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### Between nation and empire: revisiting the Russian past twenty years later

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## *Between nation and empire: revisiting the Russian past twenty years later*

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If revolutions are the “sex of history” – being “moments of great intensity during which everything seems transformed” – then “the ten years since the fall of Soviet Communism have been the sex of historiography”. This view was expressed in a 2001 editorial in *Kritika*, a newly established American journal bearing a Russian name with ancient Greek roots.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, *Perestroika* in the second half of the 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern bloc caused a seismic tremor that shook not only the Soviet-controlled region but also the entire planet. The new international situation that emerged could not leave historians and historiography unaffected insofar as the latter is associated with the present and with its reflection in the work of historians.

The promising archival revolution during *Perestroika*, namely the easy access to valuable but previously largely unknown Soviet archives in the metropolitan cities of St Petersburg and Moscow and also in the provincial centres, benefitted the field of Russian studies, which hitherto had not been particularly theoretical in its approach. Moreover, from the 1990s onwards, Russian studies were infused with the various new theoretical approaches developed in the last quarter of the twentieth century in the wider humanistic and social sciences, such as social and cultural anthropology, the linguistic turn, cultural studies and postcolonial studies – all of which transformed historiography into a more theoretical terrain. The embracing of new methods and perspectives inevitably led to new fields of research. In addition to the above, the 1990s experienced a creative osmosis and refamiliarisation of Russophone historiography and that in

other languages through the translation not only of texts but also of perceptions, concepts, ideas and theories. Various exchanges and research programmes were institutionalised, and as a result Russian historiography has been in a process of internationalisation, best manifested in the intense and frequent communication between scientists originating from different parts of the world, for example the former Soviet Union, Europe, North America and Japan. Among the side effects of this worldwide communication are the interaction between different scientific communities, the osmosis of national frameworks and the creation of a multiplicity of international networks of exchange. This open communication and exchange of both data and theories has given rise to a fertile dialogue and created a friendly environment for common endeavours between peers in order to organise and categorise knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

The new meanings that emerged with regard to the relations between present and past had a definite influence on the research agendas of Russianists and this has led to a reinterpretation of Russian history away from cold war certainties and ossifications, represented in the west by bipolar geopolitical simplifications with Orientalist overtones and in the world of so-called “existing socialism” a wooden language tailored to the only existing theoretical paradigm (Marxism *à la Russe*/ Soviet Marxism), replete with deliberate silences and “white holes”. Thus from the 1990s onwards, traditional schemes in the study of Russian history have become more sophisticated by way of new approaches or innovative criticism, and as a result have been put in doubt or abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

In the post-Soviet space, the concept of class that had been the dominant analytical tool and organising principle for historical narration during the Soviet era was abandoned for the sake of a new conceptual apparatus that prioritised two analytical categories in particular; nation and empire. In the course of the 1990s, the main focus of researchers was on the notion of the nation, whereas in the following decade it concentrated on a renewed interest in the notion of empire, in what has been termed the “imperial turn”. As Ronald Grigor Suny has put it, “empire studies became a flourishing interdisciplinary sub-discipline”, with imperialistic ambitions regarding the fields it tried to cover.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of my contribution is neither to cover exhaustively what is a rich and multifaceted historiographical output arising from different scientific environments (Russian, Anglo-Saxon, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Japanese, etc.) nor to present fissures or continuities in each tradition and all the subtle nuances of each particular debate since 1991 (arbitrarily taken as a threshold). Such a task would have been impossible within the limited space afforded by this special issue of *Historein*, which is devoted to new trends in the theory of history and social sciences during the last 20 years. After all, numerous well-written and thorough surveys have been published in the two decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that adequately cover the diverse historiographical tendencies.<sup>5</sup>

My aim is more limited; it is to portray the problematic of empire in the Russian case as an alternative and innovative way of representing the past. This approach, in conjunction with comparative,

transnational and global approaches, may challenge the traditional “historiographical nationalism” with regard to the nation or the nation-state, which is usually seen not only as the protagonist of modernity but also, anachronistically, as the key point of every historical narrative in the *longue durée*, even in historical periods prior to the advent of nationalism and the nation-state. Moreover, I will try to show how the “imperial turn” contributed to the process of locating Russian history within a broader spectrum and a wider global perspective beyond an established and narrowly defined Eurocentric prism that regarded Russia as a special case deviating from the European model of development – a perspective which was shared by Marxists as well.

The lens of empire and nationality studies created the prerequisites for the easier incorporation of Soviet history within the wider frame of Russian history. It put aside the teleology of “1917”, which is no longer regarded as a watershed.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, even though the Soviet Union was not officially an empire during its lifetime, it was viewed as such when it collapsed. More specifically, it has been examined by most researchers as the last episode of the historical transcendence from empire to nation in the twentieth century. Ironically, the present-day Russian Federation – one of the successor states to the Soviet Union, is often described by commentators, not least as a result of Vladimir Putin’s grandiose rhetoric, as a state with imperial ambitions.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there is still no general consensus as to whether the Soviet state was – or was not – an empire, to what extent the “postsocialist” or “post-Soviet” condition can be viewed from the postcolonial paradigm and, finally, under what conditions this problematic can be applied to the present-day Russian Federation. Can it be placed within the postcolonial paradigm as a “Self” or as an “Other” or, simultaneously, both?<sup>8</sup> In the present article, I will limit myself to the period of Russian history during which the Russian state was self-defined as an empire, from the eighteenth century to 1917.

I will base my presentation on the material supplied by two scholarly journals that came to the fore during the same period, i.e. the beginning of this millennium. These journals can be regarded as the offspring of the tremendous transformations felt in Russian studies during the initial post-Soviet decade. Both journals have significantly contributed to the theorisation of the field of Russian studies.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that they represent two diverse local conditions of scientific output, they are both transnational in their approach, and, as a result of constant exchanges, have both contributed to the creation of a “polyphonic” research community with regard to its views and methodology, sharing common research topics and questions and systematically cultivating the imperial turn in the study of Russian history.

The first of the two journals – *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* – is published in the United States and is currently based at Georgetown University’s school of foreign service. From 2000 to August 2011 *Kritika* was associated with the history department of the University of Maryland. From the beginning, its editors – Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Marshall Poe – adopted the term Eurasia, which is associated with the wider structural changes in the world and the politics of US academia in delineating the field.<sup>10</sup> At first glance, the spatial terminology seems apt, even though it is not devoid of negative connotations, as it is also true in the case of the term empire. The editors appear to have been fully aware of the pitfalls of this term; nevertheless, they remained steadfast in the view that the adopted term was aligned with the research priorities and the agenda of the new journal, i.e. to address “comparative, trans-

national, cross-cultural, local and regional histories alongside those written within national and state-centred frameworks".<sup>11</sup> Today, the new subfield of Eurasian studies is generally accepted as covering the area of the former Soviet Union as well as those regions historically neighbouring the Russian imperial state. It also implies research interests covering the periphery and the borderlands apart from the imperial centre.<sup>12</sup>

