How Russia ‘Colonized Itself’
Internal Colonization in Classical Russian Historiography

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Abstract
In the late imperial period, Russian historiography was dominated by the self-colonization school. Russian historians wrote detailed accounts of Russia’s takeover of the Crimea, Finland, Ukraine, Poland, and other lands, but they did not describe these areas as Russian colonies. Instead, mainstream Russian historians argued that ‘Russia colonized itself’. The discourse of self-colonization was a specific, though long-term and surprisingly robust, moment in Russian historiography. Appropriating the western idea of colonization, Russian historiography transformed this idea in quite a radical way. First, in Russia, the process of colonization was construed as self-reflexive and internal, rather than as object-directed and external. Second, in Russia, we find an uncritical approval of the processes of colonization, which is different from the British and French historiographical traditions and from the postcolonial approach to colonization. However, some Russian historians held a critical stance toward the peculiar character of the Russian Empire.

Keywords: intellectual history, internal colonization, Russian Empire

Introduction
According to classical definitions, colonization refers to the processes of domination in which settlers migrate from the colonizing group to the colonized land.¹ Theoretically, definitions of colonization do not specify whether any particular migration evolved within the national
borders or outside them, or whether such borders even existed at the time. In practice, however, and also intuitively, colonization has usually meant travel abroad. Against this backdrop, the concept of internal colonization or self-colonization connotes the culture-specific domination inside the national borders, actual or imagined. Though in modern English these two concepts, internal colonization and self-colonization, have identical meanings, histories of these concepts are different, and the historiographies that produced them are different too. While German politicians and historians preferred the concept of internal colonization (‘Innere Kolonisation’), Russian historians opted for self-colonization (‘самоколонизация’), or derivative verbal constructions such as ‘colonizes itself’ (‘колонизуется’, ‘колонизирует себя’). However we will see that in the Russian historiographical tradition, these two concepts mixed up and conflated to an extent that makes these distinctions inconsistent or irrelevant.

From Soloviev to Shchapov

Classical Russian historiography mostly followed Germanic models, selectively received and sometimes, creatively distorted. This is why it is important to start the story of Russia’s ‘self-colonization’ with the idea of Prussian and German ‘inner colonization’. In Prussian bureaucratic language, internal colonization was a state-sponsored programme of managing the frontier between Prussia and ‘the Slavic wilderness’ to the east. This German colonization of Polish and Baltic lands started in the Middle Ages and was later pursued by Frederick the Great. Prussian and, then, German officials consistently, though arbitrarily, called this policy ‘the program of inner colonization’. Starting in the 1830s, the Prussian government disbursed millions of marks for the purchase of Polish manors, dividing them into parts and leasing these parts to German farmers. Under Bismarck, this policy was strengthened by the introduction of passport control, restrictions for Slavic seasonal workers, and even deportations of Slavs from Prussia. The leading figure of these events, Max Sering, found his inspiration in his trip to the American Midwest; in 1883, he returned to Prussia with a determination to organize a similar frontier along the German borders with the east but later in 1912, he also visited Russia to find appropriate models
there. In 1886, the Royal Prussian Colonization Commission was established and the imperial intellectuals started debating what kind of colonization Germany needed: an African-style ‘overseas colonization’ or a Polish-style ‘inner colonization’. Advising on these efforts, Max Weber published a survey, in which he recommended his own version of internal colonization of the ‘barbarian East’. In this work, Weber collaborated with one of the leaders of the colonization movement, Gustav Schmoller, though their ways parted later on. An historian, Schmoller looked back at the Prussian colonization in the east and emphasized the settlement programmes of Frederick the Great, which he called ‘inner colonization’. This historical retrospective, mythologized to a large extent, was crucial for the political plans of Prussian internal colonizers: it was the historical precedence of the earlier colonization that made these newest efforts ‘inner’ and therefore different from British overseas imperialism. During World War I and later, the Prussian enthusiasts of internal colonization envisioned large-scale colonization of the occupied Polish and Ukrainian lands.

