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Artículos

**WHY SIBERIA IS NOT AMERICA: THE CONTEXTS OF THE RUSSIAN AND
EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL EXPANSION IN THE 15TH – 17TH CENTURIES**

**POR QUÉ SIBERIA NO ES AMÉRICA: LOS CONTEXTOS DE LA EXPANSIÓN
TERRITORIAL RUSA Y EUROPEA EN LOS SIGLOS XV Y XVII¹**

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Abstract

The paper presents a comparative analysis of colonization activities in Siberia and America; nonetheless, alongside the traditional aspects and approaches (frontier theory, civilizational approach, etc.), the communication pattern of territorial expansion on the part of scholars, entrepreneurs and states represents an independent research objective. The conclusion is drawn as regards the fact that, impartially speaking, Siberia was not along the lines of the colonization processes for the European countries during the so-called Age of Exploration, except for the resource exploitation of the new territories. However, in order to implement the current domestic and foreign policy projects, the principal subjects of communications of the 16th – 17th centuries create in their messages a different image of Siberia, i.e. annexed in the name of the 'Christian mission' and in line with the European paradigm of colonization of the 'rogue barbarians'.

Palabras Clave: Colonization of Siberia, Colonization of North America, Frontier, Colony, Age of Exploration.

Resumen

El artículo presenta un análisis comparativo de las actividades de colonización en Siberia y América; sin embargo, junto a los aspectos y enfoques tradicionales (teoría de fronteras, enfoque civilizatorio, etc.), el patrón comunicativo de expansión territorial por parte de académicos, empresarios y estados representa un objetivo de investigación independiente. La conclusión se extrae en cuanto al hecho de que, imparcialmente hablando, Siberia no estaba en la línea de los procesos de colonización de los países europeos durante la llamada Era de la Exploración, salvo en la explotación de recursos de los nuevos territorios. Sin embargo, para implementar los actuales proyectos de política interior y exterior, los principales sujetos de comunicación de los siglos XVI-XVII crean en sus mensajes una imagen diferente de Siberia, es decir, anexada en nombre de la 'misión cristiana' y en línea con el paradigma europeo de colonización de los 'bárbaros rebeldes'.

Keywords: Colonización de Siberia, Colonization de Norteamérica, Frontera, Colonia, Era de la Exploración.

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1. INTRODUCCIÓN

The territorial expansion of the Russian state into Siberia and of the European countries into North America coincided not only as regards their timing (15th – 17th centuries), but also in terms of the consequences, both for the annexed territories as well as for the colonial powers themselves.

Nonetheless, the obvious evidence, particularly in recent decades, provokes discussions on the feasibility to attribute on the common basis the Russian expansion into Siberia and the European expansion into America to certain general historical process such as, for instance, the Age of Exploration. The purpose of this research lies in employing the contemporary methodological approaches and the newly discovered (or considered from a new angle) historical sources in order to highlight the principal contexts of the Russian and European territorial expansion into Siberia and North America; to outline the general and specific features of these processes; and to compare their representation in communication practices of the individual subjects.

Nowadays, available are at least three viewpoints on the issues as raised; still this division is largely supported by the ideological principles. Thus, the ‘westerners’ traditionally view the annexation of Siberia in the context of the term ‘western offshoot’ coined by A. Maddison in 1996 (the key aspects of which being a radical change in the way of life in the annexed territory, and a swift dominance imposed by the colonists over the local population); the outpouring of the European civilization, so to speak, and running in a similar way in Siberia, America or Africa. This approach is largely unanimous among the western scholars, but only partially shared by the scientists in today’s Russia². In a different perspective, the annexation of Siberia to the Russian state is far different from the European expansion into the American continent in terms of interaction between the colonists and locals.

²Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*. (París: OECD Publications Service, 2017).

Given America remained a colony for Europe, the second-rate land, then Siberia got integrated into the all-nation system of relations on general grounds³. This is a classic perception stemming from the traditional Soviet historiography: the annexation of Siberia was peaceful and amicable, whilst for America it meant hostility and warpath.

