TITLE: CONSTRUCTING BOUNDARIES AND IDENTITIES IN THE SOUTH-EAST OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, 16TH - 18TH CENTURIES

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EURASIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

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PROJECT INFORMATION:¹

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 810-24
DATE: October 28, 1997

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¹ The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).
NSEEER NOTE

This is the second of three background papers, condensed in Council Report From Frontier to Empire: Russia’s Southern Frontier and Formation of the Empire, 16th - 18th Centuries, distributed in print copy on October 21, 1997.
CONSTRUCTING BOUNDARIES AND IDENTITIES IN THE SOUTH-EAST OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, 16-18TH CENTURIES

In 1731 the Russian envoy Mehmet Tevkelev was sent to the Kazakhs of the Lesser Horde to make them swear an oath of allegiance to become the faithful subjects of the Russian empire. In response to the Kazakh nobles, who explained to him that they had sent an envoy to Russia solely to make peace but not to become Russia's subjects, Tevkelev stated: "The Russian empire is in high repute among many states in the world, and it is not befitting such an illustrious monarch to be in peace with you, the steppe beasts."  

In the middle of the eighteenth century it was common for the Russian officials in charge of the southern and eastern frontier districts to refer to the neighboring nomadic peoples, the Kazakhs, Kalmyks and Bashkirs, as "wild, untamed horses," "wild animals," "wild, unruly and disloyal peoples," whose khans practice "savage customs." They described the nomadic peoples as the "wind," while Russian empire was proudly portrayed by the government officials as a "pillar of stability and the world's most respected and glorious state." Obviously, the political universe of the Russian officials was limited to a clear-cut, bi-polar world in which non-Christian nomads represented the savage, the brute, the unreliable and the unruly, while Russia stood for civilization, morality, and a stately order, like a "pillar of stability" untouched by the "steppe winds." Revealing more
about Russia's self-image than about its neighbors, the description of the "other" reflected government's new-developed realization of its civilizing mission among the non-Christians. It was implicitly clear that to become Russia's subjects, the non-Christians were to be made "better," they were to become Russians. How was, then, Russia to tame, civilize and otherwise turn its unruly neighbors into the faithful subjects?

The process of the encounter, contact, and incorporation of the non-Christian peoples into Muscovy and later into the Russian empire, could be seen as a three-stage development. First, their identity as "the other," the stranger and the alien was constructed, as they were seen and described as distinctly different from the Russians. While their different smell, clothing, and customs were important separation markers in everyday encounters, their language and religion were seen by official Moscow as more important signs of separation. Then the non-Christians had to undergo transitional rites of swearing political allegiance and assuming a separate economic status. By classifying the non-Christian peoples and by creating a special status for them, whether preferential or discriminatory, the government thus set them apart from others and affirmed their separate identity. Finally, religious conversion served as the ultimate rite of incorporation leading to a change of customs as well as legal and economic integration.

The process of the construction of the peoples' identities is inseparable from the notion of the frontier. In the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries Western Europe, the idea of "limites naturalles" or natural frontier became one of the justification for the expansionist policies of the states. Thus, France claimed that it was its manifest destiny to have a border along the Rhine River and Spain made similar claims to the
Pyrenees region. The concept of the natural frontiers suited the purposes of the Christian monarchs of the Christian Europe, where territorial conflicts and disputes had to be resolved between the Christian states. When theology was injected into politics and one Christian state was seen as an infidel by another, some of the bloodiest wars in the history of pre-modern Europe followed.

In early modern Russia the notions of natural law, natural frontier, or residence based on naturalization--the latter practiced in France at least from the fifteenth century on--simply did not exist. Imbued with its own sense of the manifest destiny since the early fifteenth century, Russia's ideology of expansion was fundamentally shaped by its encounter with the various pagan and Muslim peoples in the south and in the east. In 1552, on the eve of the conquest of Kazan, the metropolitan Makarii described the Russian army as the "soldiers of Christ" in battle with "the infidels and the enemies of Christ." Moscow's military and political interests could no longer be separated from the ideological and theological language, which drove the expansion. It was only in the nineteenth century that the foremost historian of Russia, S. M. Solov'ev, claimed that "Nature itself indicated at the outset [what] the broad borders of the state [were to be]."

The subtitle of Mark Bassin's article "Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces" cogently captured the essence of the belated attempt to use the concept of the natural frontiers to justify the expansion of the Russian state.

I shall briefly discuss the concept of the frontier in Russia, outline some of the ways in which the government constructed the identities of different peoples along the frontier, and consider the process by which a
frontier area was first turned into a borderland only to become later an integral part of the Russian empire.

Boundaries

It is important to distinguish from the outset between the notions of a frontier and a border. A frontier is a region that forms the margin of a settled or developed territory, a politico-geographical area lying beyond the integrated region of the political unit. A border is a clearly demarcated boundary between two or several sovereign states. To put it differently, a border is a function of a state-organized political entity. It is the state which, either mentally or physically, constructs, maintains and enforces such a border. In the west, where Russia confronted other sovereign states, the territorial limits of the states were demarcated by borders. In the south and in the east, where Russia's colonization movement encountered disparate peoples not organized into states and with no clearly marked boundaries between them, the zone of separation between Russia and its neighbors was a frontier.

