INTERNAL COLONIZATION

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RUSSIA’S IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

ALEXANDER ETKIND

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In 1927 in Moscow, Walter Benjamin noted that Russia had no use for the romantic concept of the east. “Everything in the world is here on our own soil,” his Russian friends told him. “For us there is no ‘exoticism’,” they stated; exoticism is nothing but “the counterrevolutionary ideology of a colonial nation.” But having killed the idea of the east, these intellectuals and filmmakers brought it back to life again, and on a huge scale. For their new films “the most interesting subject” was Russian peasants, a group that these intellectuals believed were deeply different from themselves: “The mode of mental reception of the peasant is basically different from that of the urban masses.” When these peasants watched films, they seemed to be incapable of following “two simultaneous narrative strands of the kind seen countless times in film. They can follow only a single series of images that must unfold chronologically.” Benjamin’s friends maintained that since peasants did not understand genres and themes “drawn from bourgeois life,” they needed an entirely new art, and creating this art constituted “one of the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments in the gigantic laboratory that Russia ha[d] become.” Despite Benjamin’s sympathies towards both the new film and the new Russia, his conclusion was wary: “The filmic colonization of Russia has misfired,” he wrote (1999: 13–14).

Studying imperial Russia, scholars have produced two stories. One concerns a great country that competes successfully, though unevenly, with other European powers, produces brilliant literature, and stages unprecedented social experiments. The other story is one of economic backwardness, unbridled violence, misery, illiteracy, despair, and collapse. I subscribe to both of these at once. In contrast to the Russian peasants whom Benjamin’s friends exoticized in line with an age-long tradition, scholars cannot afford one-track thinking. But scholarship is not a dual carriageway, either. We need to find a way to coordinate
the different stories that we believe in. My solution is a kind of Eisensteinian montage interwoven with an overarching principle, which in this book is internal colonization. I propose this concept as a metaphor or mechanism that makes the Russian Empire comparable to other colonial empires of the past. So, in this book, the two Russian stories combine into one: the story of internal colonization, in which the state colonized its people.

In 1904, the charismatic historian Vasilii Kliuchevsky wrote that Russian history is “the history of a country that colonizes itself. The space of this colonization widened along with the territory of the state” (1956: 1/31). Coextensive with the state, self-colonization was not directed away from the state borders but expanded along with the movement of these borders, filling the internal space in waves of various intensities. At that moment, this formula of Russia’s self-colonization had already had a long history in Russian thought, which I describe in Chapter 4. Enriched by twentieth-century colonial and postcolonial experiences, we can draw further conclusions from this classical formula. Russia has been both the subject and the object of colonization and its corollaries, such as orientalism. The state was engaged in the colonization of foreign territories and it was also concerned with colonizing the heartlands. Peoples of the Empire, including the Russians, developed anti-imperial, nationalist ideas in response. These directions of Russia’s colonization, internal and external, sometimes competed and sometimes were indistinguishable. Dialectic in standstill, as Benjamin put it, but also an explosive mix that invites oxymoronic concepts such as internal colonization.

Exploring the historical experience of the Russian Empire before the revolutionary collapse of 1917, this book illuminates its relevance for postcolonial theory. However, I turn the focus onto Russia’s internal problems, which have not previously been discussed in postcolonial terms. Since the 1990s, scholarly interest in the causes and results of the Russian revolution has paled in comparison to the explosion of research on the Russian Orient, orientalism, and Empire.

1 Here and elsewhere, the translation is mine unless stated otherwise. I refer to multi-volume editions by volume/page, e.g. 1/31.

2 This literature is too large to be surveyed here. On the Russian east, I benefited in particular from the now classical Brower and Lazzerini 1997; Barrett 1999; Bassin 1999; Geraci 2001. On orientalism in Russia, see Layton 1994; Sahni 1997; Khalid et al. 2000; Sopelnikov 2000; Thompson 2000; Collier et al. 2003; Ram 2003; Tolz 2005; Schimmelpenninck 2010. On the Russian Empire in comparative perspective, see Burbank and Ransel 1998; Lieven 2003; Gerasimov et al. 2004, 2009; Burbank and Cooper 2010.
INTRODUCTION

Historians have learned to avoid the Soviet-style, teleological approach to the revolution and the terror that followed, which explains the preceding events as “the preparation” for the subsequent ones. However, historians—and all of us—need explanations for why the Russian revolution and the Stalinist terror occurred on the territory of the Russian Empire. Such explanations cannot be sought exclusively in the preceding era, but they, or at least a part of them, also cannot be disconnected from the historical past. I do not aim to explain the revolution, but I do believe that a better grasp of imperial Russia can help us toward a clearer understanding of the Soviet century. I am also trying to bridge the gap between history and literature, a gap that few like but many maintain. Some time ago, Nancy Condee formulated the idea that while area studies is an interdisciplinary forum, cultural studies “incorporate[s] interdisciplinarity into the project itself” (1995: 298). This book is a project in cultural studies.

Incorporating different disciplines, voices, and periods is a risky task for a cultural historian. I take courage in the idea that high literature and culture in Russia played significant roles in the political process. As I will demonstrate in several examples, “transformationist culture” was an important aspect of internal colonization. Due to a paradoxical mechanism that Michel Foucault helps to elucidate in his “repressive hypothesis” (Foucault 1998; see also Rothberg 2009), oppression made culture politically relevant and power culturally productive. For an empire such as Russia’s, its culture was both an instrument of rule and a weapon of revolution. Culture was also a screen on which the endangered society saw itself—a unique organ of self-awareness, critical feedback, warning, and mourning.

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In Russia, social revolutions resulted in magnificent and tragic transformations. However, the continuities of this country’s geography and history have also been remarkable. Russia emerged on the international arena at the same time as the Portuguese and Spanish Empires; it grew in competition with great terrestrial empires, such as the Austrian and Ottoman in the west, the Chinese and North American in the east; it matured in competition with the modern maritime empires, the British and French; and it outlived most of them. An interesting measure, the sum total of square kilometers that an empire controlled each year over the centuries, shows that the Russian Empire was the largest in space and the most durable in time.