Taming the Wild Field

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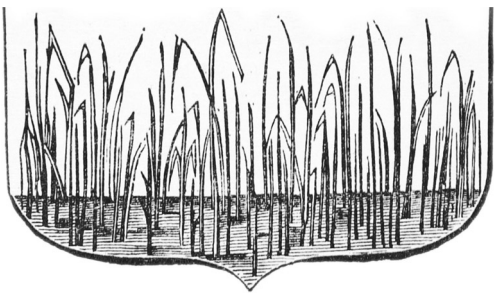
Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe

Willard Sunderland



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Our carts, when we started, were in an awful fix.

The Handcart Pioneers, Report of the Second Handcart Company, 1856

To GM and GP

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Preface

In the age of Kievan Rus' the immense steppes running north of the Black and Caspian Seas represented the Eastern Slavs' most dangerous and seemingly alien frontier, but by the end of the tsarist period the Slavs had become far and away the most numerous inhabitants of the region and had re-created its geography and history as their own. This book is an exploration of this transformation, emphasizing the phenomenon of Russian-sponsored colonization and its impact on the making both of Russia as an empire and of the Russians as imperialists. As such, it aims to present a broad picture of a complicated historical process, but it is neither a total nor a comprehensive history, and it is certainly not *the* history of steppe colonization, if ever such a history could be written. Instead, it is a more limited narrative concerned less with recounting every facet of the story than with evoking the themes I found interesting and important and was able to relate. Inspired by fascination and respect for the steppe, its peoples, and the Russian empire that eventually encompassed them, the book is also an attempt to wrestle honestly with the contradictory entanglements of achievement and loss, creation and destruction, that are always present in historical change. Colonization, the making of "new worlds," and the projection of imperial power—by Russians and others—are usually the subjects of myth and oversimplification. Here they are explored instead for their ironies, contingencies, and paradoxes in the hope that such a history offers its own important vantage point on the truth.

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Abbreviations

Sources

AMG	*Akty moskovskogo gosudarstva*
CASS	*Canadian-American Slavic Studies*
CMRS	*Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*
CSSH	*Comparative Studies in Society and History*
DAI	*Dopolneniia k aktam istoricheskim*
DAOO	*Derzhavni arkhiv odes'koi oblisti* (Odessa)
DAKO	*Derzhavni arkhiv krym'skoi oblisti* (Simferopil')
FzOG	*Forschungen zur Osteuropäischen Geschichte*
GAOO	*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv orenburgskoi oblasti* (Orenburg)
IM	*Imago Mundi*
IIRGO	*Izvestiia imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*
ITUAK	*Izvestiia tavricheskoi uchenoi arkhivnoi komissii*
JfGO	*Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
JSH	*Journal of Social History*
KS	*Kievskaia starina*
LOSKIR	*Listki obshchestva sel'skogo khoziaistva iuzhnoi Rossii*
MERSH	*Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*
MDIIAN	*Materialy dlia istorii imperatorskoi akademii nauk*
OGV	*Orenburgskie gubernskie vedomosti*
OEV	*Orenburgskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*
OI	*Otechestvennaia istoriia*

OZ	*Otechestvennye zapiski*
PiB	*Pis'ma i bumagi imperatora Petra Velikogo*
PSRL	*Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*
PSZ	*Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiiskoi imperii*
PVL	*Povest' vremennykh let*
RA	*Russkii arkhiv*
RGADA	*Rossiiskii gosudartsvennyi arkhiv drevnykh aktov* (Moscow)
RGIA	*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv* (St. Petersburg)
RH	*Russian History/Histoire Russe*
RR	*Russian Review*
RV	*Russkii vestnik*
SamGV	*Samarskie gubernskie vedomosti*
SarGV	*Saratovskie gubernskie vedomosti*
SEER	*Slavonic and East European Review*
SIPKPIUS	*Sochineniia i perevody k pol'ze i uveseleniiu sluzhashchie*
SIRIO	*Sbornik imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*
SMDOMIPK	*Sbornik materialov dlia opisaniia mestnostei i plemen Kavkaza*
SO	*Syn otechestva*
SR	*Slavic Review*
StGV	*Stavropol'skie gubernskie vedomosti*
TGV	*Tavricheskie gubernskie vedomosti*
TVEO	*Trudy volnogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva*
TsGIA RB	*Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv respubliki Bashkortostana* (Ufa)
VE	*Vestnik Evropy*
VI	*Voprosy istorii*
VIRGO	*Vestnik imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*
ZhMGI	*Zhurnal ministerstva gosudarstvennogo imushchestva*
ZhMNP	*Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia*
ZhMVD	*Zhurnal ministerstva vnutrennykh del*
ZOOID	*Zapiski odesskogo obshchestva istorii i drevnostei*

