Russia" continued Siberia, Transcaucasia, the Kazakh steppe (Stepnoi Kray), and Turkestan, though, of these territories, the provisions of the 1882 law extended only to Western Siberia and parts of the Kazakh steppe. The law was applied to the other areas a few years later. See "Perevedencheskaya kolonizatsiya v konc- xix-xx vekov," Drevnosti po agromir otechestvennoi Rossi (Moscow, 1979), pp. 43-48.
11 For the deeds creating these bodies, see Sibirskie kolonisty i voennoe khoziaistvo (St. Petersburg, 1901), pp. 1-7. The first head of the Resettlement Administration was V.I. Gippon, and his assistant was A.V. Krivoshein, the future minister of Agri-
Committee neatly encapsulated the new thinking on the question that had come to prevail in high circles by the end of the century: "There is no reason to look on peasant resettlement with special trepidation. Government action should instead be taken to ensure that it becomes better coordinated and acquires a more correct aspect." The government's newly resurrected resettlement enthusiasm focused overwhelmingly on the east. By the late 1860s, the Great Siberian Migration had begun. By the early 1890s it was intensifying as a result of the opening of the Trans-Siberian Railway. And by 1900, it had become massive enough to turn "Russia beyond the Urals" into the empire's leading zone for new agricultural settlement. The consequences for the European steppe were historic. With the Siberian surge, the south was knocked from its long-held perch of colonizing preeminence, never to regain it again, either before or after 1917. For all that, the region's sluggish did not signal an end to new colonization. In fact, before migration rates dropped off precipitously in the early twentieth century, settlement on the steppe increased, with more incoming settlers than in any comparable preceding period. In the 1870s, Kuban' Oblast was the single most intensely settled region in the empire, with Stavropol' and parts of New Russia not far behind. In all, between 1871 and 1886, even as "Asian Russia" rose steadily in favor, the European steppe received over half (54.45 percent) of the empire's colonists—that is, roughly two million people. In Orenburg in 1889, local correspondents told of peasants stopping short of Siberia and "wandering around the province...in massive numbers" looking for land. And in 1884 officials in the Northern Caucasian described Stavropol' as being all but overrun by illegal settlers, known in the region as "outlanders" (незаконники). By the time of the all-emprise census in 1897, despite the fact that Siberia was now far and away the leading center of colonization, and the steppe itself was losing migrants to the east, enough new settlement was still occurring on the European plains for observers to remark that the south's population was "growing many times faster than [that of] the interior" and that European Russia's "demographic center of gravity" was "shifting ever more toward the steppe zone."

The profile of the population moving to the steppe had changed little since mid-century. It consisted overwhelmingly of peasants from central Russian, Ukrainian, and northern/central Volga provinces, most of whom continued to move illegally or semilegally (even after the law of 1883) and almost all of whom were hoping to escape high rent payments, bad harvests, and/or poor land allotments while looking to find a better life in the form of a bigger and more fertile piece of ground. Such was the case of Vasiliy Petrov and Egor Kazakov, two former state peasants from Nizhnii Novgorod Province who petitioned the minister of the Interior in the name of their households in 1871:

We two poor families draw our living from a rather small plot of land of poor quality in the village of Borsinka that provides us but one-half year's worth of grain in a good harvest year and at other times one-third or less. Because of this we experience great hardship and cannot feed our families and meet our daily needs. It is worst of all in times of poor harvests when we must work to the last of our strength and spend all that we have to buy grain at inflated prices, such that we have nothing left to render our state taxes or the dues to our commune. It is this dire situation that has forced us to seek a new place to live, wherever it may be, on open state lands, and so we have found such a place in the village [of] Podolesk, Ipatievskaya County, Stavropol' District, Samara Province, which has state lands... and all amenities available for our accommodation.

Peasants in parties like those of the Petrovs and Kazakows moved by foot, oxcart, barge, raft, and by the end of the 1870s increasingly by river steamboat and railroad car, traveling on the latter with their horses and carts (if they had them) at reduced "migrant rates." On the road, migrants were led by scouts (khodoki) and aided by representatives (pochvatniki). Once they reached the steppe, many enrolled in existing villages or Gostack settlements, paying for "documents of admission" (приведение приезжих) and land (sometimes purchased but more often rented) with cash and/or buckets of vodka. The stress in these arrangements tended to fall on the practical, cultural. In 1905, the administration was transferred from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Management. Treadgold, Great Siberians Migrations, pp. 122, 125-26, V.I. Chernevzzov, Polnuy Sb. epogy rnikh poesiy: Shal'maiteoiana, saniioiana Russi v Sibiri (Moscow, 1970), pp. 106-9. 11 RGAZ, f. 391, op. 2, d. 149, l. 51. On resettlement policy in the 1860s, see Treadgold, Great Siberians Migrations, pp. 107-9, 131, La Siberia, pp. 463-34, Smirnova, "Pervoeuchast'koe razpolozenie v nemovnoe pol'skoe samodejstviu," pp. 62-75, T.V. Tikhonov, "Pervoeuchast'koe pol'skoe samodejstviu v 1820-1920 godakh," Istor. SSR, 1957, 1, pp. 179-94; Boris Anamich et al. (eds.), Kratn uslovienisi v Rossi, 1894-1927 (Leningrad, 1964), pp. 47-92. 12 V.M. Kabanov, Neobhodnoe stanovlenie v sibirskim okruga 1860-70-kh g., Ekonomicheskoe isledovaniu (St. Petersburg, 1907), pp. 436-37, Kabanov, Rozhod v nite: Dizainskii skolvervi v rabochikh, 1790-1905, sochineniia epizdoesiab i polzovat'sya gnomi raznoi sredem (St. Petersburg, 1937), tabl. 33, p. 516. 13 "Pervoeuchast'koe samodejstviu," Orenburgsi Blad, 1886, n. 6, p. 5. 14 RGAZ, f. 1, 1921, op. 51, d. 1884, B. 17-19 (1921). I have borrowed this translation of the term muzonoptie from Peter Holquist, Making Wit, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuation of China, 1914-1917 (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), p. 10.
with communal admittance predicated on good behavior and new responsibilities balanced by access to resources. The assembly of one Cossack settlement in the Kuban’ wrote the following in its decision in 1885 to admit the household of the “outsider” Elisei Popov from Voronezh:

Recognizing that peasant Popov already lives in our stanitsa and is of good conduct, we the assembled do hereby fully agree that he and his family, consisting of a wife and two daughters, be accepted and registered within our community with rights of inheritance for all coming time. And to this we add that if Popov is permitted to enroll in the Cossack estate, then shall he be given land in the same measure as we receive it from the common stanitsa holding.17

Enrollment agreements of this sort worked only in certain situations. If villages did not exist in the vicinity, were not welcoming, or did not have room, incoming migrants were forced to eke out a precarious existence as unwanted squatters or to found new settlements, with the land either provided by the government or purchased with loans through the Peasant Land Bank (founded in 1882) and its provincial affiliates. (In nomadic areas, migrants frequently struck deals to rent “aliens” land.) In the early going, regardless of whose land they settled on, the new arrivals commonly lived in dugouts or hastily assembled shacks, boarded with “old residents” if there were any, hired themselves out as laborers—sometimes for years—to make ends meet, searched for better lands if they did not like what they found on arrival, or gave up and returned home if things became too desperate. Yet even with the challenges, most stayed for the simple reason that things seemed better in their new environs. The basic rationale for popular movement to the steppe that had prevailed for centuries thus remained in place. Or at least, this was how many of the migrants told it. As the settler Stepian Stepanov wrote from Samara to his kin in Riazan’ in 1879:

My dear brothers, if you can live where you are without great hardship, then live there, but if things have gotten still worse than before, then come over here to join us… Here life is possible. There is much land and pasture, and, thanks be to God, the grain grows well.18

Satisfied settlers were undoubtedly appreciated by state officials, but setters of all sorts posed problems. Much as before large numbers of mi-

17 Cited in M.M. Gromyko, Mit rashest devost (Moscow, 1931), p. 218.

grants left without permission, traveled with insufficient resources, ended up where they were not supposed to go, and arrived without the “docu-
mentation” required to receive state land (that is, “certificates of release” and “land plots”) issued by their home communes. They drove up land prices by arriving in massive numbers, argued over land, timber, and water with neighboring “old residents,” Cossacks, and nomads, and, de-
pending on circumstances, fell ill or died in unusually high concentra-
tions. It was not always easy to tell who was an illegal settler and who was simply coming to the region “looking for work on a temporary passport.” It was not even wise to assume that settlers knew where they were going. The governor of Stavropol’ observed, for example, that the migrants he found traversing “in all possible directions” across his territory frequently announced that they were looking for “places and geographical terms that simply do not exist in Stavropol’ Province.”19 The by now familiar disconnect between resettlement procedures and resettlement realities thus per-
sisted. As the frustrated governor of Ekaterinoslav put it in 1884, “The will-
ful and incorrect resettlement of peasants completely contradicts the con-
ditions set forth by law.”20

And yet as far as Russia’s chief executives were concerned, the law was still the issue and it still had to be enforced. Indeed, the government’s abiding response to the persistent confusions of resettlement in the late nineteenth century was to insist on trying to reduce them through still greater bureaucracy and an even more rigorously scientific approach to the alignment of population and territory. Now, more than ever, the goal was something that high officials and their sympathizers in the public re-
ferred to as “correct colonization” (pravil’naia kolonizatsiia)—that is, an orderly, scientized, systematic process in which peasant migrants left with appropriate resources and reasonable expectations, went just where they were told, moved in just the right numbers, settled on just the right amount of land, and did their obedienc best to improve their livelihood and advance “the state’s interest.”

