TITLE: FROM FRONTIER TO EMPIRE: RUSSIA'S SOUTHERN FRONTIER AND FORMATION OF THE EMPIRE, 16TH - 18TH CENTURIES

AUTHOR: MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY, Loyola University - Chicago

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EURASIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
LEGAL NOTICE

The Government of the District of Columbia has certified an amendment of the Articles of Incorporation of the National Council for Soviet and East European Research changing the name of the Corporation to THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EURASIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH, effective on June 9, 1997. Grants, contracts and all other legal engagements of and with the Corporation made under its former name are unaffected and remain in force unless/until modified in writing by the parties thereto.

PROJECT INFORMATION:¹

CONTRACTOR: Loyola University - Chicago
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Michael Khodarkovsky
COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 810-24
DATE: October 21, 1997

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Individual researchers retain the copyright on work products derived from research funded by Council Contract. The Council and the United States Government have the right to duplicate n written reports and other materials submitted under Council Contract and to distribute such copies within the Council and U.S. Government for their own use, and to draw upon such reports and materials for their own studies; but the Council and the U.S. Government do not have the right to distribute, or make such reports and materials available, outside the Council or U.S. Government without the written consent of the authors, except as may be required under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 552, or other applicable law.

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).
NCEEER NOTE

This report is a condensation of three substantially longer background papers by the same author on the origins of Russian domination of territories and peoples to the south and east of the Russian heartland -- the Caucasus and Central Asia -- and the seeds of contemporary issues and conflicts in those areas. Those longer papers, to be distributed seriatim in the same order, are:

"Of Christianity, Enlightenment and Colonialism: Russia in the North Caucasus Before the Nineteenth Century" (32 pages).

"Constructing Boundaries and Identities in the South-East of the Russian Empire, 16-18th Centuries" (29 pages).

"Not By Word Alone: Missionary Policies and Religious Conversion in Russia, 1550-1870s" (50 pages).
FROM FRONTIER TO EMPIRE: RUSSIA’S SOUTHERN FRONTIER
AND FORMATION OF THE EMPIRE, 16TH - 18TH CENTURIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1991 the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. In 1917 the Russian empire collapsed. We know much more about how the two related political entities fell apart than how they came together. We know particularly little about the early stages in the formation of the Russian empire. This work is focused on a process of Russian expansion in the south and southeast, the steppe region from the Don river in the west to Lake Balkhash in the east. Now that the former imperial borderlands have again become the territorial borders of new Russia, and regions from Krasnodar by the Black Sea to Khabarovsk by the Pacific Ocean are resurrecting their Cossack identity, it is even more important to understand how these regions were transformed from the distant and hostile frontier into an integral part of the Russian empire.

Before the nineteenth century, Russian expansion in the south was driven by a variety of motives. In the seventeenth century there were defense concerns over the nomadic predations, geopolitical considerations, and missionary aspirations. The eighteenth century they included a search for natural resources, commercial interests, farming of the virgin lands, and civilizing the natives. Russia was destined to bring the natives the light of Christianity and Civilization, two notions inseparable in the minds of the government officials. Christianity and Enlightenment were both convenient explanations for Russian policies in the south and a perfect justification for the region's colonization.

For a long time, Russian officials labored in thorough ignorance of the local customs and societies. They projected onto the natives Russia’s own image and tried to remold the natives into Russians. Numerous and mutual misconceptions led to misunderstandings and clashes. To control the natives, the Russian government employed a variety of methods, from the classic colonial “divide and rule” to no less typical “unite and rule” when promoting one strong leader was seen to enhance Russian security.

The most effective tools of Russian colonization of the region were the presence of the Russian military and the natives’ growing integration into the Russian economy. Russian expansion in the region would have been virtually impossible without a collaboration of the native elites. Many tribal leaders, hoping for a short term military aid from Russia, quickly found themselves dependent on the Russian military, payments, and luxury items.

No other colonial empire found within its borders or contiguous territories such large and varied constituencies of different faiths: there were pagans, Muslims, and Buddhists. Yet, Russia did not conceive of itself as a colonial empire, but a Christian nation-state. The most numerous and best organized of the natives were the Muslims, and they presented a particular and distinct
problem. Most of them lived in direct proximity to their coreligionists on the other side of the frontier and their centers of ecclesiastical authority were located outside of Russia. Thus they were far more resistant in offering their religious and political loyalty to the Russian government.

