

Colonizing the Colonizers: Layers of Subjectification in the Russian Caucasus

Authors : Aaron Derner

Abstract : Unlike the histories of France, the UK, or even Spain, the Russian colonial past often dissolves before the seemingly more salient Cold War figurations or Soviet dissolution. The obvious explanation behind Caucasian states' roles—that of Russian-propped governments obeying the whims of their patron—is but the latest instance of such oversight. Where the results of colonial social and cultural interactions are indelibly stamped across France, Algeria, and every other former (and current) French holding, so to are the Muscovite and Russian colonial ambitions embedded within the modern politics and cultures of both Russia and the Caucasus. Russian colonial artefacts are enhanced and perhaps granted an additional social explanatory edge over those of the 'typical' colonizers, by the cyclical adoration for and noisy rejection of European cultural markers over the centuries, along with the somewhat unusual composition of the Cossacks: Russia's main agents of colonialization within the Caucasian frontier. The story of Russia and Chechnya, of all the Caucasus, is of the manufacture of social and individual identity through "modes of subjectification" inherent within the region's colonial history and driven by the triangular interactions between three main groups: the Cossacks, the Caucasian Mountain Tribes, and the Russian Metropol. Together, interactions between these social groups worked to shape and transform the lifestyles and institutional pathologies that constitute the Russian and Chechen states and the politics between them. At the core of this (Western) state-building is the simultaneous and seemingly contradictory desire to be more Western and emulate Western cultural and political practices while also desperately grasping for a uniquely Russian identity. This sits somewhat ironically against the backdrop that Russia hosted a frontier-based settler society and had established that distinctly European feature of settler colonialism early in its history—arguably establishing a claim to being the most "colonial" of the colonial powers. There is no doubt that these forces worked to shape contemporary Russian political and social identity—apparent in the mythic popularity of the Cossack in Russian literature, politics, and academic discourse. What needs to be expanded from the current narrative, however, is that beyond the Cossack identity's attractiveness on the grounds of its tones of freedom and resistance to unjust authority, the identity is rooted in the imperial ambitions and colonial experiences of the Russian state, and is, therefore, a direct marker of domination and subjectification. Adding an unusual dimension to this not-uncommon cultural progression, the Russian state needed to colonize both the Caucasus and the Russian Cossacks, appropriating them in much the same way they appropriated the Circassian mountain tribes. The focus of this paper is not to tell yet another story of how one culture entered an area to overpower another but how a 'powerful,' 'modern,' 'Western(ish)' culture was profoundly and continually changed through its contact with a group of tribal 'savages' and 'braves.'

Keywords : Russia, chechnya, subjectification, caucasus, cossacks, Ukraine

Conference Title : ICHSWH 2023 : International Conference on Historical Sociology and World History

Conference Location : New York, United States

Conference Dates : July 06-07, 2023