
Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Siberia is unknown in Europe and little-known in Russia.

Ippolit Zavalishin

My Russia, my life, need we suffer together?
The tsar, and Siberia, and Ermak, and prison!
O, isn't it time to part ways, to repent . . .
What does a free spirit need with your darkness?

Alexander Blok¹

THE POLITICAL EXPANSION OF EUROPE beyond its continental limits, which began with the acquisition of vast colonial empires in the sixteenth century, thrust a special sort of intellectual and psychological challenge upon the European consciousness: to represent to itself and interpret the nature of the exotic, remote regions of the globe with which it was suddenly and intimately confronted. The response to this challenge set in motion a creative process that continues to the present day and has borne rich fruit in the form of colorful and diverse geographical images or representations of the non-European world. The fanciful and often fantastic character of these images makes them an entertaining object for study, but their imaginative excesses should not obscure their deeper significance for the intellectual and indeed spiritual constitution of European civilization. While these images, as Henri Baudet has pointed out, were certainly not founded in the "perceptible reality" of the regions in question,² neither were they the result of a simple and random distribution of exotic characteristics and attributes across the world map. Rather, in each case, they represented the careful

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¹ I. Zavalishin, *Opisanie zapadnoi Sibiri* (Moscow, 1862), 1; A. A. Blok, "Rodina" (1910), *Sochineniia v odnom tome* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1946), 228.

² Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man*, E. Wenholt, trans. (New Haven, Conn., 1965), 6.

(if unconsciously motivated) construction or invention, for a specific purpose, of an external world or geographical Other of a particular type. The identity assigned to these geographical externalities corresponded to the ideological categories of their progenitors, in other words, the constellation of beliefs and fears, predilections, prejudices, and needs of European society itself. Once created, these images entered this constellation and assumed their own special function within it as a discrete category.

The conceptual assimilation of the geographical Other introduced a dialectical tension into the European world view that determined how Europe perceived the outside world and, much more important, became virtually indispensable to its self-conception as well.³ This final point is most significant and may be seen in two different respects. In his provocative study of European attitudes toward Asia, for example, Edward Said argued that by bringing into existence the conceptual category of the "Orient," Europe was merely fashioning an antipodal point of reference for itself, an "antitype," as he called it, against which it could clearly establish its own identity and justify its own arrogant sense of cultural and social superiority. Tzvetan Todorov made essentially the same point in regard to the discovery and conquest of the New World.⁴ At the same time, the vision of the geographical Other could serve a very different function. For disaffected individuals and groups in Europe, it could offer a powerful representation of escape and perhaps even salvation. In the non-European world, a dimly perceived but nonetheless entirely plausible arena seemed available for the articulation of those exalted hopes and even utopian aspirations that could not be accommodated within the confining and frustrating reality of European society. In either of these functions, the geographical Other became inextricably enmeshed in the larger ideological web of the European imperial imagination.

These themes have been pursued in a substantial interdisciplinary literature, in which historians, geographers, literary scholars, sociologists, critical theorists, and art historians explore the European "Othering" of Asia and Africa, of the Americas, and recently of Australia as well.⁵ There has, however, been no parallel

³ For discussions of the psychological aspects of this process, see Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, H. Greedfeld, trans. (New York, 1965); O. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, 2d edn., P. Powesland, trans. (New York, 1964); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983).

⁴ "[C]'est bien la conquête de l'Amérique que annonce et fonde notre [European] identité présente"; Tzvetan Todorov, *La Conquête de l'Amérique: La Question de l'autre* (Paris, 1982), 14. Edward W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," in Francis Barker, et al., eds., *Europe and Its Others*, 2 vols. (Colchester, Essex, 1985), 1: 17; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), *passim*.