The management of colonization along these lines naturally required data, and data there was. The “temporary regulations” of 1881 ordered the opening of a “resettlement office” on the Volga (first at Batskii, then moved to Syzran’) to allow for settler assistance and settler monitoring. And the law of 1889 required economic data to be compiled on all settler-
petitioners and their communities.21 By the late 1890s, migrants passing out of European Russia into Siberia were required to register and provide

19 RGIA, f. 1391, op. 23 (1883), d. 8, l. 9-15 (b).
20 RGIA, f. 1391, op. 23 (1884), d. 8, l. 98.
21 Trenchikov, Great Siberian Migration, p. 95; Couplin, La Siberie, pp. 532-533; RGIA, f. 1391, op. 55 (1881), d. 10, l. 7-9; Shegel’ narkomen’ i muzhestwenni v pomeshcanykh, p. 18.
agents of the Resettlement Administration with their names, the number in their household, their original place of residence, their estate or former peasant category (serf, state, or crown), and their reasons for leaving. (Some forms also asked for data on nationality [national‘nost’].) In the same years, "medical-sanitary inspections" were initiated at Syryan because of reports of deaths from infectious disease on the Samara-Zlatoust railway. Throughout the period, data on land and the migrant economy continued to be compiled by the ministries, the governors’ offices, and new institutions such as the Peasant Land Bank. The norm in every case remained one of exacting numerical thoroughness. In his survey of the status of five settler households in Orenburg District in 1888, the dutiful representative of the Orenburg branch of the Peasant Land Bank, V. S. Pitch, noted that the households in question lived in structures of an average value of 52 rubles, possessed an average of 2.4 horses, 1.2 cows, and 3.4 head of "small stock," had left home with an average of 219 rubles (the poorest with 75 and the richest with 500), and had put down a combined total of 100 rubles—"that is, 3.2 percent of the purchase price"—for 292 desiatinas and 770 shedny of land from a certain Commander Rukhun. (The bank loaned them the rest.) Pitch also noted how many desiatinas each household had under plow, how many had been set aside for hay, how many "puds of harvested grain" had been collected "per desiatina sown," and whether the peasants were registered and had paid their taxes. If some statisticians focused on the means of migrants, others divided the empire into "donor regions" and "receiver regions" and explained resettlement as a phenomenon "produced by the concentration of population in quantities that exceed the capacity of the country." Indeed, as colonization continued to be scientized, the need to determine colonizing capacity—that is, to identify how many agricultural people could be supported within a given territory—became increasingly important, and the terminology of capacity itself became routine. By century’s end, expectations such as "colonizing strength" (kolonizatsionnaja sila), "colonization reserve" (kolonizatsionnaja zapa), "colonization fund" (kolonizatsionnaja fond), and "colonization area" (kolonizatsionnaja ploschad’k) regularly appeared in ministerial reports. At the same time, a variety of official and semiofficial commentators ranked provinces in terms of their population density. They noted that the empire’s "agricultural center" was "overpopulated" while borderland areas were "far below their limit," and they generally called for "the correct redistribution of [the state’s] population" as a necessary step toward "correct progress." One of the age’s more notable proponents of colonization as a tool for creating demographic-territorial balance was the "pragmatic liberal" Prince Aleksandr Il’ichovich Vasil’chikov. A zemenvo man with high government connections, the prince was also something of a political economist, who commented frequently on colonization’s virtues as a force for domestic reorganization. "Resettlement," he averred, "is a means for attaining the gradual equalization of land holdings and the correct distribution of population." Moreover: "In times of agrarian social crisis, [the adoption of] a broad-based and correct system of colonization is the only salvation." This sort of "correct colonization" had been around before. Indeed, it was simply the restatement of an old Enlightenment-era idea in the new language of late nineteenth-century science and planning. But there was one important difference: colonization in Vasil’chikov’s time was not only meant to be scientific and programmatic, it was also expected to be national; or, more precisely, the men organizing and commenting on it were now more sensitive to the relationship between colonization and nationality than had previously been the case. This was only to be expected. Prompted in part by the great awakening of the Great Reforms and in part

by the emergence of other peoples’ nationalism (both at home and abroad), Russian nationalism was now on the rise. Matters had definitely moved on from the collection of national sayings and recipes to the mobilization of national commitment, and so, at once threatened and inspired, the public and the government put out the call. Conservative nationalists championed the “civilizing” of the “East” while urging the Russification of just about everyone. Pan-Slavic conservative nationalists excitedly supported Russian imperial expansion in the Balkans in order to wage “the terrible, bloody, final battle of Slavdom with Islam.” Liberal nationalists voiced concerns about conservative nationalists (Pan-Slavic or otherwise), though without rejecting in the least the imperial idea or even necessarily the premise of Russification. Even antiastras, anticapitalist, propeasant populists were not without their support for the Russian national way. The nationalisms of the age thus varied, but the important thing was that most of the members of the government-public nexus were now indeed nationalists of one variety or another. The only apparent internationalists still to be found were the socialists, but they were extremely few before the very end of the century and almost completely irrelevant to the mainstream political discussion.

With the theme of the nation so prevalent in public discourse and so central to government policy, the national meanings and functions of colonization understandably came to be stressed at an unprecedented degree. Thus formal official reports on settlement in the borderlands that once carried generic references to “resettlers” now referred instead to “Russian resettlers,” “Russian colonists,” “Russian people,” or the “Russian element.” In other cases, nationality was addressed directly. For example, at different points between the mid-1860s and the turn of the century, the governors and the ministries observed that it was essential to keep “Russians” from resettling from other territories and equal amounts of territory to the new one.

As internationalists in a time of nationalism, Russian socialists resembled their Western counterparts. See Martin Malka, Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 190.
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ceplent, at least understandable. As he put it, “It was the obvious historic preference shown to Jews and Germans over the native Russian peasant population (in the allocation of land) that provided malcontents (among the peasants) with the basis for provoking these troubles and disturbances.” By comparison with Germans and Jews, Greeks, Armenians, and Bulgarians tended to meet with far less government pessimism or disapproval, but their colonizing, too, lost most of its remaining official luster.

Colonization of a general sort was no longer attractive. It had to be “Russian colonization” (ruskrai kolonizacija). In Bessarabia, this kind of colonization was needed to counteract “Romanization” at the hands of local “Moldovans.” In Orenburg, it was simply to be expected because, as one official put it in the late 1880s, “the region had always served in the past and will continue to serve in the future as a place for the colonization of Russian working people.” Of course, the priorities of Russian colonization were not the same in all areas of the steppe at all times because the concentration of different ethnic groups varied considerably. In Stavropol, for example, “Russians” by the 1890s accounted for over 90 percent of the population, and consequently the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains (founded in 1833 as a new and expanded version of Khoev’s original ministry) determined that there was little cause to worry about bolstering the local “Russian element” with additional colonists. Yet even coming to this conclusion naturally presumed a certain attention to the question of Russian nationality. In fact, the same ministry official who argued that there was no need to encourage new Russian resettlement in Stavropol proposed allocating state land to the hundreds of thousands of illegal and unregistered “outsiders” who were already there. The overwhelming share of these illegals, the official pointed out in passing, were also “Russian.”

