

Metropole, colony, and imperial citizenship in  
the Russian Empire.

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## **Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire**

Alexander Morrison

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History

Slavica Publishers

Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 2012 (New Series)

pp. 327-364

10.1353/kri.2012.0016

ARTICLE

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

### **Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire**

*Alexander Morrison (bio)*

We are not Englishmen, who in India strive by no means to mingle with the native races and who for this reason, sooner or later, may pay with the loss of that country, where they will have no ties of *relationship*; our strength, by contrast, up until now has consisted in that we assimilated the defeated peoples, blending with them peacefully.

—Mikhail Veniukov<sup>1</sup>

Russia's supposedly ambivalent identity between Europe and Asia long exercised a peculiar fascination for historians seeking to understand the nature of Russian imperialism. In the 19th century, an era when it is often assumed that biological racism and the creation of difference were becoming a universal justification for colonial rule, the Russian Empire was seen, and has continued to be seen, as an intriguing exception. As the opening quotation from the famous military geographer Mikhail Veniukov suggests, there has never been any shortage of those prepared to claim that Russian imperialism was distinctively tolerant and assimilationist when contrasted with the imperialism of the other European powers. Ideas of pan-Asian kinship and a seeming lack of political privileges for Russians suggested that access to power was determined largely by social status rather than ethnicity or religion, with the Russians themselves becoming the victims of their own imperial enterprise.<sup>2</sup> The existence of an "Asianist" imagined geography of the empire appeared to set Russian imperial culture apart from that of **[End Page 327]** Britain or France.<sup>3</sup> The most common alternative to this view of Russian imperialism was nationalist historiography which described the empire and its Soviet successor as a "prison of peoples," or at the very least understood Russia's imperial history as a series of separate national historiographies.<sup>4</sup> Both sides of this debate were heavily influenced by émigré writings, from the self-indulgent fantasies of the "Eurasianists" to the polemics produced by disappointed Ukrainian, Georgian, or Tatar exiles, who claimed that a brief moment of national independence had been crushed by a new and still darker form of Russian imperialism.<sup>5</sup> While

the latter school at least acknowledged the empire's diversity and tried to give a (very partial) idea of what had destroyed the tsarist regime, neither made any real attempt to understand how it had functioned and held together for so long, beyond invoking either mystic geographical determinism or the use of force. Above all, perhaps, both approaches privileged the study of identity through the written products of high culture at the expense of making serious attempts to understand how such a vast polity was governed.

The "imperial turn" in both Russian and Western scholarship since the early 1990s (prompted in large part by the opening up of provincial archives in the former USSR, which finally allowed Western historians to do serious empirical research on Russian rule over non-Russians) has seen an extraordinary blossoming of works that increasingly try to understand the empire on its own terms.<sup>6</sup> Dominic Lieven's and Kimitaka Matsuzato's calls for a greater focus on the reasons for imperial cohesion, rather than the artificially divided "national" historiographies that emerged between the 1970s and the 1990s, has been widely answered; and recent scholarship has placed a greater and welcome emphasis on exploring the empire's territorial divisions and administration and on the plurality of regional approaches to governance.<sup>7</sup> **[End Page 328]** Perhaps the most prominent and ambitious example of this new trend is a collective volume edited by Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatoly Remnev, which offers a rich variety of perspectives on the peoples, places, and hierarchies of the Russian Empire.<sup>8</sup> Not one of the contributions to this book, however, deals with the Russian Empire's most obviously colonial region, Central Asia. This is a serious omission: Turkestan and the steppe cannot be viewed as uncharacteristic administrative anomalies which somehow do not fit an alternative, all-Russian pattern. Central Asia is too important both to late imperial thinking about Russia as a colonial power, and to the experience of the empire's largest religious minority, its Muslims (most of whom lived there), not to be at the center of...

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ALEXANDER MORRISON

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The debt which this paper owes to the work of other scholars will be obvious—it is not a piece of original research, merely an attempt at synthesis. I would like to thank Mike Hughes, Catriona Kelly, Norihito Naganawa, Tomohiko Uyama, Paul Werth, and the anonymous reviewers of *Kritika* for their valuable advice and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> M. I. Veniukov, "Postupatel'noe dvizhenie Rossii v Srednei Azii," *Sbornik gosudarstvennykh znaniĭ*, 3, ed. V. P. Bezobrazov (St. Petersburg: V. Bezobrazov, 1877), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1558–1917* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

*Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, 2 (Spring 2012): 327–64.



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