

How “Modern” was Russian Imperialism?*

Alexander MORRISON

Is there such a thing as “modern” Imperialism? Does it have any common characteristics? What distinguishes it from the Ancient Empires of Persia, Greece or China, or from the medieval and early-modern Empires of the Mongols and Ottomans? Can we speak of a common form of “European” Imperialism emerging in the 19th century, as Europe’s growing fiscal, military and technological superiority over the rest of the world was transmuted into commercial and territorial domination? These are all broad theoretical questions which have long exercised the minds of historians of empire. On one level they are unanswerable: there is no universally-accepted definition of either “empire” or “modernity,” but like many concepts which provoke acres of sterile semantic debate, we generally know them when we see them.¹ The classic Weberian idea of modernity has it originating in Europe, and associates it with (amongst other things) industrialisation, urbanisation, bureaucratisation, secularisation, the simultaneous rise of individualism and state power, and the overall “disenchantment” of the human race as it turns from magic to rationality.² To this E. P. Thompson added the accurate measurement of time, making possible industrial discipline, “working hours” and common temporal awareness.³ Benedict Anderson’s notion of the modern Nation-State as an “Imagined Community” also includes shared time, the linking together of people who do not know each other and are in widely

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¹ A stimulating discussion of “empire” is to be found in Dominic Lieven, “Empire: A Word and its Meanings,” *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London, 2000), pp. 1–26; on the vagueness and changing meanings of “modernity,” see Michael Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006), pp. 692–716.

² H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford, 1946).

³ E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967), pp. 56–97.

separated places at particular moments of “national” significance, and the end of any feeling of “simultaneity” with past events.⁴ These are just a few of the most commonly-invoked markers of “modernity.”

Over the last thirty years historians have mounted a sustained critique of the Weberian model. Some do this from a postcolonial perspective, claiming it is Eurocentric and implicitly endorses colonialism. Others simply point to the gaping holes in Weber’s paradigm, not least the great religious revivals of 19th-century Europe and 20th-century America, and the widespread failure of most of the world to industrialise and embrace rational individualism. As with many such theories it is perhaps too early to say if they represent a correct prediction of the trajectory of social evolution, but amidst the murk certain important ideas have emerged: firstly, most of humanity has not yet become “modern,” and (some would argue) will never do so, whilst most of those who have find that modern and pre-modern elements can co-exist, often quite comfortably, within a single individual’s identity; secondly, and similarly, modernity seems to exist in pockets dotted around the world, rather than coinciding neatly with notional “civilizational” boundaries; thirdly, Europe did not have a monopoly on its origins; fourthly, historians can now speak of the emergence of “multiple modernities,” which share some characteristics (such as urbanisation and common temporal awareness) but not others (such as secularisation and industrialisation) emerging at different times in different places around the globe. Sheldon Pollock has repeatedly urged historians to be cautious in assuming the lack of modernity, or of any capacity for developing it, within pre-colonial societies such as India before the mid-18th century.⁵ As David Washbrook has shown, the industrial revolution in Britain, that defining moment in Europe’s “invention” of modernity, was based upon the manufacture of cotton textiles in order to compete with Indian innovation and manufacturing capacity: it cannot be understood simply as a European phenomenon.⁶ Similarly, China was a highly bureaucratised society with institutions (such as competitive examinations for entry to the civil service) which have long been considered characteristic of “European modernity” hundreds of years before such things were ever thought of in

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1999), pp. 22–24.

⁵ Sheldon Pollock, “Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern South Asia: Introduction,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004), pp. 19–21.

⁶ David Washbrook, “From Comparative Sociology to Global History: Britain and India in the Pre-History of Modernity,” *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997), pp. 410–443.

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Europe.⁷ The destruction of the concept of “modernity” is far from complete: certain phenomena associated with it, notably time-keeping and industrialisation, are too real and too important in recent history to disappear entirely at the wave of a post-modern wand. Washbrook also suggests that a certain type of “modern” Imperialism can also be identified, and that it emanates from the West.⁸ It is this idea which I would like to pursue further: in my view the implications of these arguments for the distinction made between “modern” and “pre-modern” empires have not been sufficiently thought through.

When historians use such categories as “modern European empires” or “European colonialism” they normally have a certain Imperial archetype in mind. It will be a maritime empire with a clear distinction between metropole and colony, visible in cultural, linguistic and ethnic terms and enshrined legally; it would be acquired by conquest or commercial penetration, and held by force. Many historians would also assert, following J. A. Hobson, V. I. Lenin and, more recently, P. J. Cain & A. G. Hopkins, that it has a particularly close relationship with finance and industrial capitalism.⁹ It will have some notion of a “civilising mission,” and employ this and other Enlightenment discourses to legitimate its rule. It will have varying hierarchies of political rights based largely on race, and at its heart will lie a nation-state,¹⁰ in the name of whose privileged titular nationality all these territories will be held; all of this then contributes to a clear and insuperable barrier between ruling and subject peoples; indeed this entire model of empire is based upon ideas of difference, clear boundaries and demarcations, however difficult these often were to uphold in practice in the face of 19th-century ideas about universal human political rights.¹¹ The most common archetypes invoked are the British and French empires, but the German,

⁷ Mark Elvin, “A Working Definition of Modernity?” *Past & Present* 113 (1986), pp. 209–216.

