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# Reflections on transnational and world history in the USA and its applications

By David L. Ransel

Transnational history and world history have been an interest of historians in the United States for some time. Soon after becoming editor of the *American Historical Review* (AHR) in 1985, I began to feel pressure to move in the direction of internationalization.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the AHR had already featured an example of transnational history, even if the journal had not labeled it as such. As I started my editorship a splendid discussion was in progress on the issue of the anti-slavery movement, a campaign that affected nearly all the countries bordering the Atlantic Ocean. We continued that discussion, and eventually all the elements of it were gathered into a book that has been much used in historical seminars.<sup>2</sup> When we soon after sought explicitly to explore a transnational perspective in the journal, we did so in two forms. The first was to return to the Atlantic world as a context in a 1988 issue that included both an AHR Forum (a formal scholarly exchange of opinions) on world-systems theory and a separate essay on Atlantic trade. Economic historians had been the pioneers of transnational history, and the Atlantic trade systems, again including slavery, offered a ready and well-documented field of analysis.<sup>3</sup> The second approach was a forum on American exceptionalism, one of

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1. The *American Historical Review* (AHR) is the journal of the American Historical Association. It is the largest scholarly journal of history in the United States and presents research articles, discussions and reviews from every major field of historical study. It began publication in 1895.

2. Thomas Bender (ed.), *The antislavery debate: capitalism and abolitionism as a problem in historical interpretation*, Berkeley 1992.

3. The issue included an essay by David Eltis and Lawrence Jennings, "Trade between Western Africa and the Atlantic World in the pre-colonial era", and an AHR Forum on "Feudalism, Capitalism, and

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the central themes of United States history and a question that invited transnational comparisons and analysis.<sup>4</sup>

The American Historical Association (AHA) is the largest scholarly organization of historians in the United States. It was founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889. Its membership includes scholars of every period and geographical area of historical study. Each year the association elects a new president, who delivers an address, which is soon after published in the *AHR* and serves as an indication of emerging interests among leaders in the field. Two presidential addresses from the early 1990s provided examples of how transnational history could be written. The first was by an East Asian specialist from the University of California (Berkeley), Frederic Wakeman, Jr. The address, published in February 1993 and titled "Voyages", took the reader on a tour of the world that began with Wakeman's own childhood voyage on a sailing yacht around Cuba following the route of Columbus. During the voyage he learned the history of the Chinese forcibly brought to Cuba in the nineteenth century as indentured laborers. Wakeman then traced the traditions of the Chinese back to their seafaring forebears who moved in great armadas across the seas to India, Arabia, and Africa. He finished the essay by returning to the present and pointing out that the millions of overseas Chinese, scattered by the attractions or impressments of early modern imperial powers that Wakeman had just described, were now investing billions of dollars annually in modern China and assisting its growth into a world power about to eclipse the brief dominance of the United States in world affairs.<sup>5</sup> Wakeman's approach was the one that later became associated with the name of the sociologist Arjun Appadurai and the idea of "globalization", namely, the powerful and enduring effects of flows of people, ideas, and goods across borders and continents.<sup>6</sup>

The second address, delivered and published just one year later, was by Louise A. Tilly of the New School University in New York City. Its title was

the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean", that included contributions from Steve J. Stern and Immanuel Wallerstein. *AHR* 93:4, October 1988.

4. American "exceptionalism" rests on the idea that the United States of America differs qualitatively from other modern nations because of its special origin, religious culture and political institutions. The country therefore does not lend itself to analysis based on European historical models. It is a kind of American *Sonderweg*. The forum referred to above included Ian Tyrrell, "American exceptionalism in an age of international history"; Michael McGerr, "The price of the 'New International History'"; Ian Tyrrell, "Ian Tyrrell Responds", *AHR* 96:4, October 1991, pp. 1031-1072.

5. Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "Voyages", *AHR* 98:1, February 1993, pp. 1-17.

6. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*, Minneapolis 1996.

"Connections", and it formed a complement to Wakeman's. Tilly, too, discussed Asians, but this time the focus was on their interrelations with Europeans rather than with Americans or other Asians. She began with the story of capitalist industrialization of cotton textiles in India and traced the connections between events there and developments in England and France. She illustrated the importance of decisions made in one place for the lives of ordinary people in other widely dispersed locales, as when Indian hand-loom textiles, regarded as superior to British products, were displaced by capitalist organization and mechanization of production and colonial policies that privileged English cloth in Indian markets. Choices about investment and production made in one region of the world led to changes in the economic chances for working people elsewhere. Tilly focused on how the shifts in productive processes affected the power and gender relations within the families caught in a global web of trade.<sup>7</sup> Her starting point was the work of E. P. Thompson, and her wish was to emulate his respect for ordinary working people, but her approach seemed to build on the dependency theory of Andre Gunder Frank and world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, although she did not explicitly refer to either of them. Tilly added to the mix her own analysis of age and gender relations within family economies. The Wakeman and Tilly essays were good examples of what I would call "transnational" history.