⁵ Barker, *Europe and Its Others*; Baudet, *Paradise on Earth*; V. G. Kiernan, *Lords of the Human Kind: European Attitudes towards the Outside World in the Imperial Age* (Harmondsworth, 1972); Jonah Raskin, *The Mythology of Imperialism* (New York, 1971); Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East 1680–1880*, G. Patterson-Black and V. Reinking, trans. (New York, 1984); Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London, 1961); John M. Steadman, *The Myth of Asia* (New York, 1969); Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination 1880–1930* (London, 1972); Allen J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880–1960* (London, 1969); Rashna B. Singh, *The Imperishable Empire: A Study of British Fiction on Asia* (Washington, D.C., 1988); Robin W. Winks and James R. Rush, eds., *Asia in Western Fiction* (Honolulu, 1990); Andrew L. March, *The Idea of China* (New York, 1974); Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2d edn. (New Haven, 1986); O. H. K. Spate, "The Pacific as an Artefact," in Niel Gunson, ed., *The Changing Pacific: Essays in Honour of H. E. Mande* (Melbourne, 1978), 32–45; Harriet Guest, "Imagining the South Pacific," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 12 (1986):

examination of this process in regard to one of the oldest and largest colonies of all: the vast expanse of taiga, tundra, and steppe that extends eastward from the Ural mountains across northern Asia to the Pacific.⁶ Siberia offered fertile ground for the creation of such images, for it was not only foreign but a virtual *terra incognita*, about which Russians west of the Urals throughout the nineteenth century possessed little positive information. This circumstance gave free rein to the imagination of those who undertook to speculate about the Russian east and enabled them to use it as a translucent geographical canvas for what has aptly been called the “externalization of their private vision.”⁷

To be sure, the fact that the Russians have traditionally entertained highly contrasting and volatile images of Siberia is generally appreciated. Siberians themselves, understandably sensitive on the issue, have been expressing their annoyance and dismay at this sort of fetishization since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, and a number of specialized studies have traced it through the centuries.⁸ Beyond identifying these images, however, there has been no

425–28; Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action 1780–1850* (Madison, Wis., 1964). For America, see Antonella Gerbi, *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo: Storia di una polemica 1750–1900* (Milan, 1955); Edmundo O’Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1961); D. Echeverría, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton, N.J., 1957); Gilbert Chinard, *L’Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature au XVII^e et XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1913); Ray A. Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981); and the review by C. Vann Woodward, “Spaghetti West,” *New York Review of Books* (June 11, 1981): 33–35. For a study of the images of America portrayed in European art, see Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (London, 1975). The fact that even in our own day, Europe continues to construct images of the New World as an antitype and geographical Other is eloquently demonstrated in two recent essays on the “American scene” by leading European intellectuals: Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, W. Weaver, trans. (New York, 1986); Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique* (Paris, 1986). On the “discovery” of Australia, see Paul Carter’s fascinating study *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London, 1987).

⁶ To be sure, the question of Russian images of the territories beyond the Urals—contemporary as well as historical—is attracting growing attention. For recent studies of Russian perceptions of other realms of the empire, see Seymour Becker, “The Muslim East in Nineteenth-Century Russian Popular Historiography,” *Central Asian Survey*, 5 (1986): 25–47; Susan Layton, “The Creation of an Imaginative Caucasian Geography,” *Slavic Review*, 45 (1986): 470–85.

⁷ Hugh Ridley, *Images of Imperial Rule* (London, 1983), 4. On the special perceptual qualities of *terra incognita*, see John K. Wright, “*Terrae Incognitae*: The Place of Imagination in Geography,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 37 (1947): 1–15. This innovative piece is gathered along with other essays by Wright on the theme of regional images in the collection *Human Nature in Geography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966). Also see David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geosophy in Honor of John Kirtland Wright* (New York, 1976).

⁸ In 1865, N. M. Iadrintsev noted with considerable bitterness: “Siberia has been either the object of exaggeration and praise, of joyous aspirations and dreams . . . and the most auspicious images, sometimes even taking on fairytale-like proportions; then suddenly, it [could] become the object of disappointment, blame, and betrayed hopes”; “Sibir’ pered sudom russkoi literatury,” *Literaturnoe nasledstvo Sibiri*, 5 (1980): 21. See especially N. M. Iadrintsev, *Sibir’ kak koloniia v geograficheskom, etnograficheskom, i istoricheskom otnoshenii*, 2d edn. (St. Petersburg, 1892); S. G. Svatikov, *Rossia i Sibir’ (K istorii sibirskogo oblastnchestva v XIX v.* (Prague, 1929); Mark Bassin, “Expansion and Colonialism on the Eastern Frontier: Views of Siberia and the Far East in Pre-Petrine Russia,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 14 (1988): 3–21; V. G. Mirzoev, *Istoriografiia Sibiri (domarksistskii period)* (Moscow, 1970); L. M. Goriushkin and N. A. Minenok, *Istoriografiia Sibiri dooktiabr’skogo perioda: Konets XVI–nachalo XX v.* (Novosibirsk, 1984); E. A. Kuklina, et al., eds., *Voprosy russkoi i sovetskoi literatury Sibiri* (Novosibirsk, 1971); M. K. Azadovskii, “Poetika ‘giblogo mesta’ (Iz istorii sibirskogo peizazha v russkoi literature),” in Azadovskii, *Ocherki literatury i kul’tury Sibiri* (Irkutsk, 1947), 165–200. For bibliographies of Siberia