In the end, it was neither the Ottomans nor Persians, but rather the Russians who succeeded in turning this longtime frontier region into Russia's borderland. The Russian government undertook a systematic colonization of the region by stationing troops in the numerous forts, dispatching bureaucrats, merchants, and priests to the newly built towns, and encouraging the newcomers to settle and farm the land. Yet, the government policy of linking the process of the region's colonization with Christianity only pushed the natives to further embrace Islam. In time, the natives chose to rally under the banners of Islam, which became both the means to, and the goal of, resistance. The lines of the future conflicts were clearly drawn.
Like its double-headed eagle, once a symbol of the old Russian empire and now of the new Russian Federation, Russia had always faced both east and west. Compelled by geography and history to straddle Europe and Asia, Russia could not escape the duality and contradictions of its enormous empire. In the south and east, from the Caucasus to Siberia, it behaved like a universal ruler attempting to erase the differences by turning the natives into Russians and Christians. In the western borderlands, whether in Poland or the Baltic, Russia acted like a western monarchy, at least since the early eighteenth century, recognizing and accepting the differences with the local Christian population. Even though the realities of the Russian empire demanded a highly differentiated approach to different regions and peoples, the centralized nature of the Russian empire militated against it.

On May 12, 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov signed a peace treaty between Russia and Ichkeria. At the same time the Russian officials continued to insist that the Chechen Republic remain a constituent part of the Russian Federation. The following day, a popular Russian comedian, Mikhail Zhvanetskii, was the first to point out the irony of the situation: "I do not understand how one can give someone independence and make it a part of Russia at the same time." A comedian unimpressed with empty words was able to observe more than most historians trained to revere official written records.

Indeed, throughout Russia's history of encounters with various peoples in the east and south, such an apparent contradiction was no aberration. From the sixteenth century onward, Moscow referred to the newly-encountered peoples, be they the Kabardinians in the North Caucasus, the Kalmyks in the Caspian steppes, or the Kazakhs in Central Asia, as the subjects of the Russian monarch. While in essence Russia's relations with these peoples were based on a peace treaty between equal partners, the government referred to such treaties as the natives' oath of allegiance to the tsar; its rhetoric unmistakably underscoring the servile status of the new Russian subjects. Contradictions abounded. For instance, the peoples of the North Caucasus, the Kalmyks, and Kazakhs were regarded as Russian subjects, but well into the nineteenth century relations with them were administered by the Foreign Ministry.

These and other internal incongruities reflected a gap between rhetoric and reality, a typical and persistent feature of the Russian (and Soviet) empire. Despite Russia's continuous annexation of enormous territories occupied by peoples of different races, religions, and languages,
Russia did not conceive of itself as a colonial empire, but rather a Christian nation-state. In the west, where the population was Christian, the government’s main concern was to ensure that the local population paid their taxes and exhibited loyalty. In the eastern parts of the empire, the government added to its goals another distinctive mission, i.e. converting the natives to Christianity and thus civilizing and Russifying them, which was viewed as one and the same by government officials.

In the south and southeast of the empire, neither of the two goals, collecting taxes and securing loyalty, were easily achieved. The entire region from the Don river to Lake Balkhash was a steppe, whose sparse inhabitants were nomadic pastoralists. No taxes could be imposed on them because these nomads could effortlessly move away if they found Russian demands too onerous. Their loyalty also remained dubious and the government could not trust them until they converted to Christianity and severed contacts with the two Islamic empires, Ottoman and Persian.

This huge space of the "wild" steppes was a frontier region, an area of uncertainty and contest between the neighboring empires. It was a zone of a continuous low-level warfare, which made farming activity impossible. Instead of pitched battles between large armies of the nation-states, here Russia faced raids and incursions, with a high human cost of captives sold into slavery and untold losses of property looted by the war parties.

Unlike the American frontier which spun its own mythology and numerous histories, the Russian frontier was never conceptualized as such, or seriously discussed, in either Russian imperial or Soviet historiography. To introduce such a concept meant to open the issues of conquest and colonization for discussion, with possible consequences of renewed claims for land and separate national identity, resistance to the dominance of Moscow, and a struggle for liberation and independence. This study is about Russia's southern frontier and its eventual transformation from the frontier area into the integral part of the Russian empire. Thus, it is also an inquiry into the formation of the Russian empire in the south.