The labeling or "branding" of the various approaches that challenge national or nation-centered history is the subject of recent presentations in two leading American history journals. The *Journal of Modern History*, the principal American journal of European intellectual and political history, featured two essays summarizing the literature, one on "world history" and one on "globalization and its history".<sup>8</sup> World, global, and international history are current favorite labels, along with transnational. But each of these has a slightly different emphasis. The *American Historical Review* has recently returned to the topic of transnational history with a "Conversation" between six historians who sorted through various definitions of non nation-centered histories and discussed what each means and what each is capable of revealing. Although the "Conversation" was somewhat unstructured and did not yield a clear consensus, one could draw from it the general view that

7. Louise A. Tilly, "Connections", *AHR* 99:1, February 1994, pp. 1–20.

8. See the essays by Raymond Grew, "Expanding worlds of world history", and by Michael Lang, "Globalization and its history", *Journal of modern history* 78, December 2006, pp. 878–931.

world and global history strive for comprehensiveness, while international history, which continues to use nation as its primary category of analysis, seeks to transcend the old diplomatic history by investigating not just interstate relations but cultural, social, political, labor, and other institutional contacts and influences between countries that affect state governments. Transnational history, in contrast, is concerned primarily with connections: how people, ideas, institutions, technology, and commerce flow across national borders and link up with or influence people and processes in other countries.<sup>9</sup> Yet scholars may disagree on how the term should be applied. Can it apply to the histories of pre-national or non-national times and places? For example, was Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* a work of transnational history *avant le mot*? Or does "transnational" only acquire its proper meaning in opposition to "national"? That is, should it be used solely to refer to new ways of writing history in the era of nationally organized states without being constrained by the form of the nation-state?

World history has been on the agenda of U.S. based historians for at least as long as transnational history. The election to the presidency of the AHA in 1985 of the pioneering author of a widely read history of the world, William H. McNeill, then professor of history at the University of Chicago, was a sign of growing interest in the subject. Accordingly, I soon after planned to do a special issue of the *American Historical Review* on world history. However, when I started to look for contributors, I discovered that world history was not yet a research field. Because the journal was a forum for research publications, the editorial board decided to postpone doing such an issue. Since that time, interest in world history has continued to spread. A recent study by the AHA reported that world history was the most rapidly growing geographically defined specialization in college and university history departments in the United States, going from 10 percent of faculty claiming world history as a specialization in 1990 to over 40 percent in 2005.<sup>10</sup> If departments are turning increasingly to teaching world history, someone has to produce the instructors. Not surprisingly, graduate programs

9. Participants are C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed. "AHR conversation: on transnational history", *AHR* 111:5, December 2006, pp. 1440–1464.

10. The survey also included thematically defined specializations such as cultural, social, gender and other thematic subdivisions of historical study. Robert B. Townsend, "Changing patterns of faculty specialization since 1975", *Perspectives* (The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association) 45:1, January 2007, p. 10.

have been responding. According to information gleaned last year from AHA records, 19 history departments in the United States are offering world history as a field for doctoral study.<sup>11</sup> What this means in almost all cases is that a student may take world history as one of the three or four fields required for the doctoral exams. In only one or two universities can a student take world history as a major field for dissertation research.<sup>12</sup> Even so, teaching jobs are available as never before. In recent issues of the AHA jobs bulletin the number of listings for faculty qualified to teach world history, though trailing those for U.S. and European history, matches and often surpasses the listings for instructors in regionally defined world areas (Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Middle East).

If world history has found its way into the American college curriculum, just what the content and unifying themes should be is less certain. A number of different approaches are in play. The subject got its start in this country with the work of William H. McNeill, referred to earlier, who grounded his *Rise of the West* in Arnold Toynbee's thesis of "challenge and response" and then added the effects of the evolution and diffusion of knowledge and technology. The question that held the study together was why the West came to dominate so much of the world. In a sense, this is the question that continues to animate most world history texts. The approach to it can start with pre-history and a scientific foundation as in Jared Diamond's influential study, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Diamond, a biogeographer at the University of California at Los Angeles, sought to explain Western dominance from the point of view of a scientist who studied the domestication of plants and animals. He applied a rigorous geographical determinism that removed any hint of racism or Spencerian notions of survival of the fittest. The book was so successful that it was even adopted as the basis of an undergraduate degree program at one of the best universities in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

11. Information from an internal Indiana University Department of History study done by Arlene Diaz, Lynn Struve, James Madison, and Leah Shopkow.