Competing with great European powers, the Russian Empire took its part in the conquest of America, the Great Game in Asia, and even the scramble for Africa. The largest state on earth (in some periods, the British Empire competed with the Russian Empire in square mileage, but these moments were short) was also concerned about its vast terrestrial hinterland. Having appropriated imperialist language, it needed to combine the overseas concept of colonization with the challenge of controlling its huge, multi-ethnic, underpopulated provinces in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. In the 1840s the Moscow historian, Sergei Soloviev, made the conceptual breakthrough in applying the discourse of colonization to Russia. A disciple of the prominent Göttingen historian, August Schlözer (who worked for many years in St. Petersburg), Soloviev rejected the very difference between the colonizers and the colonized: ‘Russia was a vast, virgin country, which was waiting to be populated, waiting for its history to begin: therefore ancient Russian history is the history of a country that colonizes itself’. Soloviev formulated this astonishing dictum in his survey of Russia’s ancient history that became a mainstream reading for two generations of Russian historians. Soloviev gave a dynamic depiction of the concerns of a self-colonized country: ‘To populate as soon as possible, to call people from everywhere to come to empty places, to tempt them with various benefits; to
leave a place for newer, better lands, for the most profitable conditions, for an edge that is quiet and peaceful; on the other hand, to cling to the people, to bring them back, to force others not to accept them – these are the important concerns of a country that colonizes itself.’ For a colonial mind, there is no greater distance in the world than that between the metropolitan land and its colony. How can a country colonize itself? Soloviev knew the problem and emphasized it: ‘This country [Russia] was not a colony that was separated from the metropolitan land by oceans: the heart of the state’s life was situated in this very country… While the needs and functions of the state were increasing, the country did not lose her self-colonizing character.’

If there is no point in differentiating between the subject and the object of Russia’s colonization, then a historian should learn how to avoid doing so.

In Russian, the reflexive form that Soloviev used, ‘to colonize itself’, is as unusual as it is in English. In the original even more than in the translation, this formula sounds paradoxical. But Soloviev and his disciples were consistent in the use of this verbal form. Going into detail in his multiple volumes, Soloviev explained that the direction of Russia’s self-colonization was coherent, from the south-west to the north-east, from the banks of the Danube to the banks of the Dnieper. Going north, the ancient Russian tribes went to Novgorod and to the coast of the White Sea. Going east, they colonized the upper Volga and the neighbourhood of Moscow. There they established the Russian state, but the direction of colonization remained the same, to the east and all the way to Siberia. Importantly, Soloviev did not apply the idea of ‘Russia colonizing itself’ to the history that he perceived as modern. In his later volumes that described the ‘new’ Russian history as opposed to the ‘ancient’, he did not use the term ‘colonization’. With his students who shaped the ‘State-Focused School of Russian History’, Soloviev defined the central, mainstream line of Russian historiography of the Imperial period.

Russia’s rapid expansion left huge lands behind it as virginal as they had been. Later, these empty spaces had to be colonized again, and then again. Mapping these internal lands was tough; exploring the peoples who populated them was no easier. Although in various segments of the immense frontline of Russia’s external colonization, ‘middle grounds’ were created that hybridized the colonized and the colonizers, these synthetic cultures were local, variegated, and dispersed over huge stretches
of time and space. Developing centrifugally, these local formations were crucial to the economic development of Russian centres, from Novgorod to Moscow to St. Petersburg. With gunpowder, alcohol, and germs on their side, the Russians exterminated, absorbed, or displaced myriads of natives. But these processes took centuries. Multiple waves of adventure, violence, labour, and breeding rolled between Russia’s centers and the moving frontline of colonization. Even Russian capitals were established on territories that were foreign to their founders. Indeed, the lands of Novgorod and Kiev were as foreign to the Vikings who ruled there as the land of St. Petersburg was for the Muscovites. From the borders to the capitals, the space of internal colonization extended throughout Russia.