The second journal I have singled out is multilingual (but mostly written in Russian and English) and has the characteristic title of *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*. I will give greater emphasis to this journal because it focuses on empire per se and is an unusual academic project for Russia. It is based not in the capital cities, but in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. It is interdisciplinary and works in close collaboration with local as well as foreign scholars. In the Russian nationalist media, *Ab Imperio* is openly accused of being engaged in "antipatriotic" activity because it uses foreign grants. Its editorial team is comprised of Ilya Gerasimov, Serguei Glebov, Alexander Kaplunovski, Marina Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov. With their research and their insightful editorials, they have succeeded in elevating this journal to the forefront of the debates with regard to the conceptualisation of this field of research. They have adopted the term "new imperial history", which is in line with poststructural approaches and the linguistic and cultural turn, and they have put an emphasis on the principal differentiation between the categories of analysis and the categories of practice. Their approach differs from "old imperial history", with its emphasis on central authority and the point of view emanating from the capitals, and they have redirected their interest towards multiple vantage points coming from the periphery as well as the subaltern.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the journal is in conversation with the British imperial turn and its similar new imperial history.<sup>14</sup> The themes examined in the issues of this journal have contributed to a better understanding of the interrelated phenomena of empire and nation within the Russian context, by focusing on different viewpoints such as the concepts of modernisation, memory, frontier, knowledge output, languages of self description, the second world and so on. It appears committed to the internationalisation of innovative research and contributes to the circulation of knowledge. It functions as a forum, a "virtual workshop and moderation for discussion",<sup>15</sup> for western historians and those who reside in the new states of the post-Soviet region. The journal has covered all the relevant international debates, wherein one may observe a fruitful dialogue between Russian and western researchers.

Finally, this specific journal, apart from contributing to the circulation and promotion of knowledge, seriously challenges the stereotypical division of scholarly labour, i.e., where the westerners produce theory while the easterners produce empirical studies. As a result, all its contributors partake in international scholarly dialogue as equals and not as subalterns.<sup>16</sup>

### ***From nation to empire***

Although the Russian state was self-defined as an empire, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to 1917, during the Cold War, with few exceptions – as in the cases of Richard Pipes, Hugh Seton-Watson and Seymour Becker – studies of empire, nationalism and nation/ethnicity were not the backbone of studies of the Russian Empire.<sup>17</sup> The situation changed drastically during the 1990s, when the phenomenon of nationalism drew international attention.

On the one hand, the post-Soviet space is replete with new national narratives fashioned by the new national states engaged in a primordial discourse, which is also typical of Soviet approaches to the phenomenon of nationalism.<sup>18</sup> These new narratives attempt to present the various new nations as autonomous objects and subjects of history. This tendency coincides with the attempt to put an emphasis on the break with Russian/Soviet domination, the democratisation of history and an alternative historical narration originating from below and from what was previously perceived as the periphery. On the other hand, during the same period and on the other side of Europe, as well as in America, the theories of nationalism do not count the primordialist line of reasoning as a scholarly approach, but simply as national history. They even proceed beyond the modernist or ethnosymbolist approach to nationalism towards critical and postmodern approaches of nationalism. In particular, a national narrative that tends to be perennial or primordial is viewed by definition as a self-serving narrative of violence, exclusion and silencing. The reconceptualisation of the phenomenon of nationalism has been enriched by the study of gender, the construction of identity, postcolonial studies, the work of Homi Bhabha and others along the same vein, as well as studies of immigration, diasporas, the phenomenon of deportation and the study of ethnic and other oppressed minorities within nation-states. Critical studies regard nationalism as a modern phenomenon, as in the case of modernist theories of nationalism. Yet, they differ from the modernist paradigm in that they do not regard the situation as fixed in time and space but open ended; therein the nation is fluid, is constructed and reconstructed, is questioned, and reappears.<sup>19</sup> These theories have posed powerful challenges to the traditional historiographical paradigm: in them, the nation has been denaturalised while the nation-building process that led to the construction of the nation was put under scrutiny only to be proved that it did not necessarily lead to the creation of the nation. At the antipodes of primordialist national narratives in the service of national projects, a new research situation emerged among Russianists characterised by rich and pluralistic methods and interpretations as well as a critical stance towards ideology and various one-sided interpretations.<sup>20</sup>

One could claim that the imperial turn and new imperial history are closely connected to the process described above and that it surfaced partly as a result of the new findings from the study of the national phenomenon, though the opposite may also be asserted, i.e. that the imperial dimension contributed profoundly to a better understanding of the complex and constructed nature of identities. This was even more so the case following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This historical event has led to the examination of a different historical pattern for the empires of central Europe and Eurasia, a pattern that distinguished itself from the traditional Manichean polarities – the dynastic (East) versus the bourgeois (West), the archaic versus the modern, etc. This innovative pattern may be best described as a continental, adjacent empire with permeable boundaries and unclear distinctions between the centre and periphery, accommodating mixed populations and common cultural ingredients.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Nationalism revisited***

This shift from the study of domestic and national history towards the study of the empire has been marked by the “dialogue” between two seminal works, one by the Swiss historian Andreas Kappler (*Russland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall*, Munich: Beck, 1992)<sup>22</sup> and the other by British historian Geoffrey Hosking (*Russian People and Empire, 1552–1917*, Cambridge,

Harvard UP, 1997). Both authors use the concept of the empire as a political and social context in order to study the national phenomenon. Kappeler introduced the concept of the Russian Empire's multinational character in order to counterbalance the dominant Russocentric view of Russian history. By doing so he decentred and derussified the Russian narrative; he relocated the Russian nation from the core of the historical narratives of the Russian Empire and brought forth into the historical scene the subaltern peoples, ethnocultural communities and nations. Hosking created new terms for the study of Russian nationalism by using the multinational character of the Russian Empire. On the contrary to Kappeler, he placed the Russian nation at the centre and highlighted its relations to the Russian state and the other peoples or nations of the empire in order to demonstrate the deviation of the Russian nation from the western norm, i.e. the Russian state did not belong to the Russian nation whose name it held, while the integration process of the Russian nation remained unfulfilled until the end of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> In other words, he introduced a paradigmatic discourse for the interpretation of the Russian national phenomenon: Russian national identity remained underdeveloped and suppressed precisely due to the dominance of the imperial model of state-building. He, thus, counterbalanced a previous paradigmatic approach according to which Russian nationalism was closely associated with the process of nation- and empire-building.

Within such a framework that recognised the Russian state's multiethnicity (multinationalism), the ambiguity of the relationship between empire and nation became apparent. Particularly in the Russian case, nationalism was not studied as if it had been the only actor of Russian history. A series of questions were addressed. For example, was Russian nationalism a state ideology or not? What are the conditions we should take into consideration in order to discuss the politics of russification during the modernisation period in the second half of the nineteenth century? Was the concept of russification one-dimensional or multifaceted, given the fact that the concept of Russianness was neither fixed nor well-defined? Was there a consistent and consolidated policy of russification on the part of the central authority and especially with regard to central and coordinated planning and implementation, or was this not the case? What was the precise role of the imperial bureaucrats (who, note, were not necessarily of Russian ethnic origin and faced different cultural conditions from one region to another in the vast Russian state) in the realisation of these policies? One must also bear in mind that the policies of the centre were open to variations and adaptable to the aims and methods used, as they mainly depended on the idiosyncrasy of different regions and collectivities which inhabited the Russian Empire.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Imperial and national subjectivities***

In the light of the above, the traditional research strategy used in the study of the relations between the metropolis and the imperial peripheries that treated the two parts as bipolar opposites has been revised. Complex perspectives were adopted by historians that took into consideration more parameters such as, for example, the social or religious criteria in creating a hierarchy between the different populations of the empire. The status of the country, being recognised as an influential European power, and the pride resulting therein, were factors that were also taken into consideration. A plethora of policies and practices have been studied under the light of the central administration's authority mechanisms, i.e. tolerance, flexibility, dialogue, conciliation, centralisation and coercion. What has emerged is a scale of relations that existed between the central hege-

monic power and the peripheries, and within a spectrum ranging from accommodation, acculturation and cooptation to varieties of resistance or violent uprising. The result has been a re-evaluation of the stereotypical view of Russia as the “prison of peoples” and its replacement by a more variable and positive image.<sup>25</sup>