12. The first such offering came at the University of Wisconsin under the direction of the famous Africanist, Phillip Curtin, but it may be in suspension since he left. Northeastern University had such a program under the direction of another Africanist Patrick Manning. Manning just moved to the University of Pittsburgh as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of World History, and he plans to establish a doctoral program there in world history.

13. Jared Diamond, *Guns, germs, and steel: the fates of human societies*, New York 1997. At the University of California at San Diego the newest undergraduate college, Sixth College, uses Diamond's book as the foundational text for its core curriculum and core course on "culture, technology, and art". Personal communication from Dean of Social Sciences Paul W. Drake.

The field of world history, however conceived, covers a terrain so vast that a narrative must of necessity be built on a unifying theme that excludes much more than it includes, and this circumstance invites teleological, which is to say ideological, interpretations. Jerry Bentley, one of the pioneers of world history and editor of the *Journal of World History*, recently commented on this issue. He pointed out that in the United States, conservative educationists have been using their political and financial influence to insist that world history be construed as a version of neo-conservative triumphalism; they believe that the history of the world should be taught as a movement toward American-style democracy and free market capitalism, which once embraced by the rest of the peoples of the world will bring an end to history in the sense forecasted by Francis Fukuyama in his influential work on the end of the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> On the left, Bentley continued, there was the neo-Marxist approach associated with the world-systems model of Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers. For them, world history is moving toward a socialist resolution. In between these two politically charged versions of world history are the survey courses that simply tell an empirical and chronological tale of the rise and fall of civilizations without a strong teleological orientation.

Whichever approach is adopted, most writers and teachers try these days to escape a Eurocentric point of view (which is generally regarded negatively). But this is an aspiration more than an achievement. Bentley pointed out that however innovative writers of world history may wish to be, they find it difficult to escape analytical categories that are necessarily culture-bound such as "nation" and "civilization". The problem may be that history as a means of organizing our understanding of the past is inescapably culture bound. For this reason some post-colonialist critics have rejected it altogether, arguing that it cannot transcend its Hegelian and Eurocentric origins and so will inevitably fail to capture an accurate picture of the world. While it is true that professional historical scholarship was heavily implicated in the construction and valorization of nationalism and imperialism, attempts by post-colonialist critics to supplant it with older indigenous forms of knowledge about the past such as myths and legends seem quixotic. Now that professional history enjoys worldwide intellectual hegemony, the best solution may be to continue

14. Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, New York 1992. Fukuyama has modified his view and his attachment to neo-conservatism more recently. His latest book is *America at the crossroads: democracy, power, and the neoconservative legacy*, New Haven 2006.

to interrogate its categories of analysis and their inherent biases and, as much as possible, to correct for them. This approach has in some measure redeemed the field of anthropology, which, as much or more than history, initially served to valorize western imperialism and colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

Bentley himself has argued for what he calls an ecumenical world history based on large-scale empirical narratives. "The main features of this narrative are rising human population, expanding technological capacity and increasing prominence of cross-cultural interaction over time – three empirical realities that have profoundly influenced the world and its development through time." This ecumenical world history, he continued, would "not pretend to know the end of history. Rather it leaves the end of history open, warning that human agency and ingenuity likely hold surprises in store for those who leap from world history into world forecasting".<sup>16</sup> This project, while appealing when compared to the heavily ideological approaches against which Bentley measured it, nevertheless skirts the issue of how one escapes the Eurocentrism of history as a form of knowledge or, indeed, how one finds meaning in history.

Taking a few steps farther back for an even wider perspective, David Christian, a professor of history for many years at Macquarie University in Australia and now at San Diego State University in California, has fashioned what he calls "Big History", an account that begins with the Big Bang and the origins of the universe. About one-third of Christian's thick history book, *Maps of Time: an Introduction to Big History*, treats the formation of the universe and solar system, another third the development of life on earth and the emergence of human beings (the sphere normally left to anthropology), and the final third history in the usual sense of the time since the appearance of written records. Christian rests his analysis on Darwinian science, extending physical and biological metaphors to explain human activities. For example, he compares the formation of states to that of star clusters, which develop around hubs. He argues that states behave with their tributary peoples very much as parasites in nature do with their hosts, or that humans in sufficiently dense settlements begin to organize themselves along the same lines

15. Jerry H. Bentley reviews in detail a number of the post-colonialist criticisms of western scholarship and suggests the approach mentioned here. "Myths, wagers, and some moral implications of World history", *Journal of world history* 16:1, March 2005, pp. 70–75.

