

Interview with Prof. Alexander M. Semyonov, Ph.D. Whither New Imperial History? New Approaches to Russian History



From July to mid-August 2016 the Russian historian Prof. Alexander M. Semyonov, Ph.D. was Visiting Research Fellow of the Graduate School in Regensburg. Semyonov is professor at the History Department of the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in St. Petersburg and is particularly interested in Intellectual History, the history of the Russian Empire, imperialism, and nationalism as well as in comparative history. **Henner Kropp**, Ph.D. student in Regensburg, interviewed Semyonov about his stay and ongoing research.

Mr. Semyonov, I hope that you are enjoying your time here in Regensburg at the Graduate School. What are your experiences so far?

I am very grateful to be a visiting scholar here at the Graduate School. I am working on my research projects and I am enjoying the intellectual atmosphere. I am meeting Ph.D. students and we are discussing their research, but I am also meeting other members of the Graduate School and from the Institute for East and South-east European Studies. They are all wonderful colleagues with interest-

ing research that I am very happy to learn from. I am also very interested in this structure of a graduate school between the two universities. It has been an experiment in Germany and from what I see here between Munich and Regensburg I can recognize that it has been a very successful experiment of developing an intellectual milieu for Ph.D. students and foster their dissertation research. It is a very interesting model and it is very helpful for me to observe that as we think back at my university in Russia on how to reshape the graduate school.

What are you currently working on? Were you able to make some progress in your own research during your Fellowship?

Yes, I am very happy to be in an environment with a good research library that not only has a wonderful collection but also orders material for me from Munich libraries. There are two projects I am working on currently. One project explores imperial transformations that happened in the what I call “the arc of imperial revolution” from 1905 through the 1920s comprising the crisis and reform in the Russian empire, the war and imperial collapse and the reshaping of the former imperial space of diversity into the Soviet Union. The key element of this project is looking at the ways the legacy of the late imperial Russian made it to the Soviet universalism (of Comintern and anti-colonial policies) and ethno-territorial and regionalist federal structure. The hybrid architecture of the Soviet Union proved to be both long lasting and crucial for the end of the Soviet Union in the Perestroika. This project critically interrogates the notion of historical teleology from empire to nation and hegemony of nationalism as a political principle. I personally think that the theme of imperial transformations rather than transition from empire to nation-state can be fruitfully explored in the Russian-Soviet history and in comparative perspective.

The second project I am working on is the publication of diaries of Teymuraz Stepanov-Mamaladze covering the Soviet foreign policy during the Perestroika.

The broader frame of your work is the study of Russian history through the perspective of imperial history. To which aspects and questions should historians of empire devote special attention to? And what does the so called “New Imperial History” do differently?

This is a good question, but also a big one. To give a short answer: The “New Imperial History” is a doubly new look at the Russian history, not only because Russian history has been traditionally dominated by the Russo-centric perspective and was in need of decentering, but also because recently the study of empire has gone much in line with a structuralist political history, that looks at the empire as a mighty state emanating from the center and imposing its will on the periphery. Instead, the New Imperial History is bridging the gap between studies of social and cultural processes and political processes. It questions critically the notion of the all-powerful imperial state, simply because historically we find more than often that the imperial state was rather weak and hence historians need to explain this paradox. We are trying to look at the space of the empire from multiple perspectives, not

only from the capital, not only from the central bureaucracy and indeed, as relational rather than linear. The central question here is uncovering different types of agencies and subjectivities in the space of empire without recourse to the catch-all notion of the imperial elite.

One of the interesting questions is to explore more carefully comparative and entangled perspectives. There are calls everywhere to be more global and more comparative as a historian. The project that I co-direct with Ronald Suny at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg is named "Comparative historical studies of empire and nationalism." One way to pursue this agenda is to take seriously the heterogeneous space of empire and the historical role of empire in making different connections and entanglements of what is called these days "transnational moments." Another way is to look at moments of connectivity at the times of imperial crises, such as the one brought about inter-imperial competition of the World War One. The inter-imperial competition aided the comparative perspectives by different actors from different empires or what could be called the "politics of comparison." They intensively compared own and other imperial regimes and engaged in different forms of post-imperial political imagination by drawing on this politics of comparison.