A complex web of policies, common ideas, perceptions and practices were crucial in negotiating and renegotiating ethnic identities and the position of each people or nation within the empire. The formation of national identities – including the attempt to determine Russian identity – within an imperial milieu encounters particular difficulties, precisely because the subjects could partake in multiple identities, i.e. ethnic, religious, state/imperial, regional, social, class, gender and so on. Under this perspective, the Russian Empire may be treated as a kind of special forum, a region where different national projects interacted, clashed or were involved in relations of hegemony or subordination. Finally, the reciprocal effects of nationalist ideologies and movements within the empire bring to light the multiplicity of Otherness beyond the metropolitan Other.<sup>26</sup>

In the same vein of thought, the editorial board of *Ab Imperio* advocates the shift of research interests from the structural analysis of the empire to the concept of the “heterogeneity of society in an ‘imperial situation’” (which may also exist in states that do not fall, strictly speaking, under the category of empire, such as the Soviet Union) in order to uncover the imperial palimpsest of social identities – local, confessional, estate, ethnic – and not the positivist and teleological perspectives that point to a historical determinism, namely that of the emergence of a nation-state, that requires the structural and Manichean antithesis between empire and nation. Such a research strategy can respect the historical subjectivity of peoples and societies that have been neglected by the traditional historical narrations. The aim is to study the role of the empire “as a context setting category”,<sup>27</sup> so as to examine composite subjectivities in complex societies. By studying the languages used by the historical subjects for self-description and -representation, one can discern contradictory roles (at least in the first instance), as in the case of being a confessional or social subaltern but at the same time a full participant in the imperialist expansion in Central Asia. One can also encounter paradoxical situations within conventional national narratives, such as, for example, the one of the Poles, who can be seen not only fighting for their national liberation but also oppressing and assimilating “national’ minorities” in their midst.<sup>28</sup>

The challenge to the essentialist ethnonational paradigm and the turn to the imperial paradigm underscore the importance of other historical forces in the formation of collective identities, even more so in the Russian case where the national element was not the decisive one before the advent of the nineteenth century and in many instances even later, into the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> As an example, the study of the religious parameter is crucial, not only as a structural element in the construction of identities but also as a vital means whereby the empire conceptualised, institutionalised and managed difference.<sup>30</sup>



### *A spatial turn: from the national state to imperial territory*

A history of empire in the place of national history should not, of course, be conceived as the accumulation or sheer addition of national histories. It presupposes the study of transnational and entangled methods of research so as to be able to understand the interaction and interdependence of these histories.<sup>31</sup> Another avenue in the same general trend is the “spatial turn”, whose fertile methodology and approach were “adopted” by the problematic of empire.<sup>32</sup>

The nation or the nation-state, as a key unit of scholarly inquiry, transports all the spatial references to a system that prioritises the nation unit. On the contrary, the history of territory, as pointed out by von Hagen, can be used as a kind of “anti-paradigm”, for it puts on the research agenda the comparative, transcultural, transnational, local and regional dimensions. It brings to the surface the history of the interconnections between empires, frontiers as well as diasporas.<sup>33</sup> The spatial dimension on the one hand implies the comparative and interactive histories of peoples, ideas and goods, and challenges in multiple forms the homogeneous nation-state with fixed boundaries as a primary organising principle of historical research; on the other hand it includes the category of nation in a nonanachronistic manner. Even more provocatively, as claimed by Burbang and von Hagen in their introduction to the volume *Space, People Power, 1700–1930*, the “nation state – if we take its premise at face value – is a historical rarity, if not an impossibility”, while an “unabashed address to empire as a state form allows us to study polities based on difference, not likeness of their subjects and to begin an assessment of the limitations and possibilities of particular historical imperial projects”.<sup>34</sup> Hence, territory is seen as the organisational principle of the historical narration for the understanding of the polity, the ideas regarding history, religion, ethnicity, landscape and the mutual relation between the imperial authorities and local societies.

Contesting the national rule of writing history for the “metropolitan” nation, as well as the subalterns, has acquired a special intellectual and political importance in the present-day Russian environment. The dissolution of the Soviet Union deconstructed the Soviet myth of the friendship of peoples. Within the new landscape, former “colonisers” and “colonised” were in a state of conflict for territory and political legitimacy, with national history as the prime vehicle. For the editorial group of *Ab Imperio*, the importance of the study of empire also has a moral message or moral imperative in the multiethnic Russian Federation, which sees itself as a nation-state, where xenophobia and nationalist or racist tendencies are entrenched in Russian society as well as in the societies of the other former Soviet republics. The national perspective in historical writing gives birth to narrations with strict borders and results in the exclusion and oppression of all forms of heterogeneity in the past and present. In the former Soviet space, the rewriting of history from a nationalistic perspective is unable to combine “ours” with “yours” within a historical narration that refers to what was, after all, a common past. The object of the exercise is not only to make history-writing richer, more complete and more consonant to the actual experiences of the people who lived in the past and came from different ethnicities and cultures. It is not simply the sensitivity to historical realities but also the sensitivity to the memories and everyday experiences of the different groups that inhabit new multiethnic national states. The annual theme of the journal in 2007 was “The Imperium of Knowledge and the Power of Silences”, and in the fourth thematic issue, entitled “The Future of the Past”, the editors wrote that the “future of the historical past” is

explicitly political and pertinent not only to historical realities but also to the language in which historical dynamics are accordingly described and constructed, in order to protect fundamental human rights and liberties. As they put it:

And yet, historical writing – and thinking about history – requires exceptional responsibility in such historical moments, as ours. One step away from individual rights and freedoms, one step towards tacitly approving of the new grand visions of “normal” national states with “cultural cores” and we may find ourselves in accordance with the emerging culture of fascism in the early twenty-first century. We have in the present what we managed to recognise as a legitimate history. It is the time to see a different future in our past. We hope that the study of empire will help in this venture.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Comparative, transnational and entangled histories at interimperial level***

A common typology of different empires made a distinction between colonial maritime empires with bourgeois characteristics and dynastic empires with archaic, premodern characteristics. On the basis of this typology, Russia and the Ottoman and Habsburg empires are predictably placed in the second category, precisely because of their premodern elements. Von Hagen, who supports the usefulness of the comparison of these three empires, differentiates the comparative criterion: the ground for the comparison is that all three have contiguous territory, which is a determining factor for the people inhabiting the empires in question, for their nations, intellectual tendencies, commerce and so on. The main character of these empires has also been re-examined. As pointed out by Ronald Suny,<sup>36</sup> the Russian Empire – and we would add the Ottoman and Habsburg empires – though not a liberal bourgeois empire, existed in what was a bourgeois European world, and in its attempt to cope with the challenges of modernity, thereby adopted a reformist modernising agenda during the second half of the nineteenth century. With the concept of multiple modernisations,<sup>37</sup> the Russian Empire is increasingly treated by researchers not only as merely traditional but also as a polity in transformation towards a modern state. As Alexei Miller noted: “The tendency to ‘normalise’ the history of these polities, particularly that of Romanov and Ottoman Empires, and to overestimate their success in adapting to modernity is a new extreme in historiography. Only a decade ago, there was almost total negation of their ability to adapt and change, now we are witnessing the opposite extreme.”<sup>38</sup> The comparison has been extended to other empires such as that of the German Hohenzollern Empire.<sup>39</sup> The creation of the field of Eurasian studies made it possible for the comparative framework to move eastwards in space, as well as deeper into the past, with reference to the Mongolian, Byzantine, Iranian and Chinese empires.<sup>40</sup>