Archival Terms

f.	*fond*(holding)
op.	*opis'* (register)

d.	*delo* (file)
ch.	*chast'* (part)
l.	*list* (page)
ll.	*listy* (pages)
(b)	back
otd.	*otdel/ otdelenie* (section)
neoff. ch.	*neoffitsial'naia chast'* (unofficial section)
smes'	miscellany (miscellaneous section)

Taming the Wild Field

Introduction
Steppe Building

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

The book's coverage extends from the period of early Rus', when the Eastern Slavs first started writing about their settlements in the forest-steppe, to the late nineteenth century, when major new agricultural settlement in the European steppe region ended and the Great Siberian Migration began. Despite this broad framework, however, four-fifths of the book is devoted to a study of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

when settlement on the steppe proved most intense. With the emphasis on the period of major Russian "incorporation" come three basic implications. The first is that the book is indeed a study of the Russian incorporation process, and, as such, it focuses on the Russian state and its colonists. That is, it treats the colonization of the steppe largely through the minds and experiences of the colonizers rather than those of the colonized because the central story being told here, a story of appropriation, was one in which the colonizers' terms ultimately prevailed. If frontiers are "middle grounds," appropriation is a mutual business practiced by both "natives" and "strangers," and "power by itself is too crude an instrument for measuring all the subtleties that make up cultural interaction," it is still true that "middle grounds" (as frontiers) invariably "close," that all sides do not come out ahead in the equation, and that traditionally the one with the most "guns, germs, and steel" has been able to appropriate the other in ways that bring more drastic consequences.[1] Though it took centuries, and was never predetermined, Eastern Slavic agricultural society, with its greater aggregate wealth and larger population, eventually overtook and then eclipsed steppe nomadism; the agents of centralized state power eventually outgunned or bought out the independent "men of the frontier"; and the "spirit of the nation" eventually insisted on claiming the nation's "empty spaces." This book begins with times when outsiders and natives were either broadly equal in their ability to affect the other or when the natives' power was greater, but it ultimately emphasizes the way that outsiders made the natives' region their own. This does not deny the history or agency of the steppe peoples or diminish the mutuality of colonial encounters. It simply acknowledges the full enormity of the change that the coming of the outsiders entailed.

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

1 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region* (New York, 1991); Greg Dening, "Possessing Tahiti," in his *Performances* (Chicago, 1996), p. 167; Stuart B. Schwartz, "Introduction," in Schwartz (ed.), *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (New York, 1994), p. 7; Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York, 1999); Richard J. Perry, *. . . From Time Immemorial: Indigenous Peoples and State Systems* (Austin, Texas, 1996), pp. 223–52.

tion of official settlement programs, or as a result of being claimed by or for the Russian *imaginaire,* but rather through the effects of all these factors. It mattered a great deal that even as a varied constituency of plebeian colonists were moving onto the steppe, the region, its native inhabitants, its new residents, and colonization itself were being continuously invented and reinvented in the plans, fears, and dreams of Russia's rulers and learned observers. These two planes of experience—steppe and colonization, fact and image—were sometimes contradictory and frequently out of synch, but they were always related, each with its own consequences for the transformation of the region.

Third, my approach stresses the history of steppe colonization as a story of Russian imperialism, with *imperialism* defined "in behavioral terms" as "the process . . . of establishing or maintaining an empire" and *empire* defined, in turn, as "the effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinate society by an imperial [one]."[2] The steppe belonged to other peoples before governing Russians ultimately took it over and "established" and "maintained" it as part of their empire. The projection of Russian power onto the steppe was thus, in a very basic sense, a matter of imperialism, one no less obvious for having taken place across a continent rather than across oceans and for involving "others" who were well known rather than peoples and "things never heard of, seen, or dreamed of before."[3] Yet, for all this, the Russian colonization of the steppe has rarely been interpreted as a deliberate story of imperialist expansion, especially by Russians but also by Western specialists who have—to varying degrees—followed their cue.[4] Instead, the movement of Slavs and other migrants into the steppe and other "agricultural" peripheries, such as Siberia, has been viewed as a matter of "resettlement" (*pereselenie*), "spreading out" (*rasselenie*), or "internal colonization" (*vnutrenniaia kolonizatsiia,* an adaptation of the Germans' *innere Kolonisation,* seized on by late imperial Russian observers looking for a suitable analogy for the Russian process). Similarly, peasant colonization has generally been approached from the perspective of agricultural and demographic expansion rather than from that of empire; and the imposition of Russian power and Russian norms on peripheral territories and peoples, while undeniably involving cases of conquest and expropriation, has been characterized as a process of "incorporation" and "economic development"—both ideas contained within the Russian term *osvoenie,* which means, literally, the making of something other into one's own. The question of empire in