⁸ Washbrook, “From Comparative Sociology,” p. 417.

⁹ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a Study* (London, 1902); V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow, 1982); P. J. Cain & A. G. Hopkins, “Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas: I. The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850,” *Economic History Review* 39, no. 4 (1986), pp. 501–525; idem, “Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas: II. New Imperialism, 1850–1945,” *Economic History Review* 40, no.1 (1987), pp. 1–26.

¹⁰ Peter Van der Veer suggests that the nation state with its internal and external colonising projects that seek to remake subjects and citizens and erase their “backwardness” is itself a defining phenomenon of “modernity,” although Washbrook points out that he overlooks the anti-enlightenment, romantic heritage of the nation-state. See Peter Van Der Veer, “The Global History of ‘Modernity’ ” & David Washbrook, “The Global History of ‘Modernity’: A Response to a Reply,” *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998), pp. 289, 305.

¹¹ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in idem, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 1–56.

Belgian and Dutch overseas empires all fall clearly enough into this pattern. The Japanese empire in China and South-East Asia, which shared most of these characteristics, is also commonly placed in this category, as an example of imitative or “neo-European” Imperialism.¹² The Spanish and Portuguese empires, despite clearly being European, are often omitted from consideration as being mere relics of much greater early-modern Empires. The Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian Empires, despite unquestionably existing in the period of modernity, are often left out on the grounds that they were land-based, dynastic agglomerations, and in the case of the latter two only very marginally “European.”¹³

The inconsistencies of these categorisations are endless; they both obscure the differences between different types of “modern, European imperialism” and the similarities between these and “Asiatic” or “pre-modern” empires. As John Darwin has recently suggested, the emergence of European hegemony in Asia cannot be understood without reference to the great early-modern Islamic Empires of the Ottomans, Mughals and Safavids, whose emergence was almost contemporaneous with the first stirrings of Portuguese, British and Dutch Imperialism, and which until the early 18th century were more than holding their own against them.¹⁴ That other great early-modern Empire, Qing China, survives to this day under a different political guise, and retains the colonial peripheries of Turkestan and Tibet which it conquered in the 17th and 18th centuries, where it pursues a policy of railway construction and mass colonisation highly reminiscent of 19th-century European Imperialism.

Historians have also long been aware of the many differences between different European colonial powers, even if at times they conflated the intentions and outcomes of Imperial policies. Henri Brunschwig famously argued that British Imperialism was motivated largely by hard-headed commercial and strategic concerns, whilst France’s was an often irrational outgrowth of thwarted nationalism in the aftermath of the Napoleonic and Franco-Prussian wars.¹⁵ France proudly proclaimed her “*mission civilisatrice*,” and

¹² See, however the rather more subtle and wide-ranging discussion of the place of Japanese Imperialism amongst the European Empires in W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894–1945* (Oxford, 1987), pp.1–13.

¹³ D. K. Fieldhouse, for instance, does include Russia (but not Japan or the Ottoman Empire) in his survey of colonial empires, but is clearly irritated at having to do so and confines his attention to Turkestan. *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1966), pp. 325, 334–341.

¹⁴ John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (London, 2006).

¹⁵ Henri Brunschwig, *French Colonialism 1871–1914: Myths and Realities* (London, 1966), pp. 20–30, 182–186.

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through protective tariffs and cultural Imperialism sought to create islands of Frenchness around the world. The British were free-trading, usually very distrustful of evidence of Anglicisation amongst their subject peoples, and the great centres of their empire were cosmopolitan entrepôts such as Alexandria, Bombay, or Singapore, the “plural societies” identified in J. S. Furnivall’s pioneering work.¹⁶ In practice, of course, this distinction was often blurred: Britain’s self-governing white settler dominions were mostly protectionist as well, the cultural (and particularly the sporting) legacy which the British empire left behind in Africa and Asia was every bit as profound as that of the French, whilst Algiers was no less cosmopolitan than Rangoon.¹⁷ However the rhetoric (and perhaps the aims) of Empire were often rather different, and furthermore Britain was a monarchy, with the crown at the heart of the whole Imperial system, whilst in France for most of the 19th century (and certainly at the time when Imperial expansion was at its height, under the Third Republic) the people were, in theory, sovereign. For outsiders, at least, Britain was defined by her Empire, however little attention the British may have paid to it domestically: it was what made her a great power.¹⁸ For the Germans, though, their colonial empire was arguably little more than a set of bargaining chips to be played on the diplomatic tables of Europe.¹⁹ The Dutch, meanwhile, never even used their own language in governing the East Indies, employing instead a Malay lingua franca which subsequently became Bahasa Indonesia, meaning that their cultural legacy in this respect was minimal. Most obviously, perhaps, the general category of “European Imperialism” elides the vital distinction between settler and non-settler colonies, something of far greater importance than the approach or policies of any particular country.

So, amongst the 19th-century empires, does one stand out as being more different from all the rest than they all are from each other? Russia would be the example put forward most frequently: here was a great, land-based empire, with its roots in the early-modern period, whose titular nationality was ill-defined and enjoyed no particular privileges, whose ruling elite was cosmopolitan, with a disproportionate role played by non-Russians, in particular Poles, Baltic Germans and Georgians, and which had at its heart

¹⁶ J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 117–123.

