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Michael Khodarkovsky, Russia's steppe frontier

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Michael KHODARKOVSKY, **Russia's steppe frontier. The making of a colonial empire, 1500-1800**. Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002, 290 p. and maps.

- 1 Anyone familiar with the author's first book *Where two worlds met* (1992) must look forward to reading this new volume, which is a comprehensive study of Moscow's relations with the steppe nomads from the emergence of a Russian empire until the closing of the frontier 300 years later. He will not be disappointed. In the author's own words, this book is about the transformation of a dangerous frontier into a part of the empire and of its peoples into subjects. Certainly more controversial is his determination to show that Russia was no less a colonial empire than any of the other western powers.
- 2 It is very difficult to organize an abundant material covering such an immense territory and such a long period to form a coherent whole and tell a consistent story. In this respect, Khodarkovsky is not fully successful, although his organization of the material is nevertheless a good one. He chose to sandwich two historical chapters between a set of two analytical chapters on the one hand and a last conceptual chapter on the other. The reader might prefer to read the straight story before being given the analysis. In these first two chapters, Khodarkovsky discusses the social and political organization of the steppe nomads as well as practices and ceremonials regulating relations between Moscow and the frontier peoples such as types of treaties, the hostage system, the tribute and presents. This is followed by the emergence of Moscow as an imperial power with the conquest of the Kazan and Astrakhan khanates and later, after 1600, the transformation of the Nogais, Kalmyks and Kazakhs into subjects of the empire. The last chapter discusses the role of religion, the integration of the native elites and the "colonial contest" over administration and land. There are excellent maps, including contemporary ones he found in the archives; some,

unfortunately, are so reduced as to be nearly illegible. The author's own maps include a very good one (p. 75) showing the approximate boundaries of the Kazan, Astrakhan, and Crimean khanates. Missing, however, is a map of the Ural and Irtysh lines which might have helped him avoid the facile conclusion about Russia's inexorable advance during the eighteenth century.

- 3 One strong feature of the book is Khodarkovsky's awareness of the terrain: he tells us where the pastures of various people were, something too often overlooked by writers on the subject. He is also very much aware of the geopolitical context within which Russia's relations with the nomads took place. He does not make the nomads into helpless people, the victims of Russian aggression, but tells the reader that those societies were warlike, depended on booty, and that "lasting peace was antithetical to the very existence of the peoples that Russia confronted along its frontier" (p. 17). He reminds us that Muscovy rose as part of the frontier system of the Golden Horde and that, after 1500, Moscow derived its legitimacy from several sources simultaneously: Christian Byzantium, Kievan Rus, and the Golden Horde (p. 40), while being at the same time the only Christian power facing the Muslim world in the steppe. He tells us the little known fact that Moscow kept paying tribute to the Crimean khan until 1700 (not 1699). Some of the best sections deal with what presumably happened on the bank of the Ugra in 1480 and the integration of the local elites into an imperial society. And there is an amusing description of the misunderstanding between Russian envoys and local chiefs, for whom keeping the head covered was a form of respect while it was an insulting gesture for the Russians. Altogether, this is a very fine book which will become a basis of discussion for scholars interested in the subject. I will briefly mention some oversimplifications and contentious points.
- 4 Khodarkovsky is right to insist on distinguishing between a boundary-border and a frontier, but does not always follow his own advice, as when he writes that the frontiers of the empire were becoming imperial borders (p. 185), or that the de facto frontier of Muscovy was its fortification lines (p. 50). It would have greatly helped if he had included genealogies of the various khans in order to show how many of these families in the steppe were interrelated. Readers may demur when told that it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that Russian officials began to conceive of Russia as a multireligious and multiethnic empire. Those who organized Anna Ivanovna's coronation certainly knew it, and many members of the elite already knew that quite a few of their colleagues were of Turco-Mongol stock long before the 1750s. Was there really no curiosity about the nomads until then (p. 188)? How then did the Russians know so well about the politics of the steppe and the ways to manipulate its rivalries?
- 5 I have some problems with Khodarkovsky's treatment of the hostage issue. The reader is led to believe that only the Russians took hostages, although the practice was general in the steppe: nomads gave hostages to other nomads as token of submission. Since the hostages were sons or close relatives of important notables and chiefs, why does he say they were so poorly treated? There is a lack of logic here which requires some explanation. Some hostages also went to the capital to be impressed with the might of Russia and to make sure they would spread their impressions among the local elite when they went home. No doubt because of his limited space, Khodarkovsky does not give a clear picture of the relations with the Kazakhs. The reader is not sure at times which horde he is talking about, and whether the Kazakhs had one khan or three. The situation changed over time, of course, but readers will be confused. When it comes to

the relations with Abulkhair, it is clear that Tevkelev is the villain. If the khan had to be persuaded to ask the Russians – who really did not need his permission – to build a fortress on the Ural River why then did he also ask the Russians to build another fortress on the Syr Daria? Khodarkovsky's geopolitical vision deserts him here. Determined to show Russia's "relentless" advance, he overlooks the khan's ambitions and the pressures to which he was exposed on the part of the Zunghars. The story of Russian relations with the Kazakhs in the eighteenth century still needs to be written.

- 6 There is a larger issue on which scholars may disagree: that of colonialism. It has become very fashionable to force the experience of various countries into a single mold presumably valid the world over. Every "colonial" experience is in fact so different that one wonders if one can find a common denominator. If Russia was a tributary state of the Mongol empire and eventually became the collector of tribute in the former regions of that empire, the Dutch and Spaniards certainly never belonged to the East Indian or Amerindian worlds. The natives never became members of the imperial elite in Spain, England, or France. One can find many other specific features of the Russian imperial experience that did not fit into the straight colonial mold. And where do we stop? Presumably, Russia was also a colonial power in the Caucasus and Ukraine; was it also a colonial power in the Baltic provinces and Finland? If not, why? The American experience must also be a colonial one. Even in the miniempires of France and Great Britain, the French of the Ile de France and the English were colonial powers (the Bretons and the Irish would agree!). Was the Mongol empire also a colonial one? But then, what does colonialism mean? It becomes simply a stage in nationbuilding, at least in some cases. It loses all specificity; once stretched to encompass the whole world, the concept becomes meaningless. If Khodarkovsky had made a serious effort to discuss what colonialism meant in the Russian experience, it might have led to some interesting conclusions. But the last two sections of the last chapter in which he takes up the issue are the least satisfactory in the book. Even if Russia was a colonial power, it certainly was not similar to the Dutch-Spanish-French-English colonial powers. What special kind of colonialism was it?
- 7 I do not want these questions and comments to add up to a negative assessment of the book. Quite the contrary. This is a major book precisely because it raises some challenging questions, as any good book does. It will stimulate scholars to explore further the immense world of the steppe, Russia's integration into it and eventually its integration into Russia's empire. This is a very worthy achievement.