

***Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* by Alexander Etkind**

Reviewed by Ganna Grebennikova

While the concepts like ‘multiple modernities’, ‘the Second world’ and ‘the third way’ often provoke intense political debate in the Russian social studies, an interdisciplinary approach to the country’s cultural history would provide new framings for these controversial concepts and open alternative directions in postcolonial studies of Russia. Alexander Etkind’s latest book *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011a) employs a fruitful metaphor of ‘internal colonization’ in a creative reconstruction of the Tsarist Russia’s colonialism and aims to fit the ‘Russian case’ into the ‘classical’ postcolonial theory. *Internal colonization* is not a scrupulous historical review of colonial practices and institutions; neither is it a comprehensive account on colonialism as seen in the Russian literature (Etkind, 2011b). Instead, it is a vivid depiction of the Russian empire’s colonial mentality that is masterfully deconstructed and reconstructed through the book’s diverse multidisciplinary cases.

‘Internal colonization’, the book’s core concept, links various cultural, economic and administrative mechanisms that the Russian Empire developed to ‘colonize itself’ (Etkind 2011a: 2). Following Saïd’s *Orientalism*, Etkind presupposes that the empire cultivated cultural distance between the colonizers and the colonized similarly to the other empires of the time. What makes the overlooked Russian case so special and yet so worthwhile for the postcolonial theory is the fact that the empire’s ‘Orientals’ were predominantly Russian nationals. Where the ‘classical’ Saïdean colonialisms were building cultural distance on the basis of race and religion, Russia ended up ‘orientalising’ peasants in its central provinces. Unlike naval empires whose colonies were separated by the sea geographically and culturally, the terrestrial Russian Empire demonstrated a ‘reversed imperial gradient’ (Etkind, 2011a: 144) putting larger pressure of colonization on the centre rather than the periphery. Simply said, the people of Russia were the objects of colonization, while the state acted as the colonizer. As the result of ‘internal colonization’, ‘the boomerang effect’ that usually affected the colonial centres was particularly

strong in Russia. Etkind's book is dominated by stories about the people, whose mentality or biography is doubled by 'internal colonization', be these the officials in the imperial Ministry of Internal Affairs or the fictional heroes in Gogol's *The Nose*, Konrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Dostoevsky's *The Double*. And though Etkind does not go far explaining why 'internal colonization' dominated in the Russian colonial history, it is clear that the initial oxymoronic mess in the conceptual model of 'internal colonization' conserved the Russian Empire for centuries and partially reproduced its methods in the Soviet Union (Platt, 2012).

Although 'internal colonization' cannot be rigidly conceptualised and thus is not persuasive as the grand mechanism of colonization, it manages to be an integral 'working' metaphor in the book's narrative. The concept is flexible enough to provide structure to all of the book's diverse cases. Indeed, the scope and originality of *Internal Colonization* is noteworthy: twelve essays masterfully embrace colonial themes from 'fur colonization' (Etkind, 2011a: 72) to revolutionization of sects, and the history of colonization from the eleventh to the twentieth century. Although the book does not follow a rigid logic, two main frames essentially accompany the core metaphor. Firstly, the paradoxical Russia as seen by the external observers and the Russians themselves are found in Etkind's overviews of Kipling, Conrad, Leskov, Dostoyevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Gogol, Bentham, Kant and many others. Secondly, the narrowing circle of the 'internal colonization' gradually destroys the distance between the actors of colonization to bring the empire to self-destruction. As the result, the essays explore the four consequent themes: Russia as a 'non-traditional Orient'; the first reflections on 'internal colonization' in the Russian history; 'internal colonization' as the state's administrative initiative; the real and the imagined encounters of the intellectuals with the colonized people.

The already mentioned attempt to fill the gap between the Russian colonialism and the classical postcolonial theory is rather sketchily, yet colourfully, worked out. Indeed, Etkind illustrates the classical concepts of postcolonial theory with apposite examples from the Russian literature. Gogol's *The Nose* demonstrates the horrors of 'colonial doubling', and 'Tashkentness' is used by Saltykov-Shchedrin for what will be later called 'boomerang effect' on a metropolis. Etkind contributes to the argument on Russia as the essential 'Second World' in the 'three worlds' model. On his opinion, Kipling often demonstrated a split attitude to Russia as a wild country and a serious threat to the British Empire in India, which made 'the Russian bear' a very specific, yet an omnipresent agent in the classical 'three worlds' (or 'East vs. West') plot.

This fact partially substantiates Etkind's criticism on Saïd who completely omitted the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire from his analyses.

Not only had the other empires felt uneasy about the colonial paradoxes of the Russian Empire, but also the Russian historians acknowledged the puzzling nature of the empire's colonial practices. The question about Rurik's status in the early Kyivan Rus was one of the most debated issues in the imperial historiography. In fact, every change in the Russian colonial situation brought about a new interpretation of the Varangians' colonization of the Slavs in the XI century, which Etkind engagingly reconstructs from Tatishchev, Kliuchevsky, Shchapov and others. The book pertinently revives the discourse of 'self-colonization' in the pre-Soviet Russian historiography which used to be a *status quo* in the imperial historiography, yet was abandoned by Soviet historians. Finally, one of the highlights of the book and a novelty for the majority of readers is an essay about the role of fur trade in the early history of the Russian Empire. Resource deficiency stimulated the young empire to set a monopoly on its key resources such as fur, so the expansion to Siberia and the resulting extermination of the native peoples was justified by the state. And though fur trade later declined, Russia further relied on various monopolies, such as labour or oil, and based its administrative gears on the political economy of resource deficiency.

