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WHY EUROPE, WHICH EUROPE?

A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research

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Provincializing Europe, De-centering Europe, Hybridizing Europe ...

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Since 2003 each year I have taught a class on the history of the Russian Empire in St Petersburg. Every year I ask my students, fresh from the high school classes of history, a question at the beginning of my course: do you think that Russia in its past or some periods of its history belonged to Europe? Answers to this question have changed in the course of my teaching career. In 2014, for the first time, the nays prevailed over the ayes. By 2015, only three students answered 'yes' to the posed question. They were two exchange students from the US and one exchange student from China.

Of course, the question I put before my students is an intellectual provocation. It serves as an entry point to the discussion of metanarratives of history, including the history of progress, modernization, and transition from empire to nation. Students delve into the vernacular translations of those metanarratives in the Russian historiographic tradition that go by names like Europeanization, reform, and revolution. Unpacking the question itself, students face the problem of how to use historically rooted categories as tools of analysis, whether it is possible to speak of Europe and Russia as unchanging entities, and

how the history of the semantic change of concepts and contestation around the meaning of those concepts, are part of history itself.

Finally, students in my course are invited to ponder the question of an overlap between the categories of analysis of an historian and categories of practice. Production of historical knowledge is nested at the crossing of professional intellectual debates, societal concerns, and politics. Today the evolving political reality of the European Union (EU) powerfully shapes the perception of what European history is inside the EU and in the outside world. It informs the perception of the spatial scale and the perception of the scope of European history. Early on, the narrative of European history was identified as a tool for constructing the nascent identity of the evolving European political space at the close of the 20th century.^[1] But the post-World War II European identity was largely founded on the ultra-modernist temporal concept of Europe as a break with its past and with the central idea of preventing the repetition of the devastating 20th century wars on the European continent. The eastward EU expansion changed that. Gradually, the spatial concept of European polity replaced the temporal concept of Europe. In the 21st century, the space and history came back together in the narrative of European identity.

The Problem of Nativism

The growing shift to nativism in Russia (some say that Russia pioneered this turn in the world today) has resulted in a dramatic recasting of the historical narrative, making it autarkic and centered on the history of the Russian state, the Russian nation, and the Russian Orthodox Church. There are many elaborate intellectual traditions in the history of Russian political thought to tap into for this reconfiguration of the Russian historical narrative.^[2] Fundamentally, Russian politics today is defined by different versions of nativism (from Eurasianism to Russian nationalism), a conservative discourse on state sovereignty for domestic and, importantly, external consumption (modeled on the post-Napoleonic European system of great powers, which aligns well with Russia's regional hegemon ambitions), and the liberal oppositional politics which sets Russia on a course to become a normal European nation-state. If one looks at the concept of Europe employed in present-day Russian nativism and liberalism, one finds a surprising similarity: a homological and homogenous European historical experience is posited as either an axiomatic destination or as an alien threat. The valence of value judgment in these political visions does not change the historical reference. Europe remains unchangeable through the past and in different contexts that one might define. This situation has two corollaries. First, for historians in Russia, reflection on the practice of European history

and on the relationship between Russian and European histories is intertwined with adjacent political discourses that employ Europe as their central reference. Second, contemporary professional historians should be on the alert when the epistemic logic of their categories of analysis reproduce the logic of categories of political practice. The professional core of historical discipline is constituted by the predisposition to historicize key concepts of social and political discourse. That is to say, to de-essentialize concepts (in this case, Europe) in order to provide for a gap between the past ‘as an alien country’ and the present world that retains many pasts’ futures.

The Challenges of Global History

The professional historiographic debate about the category of Europe and the framework of European history has recently been subjected to critiques that are coming from two dynamically developing fields of historical inquiry: global history and new imperial history. I base the following remarks on my experience as a member of the *Ab Imperio* journal collective since 2000. At *Ab Imperio* we have been developing the field of new imperial history for Northern Eurasia and engaging in dialogue with the critical strand of the field of global history. The critique of the concept of European history from these two fields (and those fields include a diversity of viewpoints) is similar as it aims to deconstruct the concept and the narrative of European history as a normative model and as a privileged scale of historical experience. Let us take those two aspects separately and then look at the openings for a refined vision of European history.