2 Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), pp. 45, 30.

3 Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* (trans. J.M. Cohen) (New York, 1963), p. 214.

4 Two prominent exceptions to this general rule are Michael Khodarkovsky and Andreas Kappeler, both scholars whose works have greatly influenced this study.

colonization is thus either elided altogether or, more commonly, treated as a natural process, part of Russia's supposedly natural national development. Much as in China, where it is more common to see Qing expansion as a process of "unification" rather than conquest, or in the United States, where visions of a Turnerian frontier ("a zone of 'free' land and opportunity") are still more powerful than notions of La Frontera ("borderlands . . . of trade, violence, conquest, and cultural exchange"), the proposition that Russian colonization was imperialist sounds at best unusual.[5] Colonization, as the historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii famously put it, is the "basic fact" of Russian history, but it has rarely been interrogated as a basic fact of Russian imperialism.[6]

Taming the Wild Field emphasizes the imperialism in colonization, though this approach necessarily means highlighting what it is about the process that has allowed it to appear so unimperialist. Indeed, the ambiguities of Russian colonization were striking and persistent, and nowhere was this more obvious than on the steppe. The representatives of the Muscovite tsars conquered and encroached on parts of the grasslands but did not seek to appropriate them in any comprehensive manner; the imperial agents of St. Petersburg, by contrast, loudly claimed the entire region in the name of "science," "utility," European-style colonialism, and the "Russian way," but they never declared or treated the steppe as a clear-cut colony and for a long time preferred foreign to Russian colonists. Similarly, the coming of ordinary Russians, foreigners, and other migrants led to the expropriation of native lands and the eventual end of nomadism and the Cossack frontier—all effects comparable to the consequences of imperialism in European settler colonies—yet the migrants' arrival on the Russian plains did not give rise to a "settler society" in which "stratification [was] based more on race and ethnicity than on socioeconomic class." Indeed, until the end of the tsarist era (and beyond) the state displayed the same "colonial" paternalism toward its own Russian commoners that it displayed toward its officially colonized non-Russian "aliens," some of whom themselves doubled as colonizers.[7] Furthermore, for longer than

5 James A. Millward, "New Perspectives on the Qing Frontier," in Gail Hershatter et al. (eds.), *Remapping China: Fissures in Historical Terrain* (Stanford, Calif., 1996), p. 120; Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford, Calif., 1998), pp. 15–16; Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 25, 29; Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in her *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York, 2000), pp. 87–88.

6 V.O. Kliuchevskii, *Sochineniia v deviati tomakh* (Moscow, 1987), v. 1, p. 50.

7 David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870–1920* (New York, 1990), pp. 9–10; Cathy Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York, 1993); Stephen p. Frank, "Confronting the Domestic Other: Rural Popular Culture and Its Enemies in Fin-de-Siècle Russia," in Frank

was the case in Western or Central Europe, Russia's "internal expansion" ("the intensification of settlement and the reorganization of society") and "external expansion" ("colonial conquest and immigration") proceeded together and were almost impossible to disentangle.[8] The colonization of the steppe, as a result, reflected and produced a particularly complicated kind of imperialism, one in which empire building, state building, society building, and nation building (real and imagined, of Russians and others) invariably intertwined. Uncovering and explaining this process is the central purpose of my story.