Ironically, however, the general increase in official support for Russian colonization did not translate into unambiguous enthusiasm for the Russian colonist. Officials still tended to characterize Cosacks as inadequate agricultural colonizers; Russian “sectarians” were still good farmers but potentially unreliable and “dangerous fanatics.” More important, the Orthodox Russian peasant, who had been the centerpiece of the government’s resettlement program since early in the century, remained far from perfect. As before, the peasant’s position at the top of the colonizing hierarchy did not depend on the state’s unquestioning respect for his Russian nationality but on the fact that he was simply the most obvious candidate. Crowded into the “agricultural center,” burdened in the best of times with backward agriculture, and afflicted in the worst by harvest failure and famine, the muzhik always seemed to need more land—land that the empire, in its borderlands, could still afford to give. Russian official and semi-official observers were thus quick to reiterate the peasant colonist’s positive national attributes—hardiness, adaptability, a tolerant acceptance of and talent for assimilating native peoples. But they also...
readily cataloged his failings—laziness, drunkenness, fatalism, lack of inventiveness, lack of discipline, an apparent inability to stay in one place, a habit of embarking on things "without thinking" (без разбора), and so much openness to non-Russian peoples that it seemed just as likely for "aliens" to "naturalize" him as it was for him to "Russify" them.46 The ambivalence surrounding the peasant's colonizing talents that had begun to appear in the Great Reforms era thus grew stronger as the century wore on, and prevailing views within officialdom remained at best neutral. While "knowledgeable people" advising the Ministry of the Interior in the 1880s favored treating resettlement as a right and recognizing the peasant settler as a would-be rational actor,47 the bureaucrats in charge continued to see him more as a pitiable unfortunate, a backward humpkin, or a devious miscreant. In any case, his redeeming qualities were few. The governor of Stavropol' expressed something of the majority opinion in a reference in 1903 to the settler representatives who reluctantly beseeched his office with requests for land even after they had been repeatedly told that it was no longer available:

These [peasants] either belong to that category of people who are so pig-headed that they refuse to listen to anything and . . . stubbornly persist in trying to get what they want; or, what is more likely, they are knowingly exploiting the naive hopes of their followers in order to line their own pockets.48

Of course, whether cunning or merely persistent, Russian settlers on the steppe did at least possess one unambiguously positive trait that was much appreciated by the government: they were not nomadic pastoralists. In fact, their presence tended to be greeted as a genuinely commendable antidote to nomadism. By the late nineteenth century, settlement or near nomadic pastures and migration routes was much less common because practicing nomads themselves were fewer. Wherever such settlement did occur, however—in particular in the Northern Caucasus and Orenburg—officialdom's prevailing sympathies were clear. The "rights" of "nomadic alien peoples" were to be protected up to a point, but the accommodation between peasants and nomads was expected to work largely in the former's favor, because the latter were deemed to be fundamentally less productive and in any case had more land than they needed. Thus,


47 See, for example, the summary of suggestions provided in RGDA, f. 359, op. 4, d. 196, l. 190a.

48 RGDA, f. 359, op. 4, d. 196, l. 190a.

of course, this government in deciding to reduce nomadic lands was straightforward. As the supreme commander for Civilian Affairs in the Caucasus wrote to the minister of the Interior in 1894 in reference to the semisemidary and apparently "completely useless" Nogays of Novgorod, or ev Distric, "There is no reason to expect these former nomads to ever become true farmers. . . . Yet if the land currently set aside for their use were to be redesignated as state land, it could be provided instead to landless Russian peasants . . . whose need for land is great."49 Indeed, fifteen years earlier, motivated by much the same kind of thinking, the governor of Stavropol' had dispatched an agronomist to analyze the steps of the
nomads to see "how suitable [they were] for the establishment of Russian villages." Then, too, there was the extra bonus of spreading progress. A senior official in the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains argued in 1867 that Starropev officials should not hesitate to settle Russian migrants on "excess land" taken from Turkmen tribes as this was a way "to annihilate [these] currently isolated and half-savage nomads." As the official saw it, the Russians represented the "cultured element," the Turkmen the "uncultured" one. It thus stood to reason (as it had for the preceding two hundred years) that more land for the former and less for the latter amounted to a practical good that would help to push the nomads more quickly "toward the sedentary way of life." Backward Russian peasants were thus not so backward that they couldn't also appear progressive, at least in relation to still more backward nomads.

There was a paradox in this, of course, but then again it was a long-standing one, and one much in keeping with the state's broader approach to colonization, which itself remained paradoxical or at the very least less than straightforward. On the one hand, colonization continued to be approached, now quite openly, as a matter of imposing or consolidating Russian power in the empire's non-Russian borderlands. On the other hand, it remained intimately tied to what were increasingly referred to as the "peasant question" and the "land question," both of which were centered on the Russian "interior" and were not usually posed as imperial concerns.

The semantics of the issue could also prompt questions. Inquirers minds on the Special Commission to Draft an Agenda for the Development of the Caucasian Black Sea Coast, for example, wondered whether "resettlement" ( perveniëris), which focused on "the large-scale relocation of excess population to open lands with the purpose of improving the welfare of the settler," was the same as "settlement" (zatvaëris), which focused on "the development of the territory where the relocation [was] occurring." Or was it perhaps more correct, as some thought, to see these operations and the results behind them as essentially intertwined— that is to say, as "two sides of a single idea." Most commission members, it turned out, sided with the latter view, which they confirmed by stating the obvious: "The movement by a group of individuals from one place to another leads to..."
TAKING THE WILD FIELD

ican "resettlement," making such distinctions between the two terms at best debatable.62

Nowhere were the conceptual complexities of "resettlement colonization" more on view than on the shelves of the Resettlement Administration library in St. Petersburg. At the turn of the century, the library's holdings included the collected laws of the empire, statistical surveys of interior and borderland provinces, soil maps, ethnographic maps, zemstvo agronomic manuals, and numerous publications relating to both internal and external European colonization, such as the proceedings of the Deutsche kolonial-gesellschaft für Südost Afrika, A. Nungenberg's Inner Abidjan (Norgenb 1870–1875);) (grain elevators and mechanical reapers remained all but invisible relative to oxcarts and wooden plows; and zemstvo, while active in most of the region's provinces by the mid-1880s and 1890s, did not open in Orenburg, Astrakhan', or Stavropol' until the 1910s and lasted only briefly in the Don Cossack territory.63

And yet, who could deny that distances were shrinking, nomads were changing, and domestication was on the rise? By the 1870s, towns all across the south were mere minutes from St. Petersburg (and one another) by telegraph. By 1881, yet another of the region's governor-generals— that of Orenburg—had been closed. (The only supragubernatorial post remaining was that of the viceroy of the Caucasus, whose bailiwicks included the North Caucasian provinces.) By 1879, Kalmyk commons had been emancipated from their lords and granted "the same individual rights guaranteed by law to all free rural residents," and by 1900 it seemed clear to all that "bakhshi in the steppe districts [of Orenburg were]. . . gradually beginning to gravitate . . . to farming."64 A few years earlier, the first tourist groups began arriving in the region, signaling the start of the late-imperial age of leisure. As a result, sightseeing in the Crimea ("the jewel of the Black Sea") and Odessa ("the capital of the South") spawned a local vacation industry, while Volga cruises ("useful for . . . both body and soul") were "packaged" to include visits to the river's "best hotels and accommodations."65 The koumiss cure, embraced as an antidote for a variety of "wasting illnesses," also thrived. As one med-

62 In ibid., p. 408.
63 ROIMA's, Zemstvo Communications to Russia v cemee pobyoshi s, 1890 (Moscow, 1890), pp. 288–289, 289–291, 291–293; and V.V. Semenov and N.N. Serebrov, Stavropol'skii okrug (Stavropol', 1910), pp. 231, 232; Voinov, ee: a drevneishie epe
no de nadezhkah dvoi: Texto podnieno s, 69–69; G.V. Konov, A. Guide to Russian Learned Societies (New York, 2000),

65 See St. Petersburg, "lands to be colonized," in Annales de la Recherche d'Odessa, no. 1, 1900, p. 216.
That increasing numbers of sickly middle-class city dwellers would choose to travel to the steppe to drink the traditional beverage of pastoral nomads at precisely the time that nomadism itself was eroding was, of course, ironic but not terribly surprising. The nomadic steppe was mostly gone, but that only made it all the more appealing for educated Russians to imagine and safer to claim. Indeed, as the nineteenth century came to its end, rapid changes in urbanization and mechanization intensified the longing for "lost civilizations" and "the slower rhythms of the past." Nostalgia became pervasive, and "memory began to take form as a self-conscious phenomenon." Modern people on the world's frontiers, for example, now realized that Indians and Aborigines had to be recorded before they "vanished," that pioneer stories had to be told in order "to rescue and preserve some of the slings of the common people," and that the Wild West had to be captured and turned into a show precisely because "the frontier . . . was dead." In Russia, and on the steppe, time also seemed to be racing inexorably forward, and reactions were similar. Ethnographers noted matter-of-factly the all but inevitable "extinction" of the Bashkirs and worried about having time to record the "old ways" (старина) of the Volga that were so "quickly disappearing." Priests, statisticians, school inspectors, and travelers collected the tales of settler old-timers and contemporary eyewitnesses and compiled the histories of


local villages "to assist in the study of the region." Across the plains, proud subjects of the tsar (ethnic Russians and otherwise) celebrated the centenaries, bicentennials, and tercentennials of their towns and provinces, marking the events with obelisks, parades, congratulatory telegrams, and jubilee publications.

To appreciate the effects of time one had only to look at the physical aspect of the land itself, and in this, too, longstanding pride in the achievements and potential of progress had now begun to mix with recurrent expressions of loss. On the one hand, it was still easy to find statisticians who celebrated the region’s inexorably rising numbers of steel-tipped plows, harvested bales, livestock, schools, churches, and resident "Russians." Indeed, it was still relatively easy to find full-blooded steppe-building optimists who continued to imagine virtually limitless possibilities for agriculture and population.