attempt to analyze them on a deeper level, to determine how they originated and were constructed, what spoken and unspoken assumptions they contained, which individuals or groups shared them, or why they differed. Consequently, no attempt has been made to fit these images back into the larger ideological complex that produced them and by so doing to determine what insights they might provide into the mind and culture of imperial Russia itself. It is to this latter problem that the present essay is dedicated.

One qualification may be made at the outset. Although Siberia was seen by many European Russians as a foreign Asiatic colony, it was at the same time somewhat more than this. The simple circumstance of territorial contiguity with the metropolis—a geographical arrangement shared by no other European empire—together with Siberia's large and long-established Russian population made it possible to see the territories beyond the Urals as a continuation or extension of the zone of Russian culture and society. This was an image of Siberia as Russia's frontier, and the best parallel was not European colonial domains but America's perceptions and myths of its own frontier, the Wild West.⁹ Indeed, the American example first suggested to the Russians that they could see their eastern reaches in this light. Of course, in reading Siberia as their frontier, the Russians, like the Americans, were consciously reading themselves rather than a foreign realm. This point in turn ensured that, while the resulting images were no less contrived and fanciful, no less the product of their progenitors' inventive imagination than any others, they acquired a different dynamic and could serve different ideological functions.

The present essay is thus a first attempt to explore the usefulness of an analytical perspective that has not been widely applied in the Russian context. The time frame is the early nineteenth century. During this period, older traditional views of Siberia were both embellished and challenged by an array of new images and associations, which collectively suggested a different perspective on the Russian east. It is my intention to demonstrate that these multifarious images of Siberia were the product of the growing diversification and fragmentation of cultural and political thought in European Russia itself. Four discrete images or image clusters have been identified and will serve as the focus for analysis. These examples convey the extraordinary range and diversity that characterized Russian images of Siberia—from a desolate desert of snow and ice to Russia's promised land—and further serve to illustrate the complex ideological process by which the vision of a geographical Other was constructed and assigned a meaning.

as a theme in Russian literature, see *Russkaia literatura Sibiri: Bibliograficheskii ukazatel'*, 2 vols. (Novosibirsk, 1976–77); M. K. Azadovskii, "Sibir' v russkoi khudozhestvennoi literature," *Izvestiia Vostochno-Sibirskogo Otdela Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva*, 51 (1926): 175–90.

⁹ On American perceptions of their western frontier, see Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800–1890* (Middletown, Conn., 1985); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (Middletown, 1973); Henry N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York, 1957); Ray A. Billington and Albert Camarillo, *The American Southwest: Image and Reality* (Los Angeles, 1979).

THE VIEW OF SIBERIA THAT IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY was probably shared most widely by Russians west of the Urals may be termed the colonial, or even better, imperial image. This was a picture of Siberia as a mercantile colony of the Russian state, for all intents and purposes a foreign territorial possession useful exclusively by virtue of the natural resources available there for exploitation. The colonial image derived naturally from the traditional relationship between Russia and Siberia, which from its inception was that of a metropolis to a colony.¹⁰ In a manner resembling that of the Iberian empires in the New World, the Russians who crossed the Urals to “conquer” and then occupy Siberia did so in quest of an easily obtained and highly lucrative mercantile commodity, fur, which presented an alternative nearly as attractive as the precious metals of the New World. On domestic and foreign markets, the luscious pelts of the Siberian taiga were as precious as gold and silver, a fact underscored by the common Russian reference to them as “soft gold.” Over the centuries, furs from Siberia provided a steady and critically important source of income for medieval Russia.¹¹ During its heyday, the fiscal significance of the fur trade can hardly be overstated. One well-informed observer, the seventeenth-century official Grigorii Kotoshikhin, estimated that fully one-third of the total state revenues in the 1640s derived from Siberian pelts.¹²