¹⁷ See for instance the gloriously Orientalist imagining of Algiers by the popular 19th-century novelist Ouida in *Under Two Flags* (London, 1863).

¹⁸ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 1–24.

¹⁹ The classic expression of this argument is A. J. P. Taylor, *Germany’s First Bid for Colonies 1884–1885: A Move in Bismarck’s European Policy* (London, 1938), pp. 1–15.

not a nation, but an arguably alien ruling dynasty. Mediaeval Muscovy expanded into contiguous territories, many of them sparsely populated, and some Russian historians argue that it ought really to be seen as the heir to the Mongol Empire.²⁰ With leading noble families such as the Stroganovs and Yusupovs descended from Muslim Tatars, with colonists in Siberia “going native” rather than the natives becoming russified,²¹ racial boundaries seem blurred. Class or *Soslovie*, not race, was what determined hierarchies in Russia. Above all, where is that vital distinction between metropole and colony, that barrier between the political, cultural and territorial “nation” at the heart of Empire, and the colonies at the periphery? Russia’s identity is said to be inseparable from Empire, her nationalism warped and weakened by it, her people even described as the chief victims of “their” empire by some historians.²² Even today one cannot really isolate “Russia” on a map: the rump of the Russian federation which was left behind after the break-up of the USSR, with its Far Eastern and Siberian territories and its patchwork of “autonomous” *oblasts* for different nationalities, is very far from being a nation-state. All of this would suggest that if Russia belongs in any “category,” it is that of the early-modern dynastic empires which survived into the modern period, those of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans: certainly some influential cultural historians have argued that to equate Russian Imperialism with that of the British or French is problematic and inaccurate.²³

Russia certainly was distinctive: but this is a relative, not an absolute judgement. Was she more distinct from the French and British empires than they were from each other? If so, by how much? Several of the points made above about Russia could also be made (sometimes with tongue firmly in cheek) about the British empire, where David Cannadine has emphasised the vital role of the (German) royal family and monarch as the keystone of the Imperial hierarchy, binding together Indian Princes, the emirs of Northern Nigeria and the Sheikhs of the Gulf protectorates in an Imperial version of the “great chain of being.” The rituals surrounding the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India, and the neo-mediaeval “feudalism” of Lord Lytton’s great Imperial Durbar of 1877 epitomise this

²⁰ Sergei Panarin, Dmitrii Raevskii, “Predislovie,” in *Evraziya, Lyudi i Mify* (Moscow, 2003), p. 11.

²¹ See Willard Sunderland, “Russians into Yakuts? ‘Going Native’ and Problems of Russian National Identity in the Siberian North, 1870s–1914,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 4 (1996), pp.806–825.

²² Austin Jersild, “‘Russia,’ from the Vistula to the Terek to the Amur,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 3 (2000), pp. 531–546; Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia, People and Empire* (London, 1997).

²³ Hosking, *Russia, People and Empire*, pp. 39–40; Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (London, 2002), pp. 381–382.

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vision of Imperial hierarchy, which was every bit as monarchical and class-based as anything which existed in Russia.²⁴ Lord Liverpool, British prime minister from 1812–1828, had a Gujarati grandmother, and a good deal of cultural exchange and racial mingling between East and West took place in the British and French Empires, even if from the mid-eighteenth century this was on strictly unequal terms and boundaries had hardened by the 1830s.²⁵ Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, the British commander in the 2nd Afghan and Boer Wars, had an Indian grandmother and stepmother. Class was sometimes as important as race in determining British imperial hierarchies, meaning that Indian princes could attend elite schools and universities and gain admission to exclusive clubs which no white working-class male could dream of entering; that the first Indian member of Parliament at Westminster was elected in 1892;²⁶ whilst in the 1890s K.S. Ranjitsinhji could not merely play cricket for Cambridge and England, but also captain Sussex County Cricket Club and have white Britons under his authority.²⁷ Certainly there was a much more obvious metropole at the heart of the British Empire, but the huge variations in rights accorded to British subjects across the empire and within Britain itself helped to blur this distinction somewhat.²⁸ The “metropole” was divided between four different nations, at least one of which, the Irish, could claim to have been colonised by England. At the same time the Scots and Irish if anything played a more important role within the Imperial ruling elite than the English themselves. Not for nothing was it called the “British Empire,” but if a British *nationality* ever existed then it was an Imperial one which arguably has not survived the loss of empire.²⁹

Perhaps, then, we should be looking at Britain as the Imperial odd man out, rather than an Imperial archetype? Britain’s empire contained a great sub-Imperial metropole in India, a land-based empire in itself, which, as has been rightly observed by Douglas Peers,

²⁴ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London, 2001), pp. 9–10, 101–120.

²⁵ See William Dalrymple, *White Mughals* (London, 2003), esp. pp. 31–32 on Sir David Ouchterlony who was British resident at Delhi in the 1830s, and supposedly provided each of his thirteen Indian wives with her own elephant!

²⁶ Dadabhai Naoroji, Liberal MP for Finsbury and a prominent Indian Nationalist.

²⁷ See Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*; Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj* (London, 1980).