The oldest term denoting a boundary was mezha. It had been used since the days of the Kievan Rus' and mostly referred to the boundaries separating different land holdings. Rubezh and granitsa were two other terms used synonymously with mezha, but in time also acquiring a meaning of a boundary separating different towns and principalities. Both rubezh and granitsa were used to refer to the western borders of the Muscovite state throughout the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. Since the sixteenth century, when the Russian state began to conceive of itself as a
territorial nation-state, the terms rubezh and granitsa were used to designate Russia's national boundaries vis-a-vis another sovereign state.10

In the south and east, however, none of the above-mentioned terms were used in relation to the native inhabitants. In Siberia, for example, from the point of view of the Russian government the frontier separated those local peoples who paid vasak to the government from those who did not do so. Those natives who refused to submit themselves immediately to the Russian governors were classified as hostile. They were considered to reside on the other side of the frontier. Their territory was populated by "nemirnye liudi"11 (people who were not in peace with Russia), and it was only a matter of time before the Russian military would be sent into "novye nemirnye zemlisy"12 (new, unconquered territories), to build more fortresses and demand vasak from the natives. Thus, the frontier would move further, the newly conquered territories would become known as "novoprivodnye zemli"13 (new territories brought into submission) and their local residents will be termed "iasachnye inozemtsy"14 (foreigners who pay tribute).

The steppe frontier in the south was referred to by a number of ambiguous terms. In the days of Kievan Rus' the term "dikoe pole" (open field, wild steppe, wilderness) denoted a no-man's land separating Rus' from its nomadic neighbors. "Krai" and "ukraina" (edge, periphery), hence the name of Ukraine, were used both in Rus' and Muscovy.15 The frontier was punctuated by "ukrainske gosudarevye ostrogi" (the sovereign's frontier forts) with residents in and around them known as "krainie liudi."16 Dating from the late sixteenth century Muscovy began building "zaseka" (a series of fortifications forming a defense line). Such a defense line, in effect, marked the boundary of Muscovy. The frontier towns near
the defense lines were known as "ponizovye or ukrainnye gorody." 17
Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these defense lines would be extended and moved farther and farther, becoming the most effective tool of Russian colonization in the south.

While hardly any of the terms demarcating boundaries in different geographic regions of Russia has been used consistently, a certain pattern, however, does emerge. It appears that Russia's western boundary was conceptualized and defined as a border separating the Russian state from that of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Such a border was clearly demarcated, negotiated and agreed upon in written treaties signed by Moscow and Warsaw. In contrast, the southern and eastern boundaries were not clearly defined or demarcated and were considered frontier regions. While the de facto frontier of the Russian state was its defense line in the south and newly-built forts in the east, Moscow's de jure territorial claims extended far beyond its actual control.

Political Identity

In 1483 a band of armed Muscovites crossed the Iron Gates or the Rocky Belt as the Ural Mountains were referred to at various times. It was not the first time that Russian adventurers, mostly from the city of Novgorod, crossed the Urals in order to explore the riches of the unknown lands and to establish trade with the local peoples. However, when they did so again in 1483, they arrived as representatives of Ivan III, the ruler of the rapidly expanding and self-consciously Orthodox Muscovite state. The Muscovite officials described one such encounter and the ceremony
involved in striking a peace treaty between the chiefs of the Khanty and Mansi peoples and the Muscovites:

"And their custom of making peace is as follows: they put a bear skin under a thick trunk of a cut pine tree, then they put two sabers with their sharp ends upwards and bread and fish on the bear skin. And we put a cross atop the pine tree and they put a wooden idol and tied it up below the cross; and they began to walk below their idol in the direction of the sun. And one of them standing nearby said: 'that who will break this peace, let him be punished by God of his faith.' And they walked about a tree three times, and we bowed to the cross, and they bowed to the sun. After all of this they drank water from the cup containing a golden nugget and they kept saying: 'you, gold, seek the one who betrays.'"18

The same event was registered by a Russian chronicler, but described quite differently: "and the local princes swore not to bear any ill-will, not to exhibit any violence, and to be loyal to the Grand Prince of Muscovy." Obviously, things did not look the same from the banks of the Siberian rivers and from Moscow. What the local chiefs considered a peace treaty struck with the newly arrived strangers, Moscow regarded as the chiefs' oath of allegiance to the Grand Prince, their submission to Moscow. Thus, from the opening salvo Russia's conquest of Siberia was based on mutual misconceptions. From the beginning Moscow perpetuated an image of the natives as the subjects of the tsar, while the natives saw in Russians merely another military and trading partner.

The Russian attitude toward its neighbors had not always been the same. The princes of Kievan Rus' regarded their steppe neighbors as equal allies and in the early Muscovite period were themselves considered subjects of the Mongol khans. This began to change in the mid-sixteenth century after Moscow's spectacular conquests of the Muslim city-states of Kazan and Astrakhan. Since both Kazan and Astrakhan were the heirs to the Golden Horde, the victory was much more than a mere military
success. In the eyes of Russian contemporaries it showed the indisputable supremacy of the Russian Orthodox state over its Muslim neighbors. Moscow's new image was on display when Ivan IV ordered the construction of St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square and proudly added the title of tsar of Kazan and Astrakhan to his already existing titles.