How do you evaluate from your point of view as an insider the clash between the rather theoretical approach of histories of empires and the Russian tradition of a more descriptive historiography?

I would first deconstruct the notion of the Russian tradition. I consider *Ab Imperio* as a global journal that takes contributions from different regions and countries but it still covers Russia and adequately represents what has been done in the field of history in Russia. In the past there was indeed this division of labor between the Russian historians being more descriptive and the international historians being more theoretical, but I think it is gone now. You have many historians coming from Russia asking very interesting questions and engaging in a theoretical reflection of historical approaches. Of course, if one looks at historical studies of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union written in Russian one can find more traces of naïve positivism. But this is also true about other historiographies one may just have a look at local studies of the Civil War in the US.

What new approaches and questions will emerge and how will these changes affect our research?

Historians having a hard time predicting the past and hence are not supposed to predict the future, as the Russian saying goes (laughs). I believe that there will be a very interesting



Alexander M. Semyonov in discussion with doctoral students

conversation between the field of Global History and the field of New Imperial History in the near future. The field of Global History with such contributors as by David Armitage and Sebastian Conrad started to distance itself from the field of empire studies. But I still think that if you do not understand empires as structures but rather as spaces of relations, then the approach of the Global History is very much congenial to the approach of the New Imperial History. In some phases of their development empires sought to keep people disconnected and bound to their particular places, indeed, *divide et impera* as the saying goes. However, at other times, empires facilitated the movement of people and moments of connectivity between different parts of populations, religions, languages, cultures and regions. There is additional proximity between the field of global his-

tory and the field of empire studies. They are seeking to engage with the pressing concerns of the present societies. The difference here is that global history is the history of the present while the studies of empire may provide a different genealogy of the present and the moment of estrangement (defamiliarization) of the present. Not only today we experience migrants and cultural differences and questions about how we do accommodate diversity. It has been the pathway of much of the history of empires. And we can learn from these different experiences, for instance, we can learn the relative weakness of ethnic grouping and nationalism. For example, we may not want to start with the assumption that people live in ethnic communities – we start with the assumption that people live in different types of settings: neighbor settings, trading

settings, the context of hybrid crossings, etc. A clear cut of ethnic or cultural boundaries is rather an invention of modern politics than the natural condition of humankind.

How big is the impact of historians from the German speaking world on Russian historiography and your field of studies from your perspective?

The field of Russian and Eurasian studies has become a global one. Indeed, Andreas Kappeler has published path-breaking studies that started decentering the Russo-centric narrative of the Russian history. We are very proud at *Ab Imperio* that he serves on the editorial board of the journal. I cannot say that there is a particular German way of looking at the Russian historiography. One generalization that I would attempt is to say that it is thanks particularly to German historians that there emerged an imperative to compare the history of Russia with other European spaces or to integrate Russian into the framework of European history. It was a welcome departure from the Russian *Sonderweg* historical narrative and brought new insights into the history of the Enlightenment, *Polizeistaat*, history of Russian civil society and modernization. Yet, at a certain point there was a realization of the limitations imposed by the European framework of interpretation of Russian history. In *Ab Imperio* we started asking questions

of why is it that historians of Russia rarely engage in a dialogue with the traditions and perspective of post-colonial studies. The newest trend is to combine the European and extra-European perspectives, that is to say Eurasian perspectives by looking at formerly neglected regions and lines of comparison: Caucasus and the Ottoman empire, Central Asia and the British India, etc. But then again, your research on Russia in the context of inter-imperial cooperation in the Pacific is a reminder and example of dangers of such generalization about historiographies.

In the most recent past the relations between Russia and Germany did not develop very well. Did the tense relations with Germany affect your research and your collaboration with partners in Germany?

Well, one has to recognize that there are political clouds. But clouds could come from different directions. There may be more obstacles on the path of the pursuit of the international cooperation between the EU and Russian academe with the Brexit. In this situation when business and political connects may not work, I think it is important to continue the cooperation in the sphere of education and research. I would add to this that the position of DFG and DAAD has been similar to that and insistent on keeping ties and connections where possible.