FROM THE EDITORS

Some Paradoxes of the "New Imperial History"

If one attempted to rank the predominant themes in the humanities and social sciences since, say, 1980, "representations of the other" would be near the top of the list. More than ever before, scholars seem fascinated by the ways in which one group views another. A central premise underlies the now established discipline of "alterology," namely, that the pictures of "the other" produced by most observers are as much products of the observers’ imaginations as they are reflections of reality. There is at present a productive industry devoted to laying bare the means by which groups were or are imagined. A search for book titles with the syntax "Imagining Something" in the Harvard University library reveals the titanic dimensions of this scholarly enterprise -- some 137 books, many of them historical and most of them written since 1990, purport to tell us how some group was imagined. Other scholars, apparently perturbed by the implied passivity of "imagining," go further. They propose that most "others" are "constructed" or "invented" by purposeful observers. Again, a quick search of the Harvard holdings is instructive: "Constructing X" yields 215 titles (some, admittedly, having to do with engineering) and "Inventing Y" produces 149 items (none, surprisingly, having to do with the history of science). It seems clear that (to paraphrase Marx and Engels) all that is solid has melted into air, or rather, that seemingly "solid" things -- nations, tribes, ethnic groups, etc. -- are not "solid" at all, but rather built out of shifting representations.

In the Russian historical context, the representations movement was and remains an important force behind what might be called the "new imperial studies." There was, it may be forgotten, an "old imperial studies." Thirty years ago the topic of Russian imperialism was perhaps more popular, and certainly more pressing, than it is today. Symposia were convened to discuss it, research institutes were founded to research it, and new lines in history and political science departments were opened to instruct students about it. It is interesting to consider that the discipline of Russian history in the West has this older vogue in empire to thank for its very existence. But, it will immediately be recognized, that "imperialism" is quite different from "imperialism" as it is understood and investigated by scholars today. The topical focus of old imperial studies was conditioned by the Cold War; unilateral Russian and Soviet military aggression were at its center. In contrast, the direction of the new imperial history has been shaped by the reality of a fragmented Russian empire, a political sphere in which Russia is but one embattled "nation" among others. Thus its center is Russian-imperial "interaction," rather than Russian aggression. The new imperial history -- inspired to a significant degree by the logic of "representations" -- has replaced troop build-ups with literary discourse, foreign invasion with cultural programs, and outright oppression with micro-techniques of power.

The benefits of the new imperial studies are manifest. Today, thanks to Russian historians working in the alterity mode, we have an excellent understanding of the way Russians (and especially elite Russians) viewed and interacted with the various peoples of the empire. Features of the Russian imperial "gaze" are becoming more and more apparent as this research proceeds. New imperial research has also shed light on heretofore dimly illuminated regions of Russian self-understanding, of the ways in which Russians projected their desires, fears, and fantasies on those they encountered. We can see for the first time (to use Gabrielle Scheidegger’s striking
phrase) how the Russians "viewed themselves in the Other." Finally, in laying bare the structure of Russian imperial perception, the new studies of empire have provided a necessary tool for those who would attempt to find the reality behind representations. With insight into the basic prejudices of Russian observers, scholars can better understand Russian accounts and provide a more accurate description of a "people without history."

Yet, as our debate on Orientalism in Russian history in this issue demonstrates, the new imperial studies are beset with a number of paradoxes, and are, therefore, controversial. As in ethics, so in imperial studies -- virtues in one frame of reference are vices in another. It is to these virtues and vices that we now turn.

It is a virtue of the new imperial studies that it recognizes the partial autonomy of other-images from the realities that stand behind them. The reports of imperial administrators about subordinate and non-Russian groups, for example, cannot be taken at face value. They are, at least in part, a reflection of the mental furniture of the observer rather than the actual state of the observed. Yet it is apparent that this theoretical insight can have rather unfortunate consequences for those who study the observed rather than the observer. Many of the "large" and "small" peoples who found their way into the Russian sphere over the last millennium left no written record until the 19th century or, in many cases, later. Thus all that we can know about their pre-modern histories must come precisely from the writings of Russians who had encountered (and conquered, colonized, and assimilated) them. How, one might ask, are we to write the history of a "people without history" if all the pertinent sources are tainted by Russian projection? What will be left to study if all is projection?

It is another virtue of the new imperial research that it recognizes the cultural specificity of Russian perceptions and, therefore, makes these perceptions a discrete object of study. The perceptions of Russian elites are different than those of, say, German or Polish notables: they are informed by different traditions, shaped by different interactions (with different "others"), and expressed in different forms and genres. Thus the project of the new imperial history is, in large measure, the exploration of the cultural specificity of Russian perceptions in various contexts and epochs. Yet, seen from another angle, are not researchers doing this sort of work opening themselves to charges of Russocentrism? What, one might ask, of the people, places, or things that (in theory, at least) stand behind the perceptions of Russians? Are we justified in neglecting them (again) so as to provide ever-finer brush strokes on an already detailed portrait of the imperial Russian mind? If not, why not study non-Russian cultures and peoples in the empire directly instead of through the Russian lens?

Finally, it is a virtue of the new imperial studies that it draws attention to the imperial nature of Russian identity in a new way. The old imperial studies, all too often focused on Bolshevik "messianism," claimed to have found a uniquely Russian imperialism stretching back into the depths of the Muscovite past ("Moscow, the Third Rome"). The new imperial history does not repeat this egregious mistake. Concentrating attention on patterns of interaction and perception within the empire, it investigates the ways in which Russian lives and institutions were shaped by the imperial experience. Despite the shift in focus, however, the new imperial scholarship suggests a conclusion remarkably similar in form to that arrived at by the old imperial studies: that the empire -- as an idea and reality -- was perhaps the defining characteristic of
"Russianness," or at least one of the defining characteristics. Yet one might well ask if the new imperial studies, like the old, is not in danger of exaggerating the importance of empire in Russian identity and history generally. Has the new imperial studies properly weighed the impact of empire on the Russian mind, or has it projected contemporary concerns (including the fate of Russia within the collapsed Soviet state) onto a past reality, thereby inflating its importance?

The arrival of the new imperial studies is to be welcomed. In marked contrast to its bellicose predecessor, it allows us to offer a more nuanced picture of the place of empire in the Russian experience. Nonetheless, as our debate on the merits of Orientalism suggests, the new imperial history is in many ways no less controversial and fraught with contradictions than the old.