The current evolution of the field of global history may be called a critical reflection on the recent failures of globalization since the end of the Cold War as a normative perspective and an historic process. It is interesting to note, retrospectively, that the growth of global history as the history of globalization overlapped with the discussion of a comparative history of Europe as a framework for shaping the narrative about a new European identity. Both intellectual developments were situated in the context of the presumed ‘end of history’ associated with the end of the Cold War. From the ‘end of history’ viewpoint the inevitable globalization of the world dovetailed with the inclusion of Central and East-Central Europe in a consolidated and enlarged EU. History never ends, though, and an end in sight also means a promise of a new beginning. But the crisis of a normative vision makes the critical work of an historian to de-familiarize purported links between the past and the present especially relevant. In his authoritative *What is Global History?*, Sebastian Conrad presents a powerful argument against this essentializing thinking and the normative visions of the global history as the history of globalization. Conrad suggests

ways to limit the claims of global history, to engage in methodological reflection on global history as an approach, and to offer what I would call a constructivist take on global history:

In some ways, what I say about global history, distinguishing it from older variants of world history, seems to be similar to the New Imperial History in distinction from older (and structural) variants of imperial history. So, essentially, three points. First, yes, global historians do not take ‘the globe’ simply as something that is ‘out there,’ as a structure, as you would say, but, in fact, they use ‘global’ as a perspective. Second, because this structure is not simply there, it very much depends upon the positionality of the historians. It does, in other words, make a difference from where you look. The world will look very different depending on from where you write. And even in one society there will be conflicting ways of thinking about what the world actually is, and what it looks like. This dimension is also crucial. The world, then, is not an objective scale that we can touch but, in fact, it depends on our views. And the third dimension, what you just mentioned concerns the temporality, or the long-termism that you have mentioned. Just as in the imperial history, I see a danger of essentialism that is linked to the long-termism that is present in some versions of global history. This happens when historians stipulate particular entities as lasting for centuries and even millennia, as if they were simply given. A good example is the concept of ‘China,’ that is usually seen as continuous across centuries. But historical actors did not necessarily experience the different dynasties, with their sometimes very different geographies, consistently as ‘China.’¹³

The critical phase in the development of global history produced a refinement of the analytical purchase of this new avenue for historical inquiry. Global history was conceived as a way to systematically contextualize and deconstruct the national history paradigm as the basic container of historical experience and Eurocentrism as both the privileged point of origin of world history in a diffusionist perspective and as the epistemological hegemony of the modern discipline of history. From a post-colonial studies perspective, national history and the universalism of historical categories were the twins strengthened by Eurocentrism. From a global history perspective, the paradigm of multiple civilizations

and the claim of autonomous epistemological power becomes another version of centrism, exhibiting the same features of essentialization of the historical life-world and epistemic hegemony.

The new analytical language developed in this constructivist version of global history helps redefine the framework of European history as one of the possible scales for historical inquiry along with imperial history, national history, regional history, and local history. Ceasing to be an object of analysis and becoming a scale of analysis, modern European history needs to be more thoroughly integrated and taught together with other histories, rather than as a separate field juxtaposed to national history. The majority of Russian university history programs follow the 19th century and Soviet-era blueprint that structures the historical curriculum on the opposition of ‘universal history’ (which, by and large, means the history of Western Europe and North America) to Russian history (actually called ‘History of the Fatherland’). Introducing a course on European history will not problematize this taxonomy, but instead will reinforce the division. Offering a course on comparative history, or global history of empires, or revolutions in world history with Europe being one of the scales for exploration of connected processes might help decenter the foundational boundary between one’s own and others’ histories that was set at the birth of the modern historical profession.

The Challenge of New Imperial History

If European history was significantly modified and became one of the scales of historical inquiry in the recent accounts of global history, it almost disappeared in the revisionist accounts of new imperial history. To clarify the argument one needs to explain the differentiation between the old and new imperial history. Empire started to attract a new and heightened interest of historians with the advent of a new global dis-order and emergence of claims of global and regional hegemony. The break-up of the Soviet Union, seen by some as the last empire, and the formation of the EU prompted historians to revisit questions of supranational sovereignties and imperial politics of the management of difference. True, the burst of the concept of empire center-stage was in part underpinned by the search for a relevant, if not usable, past. This current in historical thinking about empire (new and old at the same time) largely followed the structuralist conception, like in the model of center-periphery, or in the definition of a multinational continental empire. The center-periphery model often got subsumed under the division of the European imperial metropole and the overseas colonial periphery, even though, as Dominic Lieven reminds us, Ireland and Scotland were not exactly overseas in the British