A significant influence on the further development of the self-colonization idea was the historian Afanasii Shchapov, who wrote most of his works not when he was a university professor, but when he was either a state official or a political exile. He was the first who actually thought of Russian colonization not as a vigorous adventure but as a bloody, genuinely political process. It had its victims as well as victors, and the task of a historian was to see both. Teaching history at Kazan Imperial University in the late 1850s, Shchapov sorted out an ecclesiastical archive of the Solovetsky monastery. This archive was evacuated to land-locked Kazan as Russia was preparing for the Crimean War (located in the White Sea in the far north, thousands of miles from the Crimea, the Solovetsky monastery was nonetheless bombed by the British navy in 1854). It was in this archive, then in Kazan, that the leading historian of the next generation, Vasilii Kliuchevsky, wrote his first monograph about ‘the monastery colonization’ of northern Russia; Kliuchevsky’s first critical review was also on Shchapov. But by then Shchapov was no longer in Kazan. In 1861, he was accused of fomenting unrest, arrested and brought to Petersburg. But there, in a sensational move, the Tsar pardoned Shchapov and appointed him to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Later he again got into trouble and was exiled to his native Siberia, but still published his revisionist articles in the mainstream Russian journals.

Agreeing with Soloviev that the history of Russia was the history of colonization, Shchapov described the process as a ‘millennium of colonization and cultivation of woods and swamps, the fight with Finnish, Mongol, and Turkish tribes’. An ethnic Creole – son of a Russian
deacon and a Siberian Buriat – Shchapov emphasized racial mixing more than any other Russian historian. He was also the true pioneer of ecological history. Two methods of colonization were primary: ‘fur colonization’, with hunters harvesting and depleting the habitats of fur animals and moving further and further across Siberia all the way to Alaska; and ‘fishing colonization’, which supplied Russian centers with fresh- or salt-water fish and caviar. In this attempt at ecological history, Shchapov made an important step forward from Soloviev.

From Rurik the Varangian to Ivan the Terrible, Russia’s wealth was measured in fur. Coining the concept of ‘zoological economy’, Shchapov understood fur as the clue to Russia’s colonization. Beaver led the Russians to the place where they founded Novgorod; grey squirrel secured them the wealth of Moscow; sable led them to the place that became mapped as Siberia; sea otter brought them to Alaska and California. Throughout the Middle Ages and what elsewhere was known as the Renaissance, man-made migrations of small, wild, furry animals defined the expansion of Russia. Winter roads, trade stations, and militarized storehouses for fur spanned across Eurasia, playing roles that were not dissimilar from the Great Silk Route in medieval Asia. Ecologically, colonization also meant deforestation. ‘Agricultural colonization’ followed ‘fur colonization’ and gradually replaced it. It was not a sword but an axe that moved Russia’s colonization, said Shchapov, with the plough following the axe. But the bow and the trap preceded them all. For Shchapov, colonization was an easy and positive concept, which he used on almost every page of his wordy and warm writings. It meant the multi-edged process of exploring, populating, cultivating, and depleting new lands. Russia’s colonization had to be understood as parallel histories of peoples moved, animals exterminated, and plants cultivated. It was an unprecedented vision, multidimensional, environmental, and human.

**Vasilii Kliuchevsky**

Decades later, the most important Russian historian of the nineteenth century, Vasilii Kliuchevsky repeated the motto of his teacher, Soloviev, and revised it in one significant respect: ‘The history of Russia is the history of a country that colonizes itself … [T]his centuries-long
movement has continued until the current moment’. If for Soloviev, Russia’s self-colonization started in ancient times and stopped in the Middle Ages, Kliuchevsky extended this concept well into the modern age. I attribute this significant revision to the influence of Shchapov, who was marginal for the mid-nineteenth century generation of historians but personally important for Kliuchevsky. When Kliuchevsky revised his work in 1907, he added a long passage about the early twentieth-century state-sponsored migrations to Siberia, Central Asia, and the Pacific Coast, in which he saw the newest manifestations of the ‘centuries-long movement of Russia’s colonization’. It was the only significant change that Kliuchevsky made in his multi-volume Course of Russian History for its new edition. Covering Russia’s long history from ancient to modern times, he wished to apply the concept of colonization to his era as well.