It is from this time onward that Muscovite chroniclers as well as the Foreign Office interpreters and scribes began to deliberately construct the image of the "other." The Russian state could codify its relationship with the disparate, non-Christian and non-state-organized peoples along its expanding frontiers only in terms of a suzerain-subject modus operandi. The government used every possible means to underscore the nature of such a relationship both in its diplomatic practices and written records.

In 1616 the Nogay Prince Ishterek wrote to Moscow and, continuing the practice of many Nogay and Crimean princes, addressed the tsar Mikhail as a friend. The response of the Muscovite officials was a sharp rebuke: "A servant can never be the tsar's friend." When the letters of the Mongol ruler Lubsan, in which he addressed the tsar as an inferior local ruler, were delivered to the Russian monarch, they were referred to in Russian terminology as a "petition ('chelobit'e') of the Mongol prince." While Lubsan offered peace and asked for military assistance, the government praised him for "seeking the sovereign's favor" and encouraged him "not to violate his oath of allegiance." On another occasion, when in 1673 the envoys of the well-known and fiercely independent Galdan Boshoktu Khan of the Oirats arrived in Moscow--the first such embassy to Russia--they may have been surprised to be told by Russian officials that their khan was a subject of the tsar.
The basis for Muscovy's relationship with the peoples it recently encountered in the east or in the south was the peace treaty. Such a peace treaty (shert', a Turkic word derived from the Arabic "shart"—a condition, a clause of a treaty) was conceived, understood, and referred to by a term different from the ones Moscow used in relationship with neighbors to the west. From the mid-sixteenth century a shert' ceased to be a mutual treaty in the eyes of Moscow and became an allegiance sworn by a non-Christian people to their Muscovite sovereign. The usual procedure involved one or more local chiefs pledging allegiance on behalf of their people in the presence of a Muscovite official. Moscow always tried to make sure that such an allegiance of "eternal submission to the grand tsar" was made according to the native customs of its newly sworn subjects. 22

A Russian official of the early eighteenth century Vasilii Bakunin explained what the Kalmyk tayishis (chiefs) thought of their previous allegiances:

The Kalmyk tayishis never recognized their former allegiances as oaths of allegiance. Its very name, that is, "shert,'" is alien not only to the Russian, but to the Kalmyk language as well. They [the tayishis] referred only to the agreement concluded with Prince B. A. Golitsyn. It is obvious that they were not aware of [the contents of] those [previous] "shert'." It is clear from the copies found that the original allegiance records were written in Russian, and were only signed in Kalmyk. 23

Neither Kalmyk chiefs nor numerous other peoples encountered by the Russians in the east and in the south regarded themselves as Russia's subjects. When, in 1730, Abul Khayir khan of the Kazakh Lesser Horde decided to make peace with the Bashkirs, he was compelled to send a letter to St. Petersburg, which was presented as his "petition to become a Russian subject." 24
In 1779, even in the face of the military retribution, the nobles of the Greater Kabarda refused to swear an allegiance and declared that they had traditionally been under Russian protectorship as guests or allies ("kunaks"), but not subjects. In the end, when the Russian troops marched into Kabarda, the Kabardinians had to sue for peace and swore an unconditional allegiance.25

Either induced by the offers of gifts and payments, or intimidated by the force of the Russian military, Russia's "infidel" neighbors had to be made loyal, reduced into submission, and eventually become a part of the Russian Orthodox state. Their political identity as subjects of the Russian crown had to be constructed and reaffirmed through a peace treaty—a rite which was intended to change their status from an independent to a transitional one. This was the beginning of the long and arduous process of their political integration into Russia.

Ethno-Linguistic Identity

Language, as we know, is much more than just a means of communication. It was certainly so in the Middle Ages, where often no clear distinction existed between the notions of "people" and "language." The Latin "lingua" denoted both "language" and "people." (Cf. the use of the French "langue" in langue d'oc). And so did the Slavic word "iazyk." A Russian chronicle, describing the Khanty and Mansi peoples in the eleventh century, states: "Iugra zhe liudie est' iazyk nem," which could be translated as both, "The Iugra are the people, who speak a foreign language," or "The Iugra are a foreign people."26 Even today, perhaps as a
reminder of the older days, the words "iazyk" in Slavic and "dil" in Turkic languages retained the specific meaning of "a prisoner of war captured to obtain information." It is a clear testimony to the fact that language was used as a primary differentiating marker long before other markers, such as religion, ethnicity, or culture came to be seen as separate from language and equally or more important identities.