Dominic Lieven, in his 2001 study *The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, clearly places his attempt within this trend that challenges the national norm of writing history. By defending the utility of the comparative method, he places the Russian Empire within a wider global comparative plane, “stressing Russia’s place in the shifting European and global constellation of power”.<sup>41</sup> Taking into consideration the fact that in the nineteenth century, the empire was the ordinary kind of state in continental Europe, Eurasia and Asia, he questions, like other authors, the view that the nineteenth century was the age of the nation-state.<sup>42</sup> Lieven’s aim is to compare the Russian Empire with its main contemporary rivals at the time, that is the British, Ottoman and Habsburg empires, bringing

into the picture the importance of international relations and of geopolitical challenges within the system of great powers as a major factor in the history of empire in Russia. "The demands of international power politics and of membership the European and then global system of great powers were of overwhelming importance in Russian history. More probably than any other single factor they determined the history of Modern Russia."<sup>43</sup>

The comparison between continental and overseas empires, dynastic or not, aimed at bringing forth similarities and dissimilarities in the mechanisms of the functioning of the empire, in the systems of imperial power, the management of multinationalism and the conditions of their dissolution. By this comparison, concepts such as "traditional" and "modern" became more complex. In examining the Russian Empire not as a political and social context for the nation but as a subject and agent capable of modernisation in the age of nationalism and with the weight of rivalry with the other great powers, Lieven transfers the question from inevitable dissolution to the study of the experience and effectiveness of the continental empires in managing multiethnic differences. The question is not what led the Russian Empire to its collapse but what contributed to its re-emergence after the 1917 Revolution.<sup>44</sup> In examining the Russian Empire in the *longue durée* and the continuities between it and the Soviet Union, there is a tendency to regard the Russian imperial experience from the perspective of a "success story".<sup>45</sup> Late imperial Russia is regarded by many researchers as a rapidly developing and dynamic economic power in contrast to what is known as "declinism" in British historiography referring to the inevitable weakening of the British Empire.<sup>46</sup> The inability of nation-states to resolve successfully the current problems of multinationalism, immigration and ethnic conflict underlines the historical experience of empires and their ability to maintain stability, with their successes and failures in administrating several distinct ethnic, religious and cultural populations.

### ***Challenging comparative history***

However, even though it is relational history, the comparative method is not free of problems, such as the asymmetry in the study of distinct and comparable units. Moreover, in the taxonomy lurks the danger of creating a hierarchy among empires, especially between modern and archaic empires, with the former at the forefront of progress and the latter taking a backward direction on the basis of their archaic structures. In the Russian case in particular, the structural comparisons are more complicated if we agree with Paul Werth that the Russian imperial state was a strange hybrid that simultaneously drew on several models of state organisation: a traditional dynastic, composite state; an emerging (incomplete) national state and a modern colonial empire.<sup>47</sup> Or as put by Alexander Semyonov: "The Russian Empire in itself is a locus of intersections of different imperial traditions."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as rightly pointed out by the authors of *Novaya imperskaja istorija* [New imperial history], the comparative method solidifies the boundaries of the objects of comparison to the detriment of the study of zones of interaction; it faces the common characteristics of what are the same elements taxonomically as elements of autonomous development and not as a product of interaction, common experience and the transfer in time of common challenges. The conflict leaves out the cultural dimension and the process of Europeanisation, without which one cannot for example understand the practice of cultural appropriation or interpret the imperial ideology.<sup>49</sup>

Although strictly speaking not a specialist in Russian history, but a participant in discussions and conferences on new imperial history in the Russian context from the point of view of a specialist of the French and Dutch empires in the nineteenth century, Ann Stoler wonders “what colonial comparisons might look like which are not constrained by nation-bound historiographies, frames and narratives”. More concretely, how can we compare “patterns and technologies of rule, political rationalities and NOT imperial structures, but imperial effects”? And she argues that “there is space for a new understanding of comparison, one that emerges from the historically and politically located understandings of comparison itself as an imperial project in which architects and agents of empire invested themselves”. For example:

French blueprints for agricultural and pauper colonies drew on strategies of imperial rule that were never European alone. French observers looked to Russian initiatives as exemplary efforts to create a reasoned empire through colonisation. As French architects turned to Russia, Russian rulers looked to North America, and early colonial America looked to Spanish and British policies in the Caribbean. Such borrowings mark a *competitive politics of comparison* that accelerated circuits of knowledge production and imperial exchange.<sup>50</sup>

The challenge to comparative history comes from the turn to the studies of cultural transfers and transnational approaches (as distinct from international approaches) for they have the power to transcend national categories of analysis,<sup>51</sup> in whose family one finds the *histoire croisée*, introduced by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann in the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> In examining the dynamics as well as the restrictions of the comparative method, Alexei Miller suggests the study of the macroregion of continental contiguous empires as a macrosystem from the perspective of entangled histories and the interaction between them. In this perspective, religion comes out yet again as a primary focus of research (for example, the Orthodox Christian tsar and his relations with his coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire or the corresponding role of the sultan in respect to Muslim populations in the Russian Empire). Another primary region of research is the one of multinational ideologies (pan-Slavism, pan-Germanism, pan-Turkism), but also of the diasporas (such as the Baltic Germans, the Ukrainian nationalists from Russia to Galicia, of Poles and Jews from the Russian to the German empires, of Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, or of Armenians in the opposite direction).<sup>53</sup> As macrosystems and as part of global history, Kappeler proposes that we see the “peripheral” empires from the point of view of transimperial studies and he underlines the importance of the study of direct cultural transfers and entanglements between the Russian and Ottoman empires and not a one-way interaction from the west to Russia and the Ottoman Empire. His view amounts to a reorientation of the research agenda whose main subjects are modernisation and Europeanisation away from the traditional path that leads from Europe to the two empires. This perspective may be indispensable, he writes, but it is not the only one capable of explaining the historical complexities involved, the more so if we bear in mind that both the Russian and Ottoman empires seem to be on the margins only from a western-centric perspective. If seen from a Euro-Asiatic perspective, they are at the very centre linking Europe and Asia.<sup>54</sup>

The novel element in this approach to history is not that people, technology, ideas, perceptions, images or practices circulate across borders and, in doing so, also transform themselves. The new element is the emphasis in the journey towards various destinations not only from West to East –

thus questioning the strict line of demarcation between West and East, that Russia is only a recipient of western ideas and, finally, the issue of Russian particularism. The term influence is replaced by the terms adaptation and appropriation of the imported cultural goods. In addition, the historicity of the comparison is underlined: the comparison as a hypothesis for the historical actors-subjects. The comparison is seen as a research subject and not as a method. An example of such a multidirectional approach is Vera Tolz's recent work *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), which examines the power-knowledge nexus via Russian oriental studies and the Russian and early Soviet science academies. The author looks at the differentiation between Russian and western Orientalism and realises that the Russian and later the Soviet orientologists of the 1880s generation (whose influence was obvious until the 1920s) engaged themselves in a criticism of European Orientalism, depicting it as haughty towards the East, imperialistic and racist. In studying the multitude directions of the movement of ideas within time and space, she brings forward a genealogical link of Said's classic work *Orientalism* with Russian oriental studies through the Arab Marxists of the 1960s who were aware of the relevant entries in the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*.<sup>55</sup>