16. Bentley, "Myths, wagers, and some moral implications of world history", *Journal of world history* 16:1, March 2005, quotations from pp. 77, 78.



of hierarchy and division of labor as do social insects such as termites.<sup>17</sup> Christian decided to adopt this cosmic approach in order to give students a comprehensive, secular and scientific view of life. I learned this in a private conversation in which he pointed out that school and university programs are built on a menu of diverse courses that together provide no coherent view of society or history. A student at a U.S. university today may have learned a 20-year span of French cultural history, a smattering of African literature, the second half of American history, and a few other subjects with no connection to one another. In these courses they may even have been given a deconstructionist orientation that throws the validity of truth statements about history into question. Christian opposes this kind of nihilism. Although he is well aware that a comprehensive understanding of the world has to be stated in mythic form, he wanted to offer a myth for our time, one based on the best form of knowledge production we know, the scientific method, so that students will at some point in their studies receive an integrated and coherent account of our world.<sup>18</sup>

In my own field of Russian history, the study of transnational history began in the late 1980s and accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The role that non-Russian national minorities played in this event awakened scholars to the importance of these peoples, whose histories Western researchers had until recently left largely to émigrés with questionable scholarly credentials and strong political agendas. What these émigré historians were writing was, of course, not transnational history but national history in exile that contained the same narrow focus and myth-making that was typical of national histories in independent countries. Specialists inside the Soviet Union were not allowed to discuss the history and aspirations of the non-Russian minorities outside of a general framework of the Friendship of Nations, in which Russia was construed as the "older brother", teacher, and protector of the non-Russian peoples. Foreign scholars, with rare exceptions, were permitted to work only in the central archives of Moscow and Leningrad and, even there, on a limited number of topics. Academic advisers, archivists, and even librarians monitored the research of foreign scholars and did not permit

17. David Christian, *Maps of time: an introduction to big history*, Berkeley 2004.

18. Christian also mentioned in this conversation that took place some years ago, soon after he first began teaching the course that developed into his book, that he thought the failure of young people to be given a comprehensive scientific view of life made them susceptible to the appeals of radical religious movements and demagogues.

them to see material that strayed beyond the bounds of their approved topic of study.<sup>19</sup>

When the courageous actions of the non-Russian peoples, especially the Balts, Georgians, Ukrainians, and Jews, in demanding independence or the right to emigrate shook and then shattered the USSR into fifteen countries, the opportunities for research changed dramatically. The post-Soviet Russian authorities for a time eased restrictions on access to their archives and to field work outside the major cities. Scholars rushed in with a desire to learn about and produce honest accounts of the history and current position of the non-Russian peoples, and they were eager to apply their knowledge of transnational and comparative analysis. I was involved in this work myself, having begun in the late 1980s a series of studies comparing the history of the family and reproductive behavior of Russian, Tatars, and Jews.<sup>20</sup>

But most of the scholars were from the younger generation, and they sought to do something novel, namely, to look at the interactions between the dominant Russians and the peoples with whom the Russians came into contact as they spread across the Eurasian landscape and to assess the impact of the various peoples on one another. These young scholars looked not just at the policies and actions that emanated from the center but at the actions of peoples on the periphery and the effects of their ideas and practices on the Russians.<sup>21</sup> These young researchers took for their models analytical frameworks developed in studies of frontier interaction elsewhere. For example, Thomas M. Barrett, professor of history at St. Mary's College of Maryland, drew on the recent revisionist works of the development of the American West (known as the "new Western history") for his study of the mingling of

19. Despite these restrictions a few scholars interested in Russia as an empire or in minorities were able to produce outstanding works, primarily on the basis of sources available outside of Russia. See, for example, Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall*, München 1992; Azade-Ayse Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: a profile in national resilience*, Stanford 1986; Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, Stanford 1987; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, London 1989, among others.

20. Two products of this research were the book *Village mothers: three generations of change in Russia and Tataria*, Bloomington 2000; and a piece focused on Jews, "The ethno-cultural impact on childbirth and disease among women in Western Russia," *Jews in Eastern Europe* 2:4–5, Fall 2001, pp. 27–47.