Talking about the ancient Russians, Soloviev gave a description of the Russian national character that was widely quoted: ‘Because of [the Russians’] high mobility, their shapelessness, their habit of leaving after the first difficulty, they developed a semi-settledness, a lack of commitment to a place, a weakened moral focus, and lack of calculation; Russians developed the habit of looking for easy work, of living in limbo, from one day to another.’ Kliuchevsky argued that this set of characteristics was a consequence of self-colonization. He generalized that this ‘particular relation of the people to the country’, the relation of colonization, ‘worked in Russia over centuries and is working now’. In this, Kliuchevsky saw ‘the main condition’ that defined the development of ‘changing forms of community’ in Russian history. Repeating and varying Soloviev’s formula, that Russia is ‘a country that colonizes itself’, Kliuchevsky wished to emphasize and extend this process even more than his teacher. Thus, this most influential of Russian historians stated that ‘the colonization of the country is the single most important fact of Russia’s history’ and that, from the Middle Ages to the modern era, the standard periods of Russian history are nothing more than ‘the major moments of colonization’.

As Kliuchevsky said, the area of colonization expanded along with the territory of the state. Since the colonized areas did not retain their special status but were absorbed by the Russian state, there is no reason to distinguish between Russia’s colonies and its metropolitan center. With the territorial growth of the state, Russia colonized the newly appropriated territories, but it also (though
probably in different forms) colonized itself at its imperial core, which has recurrently undergone this process of colonization.

‘The history of Russia is the history of a country that colonizes itself.’ There is an awkward repetition in this formula but there is also a feeling that it could not be worded differently. Structurally, the formula combined the most trivial, even banal repetition in the first half and the paradoxical, deconstructive second half. By saying, ‘The history of Russia is the history of a country’, Soloviev and Kliuchevsky alerted the reader to the fact that, this time, they were talking about Russia as the country and not as the people, the state, or the empire. In Russian, as in English, ‘country’ stands somewhere between the geographical ‘land’ and the political ‘nation’, which is exactly what is needed. They could not say what they wanted to say without this rhetorical repetition, because an alternative formula such as ‘The history of Russia consisted of self-colonization’ would assume that Russia existed before this self-colonization, while the very idea was to describe the process in which Russia was created by a process that it also performed.

The Kliuchevsky School

Kliuchevsky’s followers distinguished between various modes of Russia’s colonization, such as ‘free colonization’ that was led by private men, mostly runaway serfs and deserted soldiers or Cossacks; ‘military colonization’, which happened as a result of regular campaigns; and ‘monastery colonization’, which was centred around major Orthodox sanctuaries that owned thousands of serfs, carried trade, and built outposts. For them, the trails of Russia’s eastward colonization were blazed by fur hunters, beatified by monks, fortified by soldiers, and cultivated by settlers. Their purpose was a systematic, balanced overview of these events that would show the civilizing mission of Russia in the vast, wild expanse of Eurasia. Ever loyal to the cause of Russian nationalism, Kliuchevsky’s school tended to ignore the huge amounts of violence that these colonizing activities entailed. Although it was violence that made necessary all the fences, walls, and towers of the outposts, monasteries, and towns that these historians described in detail, sensitivity to this violence and compassion for its victims came mainly with the next generation of historians, who would experience
the Russian revolution, take part in it, and often find themselves either under arrest or in emigration.