The newly-encountered peoples needed to be given names, to be separated not only from the Russians, but also from each other. Wholly ignorant of the peoples they encountered, the Muscovites, naturally, used the names they heard from others. Thus, the Khanty were first referred to by the Komi name "iugra" and later by the Turkic name "ostiak" (Tatar "ishtek"), while the Mansi became known as "vogul" (a Komi word meaning "wild"). The Oirat people of Western Siberia were referred to by the Turkic name "kalmyk," and continued to be known by this name, even though they did not conceive of themselves as a people as a whole and had no word for a supra-tribal, ethnic affiliation. The same "name-giving process" applied to many peoples, from the Nogays of the southern steppes to the Yakuts of Eastern Siberia. It was only in the nineteenth century, when most of the non-Christian peoples emerged with the sense of aggregate identity, that they began to use as their self-designation those exact terms, which were originally both alien to their language and imposed on them by others.27

Projecting its own identity onto the peoples it encountered, Moscow attempted to classify the indigenous population into large ethno-linguistic groups. For instance, the peoples of the newly-conquered Kazan region were divided according to the six different languages spoken there: Tatar, Bashkir, Mordva, Chuvash, Cheremis, and Votiak.28 The tribal confusion
and Moscow's lack of knowledge of the native kinship-based societies continued to defy its attempts at naming and classifying the natives, and the Kabardinians of the North Caucasus were often referred to as Circassians, the Nogays were considered to be Tatars, and the Khanty living along the Chusovaia River west of the Urals were referred to at different times as Tatars, Voguls, and Ostiaks. 29

Separateness or foreignness were defined in Russia through language, territory, kinship, or religion. A well-known example is the Slavic word "nemets" (lit. one who speaks unclearly), which referred to an outsider, a foreigner in general, before it acquired a more specific designation for the Germans. Similarly, in medieval Wales those who could not speak Welsh were regarded as aliens. 30 Inozemets (lit. a person of a different land) referred to either foreigners from Western Europe or the natives of Siberia. 31 They were attributed an extra-territorial identity and considered foreigners (cf. the German "Ausländer" and the English "foreigner").

Two other terms inorodets (lit. of a different kin) and inoverets (lit. of a different faith), came into usage mostly in the seventeenth century and were reserved for the non-Christian peoples residing in the newly-conquered territories in the east and in the south. The encounter with the numerous non-Christian peoples crystallized Moscow's image as an Orthodox Christian state, and the choice of terms clearly reflected a change in Moscow's self-perception. Religion became the most important marker which separated Russians from the Muslim, Buddhist or pagan subjects of the growing Russian empire.
Economic Identity

Like their political identity, the non-Christians' economic status or identity had to be expressed in terms subservient to their Russian overlord. Such, at least, was Moscow's belief. The separate economic identity of the non-Russian peoples was constructed through the notion of yasak (from the Mongol "yasa"--a law), which meant different things at different times. For the natives of Siberia, yasak was a levy paid in furs, but the peoples of the Kazan region paid it partly in cash and partly in kind. At all times, however, yasak was a levy imposed by the state specifically on the non-Christian peoples of Russia.32

If peace treaties were intended to formalize non-Christians' political subservience to Moscow, the imposition of yasak was supposed to be another and more tangible manifestation of the natives' subject status vis-a-vis the Russian suzerain. In fact, in the minds of the Muscovite officials the notions of peace and yasak payment were often equated. Those natives who refused to submit themselves immediately to the Russian governors were classified as hostile "nemirnye liudi"33 (people who were not in peace with Russia), and their territory was referred to as "nemirnaia neiasachnai a zemlitsa"34 (a territory which is not in peace with Russia and which does not submit yasak).

The non-Christian peoples of Siberia, however, were less concerned with their political status and more with the practical matters of their relations with the Russians. Each time the natives brought their furs to the Russian officials, they were presented with the sovereign's compensation ("gosudarevo zhalovan'e").35 And although the Russians distinguished carefully between the yasak paid by the natives and the sovereign's
benevolent presents or compensation, there is no indication that the native
peoples separated the two notions. What was tribute to the Russian
authorities was a trade transaction to the natives.

Each such transaction was accompanied by the distribution of
compensation, which ordinarily included axes, knives, tin and copper pots,
woolen, flints, and tobacco. The most popular item, however, was beads,
particularly crystal beads of different colors ("odekui"). In addition,
Moscow provided the natives with supplies consisting of rye flour, butter,
and fish oil. When \textit{yasak} was brought, the authorities were expected to
throw a feast for the native representatives.

For reasons of its own, Moscow often could not and did not deliver
compensation or supplies with any regularity, and the natives did not fail to
voice their complaints in this regard. On other occasions, the natives
considered their compensation unsatisfactory and complained to the
authorities that they were imposing items of poor quality upon them.
According to some reports from the middle of the seventeenth century, the
natives registered their displeasure by beating the Russian officials, "... and
they throw sovereign's presents, and tie them up to the dogs' necks,
and throw them into the fire, and they pay \textit{yasak} with no courtesy, they kick
it with their feet and throw it to the ground and they call us, your slaves,
bad people."\textsuperscript{38}

The government was aware of the quid pro quo nature of its
relationship with the natives. The reports from the Russian agents in
charge of collecting the \textit{yasak} stated clearly that the natives submit \textit{yasak}
only in exchange for the sovereign's compensation, and whenever they find
their compensation to be inadequate, they do not deliver \textit{yasak} in full. The
agents added that they were running out of compensation and supplies,
and without them the collection of the yasak would cease completely. In response, Moscow instructed its officials in Siberia to give small amounts of compensation in accordance with the yasak, and to explain to the natives that they should not regard this as a trade, but as the sovereign's compensation and that they should be content with the amount they received.³⁹