This was true for the Northern Caucasian region, which emerged in the late 1830s as the Russian public’s latest (and last) dreamland of settlement on the European steppe. Visiting Stavropol in the late 1880s, for example, the professional traveler Evgenii Markov concluded that "the vast... unpopulated lands" before him were "barely touched"—so untouched in fact that they could easily accommodate the populations of "whole districts [in the interior] currently suffocating from land shortages, poverty, and overcrowding.

For his part, the itinerant chronicler of "resettlement adventures" F. Voropanov was so stirred by the Kuban’s remaining potential for colonization in 1891 that he even heard the "spacious... almost virgin" steppe whispering to him as he rode across it: "I still have the means to feed many people and transform myself and give rise to the most varied characters [sasye nasosobnaya tip]... becoming a living extension of the body of the Russian interior. What lies in store for me in the future? As of yet, I cannot tell."

Despite hopeful reveries of this sort, however, there was no denying that pessimism and regret had now begun to rival optimism and anticipa-
The Great Calamities

It is indeed hard to believe what people say about these Azov steppes, that not long ago [they] were still covered with a thick carpet of shrubs and tall grasses that sheltered a myriad of wild geese, ducks, and other animals... Yes, she [that is, the steppe] has known a difficult life. She has seen her fair share of hardship over the years.

Of all the voices in this chorus of scientific alarm, the most prominent was that of the soil expert and professor of mineralogy Vasilii Vasil'evich Dukhovskii. A priest's son from Smolensk who trained as a seminarian before finding his calling in the natural sciences, Dukhovskii taught in St. Petersburg and Kharkov. He regularly ranged around European Russia on soil-testing expeditions, composed prize-winning soil maps of the empire, founded the Soil Research Office within the Ministry of Agriculture in 1895, and was widely acknowledged as his age's foremost authority on the black-earth soil type—what he referred to as the "emperor of the soils" (''tsar''' podoch'). An early environmentalist with close ties to the international community of concerned "earths scientists," Dukhovskii's views of the state of the steppe were also predictably dire. In the early 1890s, writing as head of a government expedition charged to evaluate the region's ecology, he concluded that man's impact on the natural world of the steppe" had been calamitous, that it had produced ruinous consequences both for local agriculture and the local ecology, and that the only remedy for this dismal situation was preservation based on the combined efforts of state and science.

In order to restore the steppe wherever possible to its original state; in order to ensure the beneficial effects of single grass cover on surface and subterranean water supply; in order to forestall wholesale de-gradation; in order to keep an entire sere of native animals and plants from falling victim forever to the struggle with man; indeed, in order to preserve this primal steppe world for posterity for all time, the state should set aside... an area of virgin steppe land as a nature preserve... And if a permanent scientific center were to be established [there], one could rest assured that the investment...
required for this endeavor would quickly pay for itself, and not just once but many times over. 80 The goal was thus the rehabilitation of a lost, prehuman landscape and its transformation into a domain of practical scientific study. As Dokuchaev mused in a work that later became a classic of Russian environmental science, “What must these stepping stones have looked like before they were mowed for hay, before they were burned off as brush, before they became crowded with herds of domesticated animals?” 81

Dokuchaev’s brand of scientific-Romantic environmentalism was not unique. Other Russians, following the Germans and the Swiss, were starting to talk about preserving “landscapes of nature” (Naturraum) and “landscape protection” (Landschaftspflege); they, too, had read the American George Perkins Marsh’s influential indictment (translated into Russian in 1880) of humankind’s wanton destruction and careless mismanagement of “nature’s hugecape.” 82 Indeed, even before Dokuchaev made his call for the restoration of the plains, a dedicated admirer of zoos and botanical gardens and large-scale sheep rancher named Friedrich Falz-Fein in 1889 began setting aside “virgin stepping stones” from his estate at Askaniya Nova near Perepech, Tauris Province, to establish what became the country’s first nature preserve. In 1898, this “friend of the animals . . . friend of plants and especially of flowers” added more land to the refuge along with a nature center, a telegraph station, a clinic, a library, an arboretum, and a botanical garden. By the early 1900s, Askaniya Nova had grown into a sprawling scientific and tourist enterprise with a one hundred-person staff, 54 species of birds, and 58 varieties of mammals, including European bison, eland antelopes, ostriches, nutria, and Prezessalski horses. 83 In the mid-1890s, as Falz-Fein was developing his domain, the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains granted Dokuchaev three “experimental tracts” (optnye vozhdy) of unplowed and ungrazed steppe in Kherson, Khar’kov, and Voronezh, one of which was later passed to the oversight of the environmentally conscious St. Petersburg Society of Naturalists. In 1900, a sympathetic landowner in Kherson Province further increased Dokuchaev’s protected acreage with land of his own. 84 Steppe preservationism was thus on the rise at the end of the century, though this did not presuppose a rejection of either agriculture or settlement. Rather, the goal was the attainment of what would later be called “sustainable development.” As the climatologist Aleksandr Ivanovich Voeikov argued in 1892, there was still every reason to promote colonization in “our rich borderland regions”—one simply had to be careful to take measures “to prevent the degradation in climatic and other natural conditions that colonization so often entails.” 85

But what exactly was the steppe that needed to be both preserved and developed? As it turned out, answers to this question also became more complicated—or, depending on one’s perspective, more precise—than before. On the one hand, it was now a matter of course to recognize à la Humboldt that Russia’s steppe had a great deal in common with the pampas, prairies, savannahs, and llanos of other world regions. On the other hand, it was also clear—and becoming clearer—that the steppe was not just one grassland but several. Dokuchaev’s work in particular helped to envisage the view, building over the preceding decades, that Russia’s Eurasian habitat was made up of five major environmental zones (“natural regions”), stacked north to south and running horizontally from west to east, with “transitional regions” running between them. In this schema the European steppe was a plains with three constituent bands: a strip of “wooded steppe” (or “pre-steppe”) that ran to the north, a broad band of “leather-grass black-earth steppe” in the middle, and a zone of “wormwood-salt flat steppe” (“polynno-solnoshchaynov step”) toward the southeast along the Caspian. 86 In 1887, one of Dokuchaev’s students, G. I. Tanfil’yev, proposed an even more variegated schema, subdividing European Russia’s “region of the steps” (oldest steppe) into four parts: “the black-earth


81 V.V. Dokuchaev, Nashi stepi. Prichini k iepere’u,” in his Etnografiqeskii trudy (Moscow, 1903), p. 572. This work was originally published as a booklet in 1892.


scription of Marsh’s views and their impact, see Max Oelschlager, The Idea of Wild-


84 V.V. Dokuchaev, Nashi stepi. Prichini k iepere’u,” in his Etnografiqeskii trudy (Moscow, 1903), p. 572.
zone," "the prehistoric steppe," "the alpine black-earth steppe," and "the region of steppe lakes, salt flats, and salted black earth," with each of these subregions marked in turn by its own diversities of soil and vegetation. After all, as the author noted, referring to the biggest of the zones, "the hand of the black-earth steppe can hardly be considered uniform in all of its parts." 

Thus the physical variation of the steppe first cataloged for science by eighteenth-century scholars and "physical expeditionaries" had now become all the more scrutinized and, as a consequence, all the more variegated—so variegated, in fact, that single definitions were daunting and generalizations unreliable. An early twentieth-century edition of Dal's dictionary, for example, defined a "steppe" as "a treeless and usually waterless (пусты́я) of enormous size, a desert (пусты́ня)," but the "botanical geographer" S. I. Kozhinskii, writing in an encyclopedia entry in the same period, insisted on greater precision: "Deserts and steppes do not differ sharply from each other, and the terms are often used interchangeably in everyday speech, but theoretically speaking, the two concepts need to be clearly separated." Indeed, the exacting Tarif'ev seemed to torture himself as he crafted his own geographical definition of a steppe, first taking two pages to explain all the difficulties inherent in the very idea of a steppe. He then went on to propose a single definition of a steppe as a "geographical concept" and then concluding with the following cautious generalization: "In its natural state, a steppe in a more or less flat, treeless, non-flooded space that is characterized by a more or less uniform covering of soil consisting of a more or less dark-colored layer of topsoil with a subsoil low in carbonates and dissolved salts." 