### ***The Russian Empire and global histories***

Comparative history and transnational approaches with their relational feature have contributed in rendering the Russian historical experience of empire part of a wider global perspective. The intersection of the imperial turn with global history leads to a decentering narrative as regards Europe, which as a result is no more regarded as the embodiment of a universal history of mankind. By the mid-twentieth century, Europe had already become one of the provinces of the world and the history of Asiatic states, as in the cases of Japan or China, implies alternative and multiple roads to modernity or to modernities, developments that undermine the Euro-centric constructions of Asia/East. As pointed out by Durba Ghosh, from within the British imperial turn and the new global and imperial history:

writing on globalisation the new global/imperial history presumes a de-centered narrative in which there was no one driving force but rather multiple and unmanageable systems, processes, imaginaries and contingent events that pushed a diversity of nations, empires and communities and their subjects in different directions. The impulse behind the newest iteration of world history offers agency, subjectivity and history to those who participated in a global economy and ecumene and it fundamentally destabilises the longstanding binaries of subjection and dominance in a range of historiographies between metropole and colony, core, periphery and perhaps most important Europe and non Europe.<sup>56</sup>

John Darwin, in his *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), argues that the foundations for the present globalised world are to be found in intercontinental networks that were established by empires, which happened to be the rule and not the exception in world history. He thus transfers the centre of gravity of the narration to Eurasia instead of Europe, detailing in great length the cases of Russia, Iran, China and Japan. In their monumental joint book *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Russian history specialist Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, an historian of French colonialism in Africa, study world

history from the point of view of empire.<sup>57</sup> Their avowed aim is “not to do the historiography but to do the history”, namely “to tell a world history” as a political history which includes a huge historical spread from the Roman Empire to the twentieth century. The method is comparative, with a parallel emphasis on long-term interaction. It also focuses on the transfer of models in order to highlight the complexity of the imperial capabilities, the repertoire of power of empires, thus reversing the conventional narrative that the history of the world is the historical transition from empire to nation, an idea that according to their research findings does not correspond to reality. The authors in question use the analytical category of empire as a complex political schema based on difference and polymorphy, which “is very much related to the dynamics of possibility of building power”. They conceive nation as well as empire as “ideal types” and as models of integrationist politics, one of which strives for homogenisation while the other attempts to manage diversity.<sup>58</sup> With their narrative, they challenge the bipolar image of nation and empire, as well as the bipolarity of premodern modern empires. Their narrative does centre on the history of the nineteenth-century overseas empires (which are usually identified as modern empires), as most colonial studies do. Opting for the methodology of the comparative and transnational narrative of history of empires within such a wide chronological period results in diminishing the significance of modern European colonialism; they presume that by placing European colonialism within a wider chronological and geographical perspective, it is possible to better understand what is more distinct about the nineteenth century and to explain more adequately the European hegemony within that period.

Within this wide chronological and global perspective, Russia, according to these two authors, is no more a “mystery”. On the contrary, if one follows the traditional European notion of normalcy then “you may find Russia puzzling because it is not living up to or fitting European standards. People pose these questions about not fitting because they have a single normative model of a polity. But if you look at history as a transformative process, you can see that Russia as a political organisation has had the capacity to bring in imperial traditions, merge them, and recreate them in its own way.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the category of empire offers an inclusive model for the narration and interpretation of the so-called second world, an area that colonial studies have utterly ignored with their concentration exclusively on the first and third worlds.<sup>60</sup>

Burbank and Cooper’s endeavour in their *Empires in World History* is an attempt to reconfigure our relationship to the past by countering the dominant narrative of nation-states. In their place, a variety of political formations enter the picture. This approach does not limit itself to academic debate but aims at the diffusion of its findings towards society and, in particular, to the curriculum design of graduate programmes in the English-speaking world.

### ***Russian exceptionalism: A double-edged sword***

The concept of empire and its affinities with the relational nature of comparative, transnational and entangled histories, as well as global history approaches, contributed in extracting the Russian historical experience of empire from regional particularity and placing it within wider European and world perspectives.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the interpretative example regarding the unique path of historical development of the country (the Russian Sonderweg) was critically re-examined. The previous perception presupposed a European world model that was structured on the basis of an idealised and

unitary Europe/West model. It is important to bear in mind that within this traditional interpretative scheme, the western rendition of Russian particularism finds – and continues in part to find in scientific but mainly in public discourse – its symmetrical version in Russian anti-western nationalist discourse.<sup>62</sup> Von Hagen has aptly pointed out that the relativity and the deconstruction of the normalcy and uniqueness of Europe is in step with the deconstruction of the nonnormalcy of Russia and of the wider region of Eastern Europe.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, the question remains what exactly does the normalisation of Russian historiography mean and with which scientific armature can this be achieved? In discussing the subject of Russian Orientalism, Maria Todorova focuses on the very important question of the applicability of the concepts of the social sciences that have been created on the basis of European/western experience to the Russian setting and historical experience. She believes that this creates an important epistemological problem which faces or has faced all non-western European historiographies, that is to select between the “Scylla of distinctiveness”, which leads to isolation and parochialism, and the “Charybdis of generic Europeanness or universalism”, which might mean semiotic inequality or the cultural hegemony of the west. She suggests instead a “universalist idiom tempered by a strong grounding in historical specificity”.<sup>64</sup> The discussion on the normalisation of Russian historiography continues because, as Alexander Etkind puts it, the appropriate language has not been yet found to describe Russian distinctiveness, to avoid isolation and parochialism and to produce theory rather than simply criticising foreign theories.<sup>65</sup> Jane Burbank says a global history perspective and long-term historical awareness is needed, and not “simply adopting prefab western categories”. As she argues: “We need to escape ‘we too’, history: we too have colonialism, internal colonialism, centre/periphery distinctions and so on.” What is needed, she continues, is “the ability to see both crosscutting similarities in imperial practices and distinctive features of various empires (not just Russia)” and not to “simply ‘take’ the categories offered by the historiography on other empires”.<sup>66</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

In the first post-Soviet decade, the new approaches put emphasis on nationality studies and in the second decade on empire studies in order to reconceptualise the historical past. Within this context, the institution of empire, which in the short twentieth century was demonised and viewed as an archaic political category, became a historical, analytical category and a metaphor for heterogeneity. It is also seen as the historical antecedent of regionalism, federalism, globalism, migration and so on, which have transformed the concept of national sovereignty. Within this framework, it is proposed as a theoretical model for conceptualising a new reality. Moreover, empire is a category of political practice and it is this dimension and its topicality that supplies the need to describe contemporary world hegemony, especially regarding the role of the USA in the post-bipolar world, where the civilisation–barbarity nexus has acquired new meaning. In particular, the discussions of Russia as an empire are associated to a considerable extent with the special circumstances of the post-Soviet world, where Russia, according to Sergei Prozorov, “faces a double problem of self reconstruction in the context that is both post-imperial and post-national”.<sup>67</sup> In view of the contemporary Russian environment where nationalist and imperial rhetoric coexist, the question arises whether the imperial studies are prone to nostalgia or, worse, they promote the rehabilitation of

empire. Alexei Miller, in his comments about the new imperial history adopted by the editors of *Ab Imperio*, argues that in today's Russian context what is of the essence is to distance one's self from the imperial narrative, even though he regards the national narrations as inadequate in describing and analysing the historical processes of imperial formation.<sup>68</sup> The answer to this criticism by the supporters of new imperial history is that rendering the concept topical with due regard to its historicity and theoretical aspect has not been done in order to bring it back into the real world of political practice but to use it as an analytical concept in the spirit of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as a concept which is useful for the understanding of the processes taking place in a world of change, in which the management of differences is a central subject.<sup>69</sup>

The concept of empire in Russian studies highlights the fragility of the limits between the Self and the Other within its borders (between various groups) as well as beyond, in Europe and the world. However, despite the challenges and alternative historical writings, the national historical narrative is still potent not only within the special circumstances reigning in the post-Soviet space but also internationally. This is obvious not so much in the realm of strict scientific research but certainly in the manner with which school programmes are conceived, including university studies in many countries, as well as in the dominant perceptions of public history. How obvious is the teaching of global history in various corners of the world and when taught, is it not for the most part ethnocentric in its presentation? On the other hand the imperial turn in the study of Russian history, at least for those who appreciate it, continues to be a dynamic workshop for the production of new questions and new narratives which have transformed and continue to transform our relations with the past by putting a question mark on a host of traditional perceptions that dominated the scene for decades in the relevant studies as well as in our perceptions of European and world history.