21. I am limiting my comments to literature by Western scholars. Some scholars in the Russian Federation have, however, been making efforts of a similar kind, working in cooperation with Western researchers. Two journals represent this dimension of scholarly life in Russia: *Ob Imperio* (a history journal with offices located in Kazan; its subtitle is New Imperial History of the Post-Soviet Space. It publishes articles in Russian, English and German), and *Vestnik Evrazii/Acta Eurasica* (a multi-disciplinary journal with editorial offices in Moscow).

peoples in the Caucasus as Russians migrated into this southern land. Just as historians of the Western United States had abandoned the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner on a frontier "of free white settlers moving west to 'vacant' lands and gloriously creating American individualism and democracy in the process", Barrett advised specialists on Russian expansion to give up their own versions of the Turner thesis and learn from the new Western histories that recognized the power of environmental factors and the presence in the American West of many non-whites. Barrett emphasized the importance of the harsh and varied environment of the Caucasus and its role in shaping the lives of the people who settled there. He pointed out that the Slavic peoples who migrated to the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became dependent on the native peoples, who had developed techniques for coping with the local conditions. Instead of the Russian and Soviet grand narrative of Russia having drawn native peoples into a larger market and civilized society, a closer look revealed that technology flows often moved from the mountain peoples toward the Russians. Not only were native agricultural methods more suitable than those brought by the Slavs from central Russia, but even the cold steel weapons produced by local masters were preferred and purchased by the invading Cossacks.<sup>22</sup> To help explain the dense interaction of peoples, religions, and lifeways on the south Russian frontier, where people of every ethnic origin crossed back and forth, intermarried, converted from one religion to another, shared knowledge, traded goods and influenced one another, Barrett borrowed the "middle ground" idea of the historian Richard White, who teaches United States history at Stanford University. The "middle ground", in White's conception, was a space in which people from very different cultural systems could work out common problems and arrive at mutually comprehensible solutions. White was studying the relations between the French and the Indians of the Lakes Region of North America. As he explained it, the "result of each side's attempts to apply its own cultural expectations in a new context was often change in culture itself. In trying to maintain the conventional order of its world, each group applied rules that gradually shifted to meet the exigencies of particular situations. The result of these efforts was a new set of common conventions, but these conventions served as a basis for further struggles to order or influence

22. Thomas M. Barrett, *At the edge of empire: the Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus frontier 1700–1860*, Boulder 1999.

the world of action".<sup>23</sup> Thomas Barrett was able to use this middle ground notion very effectively in his analysis of the interactions of Russians and indigenous peoples on the Caucasus frontier.

Willard Sunderland, a historian of Russia at the University of Cincinnati, took a similar approach in a study of the movement of Russian peasants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into areas where Turkic and Mongol peoples had long resided. Although his research started in the archives of Moscow and St. Petersburg where he mastered the details of government policies of resettlement and expansion, it finished in the archives of Simferopol, Orenburg, and Ufa in the former homelands of the Crimean Tatars, Nogais, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Kalmyks and other peoples of the southern and eastern steppes. Sunderland's approach was explicitly comparative, drawing out the many parallels between Russian colonization of the Eurasian plains and the penetration and settlement of the American West, the South American pampas, the South African veldt. It was a story at once of the mythologies of the Russian government and educated society about the steppe and the actual encounter of Slavic peasants with the Turkic and Mongol peoples into whose homelands they migrated and the meaning this encounter and its accompanying reordering of the human and material ecology of the area had for those who observed or lived it.<sup>24</sup>

While Sunderland's story wound up at about 1900, the Soviet period had its own tales of transnational and interethnic encounters. Several excellent studies of Soviet nationality policy have come out, which provide a framework for understanding the ideological shifts and changing imaginaries that affected the development of national consciousness among the peoples of the Soviet Union. Two of the more influential of these are *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) by

23. Richard White, *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650–1815*, Cambridge 1991, quotation on p. 52. An entire chapter is devoted to explaining the concept of the "middle ground", see pp. 50–93.