²⁸ David Washbrook, “...And Having Melted into Thin Air, Then Rains Down Again,” *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 4 (1999), p. 570.

²⁹ For a polemical treatment of this question from a Scottish Nationalist perspective, see Tom Nairn, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London, 2000), pp. 39–46, and from a right-wing “English” perspective, Simon Heffer, “A Crisis of Identity,” in idem, *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England* (London, 1999), pp. 1–57.

until at least the mid-19th-century was a military-fiscal garrison-state, dependent on agrarian tribute, rather than on industrial capitalist production or exploitation. Acquiring territory (and therefore land revenue), controlling labour and funding a locally-raised army were the principal aims of the state in British India during the period 1750–1860, not opening up the country to trade and investment.³⁰ Perhaps British India had more in common not only with the early-modern Islamic “gunpowder empires,” but also with Russia, than is often supposed. India was at once anomalous and absolutely central to the whole structure of British Imperialism as it emerged. It had no exact equivalent in any other European Empire: the closest would be French Algeria, but this was a settler colony with a fraction of the population, was merely a short hop across the Mediterranean, and administratively a part of the metropole. This in turn leads one to question the assumption that maritime empires are necessarily more divided by distance than land-based ones. In the 1870s, when it took two weeks to sail from Southampton to Bombay, and a matter of hours from Marseille to Algiers, it took two to three months for a caravan to travel between the frontier town of Orenburg and the capital of Russian Turkestan, Tashkent. The role played by the sea as an imaginative and cultural frontier is certainly important (though arguably no more important than that played by the “*Prostor*” of the Eurasian Steppe, which separated European Russia from its Central Asian colonies). However, before the railway age, the sea was the world’s main highway, a means of rapid communication rather than a barrier. The Empires of Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, like Russia’s, all had their roots in the early-modern period; in some cases they had expanded into more or less contiguous areas with which they had a long historical relationship (Algeria and West Africa in the French case, Ireland in the case of the British, and, if we look back even further, the Spanish *reconquista* of Andalusia which was a prelude to expansion in the Americas). In some cases they also succeeded earlier Imperial polities, most obviously the Mughals in India (where Bombay was also acquired by the British through inter-dynastic marriage). None of this amounts to saying that these empires were the *same* as Russia’s, but they certainly suggest that the differences are those of degree, not of kind.

All of this suggests that the comparison of ostensibly very different “types” of empire is far from a futile exercise, that it can yield as many and as rich and unexpected insights as the much-vaunted “interdisciplinary” approach to history. Whilst the application of theoretical insights developed in the study of one empire to the understanding of another

³⁰ Douglas Peers, “Gunpowder Empires and the Garrison State: Modernity, Hybridity, and the Political Economy of Colonial India, circa 1750–1860,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 2 (2007), pp. 245–258.

is relatively common,³¹ sustained empirical comparison between empires is still rare.³² In my own work I have looked at British India and Russian Turkestan (specifically the region of Samarkand), and the similarities and differences which I found were not necessarily those one would expect.³³ In both cases the military played a prominent role in administration, often without having received any appropriate education or training. Both the Russians in Turkestan and the British in India had difficulty in gaining accurate information about newly-conquered territories, and relied heavily on local agents and intermediaries. The nature of these intermediaries was often rather different, however, as Russian rule was markedly more anti-aristocratic than that of the British in India. Here, before 1857, the British had pursued an inconsistent policy, both creating a class of landowning *Zamindars* in Bengal in the 1790s and entrusting them with the collection of land revenue,³⁴ and also expropriating the *Taluqdars* of Oudh in 1856.³⁵ However after the Rebellion of 1857, which was widely attributed to the social unrest caused by anti-aristocratic policies,³⁶ the British generally sought to rule through local princes, tribal and religious leaders and landowning elites, appropriating their pre-existing legitimacy and

³¹ Benedict Anderson’s ideas about print capitalism and national identity were originally developed in the course of his studies of the Dutch East Indies, but have of course achieved near-universal significance for historians, whilst the writings of the “Subaltern Studies” collective of historians of South Asia have had an influence well beyond their geographical sphere. For a recent example of the application of postcolonial theory to Russian Imperialism, see Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent* (Bloomington, IN, 2007).

³² Amongst the most interesting recent examples of such a comparative approach are Beate Eschment and Hans Harder, eds., *Looking at the Coloniser: Cross-Cultural Perceptions in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Bengal and Related Areas* (Würzburg, 2004); Dina Khoury and Dane Kennedy, “Comparing Empires: The Ottoman Domains and the British Raj in the Long Nineteenth Century,” the introduction to a special issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 2 (2007). It is noticeable however that both collections consist almost entirely of essays that sit alongside each other, leaving the reader to make comparisons, rather than the authors seeking to make comparisons themselves. The exception (characteristically) in the latter is C. A. Bayly, “Distorted Development: The Ottoman Empire and British India, circa 1780–1916,” pp.332–344, although this spends more time looking at the connections between the two rather than comparing systems of Imperial rule. Most recently, we now have a sweeping comparative survey by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010)

³³ See A. S. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India* (Oxford, 2008).

³⁴ P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead: Eastern India 1740–1828* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 122–127, 139–144. See also Anand Yang, *The Limited Raj* (Delhi, 1989).