## NOTES

- 1 "From the editors: a remarkable decade", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2/2 (2001): 229–231, here 229.
- 2 However, as pointed out by Michael Confino: "If you want to be counted in the historiography of a subject, you have to write in English." This tendency applies not only to the old historiography but also to the new and he concludes: "Genuine international historiography will be achieved when the great and creative community of Russianists will become more acquainted with the works of historians not only in Russia, of course, but also in at least two or three other countries, and incorporate their findings in their work. It was so once upon a time, and it can be so again in the future." See "The new Russian historiography and the old: some considerations", *History and Memory* 21/2 (2009): 7–33 (here 24, 26). For a critical approach on the subject of academic dialogue and professional historiography, see David Ransel, "A single research community? Not yet", *Slavic Review* 60/3 (2001): 550–557.
- 3 See, for instance, the special issue entitled "Post-Soviet Historiography of Prerevolutionary Russia" of the *Russian Review* 60/4 (2001), and especially the following articles in the issue: Laura Engelstein, "New thinking about the old empire: post Soviet reflections", 487–496; Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, "In search of the people, in search of Russia", 497–504. See also Laura Engelstein, "Culture, culture everywhere: interpretations of modern Russia, across the 1991 divide", *Kritika* 2/2 (2001): 363–393; Alfred J. Rieber, "From reform to empire: Russia's 'new' political history", *Kritika* 2/2 (2001), 261–268; Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Alexander M. Martin, "From the editors: post-post historiography, or the trends of the 'naughts'", *Kritika* 5/4 (2004): 645–650; Michael Confino, in the above-mentioned article,



examines critically the old and new tendencies and analyses the term new Russian historiography. For a synopsis of the new fields of research by Russian scholars of Russia in Russian historiography, see Genadij Bordjugov, *Istoricheskie Issledovanija v Rossii –III. Pjatnadsat' let spustja* [The historical studies in Russia – III: 15 years after], Moscow, AIRO-XXI, 2011.

- 4 Ronald Grigor Suny, "Studying empires", *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* 1 (2008): 205–213. There is no complete consensus as to the utility of the return to the concept of empire in Russian studies. Confino, in the above-cited article, expresses his deep criticism of the imperial turn.
- 5 For the way the imperial turn transforms the overall outlook, see Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Alexander M. Martin, "The imperial turn", *Kritika* 7/4 (2006): 705–712; Ilya Gerasimov, Serguei Glebov, Alexander Kaplunovski, Marina Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov (eds), *Novaja Imperskaja Istoriija postsovetskogo prostranstva* [New imperial history of post-Soviet space], Kazan: Centre for the Study of Nationalism and Empire, 2004, 575–629. For an extended analysis of the 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union, see the special issue of *Kritika* entitled "The State of the Field: Russian History Twenty Years after the Fall", 12/4 (2011). See in particular: "From the editors: ten years after the 'remarkable decade'", 769–772; Willard Sunderland, "What is Asia to us?", 817–834; Susan Smith-Peter, "Bringing the provinces into focus: subnational spaces in recent historiography of Russia", 835–848; Paul W. Werth, "Lived Orthodoxy and confessional diversity: the last decade on religion in modern Russia", 849–866; Mark von Hagen, "New dimensions in military history, 1900–1950: questions of total war and colonial war", 867–884; Michael David-Fox, "The implications of transnationalism", 885–904. On the same theme, see also *Ab Imperio* 1 (2010), "Forum: The Imperial Turn in Russian Studies. Ten Years Later", 53–117; in particular: Robert D. Crews, "Russia unbound: historical frameworks and the challenge of globalization", 53–63; "Discussion", 64–88; Norman M. Naimark, "Imperial Russian history, then and now", 89–97; Maxim Waldestein, "Theorizing the second world: challenges and prospects", 98–117.
- 6 For the Soviet period see, for instance, Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (eds), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- 7 Mark Beissinger, "The persistence of empire in Eurasia", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2008): 157–176.
- 8 On the discussion on the applicability of the postcolonial paradigm and the concepts introduced by Said's work in the Russian/Soviet case, see for instance: Margaret Dikovitskaya, "Does Russia qualify for postcolonial discourse? A response to Ekaterina Dyogot's article", *Ab Imperio* 2 (2002), 551–557; David Chiomi Moore, "Is the post- in postcolonial the post- in post-Soviet? Toward a global postcolonial critique", *PMLA* 116/1 (2001): 111–128; Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the posts: postcolonialism, postsocialism and ethnography after the cold war", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51/1 (2009): 6–34; Alison Stenning and Kathrin Horschelmann, "History, geography and difference in the post-socialist world: or, do we still need post-socialism?", *Antipode* 40/2 (2008): 312–335; Adeeb Khalid, "Russian history and the debate over orientalism", *Kritika* 1/4 (2000): 691–699; Nathaniel Knight, "On Russian orientalism: a response to Adeeb Khalid", *Kritika* 1/4 (2000): 701–705. Also, see also the following articles in *Ab Imperio* 1 (2000): "From the editors: the modernization of the Russian empire and paradoxes of orientalism", 239–248 (in Russian); David Schimmelpennick van der Oye, "A subtle matter: orientalism", 249–264 (in Russian); Alexander Etkind, "The saved man's burden or the inner colonization of Russia", 265–298 (in Russian); Nathaniel Knight, "Was Russia its own orient? Reflections on the contributions of Etkind and Schimmelpennick to the debate on nationalism", 299–310.
- 9 In the course of the 1990s there was already an array of empirical studies which gave rise to the need for more theorising in imperial studies. This need has been recognised by Kimitaka Matsuzato, one of the most interesting and innovative researchers of empire, who hails from the Japanese school and