24. Willard Sunderland, *Taming the wild field: colonization and empire on the Russian steppe*, Ithaca 2004. Among the many fine studies done in this field are a number that investigate the encounters from the point of view of religious belief and practice and efforts at conversion. See, for example, Robert P. Geraci, *Windows on the East: national and imperial identities in late tsarist Russia*, Ithaca 2001; Paul W. Werth, *At the margins of orthodoxy: mission, governance, and confessional politics in Russia's Volga-Kama region, 1827–1905*, Ithaca 2002; Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and colonizers: forging Russia's empire in the South Caucasus*, Ithaca 2005; and the essay collections by Daniel R. Brower & Edward J. Lazzerini (eds.), *Russia's Orient: imperial borderlands and peoples, 1700–1917*, Bloomington 1997, and by Robert P. Geraci & Michael Khodarkovsky (eds.), *Of religion and empire: missions, conversion, and tolerance in tsarist Russia*, Ithaca 2001.

the University of California (Berkeley) historian Yuri Slezkine, and *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) by Francine Hirsch, a historian at the University of Wisconsin. Now that anthropologists are able to conduct field work, we are also seeing an increasing number of close studies of non-Russian nationalities.<sup>25</sup> Historians likewise took advantage of the more open opportunities to research transnational encounters in the Soviet period. One particularly interesting example is a book now in press by Michaela Pohl, a professor at Vassar College in upstate New York. She began by investigating the Soviet triumphalist narrative of the Virgin Lands Project of the Khrushchev era, a campaign to supply the country's food needs by extensive rather than intensive methods. Because of the lag time required to set up chemical plants to produce fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, Khrushchev decided to plow up the northern Kazakh steppe with the labor of enthusiastic members of the Communist Union of Youth and other volunteers. This supposedly virgin land, on closer inspection, proved to have been occupied, and not just by Kazakh herders and farmers but also by a number of other national groups that had been forcibly exiled there in previous decades, including Germans, Chechens, and Ingush. Using published works, archival documents, and oral testimony, Pohl investigated the history and interactions of each of these peoples, their conflicts and accommodations, in a multifaceted analysis of all those who participated in the life of these lands.<sup>26</sup>

For Russian historians this turn to the history of the empire is a natural step. Russia and the Soviet Union were after all empires, tsarist Russia explicitly so and the Soviet Union de facto, even if it advertised itself as a federation of voluntarily integrated units. For that matter, the Russian Federation of today is a continuation of Russia's eighteenth-century empire before the addition of the Baltic Provinces, Poland, the Caucasus, Transcaucasus, and Central Asia. The espousal of empire studies by the post-Soviet generation

25. Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet house of culture: a century of perestroikas*, Princeton 1995, about the Gilyaks of Sakhalin Island; Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *The tenacity of ethnicity: a Siberian saga in global perspective*, Princeton 1999, about the Sakha (Iakuts); Greta Uehling, *Beyond memory: the Crimean Tatar's deportation and return*, New York 2004; Patty A. Gray, *The predicament of Chukotka's indigenous movement: post-Soviet activism in the Russian Far North*, New York 2004; Laada Bilaniuk, *Contested tongues: language politics and cultural correction in Ukraine*, Ithaca 2005; Piers Vitebsky, *The reindeer people: living with animals and spirits in Siberia*, Boston 2005.

26. The book is under contract to Indiana University Press with the working title "Opening the Virgin Lands: Society and Reform in Kazakhstan in the Khrushchev Era" and due out in 2008.

of Western scholars is therefore not a large move in itself. Yet it brings a fresh perspective. Most earlier work on the creation of the Russian and Soviet empires such as the studies by Baron Nolde and Richard Pipes were akin in some ways to the older narratives of American westward expansion.<sup>27</sup> The peoples incorporated into the larger polity were seen more as temporary obstacles to the onward march of civilization than as people whose cultures deserved respectful study and whose influence on the Russian conquerors required evaluation and analysis. Another set of studies of expansion and conquest focused on Russification; works of this kind were more attentive to local values and concerns but viewed the process of integration as moving in a single direction.<sup>28</sup> The new histories of the creation of empire in Russia seek to elaborate the process of interaction, resistance and accommodation from a variety of points of view and with a mastery of local conditions. They foreground the influences of each national or ethnic group on the others and see the process of interaction as taking place on a socially and intellectually as well as geographically contested terrain. The outcomes are understood as negotiated more than imposed.

A rather different approach can be seen in the controversial study, *The Jewish Century*, by Yuri Slezkine, the University of California historian mentioned earlier.<sup>29</sup> It is the story of a transnational cosmopolitanism formed within the Russian empire and then carried across the world along the paths of established diasporas. Beginning with a well-known sociological analysis of the place of Jews as free agents who served the commercial needs of settled populations, Slezkine followed the movement of this first modern people into three regions: to Israel, to America, and (the group Slezkine is most interested in) to the cities of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party, where

27. Although Pipes was by no means sympathetic to the Bolshevik conquests and pointed out the cynical manipulation by Bolshevik leaders of the national aspirations of the non-Russians. Richard Pipes, *The formation of the Soviet Union: communism and nationalism, 1917–1923*, Cambridge, MA, 1964; B. E. Nolde, *La formation de l'Empire russe: études, notes, et documents*, 1–2, Paris 1952–1953. In this category belongs also the highly popular post-Soviet study, rich in social data, by the Russian historian Boris Mironov, *Sotsial'naia istoriia Rossii perioda imperii (XVIII-nachalo XXv)*, St. Petersburg 1999, now in its 3rd edition.