³⁵ Rajkumar Sarvadhikari, *The Taluqdari Settlement in Oudh* (Delhi, 1985) (1882), p. 4; Iltudus Prichard, *The Administration of India from 1859 to 1868* (London, 1869), pp. 21–27.

³⁶ See Thomas R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857–1870* (Princeton, NJ, 1964).

seeking to buy their loyalty with land-grants and tax-breaks.³⁷ By contrast, in the mid-19th century the Russians abandoned their previous Imperial policy of assimilating the aristocracies of conquered regions (seen most obviously in the case of the Tatar and Georgian nobility). The reasons for this were complicated, but had a great deal to do with the growing suspicion of Islam engendered by the long-running war in the North Caucasus, where this change of policy first became visible.³⁸ After they conquered the settled regions of Central Asia in 1865–72, the Russians expropriated or attempted to marginalise the *Beks*, *Amlakdars* and *Khoja* lineages of pre-conquest Turkestan and sought to replace them with a local administration whose members would be entirely dependent on the colonial power for their authority.³⁹ The background of the men who came to fill posts in the so-called “native administration” (*Tuzemnaya Administratsiya*) – *Volostnoi Upravitel'*, *Aksakal*, *Aryk-Aksakal* or indeed *Qazi*⁴⁰ – is not always clear. Many may have belonged to precisely the landowning and religious elite (*Khoja*) groups of which the Russians were suspicious: but the intention was certainly very different.

Both powers found it very difficult to manage pre-existing systems of irrigation owing to a lack of detailed knowledge, and were forced to devolve the vital business of water distribution to local agents. However the implications of this were much more serious for the Russians in Turkestan than they were for the British in Punjab, because in the former territory almost all artificial irrigation pre-dated the conquest, whilst in the latter the British had built most of the canals themselves. The policies towards Islamic law of the two powers also differed, with the Russians preserving (albeit altering) the *Qazis* courts, the British abolishing them and instead incorporating an elaborate structure of “Anglo-Muhammadan Law” into their penal code in India. It is interesting, though, that one of the unfulfilled aims of Count Konstantin Pahlen’s 1908 reforming mission in Turkestan was to create a codified version of the *Sharia*, with Anglo-Muhammadan law as his model.⁴¹

The Russians in Central Asia were not noticeably more racially and culturally

³⁷ See for instance, Sarah Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 36–56.

³⁸ Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire* (Montreal, 2002), pp. 32–33; Firouzeh Mostashari, *On the Religious Frontier* (London, 2006), pp. 83–84, chronicle the erosion of privileges and political power amongst, respectively, North Caucasian and Azeri aristocratic elites from the 1830s onwards.

³⁹ *Beks* were regional governors under the Bukharan administration, *Amlakdars* were tax-farmers, whilst *Khojas* claimed descent from the Prophet’s kin but were also representatives of major Sufi lineages, mostly Naqshbandi.

⁴⁰ Canton administrator; village elder; irrigation official; Islamic judge.

⁴¹ See Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), pp. 70–71; Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, pp. 274–282 for a discussion of this episode.

tolerant or assimilationist than the British. On the contrary they were if anything more hostile to and suspicious of Islam than the British were, with a paranoid fear of the “fanaticism” of the Sufi orders in particular engendered by their forty-year struggle in the North Caucasus.⁴² Their descriptions of the local population ranged from the derogatory to the patronising, but certainly never indicated that they viewed the Sarts, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Kirghiz of Central Asia as equals, or indulged in ideas of pan-Asian “kinship.” It is probable that biological racism was less widespread and influential in the Russian empire than in the British, but it was by no means unknown, and in any case this was only one of many markers of the difference and inferiority of subject peoples, racial, religious and cultural, which the Russians and other Europeans employed.⁴³ Russia may not have had as clear a distinction between metropole and periphery as the British Empire, but there was an idea of what constituted *Korennaya Rus*, and this was reflected administratively in the distinction between areas under civilian and under military rule, those in which the liberal reforms of the 1860s were applied, and those where they were withheld: between *Zemstvo* and non-*Zemstvo* provinces, and between those which enjoyed the independent civilian courts and legal code of 1864, and those which did not.⁴⁴ There was no single concept of Russian Imperial “citizenship,”⁴⁵ any more than there was in the British empire, and all the evidence of the last years of Tsarism suggests that in Russia’s fledgling democratic culture the enjoyment of political rights and “Europeanness” (if not Russianness) were becoming increasingly closely aligned. Thus the franchises for the Municipal Dumas in Baku and Tashkent were heavily skewed in favour of European settlers, whilst Turkestan’s representation in the Duma was removed altogether after 1907.⁴⁶ The events of 1916–17 in Turkestan saw an all-out ethnic war, and a land-grab by Russian settlers. Subsequently under the guise of “Bolshevism” they attempted to appropriate the power of the Imperial

⁴² See further Alexander Knysh “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm,” *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 2 (2002), pp. 139–173.