- has suggested the neologism imperiology. This term points to a distinct field of research, as well as to the need for theorising, with emphasis on comparative analysis on the basis of models that are more congenial to political science. See Kimitaka Matsuzato (ed.), *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire*, Sapporo: Slavic Research Centre, 2007.
- 10 For this term and its dangers, see Mark von Hagen, "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas: Eurasia as anti-paradigm for the post-Soviet era", *American Historical Review* 109/2 (2004): 445–468.
  - 11 Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Marshall Poe, "Eurasian studies", *Kritika* 1/2 (2000): 233–235 (here 235).
  - 12 For a criticism of the term Eurasia as well as misgivings about the naming of the field of Slavic and Russian studies, see Serguei Glebov, "Wither Eurasia? History of ideas in an imperial situation", *Ab Imperio* 2 (2008): 345–376.
  - 13 The editors of the journal presented their manifesto in "In search of a new imperial history", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2005): 33–56, which is an English translation of their introduction in Gerasimov et al., *Novaja Imperskaja Istoriija*, 7–29. For a criticism on the project of new imperial history, see Andreas Frings, "Friendly fire: a critical review of the new imperial history of the post-Soviet space from the view of analytical philosophy", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2006): 329–352. See also Alexei Miller, *Imperija Romanovykh i natsionalizm: Esse po metodologii istoricheskogo issledovanija* [The Romanov Empire and nationalism: essays on the methodology of historical research], Moscow: NLO, 2006, 28, note 26. A few years later, the editors refined their arguments further in Ilya Gerasimov, Serguei Glebov, Jan Kusber, Marina Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov, "New imperial history and the challenges of empire", in Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber and Alexander Semyonov (eds), *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 3–32.
  - 14 Durba Ghosh, "Another set of imperial turns?", *American Historical Review* 117/3 (2012): 772–793. In the same article there is a more detailed presentation of the imperial turn and of new imperial history in the British case. See also Stephen Howe, *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, London: Routledge, 2008. For the parallelisms, divergences and interactions between Russian and British new imperial histories, see Stephen Howe, "From Manchester to Moscow", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2011): 53–93.
  - 15 From the Editors, "Languages of self-description of empire and nation as a research problem and political dilemma", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2005): 23–32, here 24.
  - 16 Michael David-Fox, "From the editors: new journals in the new Russia", *Kritika* 3/3 (2002): 389–392; David-Fox et al., "The imperial turn"; Ilya Gerasimov, Serguei Glebov, Alexander Kaplunovski, Marina Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov, "Letter", *Kritika* 8/1 (2007): 222–224. For an extended discussion regarding the "asymmetry" between American and Russian historians, for the colonisation of Russian science by the American/western one, in which the East, in the spirit of orientalism, is placed in a lower position in the pecking order of knowledge/power, see "Post-Soviet and western academic communities: res publica litterarum – imperium litterarum?", *Ab Imperio* 3 (2008), 289–395.
  - 17 The work of Richard Pipes, which written within the climate of the cold war, used the concept of empire instead of multinational state, for in those days the concept of empire had a very negative connotation and was associated with the notion of imperialism and highlighted the aggressive Russian and later Soviet policies towards the various nationalities within the vast state. See Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997 [1954].
  - 18 Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict In and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*, London, Sage, 1997, 1–12.
  - 19 Omut Özkanlı, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000; Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, "Introduction: from the moment of social history to the work of cultural

- representation", in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Becoming National: A Reader*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1996, 3–37.
- 20 David-Fox et al., "From the editors: "post-post historiography, or the trends of the naughts"; Von Hagen, "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas"; See also the articles on the subject of ethnicity and the nationality question in imperial Russia in the *Russian Review* 59/4 (2000): 487–577.
- 21 Ronald Grigor Suny, "The empire strikes out: imperial Russia, "national" identity and theories of empire", in Suny and Martin (eds), *A State of Nations*, 33.
- 22 Kappeler's influence in the English-speaking world became evident following the translation of his book in 2001, under the title *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, Harlow: Longman. See also the interview with the author who discusses his work ten years later, in *Ab Imperio*: Andreas Kappeler, "'Rossija-mnogonatsional'naja imperija': nekatorye razmyshlenija vosem' let spustja posle publikatsii knigi", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2000), 9–22.
- 23 For a critical assessment of Hosking's work of today as well as of the under-researched field of Russian nationalism, see Alexei Miller (one of the most erudite Russians students of the phenomenon of Russian nationalism and empire), "Nation and empire: reflections in the margins of Geoffrey Hosking's book", *Kritika* 13/2 (2012), 419–428.
- 24 Edward C. Thaden, "Russification", in James Cracraft (ed), *Major Problems in the History of Imperial Russia*, Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1994, pp 403–409; David Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis (eds.), *Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000; Andreas Kappeler et al. (eds), *Culture, Nation and Identity: The Ukrainian–Russian Encounter, 1600–1945*, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2003; Andreas Kappeler, "The ambiguities of Russification", *Kritika* 5/2 (2004): 291–297; Alexei Miller, "Russifikatsii: Klassifitsirovat' I poniat", *Ab Imperio* 2 (2002): 133–148; Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, *Imperial Rule*, Budapest: Central European UP, 2004; Theodor Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1996; Miller, *Imperija Romanovykh i natsionalizm*; Mikhail Dolbilov, "Russification and the bureaucratic mind in the Russian empire's northwestern region in the 1860s", *Kritika* 5/2 (2004): 245–271; Darius Staliunas, "Did the government seek to russify Lithuanians and Poles in the northwest regions after the uprising of 1863–64?", *Kritika* 5/2 (2004): 273–289; Wayne Dowler, *Classroom and Empire: The Politics of Schooling Russia's Eastern Nationalities, 1860–1917*, Montreal: McGill Queen's UP, 2001; Robert P. Geraci, *Windows on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001.
- 25 For a summary, see Rieber, "From reform to empire".
- 26 The case of Ukraine is central as well as characteristic. See, for instance, the study of Russian nationalism as Russo–Ukrainian relations in Alexei Miller, *The Ukrainian Question: The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, Budapest: Central European UP, 2003; Kappeler et al. (eds), *Culture, Nation and Identity*; Georgiy Kasianov and Philipp Ther (eds), *A Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*, Budapest: Central European UP, 2009. See also Alexander Semyonov, "From the editors: a window on the dilemmas of history writing on empire and nation", *Ab Imperio* 2 (2003): 387–384, and the issue which follows regarding Ukrainian historiography, 395–519.
- 27 Alexander Semyonov, "Empire as a context setting category", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2008): 193–204.
- 28 Editors, "The diversity of otherness in the twentieth century", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2011): 15–20.
- 29 Alexei Miller, discussing the importance of Hosking's book almost 15 years after its publication, and taking a certain critical distance from it, rightly points out that the First World War should be regarded the moment of the mobilisation of ethnicity. The study of the under-studied period of the First World

- War would contribute to the better understanding of the successes and failures of integration in the empire, "including national formation, political inclusion, assimilation and acculturation". Miller, "Nation and empire", 419–428. See also Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens During World War I*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.
- 30 Paul Werth, "Imperiology and religion: some thoughts on a research agenda", in Matsuzato (ed), *Imperiology*, 51–67; Werth, "Lived Orthodoxy and confessional diversity".
- 31 Kasianov and Ther (eds), *A Laboratory of Transnational History*. See, in particular, in this volume Andreas Kappeler, "From an ethnonational to a multiethnic to a transnational Ukrainian history", 51–80.
- 32 This is also related to the study of borderlands and frontiers and regional history. See, for instance, Alfred J. Rieber, "Changing concepts and constructions of frontiers: a comparative historical approach", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2003): 2–46; Idem, "The comparative ecology of complex frontiers", in Miller and Rieber (eds), *Imperial Rule*, 179–210; Malte Rolf, "Review essay: importing the 'spatial turn' to Russia; recent studies on the spatialization of Russian history", *Kritika* 11/2 (2010): 359–380; Von Hagen, "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas"; Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini (eds), *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997; Thomas M. Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1999; Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999; Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier. The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. See also in the history section, entitled "Constructing region through the past", of *Ab Imperio* 1 (2004), 110–190, the contributions of Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "European history as comparative history", and von Hagen, "Empires, borderlands and diasporas" (in Russian), and the comments therein by Geoffrey Hosking, Martin Lewis, Mark Bassin and David McDonald. For a good summary, see Smith-Peter, "Bringing the provinces into focus". For a criticism of the regional approach, see Miller, *Imperija Romanovykh i natsionalism*, chapter 1, where the regional and situational approaches are juxtaposed. See also Iver Neumann, *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, esp. chaps 4 and 5.
- 33 Mark von Hagen, in his article "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas: Eurasia as anti-paradigm for the post-Soviet era", which proposes a research agenda on the basis of the concept of Eurasia for the study of the phenomenon of the Russian Empire, had in mind not only the critics of the nation as a political project and organising principles of historical narrative but also to replace it as an organising principle for academic departments of history and knowledge in the present (459).
- 34 Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen and Anatoly Remnev, *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007, 2.
- 35 Editors, "Moving on, back to the future", *Ab Imperio* 4 (2007): 17–23.
- 36 Suny, "The empire strikes out", 52.
- 37 See Samuel Eisenstadt, "Multiple modernities in the era of globalization", *Daedalus* 129/1 (2000): 1–29.
- 38 Alexei Miller, "The value and the limits of a comparative approach to the history of contiguous empires on the European periphery", in Matsuzato (ed.), *Imperiology*, 19–32, here 20.
- 39 See Phillip Ther, "Imperial instead of national history: positioning modern German history on the map of European empires", in Miller and Rieber (eds.), *Imperial Rule*, 47–69.
- 40 Hagen, "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas"; Rieber, "The comparative ecology".
- 41 Dominc Lieven, *The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, London: John Murray, 2000, xiii.