The image of Siberia as a foreign mercantile colony rested logically on the larger vision of Russia as a colonial empire, and thus its formal articulation must be sought in the early eighteenth century, when the imperial idea was formalized. Immediately after the Russian victory in 1721 over Sweden in the Great Northern War, Peter the Great proclaimed the tsardom of Muscovy an *imperii*, or modern colonial empire, on the West European model. Like its Western counterparts, Russia was now to be identified formally as a geographical composite, made up of organically Russian regions representing the European metropolis and a vast, extra-European colonial domain. This picture of geographical symmetry was completed only after Peter's death by one of his most brilliant ideologues, the

¹⁰ For general histories of Siberia and Russian-Siberian relations, see *Istoriia Sibiri s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei*, 5 vols. (Leningrad, 1968–69); V. K. Andrievich, *Istoričeskii očerok Sibiri po dannym predstavliaevym polnym sobraniiem zakonov*, 6 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1886–89); V. I. Ogorodnikov, *Očerok istorii Sibiri do nachala XIX stoletii*, 2 vols. (Irkutsk, 1920–24); G. F. Miller, *Istoriia Sibiri*, 2 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1937–41); A. I. Andreev, *Očerki po istočnikovedeniiu Sibiri*, 2 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1939–65); Iadrintsev, *Sibir' kak koloniia*; G. V. Lantzeff, *Siberia in the Seventeenth Century: A Study of the Colonial Administration* (Berkeley, Calif., 1943); G. V. Lantzeff and R. A. Pierce, *Eastward to Empire: Exploration and Conquest on the Russian Open Frontier, to 1750* (Montreal, 1973); J. R. Gibson, “The Significance of Siberia to Tsarist Russia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 14 (1972): 442–53. For a study of the earliest Russian knowledge about and perceptions of Siberia, see D. N. Anuchin, “K istorii oznakomleniia s Sibir'iu do Ermaka,” *Drevnosti: Trudy Moskovskogo Arkheologicheskogo Obshchestva*, 14 (1890): 227–313.

¹¹ On the Siberian fur trade, see P. N. Pavlov, *Promyslovaia kolonizatsiia Sibiri v XVII veke* (Krasnoyarsk, 1974); R. H. Fisher, *The Russian Fur Trade, 1550–1700* (Berkeley, Calif., 1943); J. R. Gibson, *Feeding the Russian Fur Trade: Provisionment of the Okhotsk Seaboard and the Kamchatka Peninsula, 1639–1856* (Madison, Wis., 1969).

¹² A. V. Baikalov, “The Conquest and Colonization of Siberia,” *Slavic and East European Review*, 10 (1932): 561; G. Vernadskii, “Protiv solntsa: Rasprostranenie russkogo gosudarstva k vostoku,” *Russkaia Mysl'*, 35 (1914): 63; Gibson, “Significance of Siberia,” 443. Also see Bassin, “Expansion and Colonialism on the Eastern Frontier,” 11–15; Fisher, *Russian Fur Trade*, 17, 119–20.

geographer and historian Vasilii N. Tatishchev. In the 1730s, Tatishchev redefined for Russians the geographical boundary between Europe and Asia, shifting it from the commonly accepted Don River line, far to the east, to the Ural mountains.¹³ The traditional boundary between Russia and Siberia thus became the demarcation between the civilization and culture of two world continents as well, and in one stroke Siberia was transformed into an Asiatic realm cleanly set off from a newly identified “European” Russia. A sophisticated array of contrasting geographical, cultural, and ethnographic characteristics and attributes were accordingly marshaled to embellish the distinction between the two. The product was an entirely novel self-image of Russia as a country divided into discrete “European” and “Asiatic” components, a geographical and geopolitical vision precisely corresponding to the categories and assertions of the new ideology.¹⁴