⁴³ N. A. Riasanovsky, “Asia through Russian Eyes,” in W. S. Vucinich, ed., *Russia and Asia* (Stanford, 1972), pp. 3–29; Alexander Morrison, “Russian Rule in Turkestan and the Example of British India,” *Slavonic & East European Review* 84, no. 4 (2006), pp.706–707; Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ For a clear and incisive description of these administrative distinctions, see Kimitaka Matsuzato, “General-gubernatorstva v Rossiiskoi imperii: ot etnicheskogo k territorial'nomu podkhodu,” in I. Gerasimov, et al., eds., *Novaya imperskaya istoriya postsovetskogo prostranstva* (Kazan', 2004), pp. 456–458.

⁴⁵ Alexander Morrison, “Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 2 (2012), pp. 329–366.

⁴⁶ Mostashari, *On the Religious Frontier*, pp. 69–70; Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society*, pp. 83, 94–95; Khalid, *Muslim Cultural Reform*, pp. 233–235.

state for themselves in order to preserve their privileged position, treating the local population with a brutality as extreme as anything seen in the Rif war or at Amritsar in 1919.⁴⁷

So when it comes to the questions of cultural assimilation, racial and religious (in)tolerance, the “colonial” nature of the administration, violence and the distribution of political rights, what might seem key differences between British and Russian Imperialism turn out to be a good deal less stark than is commonly supposed. A different picture begins to emerge when comparing fiscal, economic and military policy. The British exploited India fiscally and militarily, using Indian revenues to fund an army that made Britain a world power on land as well as at sea, and which was used as an Imperial police force everywhere from China to Mesopotamia. By contrast the Russians lowered taxes after they conquered Turkestan, and proved very ineffective at collecting even those they imposed. Combined with their reluctance to recruit the local population into the army, the subsequent cost of the Russian garrison there meant that they ran a massive budget deficit in the region until at least 1905.⁴⁸ This pattern was repeated elsewhere in the Russian borderlands, with only Poland making a substantial net contribution to the Imperial budget. Russia’s most “colonial” peripheries, Turkestan and the Caucasus, were both a substantial drain in budgetary terms.⁴⁹

Naturally the economic benefits of a colony to an empire cannot be understood purely in fiscal terms. The desire for a secure source of raw cotton for the Moscow textile industry when supplies were disrupted during the American Civil War is still frequently given as the main motivation for the conquest of Turkestan in the 1860s.⁵⁰ But this cannot have provided the spur for a campaign which began in earnest in 1853 with the seizure of the Kokandian fortress of Aq-Masjid, and which would have come to an end much sooner had the Crimean War not intervened. By the time the Russians moved into the cotton-growing oasis regions to the south of the Steppe after 1865 the American Civil War was

⁴⁷ Adeeb Khalid, “Tashkent 1917: Muslim Politics in Revolutionary Turkestan,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 2 (1996), pp. 279–280; Marko Buttino, *Revoliutsiya Naoborot* (Moscow, 2007), pp. 58–91, 172–206.

⁴⁸ From 1868–81 Turkestan ran a deficit which totalled 85,881,204 roubles – see F. K. Girs, *Otchet, Revizuyushchago, po Vysochaisheму Povelenyu, Turkestanskii Krai* (St. Petersburg, 1884), p. 366, and even in 1902 Government expenditure in the region exceeded income by over 10 million roubles – see V. V. Stratonov, “Dokhody i Raskhody Kazny,” *Turkestanskii Kalendar' na 1904 g.* (Tashkent, 1904), pp. 2–8. The figures in the Pahlen report of 1910 which show the beginnings of a surplus from 1905 are in my view suspect.

⁴⁹ Ekaterina Pravilova, “‘Tsena imperii’: tsentr i okrainy v rossiiskom biudzhete v XIX – nachalo XX vv.,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2002), pp. 115–144.

⁵⁰ Marko Buttino, *Revoliutsiya Naoborot* (Moscow, 2007), p. 18.

over in any case. Whatever the motivation for the conquest however, the subsequent economic exploitation of the region as a captive market for Russian manufactured goods and a source of raw materials is normally assumed without question. The rapid expansion of cotton cultivation in Turkestan in the late Tsarist period saw exports soar from 873,000 *poods* in 1888 to 13,697,000 *poods* in 1913 (which supplied about a half of the Empire’s needs),⁵¹ and a growing dependence on grain from European Russia. It foreshadowed the monoculture of the Soviet era, and is usually seen as fostering a classic “colonial” relationship of dependence and exploitation, the one aspect of Russian Imperialism which even Soviet historians felt comfortable comparing with the western Empires.⁵² Here the Moscow textile “barons” could play a similar Machiavellian role to Hobson’s Jewish financiers in South Africa, an argument which fitted snugly into official Marxism-Leninism, unsurprising given Lenin’s partial debt to Hobson.⁵³ Western historians also accepted at face value the assumption of successful exploitation for Imperial benefit implicit in the much-quoted words of the Agriculture Minister A.V. Krivoshein “every excess *pood* of Turkestan wheat competes with Russian and Siberian wheat; every *pood* of Turkestan cotton competes with American cotton. Thus it is preferable to supply the region with imported though expensive grain and to free irrigated land for cotton.”⁵⁴ There is certainly no doubt that by the early years of the 20th century, the Tsarist Government was *seeking* to exploit its peripheries and make them pay: that does not, however, necessarily mean that this central policy was always endorsed by local officials, or indeed that it was economically literate.⁵⁵ As Krivoshein’s words imply, Russian economic policy in Turkestan was driven by autarkic concerns quite alien to the British (for whom Free Trade

⁵¹ A. I. Knize, V. I. Yuferev, “Khlopkovodstvo,” *Aziatskaya Rossiya*, vol. 2: *Zemlya i Khozyaistvo* (St. Petersburg, 1914), p. 278.