At times, the reality proved to exert a stronger influence on the government's policies than a desire to codify its relationship with the natives in the usual submissive terms. When in 1730 the local Russian officials extracted a promise from the Kazakhs to make an annual delivery of yasak similar to the Bashkirs, the government instructed its zealous agents not to demand the yasak payment but to accept it only if the Kazakhs bring the yasak voluntarily.⁴⁰ In 1766, seeking to improve the supply of furs in Siberia, the Yasak Distribution Commission suggested standardizing the long-existing practices and recommended that in exchange for the yasak, the native nobles should be given presents in the amount of two percent of the furs' value.⁴¹

The non-Christians' separate economic status could be changed only if they chose to become Christian. Upon conversion, the non-Christians were given a three-to-five-year exemption from yasak payment and then joined the regular tax-rolls. Like other identities constructed by Moscow to set the non-Christians apart from the Russian Orthodox, economic identity too was inseparable from the religious one.
Religious Identity

It was religion which defined the aggregate identity of the Russians in pre-modern Russia. To be Russian was first and foremost to be a Russian Orthodox. And it was in these terms that Moscow perceived itself and was so perceived by others. In April 1552, on the eve of Moscow's conquest of Kazan, the Nogay mirza Belek Bulat wrote to his "brother," the Russian tsar, and made clear that "although he [Ivan IV] was an infidel, and we are Muslims, each has his own faith." A few months later, in a much less compromising missive, the metropolitan Makarii blessed Ivan IV and his "soldiers of Christ" against the Kazan Tatars, who were "infidels and enemies of Christ, and who had always spilled Christian blood and destroyed holy churches."

Upon the conquest of Kazan in 1552, Moscow acquired large numbers of new subjects, who were neither Christian nor Russian-speaking. The Russian language and Russian administration had to replace their Tatar predecessors and Christianity had to replace Islam. Ivan IV banned the construction of new mosques, and ordered the mosques of Kazan demolished and churches built in their stead. Religious conversion would become the most important policy tool in bringing the newly-conquered people into the Russian state. The non-Christians were expected to shed their previous non-Christian identity.

Before Moscow's dramatic expansion in the 1550s, religious conversion of non-Russians took place only occasionally. Yet it was not until the middle of the sixteenth century that the idea of religious conversion began to enjoy the all-embracing support of a government imbued with an overpowering sense of manifest religious destiny. The new
missionary spirit of the increasingly self-conscious Orthodox Muscovy was forcefully expressed by the triumphant Russian tsar. In his 1556 letter to Archbishop Gurii of the newly-founded Kazan diocese, Ivan IV suggested that converting pagans was a divine duty, adding that missionaries "should teach the pagans ["mladentsy," lit. "children"] not only to read and write, but to make them truly understand what they read, and [they], then, will be able to teach others, including the Muslims."45

Few conversions occurred during the sixteenth century, as the Ottoman threat, a series of uprisings in the Kazan region, and the corruption of local governors served to restrain the zeal of the Russian government and church to spread the gospel among the natives.46 The issue was raised again in earnest in the early 1590s by the Kazan metropolitan Germogen, who complained in a letter to the tsar that, due to the neglect of the local governors, new-converts did not observe Christian laws and continued to live among their non-Christian kin, while the Tatars built new mosques. In response, the tsar's decree of 1593 stipulated that converts should be resettled in a separate compound near Kazan, given farmland, and live among the Russians. The Russian officials were to ensure that converts observed Christian law and did not intermarry with Tatars or foreign prisoners of war. Furthermore, children of mixed marriages and slaves of the converts were to be baptized. Those converts who did not follow Christian ways were to be put in chains and thrown in jail to make them forget the Tatar faith and become firm believers in Christ. All mosques were to be destroyed.47

The combined threat of intimidation, force, and the revoking of old privileges was only part of the government's missionary policy. Coercion could be applied only in the territories already under the firm control of the
Russian military and bureaucracy, such as the middle Volga region. In addition to the stick, the carrot was no less important in Russia's initial appeal to the non-Christians. This was particularly true in the frontier areas, where the government's hold over the new territory remained tenuous and the need for the cooperation of the natives was acute. Here, church officials were instructed to win converts not by force, but by "love." Each convert was rewarded with woolen clothing, a shirt, a pair of boots, and cash. Converts were also enlisted as musketeers, assigned to one of the frontier garrisons, and given cash and flour compensation.48

Ultimately, conversion was the only means by which the government could ensure the non-Russians' loyalty and their acceptance into the Russian society. Apparently, their racial characteristics mattered less than their religious affiliation. For non-Russian nobles, conversion meant a fast-track to assimilation. The converted nobles intermarried with the Russian nobility, held high military positions, and often served in the frontier regions as Russia's trusted intermediaries.49 Within two generations their names often no longer betrayed their non-Russian origin.50 Assimilation was complete when a dynasty entered the Genealogical Book of the Russian nobility.51

The plight of those non-Christians who did not belong to noble families often differed from their more noble brethren; ordinary converts were designated "new converts" and regarded as a separate social group.52 Such non-Christian commoners continued to be considered "new converts" for many generations and remained alienated from both their previous pagan, Muslim, or Buddhist kin and from their present Russian Orthodox co-religionists. Their privileges, such as exemptions from taxes or military service, were only temporary, and after three or five years they had to
resume their onerous obligations. Moreover, they found themselves victims of frequent abuse by local Russian officials, who took advantage of the converts' ignorance of the Russian language, laws, and customs.