These subregions varied in soil, flora, and climate also differed widely in population density, economic profile, and ethnic concentration, and, consequently, in these matters, as well, coherent classification proved difficult. Some statisticians subdivided the provinces of the European steppe into the New Russian Region, the Don Region, the Caspian Region, the Trans-Volga Black-Earth Region, and the Caucasian Region; others added the Trans-Ural Region and the provinces of the wooded steppe. Veniamin Semenov-Tian-Shanski’s authoritative compendium on the regions of the empire, which began appearing in 1899, provided a similarly fragmented picture. And color-coded ethnographic maps of European Russia revealed that while "Little Russians" were concentrated in New Russian provinces along with a smaller number of "Great Russians" and pockets of Germans, Tatars, and Jews, barely any Russians of any sort lived on the Caspian and "Great Russians" almost exclusively populated the Northern Caucasus. The plains were, in fact, so diverse in so many ways that one might legitimately wonder whether they constituted a coherent region at all. Indeed, one of the few factors that seemed to provide a distinctive unity to the steppe had nothing to do (at least directly) with soil types, economics, or culture but instead with the height of local men. In 1889, after a scrupulous review of conscription records, the anthropologist-ethnographer Dmitrii Anuchin concluded that young recruits from steppe areas tended to be one to three centimeters taller than their peers in the interior or Middle Volga provinces, a fact that then supported his proposition of the following anthropological maxim: "Height in European Russia will be greater in those areas where there are either few or no forests . . . and smaller in regions that are relatively more forested." Anuchin did not exactly explain how a lack of trees translated into taller men, however.

Settling on a single definition or even a single term to describe the steppe’s relationship to Russia was no easier. The liberal M. N. Avenkov referred to New Russia as a "marvellous colony carried out of Russia itself," while the Marxist V. I. Lenin designated "the south and southeast of European Russia" along with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia as "colonies of Russian capital." For their part, other commentators re-
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ferred to New Russia, Samara, and Orenburg as "borderlands" (obshchina), used the term "colony" simply to mean an individual settlement or trading post, or suggested that at best only the empire's Asian possessions might be considered "colonial territories"—though even they did not amount to colonies "in the strict internationally accepted sense of the term. Most of this terminological indeterminacy stemmed from the fact that both "colony" and "borderland" remained names with varied implications that were used by different contemporaries to different effects. Was a colony a territory that was wrongfully seized and exploited or simply an outlawing area removed from and subordinate to "the metropole"? Could colonies be possessed overland or did they have to be held overseas? Was a borderland more a matter of geographical location or of ethnological diversity? Depending on how one answered these questions, the steppe might appear either as a colony, a borderland, or as some combination of the two. It might also be neither. If in the mid-nineteenth century "the center" had been a relatively stable category and the steppe region had clearly appeared to lie outside of it, by the very late nineteenth century even this seemingly routine assumption was uncertain. State commissions established between 1850 and 1895 to review what ministers and "experts from the public" called "the impoverishment of the center" included steppe provinces such as Saratov, Samara, Orenburg, and the Don Host Oblast within their purview; and the very idea of "the center" and "the core" (stred)—once limited to the peripheries of Moscow—was increasingly stretched to coincide with European Russia as a whole. In fact, as early as the 1870s, scholars such as Lu. E. Lawson and Petr Semenov-Tian-Shanskiy affirmed that the "black-earth steppe" represented part of "the center of Russian life" and contributed to the very "foundation of the power of the state."

The literary, artistic, and historical plains were likewise central to notions of Russianness. The steppe’s landscape could still appear depressingly monotonous or bucolically beautiful; it could still inspire mediocre poets to ecstatic poetry or impressionable travelers to shivers of imagined historical reminiscence, but, whatever its effects, it was now most as

suredly "Russian." The steppe, wrote the zoologist-turned-art-critic N.P. Vagner in 1873, were "those plains that [gave] rise to the Russian's bogatyry-like bravery, and Russia's passionate, unbounden sympathy. They also apparently left their mark on Russian song, Russian cuisine, Russian language, the Russian tradition of freedom (svoboda), and more generally on what the country's preeminent historian, Vassili Kluchevskiy, called "the construction of the life and mental world of the Russian person." By the 1880s, Anton Chekhov had rendered "The Steppe" as a thoroughly Russian background to an ordinary Russian journey; Aleksandr Borodin had transformed the Polovtsian dances into evocative Russian music; and Viktor Vasnetsov had used his oils to revive the south as "the field," the forbidding plain of yore where legendary Russian warriors once again clashed in battle with nomads or stood vigilant guard over the national well-being. As Vasnetsov wrote, describing his famous work "The Legendary Knights" (Bogatyz, 1888), "In my painting... Do you know... [Nikitich], [Ilia] [Munromets], and Aleisha Popovich have beaded out on patrol and are surveying the field—Is the enemy out there? Is anyone in trouble?" By century's end, Maxim Gorkiy, lyrical chronicler of the nation's lower depths, populated his southern stories with "Russian" vagabonds, migrants, nevers, grifters, and thieves.

If the steppe seemed so clearly "Russian" by Gorkiy's day, it was because of the region's long heritage of Russian colonization—that is, its long exposure to a process that Kluchevskiy now identified in his famous lectures as "the basic fact of Russian history." "The history of Russia," the great historian averred, "is the history of a country that colonizes itself." In fact, well before Kluchevskiy's lectures were first published in 1894, the emphasis on the centrality of colonization that had emerged in the work of his teacher Sergej Solov'ev had crystallized into a broadly accepted historical truth. And even less renowned historians some of the
perfect aphorisms to come. Among them was the historian P. A. Sokolovskii, who had this to say in 1878:

"Peasant resettlement was a basic characteristic of life in ancient Russia. . . . The history of ancient Russia is the history of a country that colonizes itself. Indeed, this great colonizing effort, which unfolded across the enormous spaces of the East European plain, endured for centuries, and still continues to this day, represents one of the great triumphs in the history of Man's epic struggle with Nature."106

And Sokolovskii's work was only an early example. By the 1880s, with resettlement rising in the empire, the volume of writing on the history of colonization rose as well, and the "great colonizing effort" of the national past acquired the status of a bona fide historical subject. It became the kind of subject that merited its own books, that needed to be quantified, broken down into composite categories ("government-sponsored colonization," "popular colonization," "foreign colonization," "forced colonization," "ecclesiastical-monastic colonization," and so on), provided

106 P.A. Sokolovskii, Ekonomiceskii sbot sovetskago narodnogo khoziaistva Rossii i bol'sheistv hronologicheskih data po khronologiyu priama (St. Petersburg, 1878), p. 161.

with a basic chronological narrative, and even given a hero or two (Potemkin and Kieckel were perhaps the most prominent).107 Much as before, Russian writers on the history of colonization continued reflexively to compare their country's experience to that of other European states, especially in the treatment of indigenous peoples—and usually with predictably favorable results. Many Russian authors insisted that Russian colonization—unlike that of the Spanish or English—had never done any harm to alien peoples, and even more open-minded scholars tended to stress the positive by underscoring that whatever the Russians might have done the Europeans had done much worse. One historian, for example, while admitting that the naive peoples of Siberia had indeed suffered "unfortunate consequences" as a result of the coming of the Russians, explained this as the inevitable outcome of "contact between so-called cultured and uncultured tribes" and noted that the problems in any case "fell far short of the scale on which they occurred in other extra-European countries."108

As for the history of steppe colonization, historical assessments were uneven. There might be problems with soil erosion, inefficient agriculture, or waves of impoverished migrants in the present, but the advent of the "Russian" presence in the past had been an unmitigated good. Early settlers on the plains—peasants and Cossacks alike—were portrayed as stalwart and successful "pioneers" victimized by "predatory" steppe peoples; the "emergence of civic life" in the Samara region was described as "unthinkable prior to the firm establishment of the power of the Muscovite tsars"; the transfer of the Zaporozhians to the Khanate in the late Catherinian period appeared "an indisputably great event in the history of the spread of Russian influence in the Northern Caucasus"; and the consolidation of Russian rule over the Orenburg area earlier in the eighteenth century was touted as "without doubt one of the most significant achievements that human society has ever accomplished in the pursuit of
progress.¹⁰⁹ Russia's historical triumph over the steppe peoples remained proof of national prowess and uniqueness. The orientalist Vasili Vasil'evich Grigor'ev, convinced that no European nation could understand Asia better than his own ("Whos, he asked rhetorically, "is closer to Asia than we?") was also convinced that no other nation had been able to obtain so complete a victory over its nomadic tormentors, those "predatory sons of the steppe." As he noted in 1875, "So it is Russia alone that holds the honor of achieving total domination over the nomads. Of all the sedentary peoples in the history of the world, we alone have made the nomads under our power not only to submit [to our laws] but also to pay taxes."¹¹⁰

Of course, just who the "we" was in the history of Russian colonization remained complicated, and attention to the differences between Russian and Ukrainian settlement, which had first emerged around mid-century, did not disappear. Dmitrii Bagalei (Dmytro Balbali) stressed the distinction between the supposedly free and "enterprising" settlement of "Little Russians" as opposed to the state-directed and "unenterprising" movement of "Great Russians." Georgii Pretriatkovich noted that "as colonists Little Russians were no worse than the Great Russians, and some local commanders [in Orenburg] actually favored them... in some respects." Still other Ukrainian writers with populist leanings stressed the special contributions of the Zaporozhians to the colonization of New Russia.¹¹¹ Yet even such expressions of pride from scholars with Ukrainian sympathies did not translate into arguments for Ukrainian national exclusivity.