⁵² See Z. D. Kastel'skaya, *Iz Istorii Turkestanskogo Kraya* (Moscow, 1980), pp. 51–66; M. I. Veksel'man, *Rossiiskii monopolisticheskii i inostrannyi kapital v Srednei Azii (Konets XIX – nachalo XXv.)* (Tashkent, 1987), pp. 3–4, 9–29.

⁵³ A. M. Eckstein, “Is there a ‘Hobson-Lenin Thesis’ on Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial Expansion?” *Economic History Review* 44, no. 2 (1991), pp. 306–307.

⁵⁴ A. V. Krivoshein, *Zapiska Glavnoupravlyayushchego Zemledeliem i Zemleustroistvom o Poezdke v Turkestanskii Krai v 1912 godu* (St. Petersburg, 1912), pp. 7–8, quoted in David Mackenzie, “Turkestan’s significance to Russia,” *Russian Review* 33, no. 2 (1974), p. 182.

⁵⁵ A. Woeikoff, a government agronomist, in *Le Turkestan Russe* (Paris, 1914), pp. 254–265 complains that Russian military officials in Turkestan obstructed the spread of cotton cultivation for fear it would cause social unrest. This is borne out in Muriel Joffe’s excellent article “Autocracy, Capitalism and Empire: The Politics of Irrigation,” *Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (1995), pp. 365–388 which details how a scheme by Moscow mill-owners to acquire their own large cotton-growing estates in Turkestan and employ local labour (rather than relying on cotton grown on peasant smallholdings, as 90% of it was) was stymied by local administrative opposition.

was a sacred mantra), as the Russians sought to make their empire as independent as possible of imports of American cotton. If we look more carefully at Tsarist cotton policy, it becomes clear that it was only through considerable fiscal engineering that Turkestan cotton could compete with American imports on price: it was given tax breaks which did not reflect the real value of water used in its production,⁵⁶ and above all the state imposed heavy duties on imported cotton, rising to 3 roubles 15 kopeks per *pood* by 1894, which effectively protected Turkestan cotton from foreign competition and acted as an indirect subsidy.⁵⁷ The net effect of Russian policies may have been to drive up the price of raw cotton and enrich Turkestan merchants and farmers, not the Moscow textile barons.

Perhaps then it is in the fiscal and economic policies of Empire, rather than in cultural questions about Russia's "hybridity" or administrative and legal distinctions between metropole and colony, that the real distinctiveness of Russian Imperialism begins to emerge. Although all European Empires had unprofitable colonies (that, after all, was the substance of J. A. Hobson's stinging attack on the "New Imperialism"),⁵⁸ and all mounted conquests for strategic rather than economic reasons, perhaps only in the Russian Empire, and subsequently the Soviet Union, did the metropole so consistently subsidise the colonial periphery.⁵⁹ Together with this, I would argue that the Russian colonial state was distinctively weak. If, as Elvin has suggested, one common characteristic of European modernity in particular is its "ability to create power,"⁶⁰ then the Russian empire did this less effectively than its western European counterparts. It could project crude military power, but it could not control or remake local society effectively: its institutions were too weak and over-stretched, its knowledge of the societies it conquered too faulty and superficial. Daniel Brower has argued that the failure to move from a rudimentary (and separate) military regime to an integrated civilian one in Turkestan was part of the Russian Empire's wider failure to modernise, which led it to collapse under the stresses of war.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Graf K. K. Pahlen, *Otchet, Revizuyushchago, po Vysochaisheму Povelēniyu, Turkestanskogo Kraya*, vol. 5: *Nalogi i Poshliny* (St. Petersburg, 1909), p. 75.

⁵⁷ S. N. Abashin, "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe i demograficheskie razvitie," in Abashin, Arapov and Bekmakhanova, eds., *Tsentrāl'naya Aziya v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow, 2008), p. 147.

⁵⁸ See *Imperialism, A Study*, Chaps. 2–3.

⁵⁹ See Ekaterina Pravilova, *Finansy imperii: den'gi i vlast' v politike Rossii na natsional'nykh okrainakh, 1801–1917* (Moscow, 2006); For an interesting point of comparison, see Avner Offer "The British Empire, 1870–1914: A Waste of Money?" *The Economic History Review* 46, no. 2 (1993), pp. 215–238, where he argues compellingly that it was not, and that in terms of its contributions to defence and to Britain's effort in both World Wars, it paid for itself many times over.

⁶⁰ Elvin, "A Working Definition of Modernity?" p. 210.

⁶¹ Daniel Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (London, 2003), pp. 152–175.

How “Modern” was Russian Imperialism?