Finally, the supporters of the third scenario believe that the annexation of Siberia differs from the European territorial expansion not in the nature of particular constituents, but, in fact, represents a distinct civilizational process with its origins to be sought not in the West, but in the East: in the Turks and Genghis Khan empires, with its essence being the succession of Russia to the Golden Horde⁴. It is noteworthy, that despite its obvious affinity, this scenario is not dominant in the contemporary Russian historical domain.

Yet another discussion normally resonates with the issue of the principles of the annexation of Siberia to the Russian state: whether it is appropriate to refer to Siberia as a colony of Russia, just no less than the separate territories of North America were defined as the colonies of the European countries⁵. Acknowledgment of this possibility means either a specific ‘western-oriented’ approach or the use of an ‘internal colonization’ concept coined by Richard Pipes in the 1990s⁶.

The important stage in understanding the territorial expansion of the European countries turned up to be the theory of the frontier (the division between us and them, civilization and barbarity), which F. Turner defined in the 1920s⁷.

³ Dameshek, “The annexation of southeastern Siberia to Russia as a political process. The emergence of the policy of paternalism”, *Izvestia*, (2012): 128.

⁴ Vernadsky, *History of Russia*, Vol. 3: The Mongols and Russia. (New Haven: Yale University Press. New Haven, 1966)

⁵ Lantzeff, *Siberia in the 17th Century. A Study of the Colonial Administration*. (Los Angeles, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943); Kolarz, *Russia and Her Colonies* (1952); Treadgold, “Russian Expansion in the Light of Turner’s Study of American Frontier”, *Agricultural History*, 26 (1952): 147-152.

⁶ Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

⁷ Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1920)

Nonetheless, in relation to Siberia, the theory of the frontier did not gain any sensible development; and by the 2000s, in the Russian historiography the assumption that there were no fundamental differences between the Russians and the natives of Siberia, given their established historical dialogue, became a dominant viewpoint⁸. Thus, the difference in approaches seems to be chiefly ideological. The known ideologization and the proprietary nature of the Russian (Soviet) historical studies in the 20th century, which persists to date, played its part in these contradictions.

2. METHODS

The study of the contexts of the territorial expansion of the Russians and Europeans to Siberia and America respectively was carried out on the basis of several methodologic principles. The first and foremost represents the theory of the frontier by F. Turner, and takes into account its contemporary development in medievalism⁹. Close to the theory of the frontier is the phenomenological approach to the analysis of the Other (the ‘Alien’ concept that extends beyond its own familiar world) proposed by Berichard Waldenfels¹⁰. For the purposes of conducting this research, the reference was primarily made to the works by the contemporaries of the annexation of America and Siberia to the respective colonial powers (travelers, merchants, ambassadors), as well as to the official state acts and diplomatic papers¹¹.

⁸ Sherstova, The nature of Siberia's entry into Russia: review of conceptual approaches. Altay - Western Siberia in the 19th - early 20th centuries: population, economy, culture: materials of the All-Russia scientific and practical conference. (Gorno-Altaysk, 2018)

⁹ Bartlett, *Medieval Frontier Societies*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Power & Standen, *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Abulafia & Berend, *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2020); MacKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000–1500*. (London: Springer, 1977); Curta, *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005); Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*. (Albuquerque, 1991)

¹⁰ Waldenfels, *The Alien Motive*. (Minsk, 1999)

¹¹ Hariot, A brief and true report of the new found land of Virginia, of the commodities there found and to be raised, as well merchantable as others. In Hakluyt R. *Principal navigations, voyages and discoveries of the English nation, made by sea and over land, to the most farthest and distant quarters of the Earth at any time within the compass of these 1500 years*. (London, 1589)

3. RESULTS

At first glance, the fundamental difference between the main discourses on the annexation of Siberia and North America is observed in testimonials of the 16th – 17th centuries by the contemporaries. In these texts, which outline the particularities of the colonized American continent and the advantages of resettlement to the new lands, there can be traced several clear ideological compositions: first of all, because of attractiveness of the new territories in terms of entrepreneurial activities and implementation of new business projects¹². Yet another contemporary of the colonization of North America in the mid-17th century, Robert Lochinvar, explicitly refers to the objective of his essay on European colonies in America as ‘the need to overcome people's disbelief in the prospects of colonization’¹³. It is widely accepted, that in the Russian state of the 16th – 17th centuries nothing of the kind is taking place, and the dominant role in the colonization processes in Siberia belongs to the state itself with its military forces and administrative structures. This is true in many ways: the main topic of communications of the Russian state as regards the annexation of Siberia appeared to be justification of the legitimacy of incorporation of the new territories into the country¹⁴.