28. An excellent example that includes several groups is Edward C. Thaden et al., *Russification in the Baltic provinces and Finland, 1855–1914*, Princeton 1981. But see also the recent collection of essays: David L. Ransel & Bozena Shallcross (eds.), *Polish encounters, Russian identity*, Bloomington 2005, whose essays illustrate the interactive processes in Polish and Russian life and culture that shaped the identity of each nation.

29. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton 2004.

they became acculturated as Russians and played leading roles in Soviet life as administrators, warriors, and intellectuals, until the Russians themselves became modern, which is to say educated and urbanized, after World War II and succeeded in displacing the Jews by rejecting, threatening, and driving them out.

Finally, Jane Burbank, a historian of Russia, and her husband Frederick Cooper, a leading specialist on African history, have just completed a large comparative study of empires that seeks to theorize this political formation in its many manifestations from ancient times to the present.<sup>30</sup> The authors point out that most people have lived in empires and that the nation states of today by comparison appear as "a mere blip" on the screen of history: formations of recent origin and uncertain prospects. The long history of empires challenges the idea that "the nation state is natural, necessary, and inevitable". Burbank and Cooper believe that for most of human history, empire "provides a better account of how states take shape, transform themselves, interact, and decline than other conceptual approaches to understanding the trajectories of large-scale political organizations".<sup>31</sup>

Their book avoids three common narratives: history as a story of the progressive movement from empires to national states; the rise of the state in early modern times (the central theme of most textbook histories); and modern history as a story of West European initiatives to which people elsewhere responded. Burbank and Cooper wish to escape "presentist and stage-bound notions of a normal kind of sovereignty and a normal path to it". Instead, they focus on the processes of creating and sustaining empires. According to the authors, these processes involved the rulers in two contradictory tasks: making subjects recognize that they had something in common as an "imperial people" and yet simultaneously establishing and maintaining distinctions between these same subjects. Managing difference was the essence of imperial rule. The primary factors that Burbank and Cooper analyze include the ecology of empire; technologies of warfare, communications, and socialization; and ideologies expressed in religion, law, and forms of knowledge.

30. The study will appear as a book by Princeton University Press. The current provisional title is "Empires and the Politics of Difference in World History".

31. These comments and those that follow are drawn from the book prospectus and first chapter, which the authors kindly supplied at my request.

32. From the book prospectus, p. 4.

Empires have taken quite different tacks on the zigzag path of making, sustaining, or eroding difference. When the Emperor Caracalla of Rome in 212 AD made all non-slave males of the empire, regardless of where they lived, into Roman citizens, and when the government of France declared in 1946 that the old distinction between subject and citizen was eliminated and that all former subjects, regardless of whether they administered marriage and inheritance via the French civil code, Islamic law, or another form of "custom," were citizens, these imperial governors moved toward one pole of empires' dual strategy. The other pole was to maintain or foster differentiation within the imperial polity: to sustain inequalities that would benefit the imperial state and people most closely associated with it, to insure that subordinate elites had their own spheres of operation and could call on their own cultural and religious idioms to keep "their" people in a state of obedient cooperation. Empires could fail when they went too far in one direction or another: too much incorporation and people would be in a stronger position to claim equality with the imperial center, too little and the imperial center might become irrelevant, leading to the splitting off of subordinate indigenous collectivities or of creole or other settler elites who had gone to live in the imperial provinces.<sup>32</sup>

The discussion is framed in terms of two dichotomous models, the first, a "Roman" type characterized by unification, equality, and homogeneity, and the second, a "Eurasian" type characterized by a reliance on difference. These are offered as two poles of a continuum on which historical empires can be classified.