Arguably the Russian empire was under-governed everywhere, and only had a very fragmented and contradictory modernising project even in its European heartlands.⁶² At the periphery, in Turkestan, it was a very shallow regime, which did not penetrate deeply into local society and was often manipulated by local elites in ways its officials deplored but could not prevent. As Tomohiko Uyama has shown for Semirechie, conscription and religious conversion, two vital tools of a modern state seeking to re-make its citizens, were only pursued half-heartedly, always tempered by the fear of provoking a revolt – a fear that turned out to be justified in 1916, when the *ukaz* introducing conscription into labour battalions provoked a widespread revolt and revealed the shallow roots of the Tsarist regime in the region, as well as its latent capacity for violence.⁶³ Whilst the limits of colonial power in other European non-settler colonies have long been recognised by historians of Empire,⁶⁴ the grand projects of enumeration and categorisation in censuses and law codes, of the creation of “colonial knowledge” which many now consider to have been as important as military might in securing European domination,⁶⁵ were very under-developed in Russia.⁶⁶

Thus a closer examination of Russia, that pre-modern, land-based, dynastic empire, reveals real differences, but also certain unexpected similarities to “modern” British maritime Imperialism, albeit sometimes in rather diluted form. This suggests to me that, rather than broad categorisations of Imperialism, with sharp distinctions between modern and pre-modern, “Asiatic” and European, all Imperialisms should be seen as existing on a continuum, with subtly shifting grades in between them, from Austria-Hungary at one end of the spectrum to, say, the Gilbert & Ellis islands at the other, with different parts of different empires located at different points on this spectrum in between. Thus in geographical, cultural and conceptual terms Russian Turkestan and British India can be seen as close neighbours; the Ukraine would be distant from the Gold Coast, but closer to

⁶² Sviatoslav Kaspe, “Imperial Political Culture and Modernization in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” in Burbank, et al., eds., *Russian Empire*, pp. 455–489; Brower, *Turkestan*, pp. ix, 174–175.

⁶³ Uyama Tomohiko, “A Particularist Empire: The Russian Policies of Christianization and Military Conscription in Central Asia,” in Uyama Tomohiko, ed., *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia* (Sapporo, 2007), pp. 23–63.

⁶⁴ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), pp. 142–144.

⁶⁵ See B. S. Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in idem, *An Anthropologist Amongst the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 224–254; idem, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

⁶⁶ I elaborate on this much more fully in “‘Applied Orientalism’ in British India and Tsarist Turkestan,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 3 (2009), pp. 619–647.

Ireland, Austrian Ruthenia or Ottoman Rumelia, whilst Siberia and Canada could also rub shoulders. Sometimes the similarity will be a product of geographical proximity or something as basic as climate and landscape; sometimes it will derive from shared cultural characteristics amongst subject populations, such as Islam; sometimes it will be found in the economic relationship between metropole and colony; and sometimes Imperial ruling elites and subject peoples will be actively borrowing ideas from each other, as the Russians did repeatedly from the British in particular.⁶⁷ Alongside these similarities, there will also, of course, be differences, but in neither case should we assume that these are simply a product of the policies of the rulers. The nature of Imperial control is determined as much, if not more, by the circumstances within the colony as it is by any particularities of metropolitan politics, culture and economics. What this means in turn is that, before attempting to make sweeping generalisations about the nature of “Russian” or “British,” “French” or indeed “modern” Imperialism, we should look carefully at the specifics of different regions and different colonies, and compare these. The literature on British and French Imperialism is already rich enough to make this a simple enough task, and that on Russian Imperialism is rapidly growing in depth and quality, to a point where it is no longer defensible to argue that the Russian empire was *sui generis*, “Eurasian,” “uniquely assimilationist” or otherwise qualitatively different from other modern European empires. Russia as a whole was unique – as unique as any other empire, but no more – and her various regions, borderlands and colonies, if considered separately, can indeed be found to fit wider patterns of European Imperial expansion and be examined comparatively with profit.

I would conclude with the observation that, without claiming to be able to define “modernity,” perhaps one thing which set the “modern” empires apart, was their heightened awareness of each other, and consequent global rivalry. This is connected to the sense of “common temporal awareness” which I referred to earlier: the emergence of a common sense of time, and a single way of measuring it, both in terms of the daily routine and in terms of development – the post-Enlightenment concepts of “backwardness” or “progress.” Previous empires had of course been rivals, had fought with each other, spied on each other, sought to steal each other’s technological advances: but they do not seem to have felt that they were part of some sort of gigantic pseudo-Darwinian contest, where the weakest and most “backward” would go to the wall and only the strongest and most “progressive” would survive. Instead their historians seem to have thought in terms of

⁶⁷ On this, see Morrison, “Russian Rule in Turkestan and the Example of British India.”

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cycles, of rise and fall, not of “advance.”⁶⁸ Certainly, it was only in the 19th century that Empires had accurate maps on which their territory and that of their rivals was clearly demarcated and painted in different colours to show who had control of the largest slices of the global pie. This, I would tentatively suggest, is a “modern” phenomenon, and one in which Russia shared, although it is perhaps equally applicable to all modern states and nationalities, and not just to Empires. I cannot really say how “modern” Russian Imperialism was – but I hope I have suggested that it was no less, and no more “modern,” than that of the other 19th-century empires.

⁶⁸ In my limited experience, in any case: certainly this seems to be true of both Polybius and Ibn Khaldun.