Several major patterns of Russian policies in annexing and colonizing the region emerge. Despite the claims of the Russian tsar to be the ruler of new territories and peoples, establishing Moscow’s control of the region was a long and difficult process. The Russian penetration into the area (North Caucasus) usually began with the request for military help from the local chief, who hoped to use Moscow to enhance his authority among the rival chiefs. Moscow responded by sending troops which, contrary to the chief’s expectation, arrived to build forts and to stay in the region. This pattern was rather consistent, and when such invitations to Moscow were not forthcoming, the local leaders were encouraged to do so. In the seventeenth century one Daghestan chief was warned of the impending Russian attack, if he failed to send to the tsar "to seek the Grand Sovereign's favors and to become a faithful subject." In the eighteenth century, a Kazakh khan was convinced by a Russian envoy that it would be to his benefit to request Russian military
aid.

If Russian military presence was controversial and Russian garrisons were often subjected to raids by the hostile parties, Russian goods and commodities were always welcomed by the local chiefs. Moscow systematically used trade, payments, gifts, material and financial rewards to induce the cooperation of the local population. This version of early modern foreign aid was much harder to resist than the Russian military, and slow but inevitable integration of the local economies into a Russian one was one of the most effective tools of incorporation of the new territories and peoples.

For a long time, the Russian presence in the southern regions was manifested to the local inhabitants through several scattered garrisons and occasional journeys to markets in Russian towns. The arrival of Russian colonists in the middle of the eighteenth century brought dramatic changes to the geographic and social landscape of the region. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the most effective means of Russian colonization was the systematic construction of defense lines, a continuous line of defense fortifications meant to create a Russian version of the Great Walls of China. At first, these defense lines intended to prevent the nomadic incursions, which wreaked havoc on Russian villages and towns. In time, the old defense lines were dismantled and the new ones built further south and southeast, thus providing safety for the continuous waves of peasant migration to the newly secured lands.

The presence of the Russian troops and markets led also to the increasing social polarization of the indigenous society. The increased appetite of the native elites for Russian goods was translated into their demands for higher taxes from the native peasantry. The Russian government tried to use this growing conflict between the native elites and the commoners by playing off the two groups and appealing directly to the commoners over the heads of their landlords. For some time, the Russian policy was directed at attracting the commoners’ defection into Russian towns, converting them to Christianity, thus forgoing the government’s obligation to return the fugitives. But such a policy resulted in further antagonizing the very same native elites on which the government had to rely to pursue its goals in the region.

St. Petersburg’s policies in the region finally led to a series of uprisings against the Russian government in the late eighteenth century. The peoples of the North Caucasus embraced Islam as a rallying banner of resistance to Russian expansion, and in the 1780s many joined sheikh Mansur in his call to liberate Muslims from the oppression of infidel Russia. The Kalmyks, whose pasture lands shrunk significantly with the encroachment of the farming communities, chose to depart from Russia. In 1771 they left on a long journey to Inner Asian steppes hoping for a better life under China’s Manchu emperor. Several years later, the Yaik Cossacks and Kazakhs found their traditional societies threatened by the restrictive government policies and rebelled against the Russian state.

No other colonial empire found within its borders or contiguous territories such large and
varied constituencies of different faiths: pagans, Muslims, and Buddhists. Pagans simply had to be converted to Christianity, they indeed proved to be more amenable to it. Both Muslims and Buddhists, most of whom lived in direct proximity to their coreligionists on the other side of the frontier and whose centers of ecclesiastical authority were located outside of Russia, were far more resistant to offering their religious and political loyalty to the Russian government.

Throughout this time, Russian expansion in the south was driven by a variety of motives. In the seventeenth century there were defense concerns over the nomadic predations, geopolitical considerations, and missionary aspirations. In the eighteenth century this list also included a search for natural resources, commercial interests, farming of the virgin lands, and civilizing the natives. Russia was destined to bring the natives the light of Christianity and Civilization, two notions inseparable in the minds of the government officials. Christianity and Enlightenment were both convenient explanations for Russian policies in the south and a perfect justification for the region's colonization.

In the end, it was neither the Ottomans nor Persians, but rather Russians who succeeded in turning this longtime frontier region into Russia's borderland. Unlike the Persians, who only occasionally sent expeditionary forces into the region to assert their short-lived supremacy, or the Ottomans, whose sporadic military campaigns intended no more than to ensure a flow of taxes and slaves to Istanbul, the Russian government undertook a systematic colonization of the region by stationing troops in the numerous forts, dispatching bureaucrats, merchants, and priests to the newly built towns, and encouraging newcomers to settle and farm the land. Yet the government policy of linking the process of the region's colonization with Christianity only pushed the natives to further embrace Islam. In time, the natives chose to rally under the banners of Islam, which became both the means to, and the goal of, resistance. The lines of future conflicts were clearly drawn.