At that, it is significant that in its external communications the Moscovia government presents the situation as if Siberia is the indigenously Russian land, and by annexing these territories, Tsar Ivan and his successors, Fyodor Ivanovich and Boris Godunov, just put the historical record straight. Further on, there is a typical statement from the instructions to the ambassadors in England in 1600: ‘The Siberian kingdom has been from time immemorial the ever-being ancestral lands of our sovereigns, the tsars of Russia’¹⁵.

¹² Hakluyt, Reasons for colonization. (Cambridge: The Elizabethan America, 1965)

¹³ Lochinvar, Encouragement, for such as shall have intention to bee under-takers in the new plantation of Cape Breton, now New Galloway in America, by mee, Lochinvar. (Edinburg, 1625)

¹⁴ Timoshenko, The role of Siberia in the Russian civilizational processes, Humanities in Siberia, 2 (2013): 4.

¹⁵ Russian Historical Society, Collection of the Imperial Russian Historical Society. In 148 vols. Vol. 38. Monuments of diplomatic relations between ancient Russia and foreign powers. Vol. 2: Monuments of diplomatic relations of the state of Moscovia with England from 1581 to 1604. (S. Petersburg, 1883)

At the same time, addressing the domestic audience, the official Russian chronicles bear complete resemblance to the chronicles of the European monarchs. This, for instance, is one of the Siberian Chronicles, Esipovskaya, describing the situation: ‘the ambassador of God to clear the place of shrine, and defeat the infidel king Kuchum, and destroy Gods of Merya and their impious temples’¹⁶. That is, for the domestic audience, the colonization of Siberia is no different from the colonization of North America, being in fact a classic example of the ‘Christian liberation’ of the lands seized by the usurpers and enemies of faith.

Nonetheless, along with the official state communication, in the undocumented folk sources there exists the subject-matter similar to the American ‘free enterprise’, i.e. the land of ‘common outlaws’ which is popularized by tales, legends and folklore. Typical sayings and proverbs on Siberia describe this land as the rich territory free from the state oppression: ‘In Siberia, kalachi grow on birches’; ‘Though there is cold there, but no hunger!’; ‘In Siberia, women catch sables with carrying poles’; ‘The rumor has it that Siberia is terrifying, but its people live better than us here’; ‘In Siberia, 100 rubles is not money, and 100 verstas is not a distance’¹⁷. Taking into account the structural features of the economy and social structure of Russia in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the concept of the land of ‘common outlaws’ for Siberia is, in overall, synonymous to the idea of promoting the entrepreneurial initiative in the process of colonization of North America.

The new territories and their locals as perceived by the colonists

Another important problem when comparing the nature of colonization processes in Siberia and North America is the frontier differentiation of ‘barbarity’ and ‘civilization’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.

¹⁶ Group of the Esipov Chronicle, Complete set of the Russian Chronicles. In 41 vols. Vol. 36. Part 1. (Moscow: Nauka, 1987)

¹⁷ Golovneva, “Formation of the image of Siberia in the process of its colonization”, Journal of Krasnoyarsk GAU, 4 (2016): 215.

As regards America, this approach is generally accepted¹⁸. ‘As for the population, it is not numerous; they are poor and uncivilized people, dressed in loose deer skin robes, belted. The rest of the body is uncovered’¹⁹, describes Lochinvar the inhabitants of the North American continent. The similar account is rendered by the European travelers visiting Moscovia at the end of the 16th and the first half of the 17th centuries and witnessing the annexation of Siberia, for instance, by Giles Fletcher, who arrived in Moscovia in November 1588²⁰.