¹¹⁰ Grigor'ev, "Obyazy vostochnikh mezhdunarodnykh vnuternikh sostoienii...," p. 126; Grigor'ev, "Rekonstruktsiia i drevnosti...," pp. 183-84; Grigor'ev, "Vostokovedeniia...," p. 203; T. V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 205; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 206; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 207; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 208.

¹¹¹ Bagalei, "Colonizatsiia Novorussiiskogo kraia i perevy shagii po puti kul'turi," 1875, p. 154; see also F. Starikov, Istoriya vostokovedeniia i torgovle i etno-vlastnykh otnoshenii v tsentral'no-vostochnom regione (1796), pp. 223-24; see also F. Starikov, "Issledovaniia po istorii..." in Mezhdunarodnaya duma (1914), pp. 143-44; Plan of the Zaporozhian Sich, 1793-1795 (1908), pp. 261-67; Serebrovskii, "Zaporozye," pp. 128-30; S. M. Serebrovskii, "Zaporozye," pp. 223-24; T. V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 203; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 205; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 206; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 207; V. V. Generalevskii, "Vostochnoe...," p. 208.

¹¹² Bagalei, "Colonizatsiia Novorussiiskogo kraia i perevy shagii po puti kul'turi," 1875, p. 154; for a contrasting argument stressing the importance of conflict in claims to the colonizing history of New Russia by the late nineteenth century, see Martin, "Empire's New Frontiers," pp. 191-200.

¹¹³ For an overview of these developments, see the pertinent chapters in S.A. Tolstoy, Istoriia russkogo byta (1724-1802) (Moscow, 1982).

though description and documentation to some longer seemed enough. As one of the field’s most prominent spokespersons put it in 1889, “Ethnography cannot be a science of mere description. Its ultimate objective must be to explain and interpret the facts of popular life and the mutual interrelations and geographical distribution of tribes” (plenno).

What to do about these varied “tribes,” in particular the nomads of the steppe, remained a complicated matter. On the one hand, in an age permeated by the presumptions of social Darwinism, numerous educated Russians fully expected that nomads would “die out” (vyelimy), the regrettable necessary victims of a universal struggle for existence between higher and lower cultures. Consequently, there was no need to change the nomads because the relentless march of societal evolution would inevitably erase them on its own. On the other hand, proponents of an active civilizing mission contended that while physical extinction might well occur, cultural assimilation was nonetheless preferable, and thus the question remained: What kind of cultural assimilation? Indeed, it was still far from clear what kind of Russification would incite in the nomads and through which methods, at what pace, and in what order. Was it enough to force non-Russians to know some Russian but otherwise use their own languages in social life (“unanimous bilinguality”)? Or did they need to speak Russian more than their native tongues (“assimilated bilingualism”)? Did they have to convert to Orthodoxy and become “Russian,” or was it sufficient to be generally obedient, pay taxes, and otherwise clear what the educational missionary Nikolay II mishnik termed “Russian sympathies”? These questions, it turned out, were all the more difficult to resolve because the nomads, now all the more studied, appeared all the more diverse.Tamming the field, for example, considered ignorant but gentle due to their Lamaism, seemed to be good candidates for eventual conversion and full assimilation into Russian culture. As the orientalist Vasili Smirnov put it in the early 1800s, giving voice to a prevailing view, the Kalmyks “are an admittedly savage people, but they are nonetheless physically fit, capable of good work, disinclined toward fanaticism, as yet morally untainted, and tend to get along quite well with Russian people.”


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added, “and Kalmyks will adjust quite quickly to a new way of life.”

By contrast, Russian administrators were inclined to view Muslim Bashkirs (even if considered “superfluous” in their devotion to the creed) as inherently more suspect. They did not even contemplate converting them to Orthodoxy and treated to see their full assimilation into Russian culture as all but inconceivable in the near term. Indeed, in the 1870s, tsarist hierarchs such as Minister of Education Dimitri Tolstoi were less concerned about turning Bashkirs into Russians than making sure that they did not become Tatars. Tatarization appeared to be rising, and Tatars were “of all peoples, the most alien to Russians.” Given such complexities, St. Petersburg and the Russian public did not embrace a consistent policy of autocratic culture building beyond generally favoring the re-education of nomadic pasture, encouraging agriculture, and attempting to integrate nomads into “all-Russian” institutions and expose them to “Russian ways.” By the end of the century, nomadism as a way of life was unequally declining on the European steppe, but this was not because of any coherent vision of assimilation on the part of St. Petersburg or its local representatives. The decline could not be attributed to the unblemished achievements of more plebeian bearers of Russian culture either. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, despite a widespread image of the Russian peasant as colonizer extraordinare, the deficiencies that peasants brought to the cultural arena were abundantly clear. Social investigators in New Russia still asked why it was that almost all Mennonite settlers are if not rich at least quite well-off, when our Russian peasant of the Russian south is often so poor.” In the forest-steppe of Bashkortostan, a local correspondent, dismayed by the ample evidence of horse-thieving, deceit, dirt, and bickering that he saw in Russian villages, still wondered: “What good can possibly come... from colonizers like these?”

The ethnographer N. Kharzio, writing in 1894, openly doubted the claim that the “Russian colonizers” (russkii kolonizator) possessed a consistent national knack for assimilating non-Russian “aliens,” even peoples who were decidedly less “cultured.”
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Steppe nomads, he argued, validated his skepticism because, despite extensive contact with Russians over centuries, groups like the Kalmyks still clung to their "national particularities" and showed "only the rarest evidence of Russian influence." Even those observers who were otherwise convinced that a special assimilating power coursed through the veins of the Russian colonist recognized a need to do better. As one articulate spokesman of Russian messianism put it:

We spread Orthodoxy among [the allous], assimilating them to the Russian nationality; we lead them to a sedentary life by gradually introducing them to the ways of agriculture, transforming the deserts of Siberia and the sands of Central Asia into fields and plantations. But as long as we continue to fail to develop in ourselves a higher moral and intellectual culture we will remain unable to civilize the East as fully as we should.

Not surprisingly, very little if any of this mattered to the rural people living in the local worlds that colonization created. Established residents and newcomers interacted according to patterns defined by popular traditions and local conditions of settlement than by state decrees, civilizing missions, or supposedly universal "laws" of societal evolution. Rules of co-habitation tended to be particular rather than general, and the implications of shared ethnicity or religion were unpredictable. Mennonites in Saratov reportedly preferred Orthodox Russians to German Lutherans, yet Mennonites in Tauris tended to disdain their peasant neighbors. Russian field hands in one German colony in the Kuban' liked working for their German employers ("The Germans let you work at your own pace, feed you well, and pay up without any take-backs"), while Russian peasants near another Kuban' colony despised their German neighbors and were constantly embroiled with them in "slander, misunderstanding, argument, and fist-fighting." In Orenburg Province, certain Bashkir landowners (Bashkiraky-okinsan), forcibly relocated from "good lands" to poorer ones by the provincial governor, were "reduced to ruin," while other Bashkirs profited from increased migration by stealing horses from newly arrived settlers. During the vulnerable early period of settlement, bonds of culture, even of kin, were no guarantee of good treatment. Exploitation could come at the hands of "others," but it could come just as easily from one's own. In the late 1800s, the populist writer Gleb Uspenskii recorded the following exchange with migrants in Orenburg who had been deceived by members of their own collective (inzhenskii) into buying poor quality land:

"But your representatives saw the land and said that it was exactly what you wanted, didn't they?"

"Well, we only believed the three [representatives] because they were the ones who started the collective. ... If one of our people [sauh line] says he likes [the land] ... and goes around all the time waving a survey map with official seals on it and so forth, talking all the time about the map, of course, why wouldn't we believe him? We're not from around here [My ate chishki]; we don't know how to buy [land] or where to look for it; we don't have the money to send out scouts of our own, and here we've got these people saying they'll take care of everything, and they're just ordinary slummers like the rest of us, regular peasants [sauhik]."

"When did these representatives leave the collective?"

"Well, they never even spent a day here. They gave us the bill of sale and the deed ... and disappeared. We waited for them the first day, then the next, then we start hearing that one of them is working on the railway, the other working in town. And what do we do? We move out here and get ourselves into a fine mess [loot an wot]. ... Two years of bad harvests, and now we're in debt up to our ears!"

This was a familiar story, and indeed much stayed the same in the way colonization unfolded. As the great age of settlement on the European steppe entered its twilight, the process itself remained an impossible amalgam of possibility and misery, planning and confusion, altruism and exploitation. Impressions of what was unfolding, not surprisingly, also remained contradictory. Concerned voices within the region's educated classes lamented that "society" was not doing enough to alleviate the hunger, poor medical care, and religious needs of settlers in Orenburg and Stavropol', called for more members of "the cultured element" to move to Terek Oblast in order to take up the "interests of the local Russ..."