The Golden Age of 'internal colonization' was defined by the state's simultaneous efforts to enlighten and to control the people of Russia. The Foucaultian argument on power/knowledge was outspoken in Etkind's earlier work on the Soviet colonial experience (Etkind, 2001), but *Internal Colonization* provided it with new facts, portraits and metaphors from the imperial history. Peter the Great, the alien Tsar who was 'homesick at home' (Etkind, 2011a: 61), came to Russia as if it were a no-man land and re-educated it as a child that was ready to 'perceive new ways' (Etkind, 2011a: 97). A boyar beard became a substitute for the coloured skin and had to be removed. Simultaneously, '...to play the function of race, this society created estates ...that [were] similar in function to caste' (Etkind, 2011a: 93), which blurred the difference between class and race even further. Estates and serfdom became the main mechanisms of internal 'orientalization'. The latter was frequently reified in one particular literary pattern: a trip to countryside essentially dealt with mysterious and exotic Russian peasants whom a Russian intellectual could not comprehend. Aside cultural distance, the empire has designed a complex system of indirect administrative and military control. Serfdom was not initiated by the state and

was not economically justified, but it was legalised to enhance ‘self-colonization’ of the Russian lands. Military settlements and village communes guaranteed the collective execution of the imperial power, which did not rely on direct orders from the metropoly. Finally, the Ministry of Internal Affairs became the actual ‘think-tank’ where the empire’s colonial programs were designed. The Ministry supported a wide range of research initiatives and united the brightest intellectuals of the time who were both orientalists (and often orientals!) and specialists in the Orient.

Inevitably, the encounters with the colonized essentially change or even harm the colonizers when one country is shared, which is one of Etkind’s most exciting points and a possible explanation to the ‘mystery of the Russian soul’. Though the colonizers dominate administratively and by force, the objects of ‘internal colonization’ are an endlessly powerful, yet silent, majority. This makes the two key actors of colonization converge and directly experience and negotiate the cultural difference. Etkind’s previous research on sects and revolution (Etkind, 1998) demonstrates how religious schism was politicised by the state and associated with radical political movements. *Internal Colonization* claims that ‘the Going to the People’ movement and the sects like the Khlysty or the Dukhobory actually communicated to create a revolutionary project that was ‘scientific’ and ‘messianic’ at the same time. However, ‘internal colonization’ is able to create dark hybrids of extreme savagery and sophisticated imperialism, such as Konrad’s colonial officer Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*. The officer, whom Etkind reads as an archetype of a Russian colonizer, has turned himself into the natives’ god and used this to benefit in ivory trade. Quite interestingly, women are too the archetypal figures of ‘internal colonization’, as their mysterious, submissive Oriental image in Russian culture usually presupposes. The ‘gender of sacrifice’ (Etkind, 2011a: 237) in Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* and Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* is obviously female, which can be associated with Russia’s own ‘gender’ as a country. Moreover, using the structural approach of Levi-Straussian and Maussian anthropology, Etkind summarises a mythical sacrificial triangle that is often found in the Russian literature of the XIX century. The contact between the Man of the People, the Man of Culture and the Russian Beauty inevitably results in a death: Pugachev in Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter*, Darialsky in Bely’s *Silver Dove* and Nastasia in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* represent the respective roles and are sacrificed as the result of the colonial encounter.

In general, Etkind's book is a fresh and entertaining work that is beautifully written. It should be read for multiple insightful microhistories and carefully drawn portraits of the colonizers that were tragically doubled by their trade. Yet, occasionally, the essays on 'internal colonization' are sketchy and hypothetical due to the lack of previous research, which is obvious in Etkind's most exiting narratives on fur trade and Kant's encounter with the Russian imperialism. The readers who are well-read in postcolonial theory may find the concept of 'creole' underdeveloped and poorly illustrated in the book, even though Etkind suggests obscure Yakuts as an alternative. Very occasionally, the readers may find the use of 'internal colonization' tendentious, superficial and self-explanatory, as the concept which is a mechanism and a metaphor simultaneously loses rigidity in definition. Indeed, the boundaries of 'internal' and 'external' in the Russian colonial process can be easily shifted or interchanged. For example, Hundorova's (2011) reinterpretation of Repin's *Reply of the Cossacks* is more persuasive than Etkind's use of the case. Where Etkind floats between the abstract 'three worlds' in understanding the laughing Cossacks and their secretary, Hundrova points at Repin's actual contemporaries and their enthusiastic attitudes to the Ukrainian cause (Hundorova, 2011: 25), which contests credibility of Etkind's argument in this particular case, yet does not undermine the book's obvious quality and ambition. However, some readers will criticize Etkind's simplistic generalisation of the colonized under the general tag of the 'Russian people'. This simplification is the major challenge to the credibility of the book's core metaphor, as Hundorova illustrates in her analysis of Ukraine's 'repeated colonization'-cum-'external colonization' by the Russian Empire. So, the book does not give final answers to the political questions that essentially rise in discussions of the Russian imperialism. Etkind chooses to avoid any political opinion on 'what is to be done' by the colonizers and the colonized about the mutual memories and experiences. Nevertheless, he persuasively demonstrates that post-Soviet postcolonial studies should shift their focus from chasing the unresolvable historical justice to pursuing original, creative and challenging research to support competent discussion of the controversial issues.

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