Still does it mean that this is how the contemporaries in the Russian state viewed the colonization of Siberia?

If we consider the documents related to the foreign matters of the Russian state with those of the European countries, then this question will provide an affirmative answer. ‘And they were in talks about Siberia to say that (...) the sovereign’s Cossacks (...) took the Siberian kingdom’²¹, declare the instructions to the Russian ambassadors to Sweden in August 1585.

However, nowadays there is enough evidence to affirm that the Russians, with their arrival in Siberia at the end of the 16th century, did not experience the same feelings, as did the Europeans in North America. By that time, the Russians (first of all, the representatives of the Novgorod republic) had been already in contact with the Siberian indigenous people for at least four centuries, with the first reference of the military campaign by the Novgorodians to Yugra (the area in the north of Western Siberia) dating back to 1193, and the return visit made by the Yugra people attributing to 1195.

¹⁸ Griffiths and Reid, “New Evidence on New Scotland, 1629”, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 49(1992): 492-508.

¹⁹ Lochinvar, Encouragement, for such as shall have intention to bee under-takers in the new plantation of Cape Breton, now New Galloway in America, by mee, Lochinvar. (Edinburg, 1625)

²⁰ Fletcher, *Of the Russe common wealth. Or, Maner of gouvernement of the Russe emperour, (commonly called the Emperour of Moskouia) with the manners, and fashions of the people of that countrey.* (London: T. Dawson for Thomas Charde, 1591)

²¹ Russian Historical Society, *Collection of the Imperial Russian Historical Society.* Vol. 129. (S. Petersburg, 1910)

Therefore, no wonder that in the Russian chronicles of the late 16th - 17th centuries there is no even a hint at the harsh ‘us-them’ opposition, which is given in the North American chronicles by the European contemporaries. The Russians got acquainted with Siberia long before the Age of Exploration. Several centuries before Yermak's campaign, these territories were associated with both trade and political relations.

Economic grounds for the colonization of Siberia and North America

When it comes to the perception of the new territories and their locals, a significant difference between Siberia and North America is clearly observed, still the economic grounds for the Russian and European colonization projects are mostly similar: that is, first of all, the exploitation of natural resources in the frontier areas. Thus, the attitude to the territories primarily as the ‘storage of resources’ is rendered not only by the already mentioned evidence of the primary sources, but also by other documents: for instance, the recently discovered documents on the first Scottish colonists in North America in the 1620s, and the records of negotiations between the European rulers and representatives of the aboriginal elites²².

The economic foundation for the annexation of Western Siberia, first and foremost, means the resource interest among the colonists. Siberia, as early as 50 years after its integration to the Russian state, becomes a resource colony of the latter, and in many ways the basis for the financial well-being of the Moscovia government. It is evident, for instance, that by the middle of the 15th century, the Siberian furs alone accounted for 40.6% of the total nomenclature and 58.1% of the commodity value of the export of the Russian state; the second place in terms of exports was taken by the castoreum and deer musk (aromatic and medicinal drugs) largely sourced in Siberia²³.

²² Laing, Royal letters, charters, and tracts, relating to the colonization of New Scotland and the institution of the order of knight baronets of Nova Scotia. 1621 – 1638. (Forgotten Books, 2018); Griffiths and Reid, “New Evidence on New Scotland, 1629”, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 49(1992): 492-508.

²³ Vilkov, “Essays on the socio-economic development of Siberia in the late 16th - early 17th centuries”, *Novosibirsk*, (1992): 196–197.

The economic nature and economic grounds for the colonization of Siberia and North America is the only factor enabling to identify similarities between the processes of annexation of these territories without any reservations whatsoever.

Management pattern in the annexed territories of Siberia

Finally, taking into account the reviewed contexts and features of the new lands annexation, it is necessary to answer the question: was Siberia a colony of the Russian state in the period under study (given the fact that the colonial nature of dependence of the territories of North America upon the European countries is indisputable)?