The importance and duty of converting non-Russians was reiterated by Ivan Pososhkov, contemporary of Peter the Great and often referred to as "the Russian Adam Smith." In his treatise written in 1719 Pososhkov contrasted the feeble missionary efforts of the Russians with that of the Roman Catholic Church and chastised the Russian government and the Orthodox church for their inability to attract non-Russians to Christianity:

"And these peoples have been the subjects of the Russian empire for two hundred years, but they did not become Christians and their souls perish because of our negligence. The Catholics are sending their missionaries to China, India, and America. [Despite] the fact that our faith is a right one--and what could be easier than converting the Mordva, the Cheremis, and the Chuvash--yet we cannot do this. And our pagans ("inoverts," lit. non-Christians) are like children, without a written language, without a law, and they do not live far away, but within the Russian empire, along the Volga and the Kama rivers; and they are not sovereign, but the subjects of Russia."

Inspired by the missionary work of the Catholic church and particularly the Jesuit order, Ivan Pososhkov was primarily concerned with saving the souls of non-Russians and making them good Christians. His crusading spirit was shared by the government, albeit for different reasons. Increasingly defined by Russia's new missionary sense of struggle with Islam, government policies on religious conversion acquired further importance as a policy tool aimed at securing the political loyalty of Moscow's non-Russian subjects.

New efforts to convert non-Russians were prompted in part by Russia's strategic interests; the government feared the emergence of an Islamic axis--a united front of the various Muslim peoples under the
Ottoman umbrella--against Russia. At various times the Ottomans and the Crimeans attempted to unite the Muslim Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Bashkirs, and Nogays in a broad anti-Russian coalition. No less important, however, were disturbing reports of a growing number of non-Russian converts to Islam. The news that some non-Russians were lured by the "disgusting faith of Muhammad," prompted Peter I to order that missionaries be taught native languages and sent to preach among non-Russians.

Although the numbers of converts had continued to grow on paper, reports from the field lamented the fact that the conversions were only nominal and converts remained ignorant of Christianity and did not observe any of its precepts. It was becoming more apparent that reliance on sheer force or legislative discrimination to effect conversions was not sufficient.

The government and the church responded by focusing missionary activity less on reporting large numbers of converts and more on spreading the Gospel among them and ensuring their understanding and attachment to Christianity. The idea of civilizing the savage ("wild," "ignorant," "unenlightened") became a major driving force behind proselytizing throughout the eighteenth century. The language of the church officials clearly reflected a change of attitude, as they increasingly began to refer to non-Russian converts as the "newly-enlightened" ("novoprosveshchennyi"). The new approach was further spelled out in 1721 in the Synod’s instructions to the bishop of the Viatka region. The bishop was cautioned to teach potential converts the Gospel before their baptism and to find out whether they wanted to become Christian out of good will or simply to avoid heavy taxation.
Fifty years later, the feeble efforts of the church missionary activity was summarized by Amvrosii Podobedov, the newly appointed archbishop of Kazan. In his report to the Synod on the state of affairs in his archdiocese he wrote: "I find that the ignorant ("neprosveshchennye") non-Russian peoples, the Chuvash and Cheremis who reside here, have not only insufficient, but not even the slightest notion about the precepts of faith into which they were converted by holy baptism."60

Thus, religious conversion in Russia was least of all religious and spiritual and involved only a nominal transfer of religious identity. For the non-Christians, conversion promised tangible economic benefits and a hope of social and economic mobility. As in other pre-modern societies, where religion defined not only religious life, but cultural, social and political norms of the society, conversion in Russia was first and foremost a process of cultural transformation and assimilation of the "other."

Yet, conversion in Russia was not synonymous with assimilation. Shedding one's previous identity and acquiring a new one proved to be a long and difficult process. Conversion was most successful not for communities as a whole, but for individuals both at the top and at the bottom of their native societies. The non-Christian elites were able to make a transition relatively quickly. Upon conversion they retained their privileged status, received additional benefits, intermarried with the Russian nobility, and were fully assimilated within two or three generations. But those who for various reasons found themselves transplanted from their native societies as slaves or serfs in Russian households, were also rapidly assimilated upon conversion.

For other non-Christians, however, conversion meant little beyond receiving temporary benefits. Commoners were attracted to Christianity by
promises of exemptions from taxes, hard labor, or military service, while the local gentry converted to avoid having their lands and property confiscated. Non-Russians were designated as "new converts," and remained in this transitional category for generations, alienated from both their former kin and their new co-religionists. Even those whose ancestors had converted centuries previously were still referred to as "old converts." 61

Conversion, for both groups and individuals, was a rite intended to incorporate the non-Russians and to mold their identity into the one sanctioned by the state. However, long after non-Christians' initial conversion and despite the government's efforts to introduce them to the Russian way of life, both new and old converts continued to have little or no knowledge of the Russian language, law, lifestyle, and most importantly, their new faith.