114 D.A. Kuzmich, Ob istochnikakh narodnoi poshastnosti ezhodenskogo polonina na vostok (Turan, 1885), p. 43.
sian resettler population,” and noted that the British government spent ten to twenty times more on Irish emigrants departing their country than the Russian state spent on its “internal resettlers.”174 At the same time, other voices emphasized panoramas of dynamism, contestation, and possibility, describing bustling towns full of happy, prospering people and re- laying the hopeful pronouncements of peasant scouts (“Just take a look at the land that I found for [my followers]! I had to put in a lot of work and trouble, but the things are going to be good here!”).175 In the Southern Urals, Russian colonization, one commentator reported, had replaced “the gypsy-like encampments of Bashkirs” with “farms... hamlets, villages, and even large settlements with Orthodox churches.” In the Kuban, colonization was an elemental, progressive force: “Today [this region] is witnessing the building of a new, harmonious, and peaceful civic life. The internal reorganization and rearrangement of colonizing elements and forms has begun.”176

Although new colonization on the steppe carried on as the century reached its close, it was nonetheless clear that the heyday of colonization in the region was over. By 1900, though increased settlement in relatively unpopulated parts of the Northern Caucasus and Orenburg had its champions, new agricultural migration to the rest of the south had all but stopped. Everyone agreed—foreigners and Russians alike—that Siberia had emerged as the empire’s latest and most obviously “young territory,” poised for growth and full of the seeds of life.177 Indeed, by contrast, the European steppe seemed old, or at least older, because it had more Slavs, more agriculture, more towns, fewer remaining open and easily coloniz- able spaces, and seemed more a part of “Russia,” even if its connections to the latter were at times difficult to define. This, in fact, was the central complexity of the colonization of the steppe and of the Russians’ broader practice of *intere Kolonisation*. The long historical migration sponsored by the Russians turned the steppe into an extension of their country, but it did so by creating a new region that managed to be at once similar to “Russia” (variously defined) and distinct from it, a region whose creation, because of its territorial contiguity, seemed as much the result of the orga- nic growth of the nation as of the willed expansion of the empire. The end to large-scale agricultural migration that coincided with the arrival of the twentieth century did not resolve the matter; it merely meant that the future of Russia’s European steppe would be that of an “ordinary” borderland rather than that of a region defined by the special problems and possibilities of ongoing colonization. It was no doubt fitting that the end of the steppe’s great age of agricultural migration coincided with the passing of its greatest chronicler, the prolific scholar Apollon Akselrodovich Skal'kowskii. Born to a noble family in Kiev Province in 1868, Skal'kowskii graduated with a law degree from Moscow University and in 1888 was sent to Odessa to serve in the chan- cellery of General-Governor Vorontsov, who promptly put him to work documenting the history of his vast domain. The governor’s new assistant then stayed on to make his life in Odessa. Over the next seven decades he produced an avalanche of articles, book-length studies, and even novels “in the manner of Walter Scott” on the “geography, ethnography, statistics, and history” of his adopted region. He helped to found the Odessa Society of History and Antiquities (1899) and New Russia University (1898), and made numerous tours through the region’s towns and settle- ments to collect documents, many of which—to the frustration of later re- searchers—he insisted on keeping in his own apartment.178 By the time of his death in 1898, he was hailed as “the Nestor of New Russia,” “venerable historian of Zaporozhye,” and “a living archive” on the history of Odessa—the man whose works, more than anyone else’s, had provided “the New Russia Territory... with its own literature and historiography.”179 He had also borne personal witness to the region’s striking changes. Less than halfway through his lifetime, he wrote that he had seen how “a foreign, isolated steppe, home to hostile Tartar hordes and rebellious bands of Con-
sacks" was transformed into a territory "of gigantic achievements unheard of in other parts of Russia and unknown even in the states of Europe. They say that America has done even more, has made even greater strides of this sort. That may be. But all of that is so far away from us... that we can be quite pleased with what we have right here before our eyes." By the end of Skal'kovskii's days, further colonization had brought even greater changes to the south, though the pleasure that one took from the transformation had everything to do with where one stood and what one was looking for.

Conclusion

Steppe Building and Steppe Destroying

All is visible and all eludes,
all is near and can’t be touched
Octavio Paz, “Entre Irse y Quedarse”

The great grasslands of southern European Russia provided the platform for the Russians’ earliest and most influential encounters with otherness and their longest-running theater of expansion and agricultural colonization. This book has been a study of how these two realities unfolded together over the course of close to one thousand years, influencing each other and creating an imperial region in the process. From the seemingly most alien of wildernesses to a touchstone of the nation, from a frontier zone of nomads and Cossacks to an imperial realm of farmers and bureaucrats, from a world of Turkic-Mongol cultures to a universe of Slavic-dominated multiculturality, the steppe was gradually but persistently transformed into the opposite of what it was when it entered Russia’s recorded history. Indeed, it was so thoroughly colonized by Russians and other outsiders and their economic and cultural practices that it evolved as Russia’s most invisible and, in that sense, most successful imperial possession. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the steppe had been so profoundly transformed by Russian imperialism that it was difficult for contemporaries to determine whether it constituted a borderland, a colony, or Russia itself.

Rural migration and settlement were central to this transformation, and they too were varied and changing. Depending on time and place, the colonization process could be hesitant or intense; “popular” or state-directed; driven by want or ordered by fiat; Russian, foreign, “alien,” or “secular.” Some nomads and Cossacks resisted the arrival of the migrants and their government; others adjusted themselves to the new limitations and possibilities and acted accordingly. As for the migrants themselves, most came to the steppe in the hopes of finding practical economic and
social improvements over what they had known at home—from more and better land to fewer lords and officials. By contrast, the statemen and educated onlookers who organized and studied colonization tended to stress objectives that were grander, or at least more general. To them, the process was about defining the state’s frontiers, developing the state’s economy, improving the “savages,” improving the settlers, evoking the nation, advancing Orthodoxy, and increasing, controlling, and redistributing the imperial population. Colonization, it was assumed, was a tool to do all these things. Properly executed and fully supervised, it was considered to be the provider of order and security, the engine of progress and enlightenment. That realities on the steppe repeatedly contradicted these plans and mythologies did not diminish the latter’s importance, because both the real and the imagined mattered equally as colonization unfolded. Indeed, the two were deeply intertwined and mutually influential, with statesmen, scholars, literatures, natives, “resettlers,” and sundry other colonizers all playing their irreplaceable parts in the steppe’s material and symbolic creation.

In fact, the creative work of region building produced not one steppe but several, each with a particular set of meanings and appearances that then changed over time. To the Rus’ of Kiev and Moscow, the grasslands represented an intimidating “wild field” and an unruly and costly—if also in ways useful and lucrative—frontier. To the descendants of the Rus’ who ruled from St. Petersburg, the region became a well-tended “garden” for displaying Russia’s attainment of progress and civilization, a dreadful “desert” where Romantic souls could contemplate the Infinite, an evocative focus of the nation’s cultural specialness and economic potential, and eventually, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, an equally evocative symbol of the country’s environmental missteps, economic limitations, and national anxieties. In each of its guises, the region was repeatedly subdivided, categorized, and recategorized, the definitions of its peoples, boundaries, natural landscapes, and relationship to “Russia” constantly shifting. The one constant that shaped the region throughout was outsider colonization, either the lack of it or its massive presence. Indeed, as the scale and direction of colonization changed over the centuries, so did the steppe, and vice versa. The region and the process were thus joined, each responding to the other’s permutations. As a group of American historians have pointed out, regions are inherently “complex and unstable constructions, generated by constantly evolving systems of government, economy, migration, event, and culture.” This was as true of the steppe as of anywhere else.

1 Edward L. Ayers et al. (eds.), All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions (Baltimore, Md., 1990), p. 4.

Conclusion: Steppe Building and Steppe Destroying

As colonization made and remade the region, inevitably much was lost. Once Russian power permanently gained the advantage in the late eighteenth century, most of the steppe’s nomadic peoples either chose to stop their “wandering,” were forced to do so by their new rulers, or took their nomadism elsewhere. The once “open” Cossack frontier “closed,” while Cossack autonomy retreated. Increasing multitudes of agricultural colonists moved down the feather grass, plowed up the topsoils, cut down the riverside woodlands, and drove off or shot down the saiga herds. Even accepting that the natural world is ever-changing, that nomads as well as sedentarists leave their mark on the land, that some of the former would have “settled down” regardless of Russian involvement, and that few Cossacks were as “free” as their mythologists made them out to be, the elimination of old ways and environments that flowed from Russian-sponsored mass migration was nonetheless an enormous change. By the time the European steppe lost its position as Russia’s premier colonization zone in the late nineteenth century, the dismantling of the old steppe world had been proceeding in fits and starts for close to three centuries. The destruction was not in all cases intentional or well-organized. It was more evident on some parts of the steppe than on others. It was even viewed by certain Russians with growing regret and wistfulness but the effects were palpable all the same.

