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The Implications of Transnationalism

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Implications of Transnationalism

Michael David-Fox (bio)

When *Kritika* published a special issue in 2001 on the state of the field ten years after the end of communism, it was logical to include a reassessment of the October Revolution and two pieces on the rapidly

developing investigation of the Stalin period.¹ Transnational history went unmentioned, along with international and comparative approaches, for they did not yet appear crucial to the state of the field. If “culture” was “everywhere” in the Russian history of the 1990s, talk of the transnational became ubiquitous in the 2000s.² In retrospect, however, the first post-Soviet decade laid the groundwork for the proliferation of cross-border and cross-cultural approaches by furthering a closely related phenomenon: intensive investigation of comparative dimensions to Russian and Soviet history.³

This essay argues that the interpretive implications of the transnational trend that crystallized in the second post-Soviet decade are most profound for the study of the revolutionary and communist period. This is for two reasons. First, the grand narratives of Soviet history have been focused internally from the field’s outset, heightening the impact of cross-border research. Second, communism’s intense ideological engagement with the outside world, combined with the effects of isolation from it, has the potential to generate a certain kind of transnational history centering on the interacting effects of models, contacts, and ideas—including rejections and misunderstandings. At the same time, from the perspective of 20 years after, transnational history in the Russian and Soviet field is still very much an unfinished scholarly revolution. **[End Page 885]**

The Western scholarship on Russia of the 1990s raised the question of Russian and Soviet modernity as a conceptual frame. The problem of modernity is still very much with us, but its initial posing centered on state violence, practices of state intervention, and the agendas of intelligentsia experts.⁴ Institutionally, it was virtually inevitable after the end of the Cold War that Russia would be studied in ways that made its history more relevant to scholars in other fields. In post-1991 Russian-language scholarship there were equally compelling reasons to investigate Russia’s international connections, first and foremost with European countries: the combination of interest in previously restricted areas, Yeltsin-era “Westernization,” and the controversy over Russia’s

osobyi put' (special path) produced a wave of books under the title of "Russia and the West" and a research boom on cultural relations with individual European countries.⁵ Another major impulse to comparative history has been the "imperial turn," which stimulated comparative studies of empire.⁶

But what, in fact, does the term "transnational" mean? In 2006, the *American Historical Review* ran a discussion entitled "On Transnational History." The resulting forum appeared to fit the Russian field, to paraphrase Stalin, like a saddle on a cow: featuring fine-tuned distinctions among transnational, global, and world history, it centered on the meaning of transcending something Russia never was, the nation-state. Of course, insofar as transnational (or any other) approaches are disciplinary-wide trends and methodologies, Russianists need not necessarily define them differently. Understanding the focus of transnational history as the movement of "goods, technology, or people" across national borders, although it is perhaps most geared toward opening up the boundaries of fields such as U.S. history, is certainly relevant to any area.⁷ **[End Page 886]** However, this formulation notably omits explicit mention of the exchange of culture and ideas, not to mention models, practices, and images. These assume heightened significance for the history of both "Westernization" and a Soviet order that severely restricted borders and movement.

I would like to argue that Russian Westernization in the imperial period and the Soviet Union's place at the center of the communist "second world" impart a particular valence to cross-border research that can make a distinct contribution to transnational history as it is being developed more generally. This was a country defined by rapid yet selective Europeanization in the imperial period and competition with capitalism in the Soviet era. Intensive scrutiny of the mechanisms by which foreign models were domesticated and international practices, knowledge, and culture circulated across often formidable quarantines can...

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¹ “The State of the Field: Russian History Ten Years After the Fall,” special issue of *Kritika* 2, 2 (2001).

² Laura Engelstein, “Culture, Culture Everywhere: Interpretations of Modern Russia, across the 1991 Divide,” *Kritika* 2, 1 (2001): 363–94; David L. Ransel, “Reflections on Transnational and World History in the USA and Its Applications,” *Historisk Tidsskrift*, no. 4 (2007): 625–42.

³ On the synergy between comparative and transnational history, see Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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