

Nowhere were the Russians more concerned to erect cultural boundaries than in Siberia. In the eighteenth-century imagination the Urals were built up into a vast mountain range, as if shaped by God on the middle of the steppe to mark the eastern limit of the civilized world.* The Russians on the western side of these mountains were Christian in their ways, whereas the Asians on the eastern side were described by Russian travellers as 'savages' who needed to be tamed. To Asianize its image, Russian atlases in the eighteenth century deprived Siberia of its Russian name (*Sibir*) and referred to it instead as the 'Great Tatar', a title borrowed from the Western geographic lexicon. Travel writers wrote about its Asiatic tribes, the Tungus and the Yakuts and the Buriats, without ever mentioning the settled Russian population in Siberia, even though it was already sizeable. In this way, which came to justify the whole colonial project in the east, the steppe was reconstructed in the Russian mind as a savage and exotic wilderness whose riches were untapped. It was 'our Peru' and 'our India'.

This colonial attitude was further strengthened by the economic decline of Siberia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As fashions in Europe changed and the fur trade declined in importance, and efforts by the Russian state to develop mining failed to compensate for the loss of revenues, so the promise of a virgin continent suddenly became supplanted by the bleak image of a vast wasteland. 'Nevsky Prospekt, on its own, is worth at least five times as much as the whole of Siberia', wrote one bureaucrat. Russia would be better off, another writer thought in 1841, if the 'ocean of snow' that was Siberia could be replaced by a real sea, which would at least enable more convenient maritime trade with the Far East. This pessimistic vision of Siberia was reinforced by its transformation into one vast prison camp. The term 'Siberia' became synonymous in colloquial expressions with penal servitude, wherever it occurred, with savage cruelty (*sibirnyi*) and a harsh life (*sibirshchina*).

* The cultural importance of the Ural mountains for Russia's European self-identification has persisted to this day - as testified by the notion of a Europe 'from the Atlantic to the Urals' advanced by Gorbachev.

This Siberia was a region of the mind, an imaginary land to which all the opposites of European Russia were consigned. Its boundaries were in constant flux. For the city-bound elites of the early nineteenth century, 'Siberia' began where their own little 'Russia' - St Petersburg or Moscow and the road to their estate - gave way to a world they did not know. Katenin said that Kostroma, just 300 kilometres to the north-east of Moscow, was 'not far from Siberia'. Herzen thought that Viatka, several hundred kilometres to the west of the Urals, was in Siberia (and in a sense it was, for he was exiled there in 1835). Vigel thought that Perm - a little further east but still not within view of the

Ural mountains - was 'in the depths of Siberia'. Others thought that Vladimir, Voronezh or Riazan, all within a day or so's coach ride from Moscow, were the start of the 'Asiatic steppe'.

But Russian attitudes toward the East were far from being all colonial. Politically, Russia was as imperialist as any Western state. Yet culturally there was a deep ambivalence, so that in addition to the usual Western stance of superiority towards the 'Orient' there was an extraordinary fascination and even in some ways an affinity with it.* Much of this was a natural consequence of living on the edge of the Asiatic steppe, torn between the counter-pulls of East and West. This ambiguous geography was a source of profound insecurity - mainly in relation to the West, though such feelings were always the mainspring of Russia's wavering attitude towards the East as well. The Russians might define themselves as Europeans in relation to Asia, but they were 'Asiatics' in the West. No Western writer failed to score this point. According to the Marquis de Custine, the centre of St Petersburg was the only European part of the Tsar's vast empire, and to go beyond the Nevsky Prospekt was to venture into the realm of the 'Asiatic barbarism by which Petersburg is constantly besieged'. Educated Russians themselves cursed their country's 'Asiatic backwardness'. They craved to be accepted as equals by the West, to enter and become part of the mainstream of European life. But when they were rejected or they felt that Russia's values had been underestimated by the West, even the most Westernized of Russia's intellectuals were inclined to be resentful and to lurch towards a chauvinistic pride in their country's threatening Asiatic size. Pushkin, for example, was a thorough European in his upbringing and, like all the men of the Enlightenment, he saw the West as Russia's destiny. Yet when Europe denounced Russia for its suppression of the Polish insurrection in 1831, he wrote a nationalistic poem, 'To the Slanderers of Russia', in which he emphasized the Asiatic nature of his native land, 'from the cold cliffs of Finland to the fiery cliffs of Colchis' (the Greek name for the Caucasus).

* This makes Russia an extremely big exception to Edward Said's provocative argument in *Orientalism*: that the arrogant European sense of cultural superiority imposed on the 'Orient' an 'antitype' or 'other' which underwrote the West's conquest of the East (E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979)). Said does not refer to the Russian case at all.

There was far more, however, than simply resentment of the West in this Asiatic orientation. The Russian empire grew by settlement, and the Russians who moved out into the frontier zones, some to trade or farm, others to escape from Tsarist rule, were just as likely to adopt the native culture as they were to impose their Russian way of life on the local tribes. The Aksakovs, for example, who settled on the steppes near Orenburg in the eighteenth century, used Tatar remedies when they fell ill. These entailed drinking *koumis* from a horse-skin bag, using special herbs and going on a diet of mutton fat. Trade and intermarriage were universal forms of cultural interchange on the Siberian steppe, but the further east one went the more likely it became that the Russians were the ones who would change their ways. In Yakutsk, for example, in north-east Siberia, 'all the Russians spoke in the Yakut language', according to one writer in the 1820s. Mikhail Volkonsky, the son of the Decembrist, who played a leading role in the Russian conquest and settlement of the Amur basin in the 1850s, recalls stationing a detachment of Cossacks in a local village to teach Russian to the Buriats. One year later Volkonsky returned to see how the Cossacks were getting on: none of the Buriats could converse in Russian yet, but all 200 Cossacks spoke fluent Buriat.

Such a thing would never have occurred in the overseas empires of the European states, at least not once their mode of operation had been switched from trade to colonial mastery. For, with a few exceptions, the Europeans did not need to settle in their colonies (and did not have to take much interest in their cultures) to siphon off their wealth. But such things were almost bound to happen in a territorial empire as enormous as the Tsar's, where the Russian settlers in the remotest regions, six months' journey from the capital, were often forced to adopt local ways. The Russian Empire developed by imposing Russian culture on the Asian steppe, but in that very process many of the colonizers became Asian, too. One of the consequences of this encounter was a cultural sympathy towards the colonies that was rarely to be found in colonizers from the European states. It was frequently the case that even the most gung-ho of the Tsar's imperialists were enthusiasts and experts about oriental civilizations. Potemkin, Prince of Tauride, for example, revelled in the ethnic mix of the Crimea, which he wrested from the last of the Mongol khanates in 1783. To celebrate the victory he built himself a palace in the Moldavian-Turkish style, with a dome and four minaret towers, like a mosque. Indeed, it was typical, not just of Russia but of eighteenth-century Europe as a whole, that precisely at that moment when Russian troops were marching east and crushing infidels, Catherine's architects at Tsarskoe Selo were building Chinese villages and pagodas, oriental grottoes, and pavilions in the Turkish style.

[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/97401.Natasha s Dance](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/97401.Natasha_s_Dance)