A student of Kliuchevsky’s, Pavel Miliukov, elaborated on this colonization theme with a new emphasis. As a young professor, Miliukov was dismissed from Moscow University for political activism, was imprisoned, released, and mixed history with politics for decades. In his multi-volume course of Russian history, he realized better than his predecessors how much violence the process of colonization required, and mapped large ethnicities who were either absorbed or exterminated by Russians on their path of colonization. In a special article of the Russian Encyclopedia, Miliukov wrote, ‘Russia’s colonization by the Russian people has continued throughout the whole duration of Russian history and has constituted one of its most characteristic features’. The most critical among historians of Russian self-colonization, Miliukov, became a hawkish politician as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government (1917). His objective in World War I was to take Constantinople for Russia.

In the 1930s, Matvei Liubavsky, a prominent disciple of Kliuchevsky who served as the Rector of Moscow Imperial University until 1917, presented a systematic exploration of the favourite idea of his teacher. Liubavsky (1996) repeated that ‘Russian history is the history of a country that colonized ceaselessly’: instead of the reflective mode that was used by his predecessors, he used a simpler construction – ‘colonized ceaselessly’ rather than ‘colonized itself’. This shift is subtle but significant. It matched a further statement by Liubavsky, that he wrote his treatise as an exploration of ‘the predominantly external colonization that created the territory of the Russian state’. Bringing his long narrative to the late nineteenth century, Liubavsky included a chapter on the colonization of the Baltic lands, which embraces the area of St. Petersburg. Ironically, his book about external colonization ended with a chapter on the colonization of the territory of the imperial capital. But he did write his history of Russia as a history of external colonization – how Russia colonized the others rather than colonized itself – and his awareness of this fact shows that he understood better than his predecessors the political meaning of the concept. His book remained unpublished, because he wrote it after he was arrested, interrogated, and exiled to Bashkiria, one of those colonized regions about which he wrote.
In the late imperial period, Russian historiography was dominated by the self-colonization school. From history textbooks, its ideas found their way into encyclopedias. Russian historians wrote detailed accounts of Russia’s takeover of the Crimea, Finland, Ukraine, Poland, and other lands. However, they did not describe these areas as Russian colonies. (In this respect, a remarkable exception among Russian authors was Nikolai Iadrintsev, whose book *Siberia as a Colony*, first published in 1882, was a great example of an anti-imperial history.) Instead of talking about the Russian Empire colonizing the Caucasus or Poland, Soloviev and Kliuchevsky argued that ‘Russia colonized itself’. However, they held a critical stance toward the peculiar character of this particular empire. ‘As the territory of the Russian state was expanding and the external power of the people growing, the internal freedom of the people was decreasing’, wrote Kliuchevsky. He used the concept of self-colonization as a shortcut for this ‘inverse proportion’ between the imperial space and internal freedom. Kliuchevsky’s disciples, who saw the worldwide processes of decolonization, reproduced his definition with minor variations. By merging subject and object, this formula provided them with an inverted, maybe even perverted, language that they reserved for talking about Russia and did not use when talking about other parts of the world.

**Conclusion**

The discourse of self-colonization was a specific, though long-term and surprisingly robust, moment in Russian historiography. Living in the age of colonial empires and working for a country that competed with these empires, leading Russian historians found the language of colonization appropriate and necessary for their work. However, they transformed the western idea of colonization in quite a radical way. First, in Russia, the process of colonization was construed as self-reflexive and internal, rather than as object-directed and external. Second, in Russia, we find an uncritical approval of the processes of colonization, which is different from the British and French historiographical traditions and from the postcolonial approach to colonization. Whereas twentieth-century historians generally denounced imperialism, their nineteenth-century predecessors did not use the ‘colonial’ words in a critical way.
Even Shchapov, a pariah and exile, admired the heroism of those who accomplished the colonization of a large country.

