

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

08 – Taming the Wild Field - Sunderland

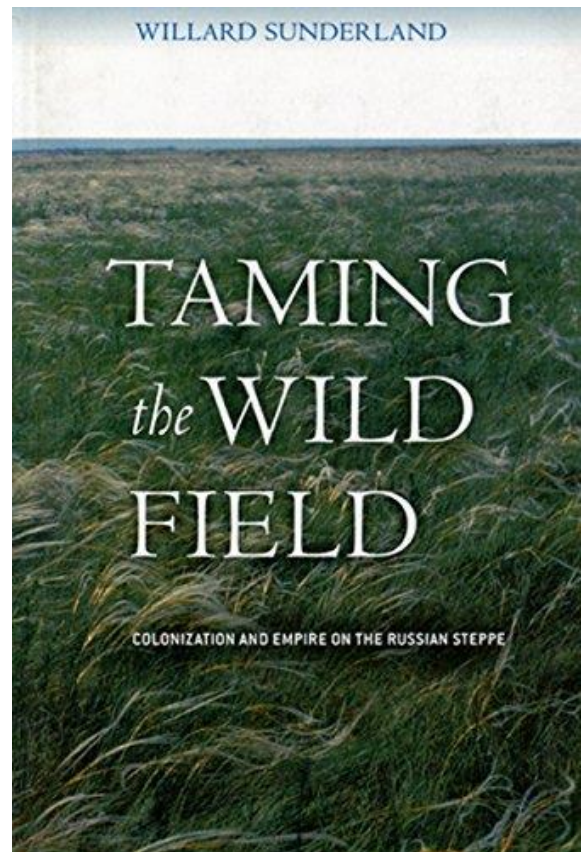
Title: TAMING THE WILD FIELD –
COLONIZATION AND EMPIRE ON THE
RUSSIAN STEPPE

Author: Willard Sunderland

Publication info: 2004, Cornell University Press
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

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settlement

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 10 May 2018



Reason to read: What you might think was a baffling chronology of peoples with exotic names moving back and forth across the trackless steppe to the south of the Muscovite state in response to invasions by other tribes with equally exotic names turns out in this account to be a fascinating reflection on the general process of Europeanisation which was carried out by Russians at the expense of their nomadic neighbours after the ebb of the Tatar/Mongol tide in the fifteenth century. We tend to be familiar with the Anglo-Saxon-style of colonisation *overseas*, which started at about the same time. The Russian advance progressed in quite a different way. It was a slow form of local expansion into wild but neighbouring territory, perhaps more akin to the German *drang nach osten* in the late middle ages. This book tells the story from the time it really got going with Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan in the 1550s until the late nineteenth century when the steppe was fully "tamed" and the main colonisation drive was transferred to the still largely empty province of Siberia.

Main talking points:

1. The word "steppe" appears to have come from Persian in the later seventeenth century. Before that, the Russian term for the area concerned was дикое поле, or the "wild field". (p. 34) The 1789 Dictionary of the Russian Academy of Sciences defined "steppe" as "an empty, unpopulated, and treeless place of great expanse." (p. 71) Dal, in his famous dictionary a century later, defined it as "a treeless and usually waterless waste of enormous size, a desert." (p. 206) If the old saying that geography is the mother of history, then it is necessary to see the steppe to

understand why it exercised such a hold on the Russian imagination for so long—as I can confirm from a recent visit to Kalmykia. The radical Russian innovation was to impose a semi-European form of order by the novel introduction of stasis. This brought an agricultural economy and a bureaucratic outlook to an environment previously thought best suited either to banditry or to nomadic pastoralism.

2. In 1714 Fedor Saltykov suggested to Peter I that an active policy of integration and assimilation should be pursued by the Russians in connection with the Cossacks. He added that “there was sound international precedent for this kind of plan since the English had done much the same thing with the Irish and the Welsh and were now pursuing a similar approach with the Scots, ‘many of whose nobles are related to English lords.’” (p. 41)
3. After the Crimean War, the “liberal Tsar”, Alexander II, carried out an operation of “ethnic cleansing” in and around the Crimea which was almost as comprehensive as Stalin’s in 1944. “At least seven hundred thousand Muslims from the Crimea and the Northern and Western Caucasus ‘emigrated’ to the Ottoman Empire.” Some left voluntarily rather than put up with official harassment, but others, “the mountaineers of the Western Caucasus in particular, were simply burned out of their homes and deported to the Kuban steppe, or forced to flee to Turkey, so their lands could be occupied by Cossacks.” (p. 151)
4. Russia had its own, steppe-related, equivalent of “Balmoralisation” in the late nineteenth century. “Increasing numbers of sickly middle-class city-dwellers would choose to travel to the steppe to drink the traditional beverage of pastoral nomads at precisely the time that nomadism itself was eroding. The nomadic steppe was mostly gone but that made it all the more appealing for educated Russians to imagine and claim.” The result was an “intensified veneration for progress even while deepening the longing for ‘lost civilisations’ and ‘the slower rhythms of the past.’” (p. 199)

Incidental interest: An interesting sub-theme is the author’s comparison with the expansion westward of the United States in the nineteenth century. In north America the state was never in charge of the colonization process, but in Russia it always insisted on retaining control. It did not like it when people moved “wilfully” (p. 133) Instead, even when the state tried to encourage people to move south (after an ukaz of 1843) “every last step of their resettlement was still to take place under minute official supervision.” (p. 140)

However, Sunderland asks, “in the final analysis, how different was Potemkin, architect of the Russian south, from Jefferson, architect of the American West? Weren’t steppe conservationists in Ekaterinoslav fundamentally similar to prairie conservationists in Kansas or Illinois?” (p. 225)

Surprising points: In the 1850s a Kazan university professor wrote, “The spreading of the Russian tribe at the expense of other nationalities is a matter of world-historical significance... It ensured the victory of European civilisation over the East” (p. 170) Sunderland comments a page later: “It was not always clear in every instance whether the Russians had colonized their own country or someone else’s or whether their colonisation had changed them more than it had changed the aliens.” (p. 171) It would be interesting to know what the Kazan university professor would have made of today’s version of Ivan the Terrible’s original “pivot to the East” when, after seizing the khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan and

losing the Livonia war for expansion to the Baltic, he sent Ermak off into Siberia. The main political fact in post-Soviet times is the *reversal* of the flow of population across the steppe, as every Muscovite knows who lives near a building-site full of industrious, under-paid Tadjiks and other like people.

Negative issue(s): Sunderland's account entirely omits Kazakhstan and Central Asia, which Russia conquered and incorporated in the nineteenth century. Was the title of Alexander Borodin's famous composition, "In the Steppes of Central Asia", an oxymoron?

Style: University-like, by which I mean competent but impersonal—and completely devoid of the poetry of the subject.

Link(s): None directly concerned with this book, but a very interesting talk about the early nineteenth century Chuvash/Russian Sinologist, the monk Nikita Bichurin, emphasising the multi-ethnic nature of imperial Russia, can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQQbaVh-ro8>

Overall recommendation level: HIGH – IF THIS IS YOUR SUBJECT

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>