Empire.⁴ The definition of multinational continental empire followed the structural precepts of center and periphery although not in terms of geographic division. Ethnicity came to play the role of the boundary between the center and the periphery, even though religion, and not ethnicity, was the fundamental marker of difference for much of the history of those empires and the modernizers of the Hapsburg and Russian empires struggled hard to arrive at a more or less clear definition of the dominant nationality (German and Russian).⁵

The new imperial history, written in different versions and on varying historical material, questions the structuralist precepts behind the analytical model of empire.⁶ This perspective strives to avoid the redundant and universal definition of empire as a large and powerful state and aims to explore diversity, filled with multiple voices and agencies in differing contexts. Like the recent turn in global history, new imperial history does not take empire as a durable and self-evident form of historical experience. It stresses the dangers of empire-realism and emphasizes historic transformations and imaginaries that underpinned the making of the world of hierarchy asymmetry, entanglement, and diversity. The theoretical reflection shifts the definition of empire from being an object of analysis to a context-setting category that allows the historian to move up or down the temporal and spatial scales of historical analysis. New accounts of imperial pasts produced new interpretations by combining center and periphery in a single analytical perspective, treating empire and nation as political claims and imaginary categories, rather than as opposites, and pointing to contestation as the central element in global history.⁷ Thus, the new imperial history adds a fourth 'C' (contestation) to the standard three Cs of the global history – comparison, connection, causality.

Consequently, the turn to new imperial history blurs the boundary of European history in two senses. First, this perspective approaches the imperial experience as a continuum treating the metropole of a colonial empire in Europe as part of the continuum. Second and following from the first, the new perspective challenges the notion that a nation-state is a container of historical experience that was born and first realized on the European continent. In their pioneering work on world history written through the prism of empire, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper demonstrate the analytical purchase of expanding the scale of analysis geographically by considering European and non-European empires together and chronologically by seeing continuous patterns of politics of diversity in pre-modern and modern empires.⁸ Cooper and Burbank stress the political history of imperial sovereignty and politics of difference, insisting on the prevalence of imperial pragmatism over epistemological power and ideology. Krishan Kumar, on the other hand, in *Visions of*

Empire, argues that the centrality of cultural frames and political languages shaped the universalism and pluralism of imperial spaces.⁹ Kumar shifts the focus on political imaginaries and deconstructs the opposition between nation and empire that is so central to the structuralist accounts of histories of empires and the concept of transition from empire to nation. In Kumar's argument, and in the work of other historians, empire and nation appear to be co-existing political claims and the language of the rationalization of social reality.¹⁰

Collaborative Frameworks as an Important Goal

If Europe becomes one of the possible scales of historical analysis considered through the lens of global history, then the new imperial history casts Europe as an especially promising locus to explore hybrid and overlapping historical forms.¹¹ An expanded and inclusive patchwork of European history allows the historian to see multiple forms of imperial control. From the Russian Empire and other Eurasian empires, through Central European empires, and on to internal colonialism and overseas empires, using the tools of new imperial history, historians can illuminate imperial contestation, interaction, and entanglement. Reframed by imperial history, European history can lead to rethinking the modern teleology of transition from empire to nation, the latter being claimed as the ultimate end of history for the alleged lack of conceivable alternatives. Finally, by historicizing and deconstructing Europe as a normative model of modern history, we can think in a new way about analytical categories of social sciences and history including state, nation, class, and race. By paying attention to the fact that these categories were not born in Europe, but in the process of reflection on the mixed, shifting, and elusive boundaries of Europe as a telos of modern history, we can understand these categories in new ways and eschew the trap between Eurocentrism and other centrisms and native epistemologies.¹² I have to add to this that hybrid historical forms are not inherently good or bad, like all intellectual constructs, they should be applied with caution. But it is also clear that the world we live in is becoming more and more complex and mixed, notwithstanding the growing rebellion of present-day populists against complex forms.