A future leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, in his early book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), suggested that in larger countries such as Russia and the United States, the unevenness of development plays the role of global inequality, which he believed to be a result of imperialism of great powers, including the Russian Empire. Thus in these larger countries the colonization of internal spaces would consume the ‘surplus product’ and give a boost to capitalist development: internal inequalities would play the same role as external ones. Speaking of the underdeveloped Russian territories on the Volga, in Siberia, and elsewhere, Lenin used the concepts of ‘internal colonization’ and ‘internal colony’. It is curious that though Lenin was influenced by the same Prussian historiographical and political-economic tradition as Kliuchevsky, Lenin opted for the concept of ‘internal colonization’ rather than ‘self-colonization’. Responding to his opponents, ‘legal Marxists’ like Struve, Lenin discussed not only the flows of capital, but also the demographical patterns of peasant migrations into the territories of internal colonization. With no hesitation, Lenin applied this concept, internal colony, to those parts of Russia that were populated by ethnic Russians, such as the steppes of Novorossiysk and the forests of Archangelsk; territories with mixed and changing populations, such as Siberia and the Crimea; and lands with ethnically alien peoples, such as Georgia. In Lenin’s account, his own homeland on the Volga was one of these internal colonies. He based his speculations about ‘the internal colonization’ and ‘the progressive mission of capitalism’ on a systematic analogy between the Russian Empire and the United States, which he abandoned a few years later.

Three generations of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian historians, whose teachings and textbooks constitute the core of Russian historiography, disagreed about many features of the Russian past but there was one formula that they kept repeating one after the other: ‘Russia colonized itself’. In late nineteenth-century Russia, colonization was still perceived as progress; in the Soviet Union, colonization was reactionary and Russia’s history was supposed to have little to do with colonialism. Therefore Soviet historians largely abandoned the discourse of self-colonization: it did not fit their ‘class approach’ and the official ideal of the socialist commonwealth. A student of Kliuchevsky,
who became his Soviet biographer, counted the concept of Russia’s colonization among his weaker ideas.\textsuperscript{16} However, the colonization paradigm continued in the work of a largely forgotten group of political geographers, led by Veniamin Semenov-Tian-Shansky. For a while, the Soviet activities in the Arctic continued under the name of colonization, which engaged some historians of the Kliuchevsky school.\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, the colonial terminology vanished from official discourse in the early 1930s, when the Soviet government implemented the most massive and brutal methods of colonization, by the forced labour of the gulag prisoners.

\section*{Notes}

\begin{enumerate}
\item See Alexander Etkind, \textit{Internal Colonization. Russia’s Imperial Experience} (Cambridge, 2011).
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Soon this policy, which would have outraced Russia with Russia’s method of contiguous expansion, became insufficient for the wildest dreamers. The Nazi’s rejected the idea and practice of internal colonization; their ambition was to create an entirely new space of colonial, ethnically purged eastern Europe, a project which Hitler compared to the European conquest of America. Rejecting Bismarck’s legacy that he associated with internal colonization, Hitler opted for external colonization, not in Africa, however, but in Eurasia. When political dreams outpaced historical precedents, the very distinction between the external and the internal had to be overcome. Describing his thoughts in Munich of 1912, Hitler called the plan of Germany’s internal colonization a pacifist and Jewish idea. See David Blackbourn, ‘The Conquest of Nature and the Mystique of the Eastern Frontier in Nazi Germany’, in Robert L. Nelson (ed.), Germans, Poland, and Colonial Expansion to the East (London, 2009) 141–170; Kristin Kopp, ‘Gray Zones: On the Inclusion of “Poland” in the Study of German Colonialism’, in Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer (eds), German Colonialism and National Identity (London, 2010) 33–44; Shelley Baranowski, Nazi Empire. German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler (Cambridge, 2011).

8 Afanasii Shchapov, Sochineniia, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1906) 182.
13 Matvei Liubavsky, Obzor istorii russkoi kolonizatsii (Moscow, 1996).
14 Vasilii Kliuchevsky, Kurs russkoi istorii, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1956) 8.
16 Militsa Nechkina, V.O. Kliuschevsky. Istoriia zhizni i tvorchestva (Moscow, 1974) 427.
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