Conclusions

It was the Russian state which engaged in constructing the images and identities of the non-Christians. The four official identities we have considered were not the only ones intended to define and separate "the other" peoples. For the Russian merchants, officials, and colonists, who initially encountered the non-Christians in the frontier areas, other markers were of greater significance: haircuts, clothing, smell, food, marriage, customs, lifestyle, language, and race. 62 Yet, most of these remained only of secondary concern to the government. Clothing, food and customs were expected to be changed upon conversion to Christianity, but in themselves, as far as Moscow was concerned, they neither served as
differentiating markers, nor were worth of being noticed, described or studied. Before the early eighteenth century, nowhere in the written heritage of official Russia one finds the slightest attention to the different mores and customs of the non-Christians.

This lack of curiosity was abundantly compensated by the official interest in the political, economic, and religious classification of the non-Russians. As the number and the significance of non-Russians within the Russian empire grew, it became increasingly important to describe and classify them, to ensure their loyalty, and to develop a set of uniform policies in order to incorporate the new territories and peoples into the empire. One of the earliest attempts at such a classification was made by the eighteenth-century Russian writer and historian, Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov. In his 1776 treatise Prince Shcherbatov suggested that the peoples of the empire should be divided into six categories in accordance with their lifestyle, taxation, military service, and religious affiliation:

"1. Russians and all non-Russians ("inovertsy") who pay the soul tax and provide recruits,
2. Russians and non-Russians who pay taxes but do not provide recruits,
3. Christians other than Russian Orthodox,
4. All kinds of Cossacks and other military settlers,
5. Bashkirs and other wild peoples who practice Islam, and
6. Kalmyks and other nomadic idol-worshippers."

It is not surprising that Prince Shcherbatov drew no clear distinction between religious, ethnic, and social identities. The overlapping of categories that was typical of pre-modern societies, was also quite common in Russia, where no clear distinction was made between ethnic, economic and religious identities. For instance, the late-sixteenth-century description of the Nizhnii Novgorod region classifies the residents of various villages as the peasants, the Mordva, and the bee-keepers.
Obviously, the word "krest'ianin" in Russian parlance meant not just any peasant, but specifically a peasant of the Russian Orthodox faith. The Mordva implied not only ethnicity, but more importantly, the economic and religious status of the yasak-paying pagans.

Likewise, the non-Russian pagan peoples considered Christianity a Russian faith and Islam a Tatar one. In Russian official correspondence non-Christian peoples were referred to by their specific names, such as Chuvash, Bashkir, or Tatar. The Chuvash, however, was often synonymous with the yasak-paying non-Christians and the Mari, the Mordva, and the Cheremis of the Kazan region were commonly referred to as "Chuvash." Tatar meant that a person was a yasak-paying peasant and a Muslim. Those Tatars who performed a military service were known as "military service ('sluzhilye') Tatars," but also often included in this category were other non-Christians who were enlisted into the Muscovite military.

The process of constructing the identities of the non-Christian peoples in Russia was not necessarily original. In fact, both the names of the newly-encountered peoples and the terms in which the encounter was codified were inherited from the Turko-Mongol political entities, which preceded the arrival of the Russians (cf. among others the origins of the words "shert" and "yasak").

For many non-Christian peoples, particularly those who saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to Chinggis Khan and the legacy of the Golden Horde, the terms of encounter looked different than they did to the Russians. Whereas Moscow regarded all the newly-encountered peoples as its subjects, the non-Christians often considered Russia no more than a military ally. What the natives of Siberia often considered trade, Moscow
regarded as levy it was due. Moscow's construction of political and economic, ethnic and religious identities of its new subjects was a mere projection of its own image. For the non-Christians, however, their regional identities signified by kinship, language, territory and local gods remained far more important. Different expectations led to misunderstandings, conflicts, resistance and violence. Resistance and violence accompanied Moscow's most direct assault on the non-Christian peoples, i.e. its attempts to convert the natives to Christianity.

The place of the encounter remained a place where several different cultures, several different worlds met. One was pagan and shamanistic allowing for the worship of numerous idols. It was also fragmented and tribal with a weak authority of the chiefs. Two others, Islamic and Orthodox Christian bowed to a single God and were equally uncompromising before the military-bureaucratic Russian state succeeded in imposing its own victorious rhetoric upon the vanquished. In the end, Moscow would be able to appropriate the space, the time, and the terms of the contest. For the time being, however, these different worlds were not easily reconciled and continued to stand apart long after their initial encounter.

1Kazakhsko-russkie otnosheniiia v 16-18 vekakh (Alma-Ata, AN KSSR, 1961), 53-54, no. 33.
2Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Drevnikh Aktov (hereafter cited as RGADA) Opis' del Sekretnoi Ekspeditsii Senata, f. 248, op. 113, no. 181, l. 20; Kazakhsko-russkie otnosheniiia, 74, 81, 96, 138.