If this argument about the analytical promise of the exploration of hybrid historical forms in the locus of European history is correct, then we need more collaborative frameworks in historical research and education. All too often universities prefer to globalize the campus rather than expose students and faculty to a different cultural experience. In addition, even well-funded universities fail to hire and cultivate sufficient faculty in the humanities for the tasks required by globally and imperially entangled European and non-


European history, especially with the cuts in the humanities of recent days. Finally, the expectation to provide training in national history looms large over chairs of history departments and local job markets are likely to favor specialists, who do not need to travel abroad for archival research.

The breathtaking development of online education and MOOCs seemed to promise exposure to the world without leaving home. I would argue, however, that they are phony alternatives to international collaboration. The online formats often reproduce asymmetries in the production of knowledge: the students are on the periphery while the European and North American centers of knowledge are the producers and educators. Likely to be in English, they reproduce and extend linguistic hegemony.

What I have in mind is joint ventures, like the joint doctoral program 'Global Histories of Empire' between the HSE University and the University of Turin. Students are enrolled in both campuses of the program, meet for specialized courses and summer schools, travel back and forth, and are taught by faculty from both universities. The language of instruction is English, but other languages, including Italian and Russian, are spoken in different tracks of the program. This program is bilateral at the moment. The idea, however, is to move to a consortium that would link faculty specializing in different regions and periods of history in a collaboration to develop a jointly taught curriculum. Even this bilateral collaboration, however, made a difference by expanding the areas of training at my department of history in St. Petersburg in the fields of Latin American, European, and Mediterranean history. The joint work of faculty from different historiographic traditions requires them to reflect on meta-historical frameworks as a way to professionally communicate and collaborate effectively. More collaborative efforts of this type would enable the pooling and sharing of resources but more important, would further the noble dream of developing inclusive and diverse representations of the past.

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1. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, European History as Comparative History, in: *Ab Imperio* 1 (2004), pp 111-126: 114, 118. 
2. The most interesting historically revisionist accounts of nativist traditions (Slavophilism and Eurasianism) associated with the critique of modernity are: Ilya Gerasimov/ Sergey Glebov/ Marina Mogilner, *The Postimperial*

- Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment, in: *Ab Imperio* 2 (2013): pp. 97-135; Sergey Glebov, *From Empire to Eurasia: Politics, Scholarship, and Ideology in Russian Eurasianism, 1920s–1930s*, DeKalb 2017. [↗](#)
3. Alexander Semyonov, 'Global History is More Than the History of Globalization': Interview with Sebastian Conrad, in: *Ab Imperio* 1 (2017), pp. 23-43: 32; Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, Princeton, 2016. [↗](#)
 4. Dominic Lieven, *Empire: the Russian Empire and Its Rivals from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, London 2003. [↗](#)
 5. See a more developed argument about the limitations of the structuralist approach to empire in Ilya Gerasimov/ Jan Kusber/ Alexander Semyonov (eds.), *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire*, Leiden 2009, pp. 1-32. [↗](#)
 6. Stephen Howe, Introduction: New Imperial Histories, in: Idem, ed., *The New Imperial History Reader*, Abingdon 2010. [↗](#)
 7. On this, see Alexander Semyonov, How Five Empires Shaped the World and How this Process Shaped those Empires, in: *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2017): pp. 27-51. [↗](#)
 8. Jane Burbank/ Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, New Jersey 2010; see also: Ilya Gerasimov/ Marina Mogilner/ Alexander Semyonov, The Challenge and Serendipity: Writing World History through the Prism of Empire: Interview with Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, in: *Ab Imperio* 2 (2010): pp. 38-39. [↗](#)
 9. Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*, Princeton 2017. [↗](#)
 10. Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, Cambridge 2016. [↗](#)
 11. A more developed argument about the importance of exploration of hybrid historical forms and the critique of the standard conception of hybridity coming from the field of post-colonial studies is given in: Ilya Gerasimov/ Sergey Glebov/ Marina Mogilner, Hybridity: Marxism and the Problem of Language of the Imperial Situation, in: *Ab Imperio* 1 (2016): pp. 27-68. [↗](#)
 12. See George Steinmetz (ed.), *Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline*, Durham 2013; for the argument of how sociology, the allegedly most nation-centered social science discipline, was born in the imperial entanglement and over the reflection on imperial mixture. I have learned about the alternative between 'provincializing Europe' and 'positionality of historical perspective' in thinking about Eurocentrism of modern social sciences from the research by my colleague: Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*, Lincoln 2013. [↗](#)