Such changes were far from unique. Other European colonizers and their descendants did much the same thing to the world’s other grasslands in the modern period. On prairies and pampas one saw the same transformation of old plains into new countries “without history,” the same replacement of nomadism with sedentary agriculture. On velds as well as llanos the same sorts of new regional societies emerged, defined everywhere by similar contrasts of wealth, liberty, and power for some and poverty, dependency, and exclusion for others. Indeed, the commonalities of colonization from one plain to the next are such that to ignore Russia’s relation to the comparative context is to miss an essential part of the story. After all, in the final analysis, how different was Potemkin, architect of the Russian south, from Jefferson, architect of the American West? How far removed was the Russian Cossack from the New World gauchos or matís? Didn’t educated Russians view Kalnyks and Bashkirs as dimly as the Argentineans viewed the Indian tribes of the pampas or the Germans the Herero cattle herders of Namibia? Weren’t steppe conservationists in Ekaterinodar fundamentally similar to prairie conservationists in Kansas or Illinois? There were important differences to be sure, but not enough to separate Russia from the international pattern.

Yet if the arc of Russia’s steppe colonization offers parallels to experiences elsewhere it also provides a window on Russia itself. To say that
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tourist Russia was an empire is hardly controversial because the tsars themselves embraced the term and most educated Russians existed in its (to them) noteworthy implications. Nevertheless, the empire that the Russians so refashioned was full of disguises, contradictions, and ambiguities, and nowhere was this more evident than in the practices and attitudes surrounding steppe colonization. The organizers of colonization saw nomads as inferior, but they did not think particularly highly of peasant colonists. Depending on circumstances, peasant colonists had conflicts with nomads but were easily as wary of state officials. In poems and travelogues, the steppe landscape could appear at once alien and Russian. Yet in time, the region as a whole was never declared a colony, even though its parallels to other colonies were at times demonstrably implied. (Although Russian leaders generally refused to conceive of Russia as a colonial empire, they did not necessarily always resent the suggestion.) By the era of the Great Reforms both state officials and the educated public had begun to suggest linkages between Russian “resettlement” and Russian “colonization,” even at times conflating the two terms; but it was still far from clear whether this meant that the Russian case had more in common with inner Kolonisation or overseas colonization. When all was said and done, when Russian colonists reached the steppe, unpacked their carts, and staked out their villages, they were engaged in the apparently natural occupation of vacant or underutilized land or in the projection and consolidation of imperial power.

The answer to this question could vary depending on one’s time and perspective, but most Russians in most eras chose the first explanation. Indeed, one of the enduring characteristics of Russian settlement was the tendency on the part of both the settlers and their supporters to ignore or downplay the imperialist dimensions of the colonization process. Peasant colonists, generally speaking, did not articulate visions of settlement that were based on notions of national, religious, or civilizational superiority and entitlement. Even the more privileged Russians who did embrace such visions rarely saw colonization on the steppe as an instance of purposeful imperial expansion. Conquest and the incorporation of territory was one thing; the migration of peasants was another. The former was empire building; the latter, more often than not, was considered a question of population redistribution and agriculture. The absence of natural barriers that clearly distinguished the steppe from “Russia,” the relative proximity of the region to the center, its seemingly abundant supply of “open” land suitable for farming or stock raising, and the lack of state organization and relative sparseness of its indigenous inhabitants all combined to make Russian migration to the south—once nomadic military superiority was overcome—relatively easy to undertake and just as easy to interpret as an elemental, organic process. Even in the late nineteenth-century Age of Empire, when educated Russians were more inclined than ever to assert their membership in a select club of world-ruling imperialists, they tended to present their “diffusion” into the steppe and across Eurasia as a natural rather than an imperial saga and to stress the mostly (as they saw it) favorable contrasts between their histories of settlement and those of other colonizing peoples. Vasili Khlevchenski, the most prominent historian of his day and the scholar whose work did the most to assure colonization’s enduring importance as a defining leitmotif of Russian history, wrote tellingly that the Russians’ long history of transcontinental migration consisted of their “hopping like birds from territory to territory, abandoning their old homes and settling in new ones.” What, one wonders, could possibly be imperialist about that?

The inclination to view steppe colonization as a popular, natural, and mostly genteel movement that unfolded within an empire but was not itself imperialist was the product of myth, of wishful thinking, and of the Russian elite’s complicated imperial-national identity. At the same time, this interpretation was, to a point at least, understandable. The steppe’s most obviously colonized peoples—the nomads—lost much of their land and all of their autonomy, but they were not driven into reservations or eradicated as were their counterparts in other imperial domains. Most retained their language and religion, and some remained nomadic. For their part, the empire’s most numerous and emblematic colonizers—the Russian peasants—enjoyed far fewer privileges than foreign colonists and were in fact no less subaltern than the native subalterns they were supposed colonizing. In general, Russian colonization was neither purely ethnically Russian nor even exclusively Orthodox, and the vast share of colonists were overwhelmingly rural people, which made it easier to view colonization as a peasant question rather than an imperial one. Finally, the Russian statement who ultimately succeeded in imposing their rule on the steppe acted in the service of a state they called an empire (imperio), but their political strategies in the region stressed military security, centralization, and administrative integration with the “core” rather than the maintenance of a territorially distinct and exploitable periphery. In other words, Russia’s mode of power on the steppe was premised on patterns of state building and incorporation that were easily as characteristic of the making of unitary states as of empires, a circumstance that

only further blurred the imperialist aspect of the colonization process. Ruling Russians certainly recognized that settlement on the steppe was helping to build and consolidate their empire, but because it was potentially hard to determine where "Russia" stopped and "empire" began, their tendency to ignore the imperialist aspect of their actions was perhaps only to be expected.

To be expected perhaps, but revealing nonetheless. If it is correct to claim that imperial power is constituted as much in "cultural formulations" as in "the actual geographical possession of land" and the domination of "lesser peoples," then it follows that it matters a great deal both how empires rule and how they represent that rule. Indeed, the imperialists knew this long before today's cultural historians. The Roman conqueror Agricola disdained the Britons as "barbarians," but when he had done enough to inspire fear, he tried the effect of clemency and showed them the attractions of peace;6 and other imperial peoples have always done the same, ruling their supposedly inferior subjects through alternating displays of force and enticement, gentleness and arrogance. To convince themselves of the righteousness of their actions, imperialists have tended to draw strength from what Joseph Conrad euphemistically called "the idea."7 God, the nation, civilization, race, communism, and, more recently, "the free market" have all served their purpose in this regard, though some imperialists have ignored the open allusion to ideology and justified the imposition of their power by making it seem that it was not being imposed at all. In characterizing their colonizing history as a process of agricultural development and population distribution rather than of empire building, the Russians, whether fully conscious of doing so or not, forged a myth that justified their migration to and occupation of the plains. This is the cultural logic of the most effective sort of empire builders, those who know that to rule best over other peoples' lands, one has to start by re-creating them as one's own, in image as well as in fact, in the mind as well as on the ground. Although the Soviet era would bring new changes to the European steppe, the essential work of Russian appropriation had been completed by around 1900 when the massive agricultural colonization of the region came to a close. By this time, it was clear that the grasslands north of the Black and Caspian Seas belonged to the outsiders who had colonized them, re-invented them, and so naturalized their possession that it seemed hard to believe that the plains could ever have belonged to anyone else.


Note on Archival Sources

This study draws on a wide range of sources, all of which appear in the footnotes. A complete citation for each published source is provided in the first mention of the source in the individual chapters, and I hope that interested readers can use these citations to obtain a fair impression of the book's published source base. Conveying a full sense of the archival documentation that supports Taming the Wild Field is virtually impossible in footnotes, however, because archival citations typically offer no information about the individual sources themselves. To compensate for this, here is a description of the principal archival collections and types of archival sources that I consulted, as well as some comments on their relative importance in shaping the book.

Documents on the history of the colonization and development of the steppe region can be found in numerous central and regional archives located in three countries that once were part of the tsarist empire: the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Moldova. Given the challenge of working in all the potentially pertinent archives in these three countries, I limited my research to the most important central repositories and a selection of regional ones that I judged to be either broadly representative or especially valuable given the themes of the book. In Russia, I worked in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) in St. Petersburg; the Russian State Archive of Ancient Arts (RGADA) and the Russian State Military-Historical Archive (RGVIA) in Moscow; the State Archive of the Orenburg Region (GAOO) in Orenburg; and the Central State Historical Archive of the Republic of Bashkortostan (TSGARB) in Ufa. In Ukraine, I worked in the State Archive of the Odessa Region (DAOO) in Odessa and the State Archive of the Crimean Region (DAKO) in Simferopol'. I did not conduct