8 *Slovar' russkogo iazyka 11-17 vv.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), no. 9: 65.


12 Ibid., 203.

13 Ibid., 205.

14 *Akty istoricheskie*, 4: 473.


17 V. Vel'iaminov-Zernov, *Issledovanie o Kasimovskikh tsariakh i tsarevichakh*, 4 vols. (St. Petersburg: Tip. Imp. AN, 1863-1887), 3: 23; *Slovar' russkogo iazyka 11-17 vv.*, no. 5: 294. In 1679 all frontier towns were classified into Siberian, "Ponizovye" (the towns in the middle Volga River), and "Ukrainnye" (the towns along the southern frontier) (DRV 15: 233-41).


19 *RGADA* Snesheniia Rossii s nogaiami, f. 127, op. 1, no. 2, 1616 g., l. 6.


22 To ensure the *shert* would be adhered to, the Muscovite authorities persisted in finding out whether the *shert* was "priamaia," i.e. performed in accordance with the customs of a given people. *Shert* varied from the ones sworn by the Muslim peoples on the Quran and by the Buddhist Kalmyks on their prayer book to the elaborate rituals of various shamanistic peoples of Siberia (S. V. Bakhrushin, "Iasak v Sibiri v 17 v." in *Nauchnye trudy*, v. 3, pt. 2: 65-66; also his "Ocherki po istorii Krasnoiarskogo uezda v 17 v." in *Nauchnye trudy*, 4: 47).

24 Kazakhsko-russkie otnosheniia v 16-18 vekakh (Alma-Ata, AN KSSR, 1961), 35. no. 25.


26 Bakhrushin, "Ostiatykie," 86.

27 When it was necessary for military and economic purposes, Moscow was able to take into account various tribal and clan divisions, but it had never been able to translate it into a political recognition of these societies' disparate nature and their loose confederalational structure. (See the precise description of the mirzas and their peoples in RGADA Nogaiskie dela, f. 127, op. 1, no. 11, 1642 g). 28 Andrei Kurbskii, "Istoriia o velikom kniaze Moskovskom," in Russkaia istoricheskata biblioteka, 39 vols. (St. Petersburg-Leningrad, 1872-1927), 31: 205-6.

29 Bakhrushin, "Ostiatykie," 88.


31 Akty istoricheskie, sobrannye i izdannye Arkheograficheskoi komissiei. 5 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1841-43), 4: 473 (hereafter cited as AD).


35 Bakhrushin, "Iasak," 71.


37 Bakhrushin, "Iasak," 72-73; Bakhrushin, "Ocherki," 55-56; Kolonial'naia, 92-93, no. 40.

38 Kolonial'naia, 25, no. 17; 98-99, no. 45.

39 Bakhrushin, "Iasak," 74-75; Kolonial'naia, 96, no. 43; 98, no. 44.

40 Kazakhsko-russkie, 37, no. 26.

41 Istoriiia Iakutskoi ASSR, 3 vols. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1957), 2: 139.


43 AI 1: 291, no. 160.

In the late 1560s, population registers of the city of Kazan listed 24 converts.

Even fewer converts could be found in the Kazan province. I have found no evidence to support Mozharovskii's claim that initially conversions were numerous and, in contrast to the eighteenth century, the converts were inspired by true belief. In response to Russian colonization of the Kazan region, powerful anti-Russian uprisings led by local nobles took place in 1556, 1572, and 1582.

A daughter of the tsar Aleksei was promised in marriage to the Kasimov prince Seyid-Burkhan upon his conversion in 1591. While his son was known as Vasilii Abulgairovich, his grandson's name, Roman Vasil'eveich, could no longer be distinguished from a native Russian name.

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57 *Pis'ma i bumagi imperatora Petra Velikogo*. 12 vols. (St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1887-1977), 1: 694-95, note to no. 227.

58 One of the most striking accounts came from the Kazan metropolitan Sil'vestr in 1729. He reported that 170 years after their conversion to Christianity, the "old converts" ("starokreshchennye") continued to reside in their old villages far from the churches, remaining wholly ignorant of the Russian language and Christian laws ("Luka Konashevich, Episkop Kazanskii," in *Pravoslavnyi Sobesednik* 1858 [October]: 234-37).

59 *ODD* 1: 141-43, no. 157; Appendix, no. 27, pp. CCCV-CCCXIV.

60 Mozharovskii, "Izlozhenie," 107.

61 It is instructive to compare the fate of "converts" in Russia with that of conversos, the Jewish converts in the late-fifteenth-century Spain. Spanish authorities considered conversos a distinct and separate group. Conversos were discriminated against and their purity of blood ("limpieza de sangre") remained a criterion for their advancement until the early-twentieth century (Angus McKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000-1500* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977], 185-87).

62 The Don Cossacks, when describing to the Russian officials a man, who came to them with a letter and invited them to join the rebels of the Shatsk district, had noticed that he "had a mug of a Cheremis" ("a v mordu Cheremis") (Krest'ianskaia voina pod prevoditel'tvom Stepana Razina. Sbornik dokumentov. 4 vols. [Moscow: AN SSSR, 1954], 2 pt. 1: 183, no. 155).