- 42 According to Miller, the nineteenth century was the century in which the nations were built in the imperial metropolises and in this sense the territorial states are not the outcome of the transition from empire to nation-state, but the outcome of the evolution of Europe's imperial metropolises. In this respect, Russia lagged behind its partners and rivals in Europe but decidedly moved in the same direction. Miller, "Nation and empire".
- 43 Lieven, *The Russian Empire*, ix.
- 44 Ibid; Alexei Miller, "Between local and inter-imperial: Russian imperial history in search of scope and paradigm", *Kritika* 5/1 (2004): 7–26; Alexei Miller (ed.), *Rossijskaja Imperia v sravnitel'noj perspective*, Moscow, Novoe Izdatel'stvo, 2004; Miller and Rieber, *Imperial Rule*; Karen Barkey, Mark von Hagen (eds), *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation Building; The Soviet Union, and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997; Alexander Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse and Revival of Empires*, New York: Columbia UP, 2005; Alexander Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand: 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008; Jeff Sahadeo, "Visions of Empire: Russia's Place in an Imperial World", *Kritika* 11/2 (2010), 381–409.
- 45 See, for example, Jane Burbank and David L. Ransel (eds), *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- 46 For comparative comments, see Howe, *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, 71. See also Miller, "The Value and the Limits", 19–32.
- 47 Paul Werth, "Changing conceptions of difference: assimilation, and faith in the Volga-Kama region", in Burbank, von Hagen and Remnev (eds), *Russian Empire*, 169–195, here 170.
- 48 "The Challenge and serendipity: writing world history through the prism of empire" [interview with Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper], *Ab Imperio* 2 (2010): 32–33. Howe (in "From Manchester to Moscow", 76) notes that the Russian case has always been special because of its difficulty to juxtapose the centre with the peripheries. This is useful for the British imperial turn, which has now turned to the study of colonial influences over the metropolis. It also points to the need to revise the well-known distinction between classical and nonclassical empires.
- 49 Gerasimov et al., *Novaja Imperskaja Istorija*, 25–26; Miller, "The Value and the Limits".
- 50 Ann Laura Stoler, "Considerations on imperial comparisons", in Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber and Alexander Semyonov (eds), *Empire Speaks Out*, 33, 35, 38. In *Classroom and Empire*, Dowler examines the exchange of experiences between the overseas and continental empires, by comparing the educational policies of Muslims in Russia with those of Muslims in French Africa. Also Ekaterina Pravilova, "The property of empire: Islamic law and Russian agrarian policy in Transcaucasia and Turkestan", *Kritika* 12/2 (2011): 322–353. See relevant comments in Howe, "From Manchester to Moscow", 60.
- 51 As regards the transnational dimension, see the following special issues of *Kritika*: "Models on the margins. Russia and the Ottoman empire", 12/2 (2011); "Circulation of knowledge and the human sciences in Russia", 9/1 (2008). Fox, "The implications of transnationalism", 885–904, in which the works of the Soviet period are mainly examined; "Fascination and enmity: Russia and Germany as entangled histories, 1914–1945", 10/3 (2009); Martin Aust, Rikarda Vultius and Alexei Miller (eds), *Imperium Inter Pares: Rol' transferov v istorii Rossijskoj Imperii (1700–1917)* [Imperium inter pares: the role of transfers in Russian history], Moscow, NLO, 2010; Kasianov & Ther, *A Laboratory of Transnational History*.
- 52 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond comparison: histoire croisée and the challenge of reflexivity", *History and Theory* 15 (2007): 30–50 (Russian translation in *Ab Imperio* 2 (2007): 59–90); Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor (eds), *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-national Perspective*, London: Routledge, 2004.

- 53 Miller, "The value and the limits", 31.
- 54 Andreas Kappeler, "Spaces of entanglement", *Kritika* 12/2 (2011): 477–487, here 487, 479.
- 55 For a critical discussion of this work, see the "Forum" section in *Ab Imperio* 3 (2011), with contributions from Mikhail Dolbilov, Serguei Glebov, Vladimir Bobronikov and Vera Tolz, 373–409.
- 56 Ghosh, "Another set of imperial turns?", 779.
- 57 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2010.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 8–11. See also "The challenge and serendipity", 43.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 32–33. Also, Alexander Etkind, "A hole in the view of the world: why did colonial authors write about Russia, and post-colonial ones did not", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2011): 99–116.
- 61 The cultural turn in the study of Russian history from the 1990s has contributed in making the Russian case a local instance in a more general trend. See Engelstein, "Culture, culture everywhere", 364.
- 62 This theme has often been covered under the title Russia and Europe/West, which as pointed out early on by Jane Burbank, instead of remaining a historical problem had transformed itself into a interpretative scheme, capable of explaining the failure of the Russian state in its attempts to follow the model of western European modernity, which is regarded as unique and is confused with westernisation and the virtues of the nation-state, free trade and liberal democracy. See Jane Burbank, "Revisioning imperial Russia", *Slavic Review* 52/3 (1993): 555–567.
- 63 Von Hagen, "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas", 458.
- 64 Maria Todorova, "Does Russian orientalism have a Russian soul? A contribution to the debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid", *Kritika* 1/4 (2000): 717–720.
- 65 "Conversation about non-classical colonialism – i: an interview with Alexander Etkind", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2011): 117–130.
- 66 "Forum: the imperial turn in Russian studies; ten years later", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2010): 53–117, here, 71.
- 67 Sergei Prozonov, "Empire in the age of its disrepute", *Ab Imperio* 1 (2008): 215–228, here 227.
- 68 Miller, *Imperija Romanovykh i natsionalizm*, 28.
- 69 See the introduction in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. According to the editors of *Ab Imperio*, the concept of empire is useful in order to examine new models so as to investigate the structure of power in an uneven environment and they propose this approach as a research experiment that tries to draw apt lessons from the experience of continental dynastic empires. It also sees it as a research situation that looks at multiple visions in the activity of the historical subjects, interaction, the abandonment of bipolar "black and white" stereotypes and divisions, placing once again on the table the orthodoxies of empire. See Gerasimov et al., *Novaja Imperskaja Istorija*, 2004, 7–29; Gerasimov et al. (eds), *Empire Speaks Out*, 3–32.