To sum up, historians who have wished to escape the grip of nation-centered historiography have taken a number of different approaches, including Big History, transnational and world (or under a new branding "global") history, and a new type of imperial history. World history and Big History continue to be the sphere of generalists, some with ideological axes to grind and others who pursue a kind of positivist empiricism that seeks to avoid an explicit teleology, although it is hard to understand how anyone could write a coherent account of world history without an overall design and implicit analytical stance. Narrative form and framing establish a point of view and sequence action in a way that implies an analytical method and position from the very beginning. Because of the linear character of narrative and the implication that an action that follows a previous action was caused in some measure by the prior action, the selection and placement of events in a story



contain an explanation of their results. Narrative functions as a string of causes and effects.<sup>33</sup>

For those who wish to go beyond general accounts and produce work grounded in original research the transnational or new imperial history seem the most productive approaches. The objects of study are far more limited than those of a world history. It is therefore possible for researchers to map the flow and impact of particular peoples, ideas, institutions, technologies, and commerce across a number of countries or to investigate in detail the interaction of different cultures and communities along an imperial frontier. The approaches illustrated in the presidential addresses of Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Louise A. Tilly or in the new histories of Russian and Soviet empires offer fruitful models for broadening perspective and presenting readers with a more inclusive and authentic picture of the past than they receive from the standard national histories. Theoretical works like the forthcoming volume by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper can help researchers sort through the issues involved in analyzing the experiences of large multiethnic or multinational polities in the past – and perhaps also provide material for understanding the behavior of multinational states of today such as the European Union, the Russian Federation, and, in less explicit forms, China and the United States.

33. Not a novel observation and one made anew some years ago by the American historian of ideas Allan Megill, "Recounting the past: 'description', explanation, and narrative in historiography", *AHR* 94: 3, June 1989, pp. 627–653.

## Tankar från USA kring transnationell och global historia och deras användningsområden

Denna uppsats presenterar och diskuterar, utifrån författarens mångåriga erfarenhet som forskare, lärare och under en period redaktör för *The American historical review*, hur nya sätt att skriva historia, under beteckningarna världshistoria, global historia och transnationell historia vuxit fram i USA sedan 1980-talet.

Vad som avses med dessa benämningar varierar men för närvarande tycks transnationell historia, i USA, vara beteckningen på ett sätt att skriva historia där kontakterna står i centrum: hur människor, idéer, institutioner, teknologi och handel cirkulerat mellan länder, nationer och kontinenter och hur detta påverkat människor och skeenden på olika ställen. Världshistoria eller global historia används däremot för att beteckna översiktliga framställningar. De nya inriktningarna har det gemensamt att de utmanar den nationella historieskrivningen. I USA är världshistoria just nu ett av de snabbast växande undervisningsområdena på universitet och *colleges*.

Vad som rymms under beteckningen världshistoria på universiteten är dock högst varierande. En av utgångspunkterna för världshistorien i USA har varit varför och hur Västvärlden kommit att dominera vår samtid. I mångt och mycket tycks denna fråga fortfarande finnas kvar implicit inom världshistorien. Världshistoriens vaga gränsdragningar har också gjort den öppen för ideologiskt bruk, både av nordamerikanska neokonservativa, som ser världens historia som en framgångsrik rörelse mot fri marknadsekonomi och demokrati av amerikanskt snitt, och av neomarxister, som, inspirerade av Immanuel Wallerstein och hans lärjungar, ser världens historia som en rörelse mot en socialistisk lösning på globala problem. Många världshistorier är dock först och främst breda empiriska redogörelser som tar upp hur befolkningen ökat, hur teknologin avancerat och hur de mellankulturella utbytena ökat över tid.

I uppsatsens andra del diskuteras de effekter internationaliseringstrenden medfört på författarens eget forskningsfält, rysk historia. Här inspirerade transnationell och komparativ historia till ett ökat intresse för minoritetsfolkens historia, ett fält som västerländska forskare dittills negligerat och som forskare inom Sovjetunionen inte fick forska om. Denna historieskrivning uppmärksammade först och främst kontakterna mellan det dominerande ryska folket och de icke-ryska folken och hur dessa kontakter kom att influera inte minst ryssarna. Inspiration kom också från kritiken i USA mot det traditionella sättet att beskriva erövringen av den nordamerikanska västern. Även studierna av Ryssland och Sovjetunionen som imperier fick en renässans. Dessa studier riktar in sig på processer, interaktion, motstånd och anpassning, med tonvikt på lokala förhållanden.

Uppsatsen avslutas med ett konstaterande att det inte bara är inom området rysk historia som transnationell historia fört med sig ett förnyat intresse för

studiet av imperier utan att detta har skett också inom andra områden, med breda jämförelser som följd. Författaren menar att vi därför kan se fram emot nya intressanta studier om imperier, som historiskt sett varit ett vanligare sätt att organisera samhället än nationalstaten.

*Keywords:* historiography, world history, transnational history, Russian history study and teaching