The setting for the story is the western end of the great Eurasian steppe belt, also known as the Ponto-Caspian steppe, a vast area that once fell within the limits of so-called European Russia but today is divided between Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and Kazakhstan.[9] The region's limit to the north is the front edge of the Russian forests, which bends gently upward, running west to east, from central Ukraine to the Central Urals; in the south, the foothills of the Caucasus and the northern shores of the Black and Caspian Seas; in the west, the Danube River; and in the east, the Ural River up to roughly the town of Orenburg. Along its northern edge on the border with the Russian and Ukrainian forests and in the south near the Caucasus, the region is marked by a transition zone of forest-steppe: stands of woods interspersed with prairie. Around the western Caspian, and between the Lower Volga and the Lower Ural Rivers, the region edges toward desert and is characterized, accordingly, by another intermediary zone, the desert-steppe, consisting largely of salt flats and low-lying shrubs. Around the time of the first millennium, A.D., the environment that fell between these edges and transition zones—the steppe proper or the open steppe—was all grassland: a continuous, mostly treeless, dry (though not arid) plain, less elevated and flatter along the seas and more rolling and elevated in the northeast toward the Urals and in the south toward the Caucasus Mountains, but characterized through-

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and Mark D. Steinberg (eds.), *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), pp. 74–107; Paul W. Werth, "From Resistance to Subversion: Imperial Power, Indigenous Opposition, and Their Entanglement," *Kritika,* 2000, v. 1, n. 1, p. 22; Yanni Kotsonis, *Making Peasants Backward: Agricultural Cooperatives and the Agrarian Question in Russia, 1861–1914* (New York, 1999), pp. 133–34.

8 Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Colonization, Conquest, and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), pp. 2–3.

9 On the topography, vegetation, climate, and soil structure of the European steppe, see Robert N. Taaffe, "The Geographic Setting," in Denis Sinor (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (New York, 1990), pp. 30–35; John Sparks, *Realms of the Russian Bear: A Natural History of Russia and the Central Asian Republics* (Boston, 1992), pp. 146–53; John Massey Stuart, *The Nature of Russia* (New York, 1991), pp. 80–101.

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

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

10 On the steppe's peoples prior to and around the turn of the first millennium, see Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 233–82; Golden, "The Peoples of the South Russian Steppes," in Sinor (ed.), *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia,* pp. 263–84; Imre Boba, *Nomads, Norsemen, and Slavs: Eastern Europe in the Ninth Century* (The Hague, 1967), pp. 40–43; Ia.A. Fedorov and G.S. Fedorov, *Rannye tiurki na severnom Kavkaze* (Moscow, 1978); S.A. Pletneva, "Pechenegi, torki i polovtsy v iuzhnorusskikh stepiakh," *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii SSSR* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1958), n. 62, pp. 151–226; and Pletneva (ed.), *Stepi Evrazii v epokhu srednevekov'ia* (Moscow, 1981), pp. 213–28. For a succinct discussion of the emergence of steppe pastoralism, see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (New York, 2002), pp. 21–43.

11 A.M. Khazanov, "Characteristic Features of Nomadic Communities in the Eurasian Steppes," in Wolfgang Weissleder (ed.), *The Nomadic Alternative: Modes and Models of Interaction in the African-Asian Deserts and Steppes* (The Hague, 1978), pp. 119–26; Golden, *Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples,* pp. 3, 42. Though it treats contemporary Arab nomads, see also William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster, "Who Are These Nomads? What Do They Do? Continuous Change or Changing Continuities?" in Joseph Ginat and Anatoly M. Khazanov (eds.), *Changing Nomads in a Changing World* (Brighton, Eng., 1998), pp. 24–37.

Natural Zones of Northern Eurasia

rated the nomadic societies to the west. The formation of these eastern steppe empires was directly related to relations with the Chinese, a circumstance that points to an essential fact of steppe nomadic pastoralism: the people who practiced it were always tied to and dependent on the world of the sedentarists.[12] This was as true for the nomadic societies of the European steppe as it was for those farther east. Through either trading, raiding, military service, or royal diplomacy, the western nomads were enmeshed with the agricultural societies and empires that bordered their territories: with the Byzantines in the Pontic region, the outposts of Arab power in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia, the Turkic-ruled states of the northern Middle East, Central Asia, and Middle Volga (Volga Bulgaria), and, to the northwest, in an area where the forest and steppe ran together, with the people eventually known as the Rus'.[13]

12 Peter B. Golden, *Nomads and Sedentary Societies in Medieval Eurasia* (Washington, D.C., 1998), pp. 38–40; Anatoly Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Julia Crookenden, trans.) (2nd ed.; Madison, Wisc., 1994), pp. xxxi–xxxii passim. On relations between nomadic peoples and China on the eastern steppes, see Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

13 See David Christian, *Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia,* v. 1, *Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), pp. 245–352, 357–61.