The most concise definition of a colony, in author's opinion, is given by the Cambridge Essential Dictionary, in which a colony is defined as 'a country or area controlled by a more powerful country'²⁴. It is widely believed that Siberia was ruled on the same grounds as the rest of the country, and therefore cannot be considered in a colonial possession by Russia. However, there are still differences from the 'old' lands of the Russian state in Siberia. Firstly, it is about favorable fiscal regimes by virtue of which the new rulers try to win over the local elites. Secondly, the legal basis for management of the Siberian peoples, as well as in North America, is formed by bilateral agreements signed by the representatives of Moscovia tsarist government and the rulers of indigenous Siberian social and political formations on the principle of 'order in exchange for obligatory tax payment and faithful service'²⁵. Everything we know today about the first decades of the annexation of Siberia to the Russian state points to the following: throughout the 17th century, the government of Moscovia had no goal to establish a reliable system of the state institutions or to include Siberia in the all-Russia administrative system. Instead, it limited itself to creating (restoring) an efficiently functioning system of tax collection and resource exploitation of the territory.

²⁴ Cambridge Essential Dictionary.

²⁵ Zuev and Slugina, "Chronicle records on the Siberian peoples sherting during Yermak's campaign and historical realities", Russian history, 3(2020): 35.

Thus, if the approach defined in this work is taken in further consideration, then for Russia, the Siberia of the 16th - 17th centuries is a classic colony with the particular management pattern and specific approach to legitimize the local power. In this aspect, as in the case of resource exploitation, Siberia and North America lie within the same contexts of the colonization policy implemented by the European countries and Russia.

4. DISCUSSION

Staying within the mainstream of traditional methodological approaches (primarily, the theory of the frontier, civilizational approach) and contemporary non-ideological conceptions on the colonization processes in the 16th - 17th centuries, this research paper attempts at discussing the issues related to the communication contexts of the annexation of Siberia and North America, specifics of legitimizing the process of annexation of the new territories, economic grounds for colonization, mutual relationship and perception among the aborigines and indigenous people, as well as the organizational pattern of the colonization of Siberia and North America. The analysis of all these processes highlights that it is impossible to draw an unambiguous conclusion on both similarities and differences between the Russian and European colonization as in some aspects they appear entirely identical, whilst in some others they are totally different from one another. Nonetheless, it is impossible to support the idea that the Russian colonization of Siberia is a very peculiar civilizational process primarily because of the above-mentioned economic grounds (first of all because of the resource exploitation of the new territories). Thus, the author cannot fully side with any of the traditional approaches through the prism of which the colonization processes of Siberia and North America correlate.

In the Russia of the 16th - 17th centuries, most likely, there *really* was the desire to present the colonization of Siberia to the outside world as part of the European colonization processes, being in fact far otherwise, in order to achieve the actual foreign policy goals as regards the legitimization of the status of the tsar of Moscovia and others.

This conclusion in overall resonates with the contemporary neo-positivist ideas on History, and is supported by a range of traditionally criticized arguments. Among them, the principle one represents the impossibility of assessing the communication pattern of the 16th - 17th centuries without the ‘interference’ of the present times. Nonetheless, it seems that in a situation when mainly the authentic texts were reviewed to justify the hypothesis, this type of criticism cannot significantly influence the conclusions of the research.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the framework of the issues discussed in this research paper, it is proved that the analysis of the communication context of the on-going events can significantly contribute to the scope of traditional research discourses. The key conclusion herein: in all fairness, Siberia and North America differ much in the nature of their colonization processes (with the exception of the economic constituent). Nonetheless, all the main subjects of communications in the Russian state in those times considered the annexation of Siberia within the limits of the ‘European’ model. True, Siberia was probably annexed to Russia within the framework of the paradigm of ‘collecting lands’ formerly ruled by the Golden Horde, but the tsars of Moscovia never employed that scenario in the domestic or external communications: in the chronicles and orders present is just the concept of the ‘Christian liberation’ of the lands, the struggle against the ‘infidels’ and others. In addition to the topic under consideration, this conclusion once again proves the complexity of the socio-political processes in the 16th - 17th centuries, and gives grounds to criticize the frequently encountered attempts at artificial simplification. This, in turn, contributes to the development of the vast and ambiguous assessments of both historical and contemporary processes.

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