In this manner, Siberia was “Asianized” in the eyes of the Russians as an intrinsic part of the same conceptual metamorphosis by which Russia itself was westernized. The creation of this non-European geographical Other was essential to the latter process, for it was well appreciated that Siberia qua Asia represented a reliable and incontestable contrast that helped confirm the European identity of Russia west of the Urals. This critical function explained the emphasis, indeed, the insistence immediately placed on Siberia’s non-European character, its dissimilarities with other parts of Russia, and the affinities it was assumed to share with the colonial possessions of other European empires. Throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century, Russian geography texts and atlases increasingly referred to the territories east of the Urals not by their native Russian name of Siberia but by the distinctly more foreign and exotic-sounding designation Great Tatar, which the Russians borrowed from the geographical terminology of the West.¹⁵ Depictions of Siberia dwelled on the region’s sparse but highly variegated indigenous population of Tungus, Yakuts, Eskimos, and other groups. The ethnographic and cultural contrast these peoples presented to their conquerors from Russia was depicted as identical to that of the Aztecs of Mexico or the “red men” of North America to the conquerors from Western Europe. These indigenous peoples served to characterize Siberia for imperial Russia, and the fact that the region also had a long-established population of ethnic Russians about equal in number was played down

¹³ V. N. Tatishchev, *Leksikon rossiiskoi istoricheskoi, geograficheskoi, politicheskoi i grazhdanskoi* (St. Petersburg, 1793), 189; A. B. Ditmar, “K istorii voprosa o granitse mezhdru Evropoi i Aziei,” *Uchenye zapiski Iaroslavl'skogo pedagogicheskogo instituta*, 30 (1958): 40–42; W. H. Parker, “Europe: How Far?” *Geographical Journal*, 126 (1960): 284–86.

¹⁴ For a more detailed examination of this process, see Mark Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space” (*Slavic Review*, in press).

¹⁵ Compare *Kratkoe rukovodstvo k geografii v pol'zu uchashchegosia pri gimnazii imoshestva* (St. Petersburg, 1742), 58; M. I. Klevetskii, *Rukovodstvo k geografii s upotrebleniiem zemnogo shara i landkart . . .*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1773), 1: 106; L. A. Baumann, *Kratkoe nachertanie geografii dlia nachimaiushchikh obuchat'sia sei nauke . . .*, V. Ivanov, trans. (Moscow, 1788), 103–06; *Vvedenie v geografiiu, sluzhashchee ko iz'iasneniiu vsekh landkart, zemnogo shara s gosudarstvennymi gerbami, i opisaniie sfery . . .*, 2d edn. (Moscow, 1790), 256–57.



Yakuten (oben) und Burjäten. Kupferstiche, 18. Jahrhundert

Siberia's "Red Men": Yakuts (above) and Buriats, German engraving, eighteenth century. Jeri Semjonow, *Die Eroberung Sibirens* (Berlin, 1937), facing p. 128.

or simply ignored.¹⁶ The extent to which Siberia was understood within the framework of West European colonialism was indicated by the common practice of referring to it as “our Peru” or “our Mexico,” a “Russian Brazil,” or even “our East India,” a habit of mind that endured in Russian officialdom well into the nineteenth century.¹⁷

It should be noted that at the outset and for some time thereafter, this image of Siberia as a remote Asiatic colony was by no means a dim one. To the contrary, as part of the blossoming of Russia's imperial regime under Catherine the Great (1762–1796), the colonial glory of Siberia reached its apogee. Comparing Siberian rivers such as the Lena to the Nile, for example, Mikhail Lomonosov dedicated odes to the splendid and rich natural environment of the country and, in the early 1760s, made his famous affirmation that “Siberia will foster the growth of Russian imperial grandeur.”¹⁸ Catherine, for her part, entertained the vision of Siberia as a flourishing and self-sufficient colonial realm. For some years during her reign, a special Siberian currency was minted for exclusive use there, and it was apparently at this time that the characterization of Siberia as Russia's *zolotoe dno* or “gold mine” became popular in European Russia.¹⁹

By the early nineteenth century, however, this Russian Peru had lost much of its economic significance. The fur trade had declined precipitously, a victim of eroded international markets, changing fashions of dress, and not least the decrease in available pelts, as the fur-bearing population of the Siberian mainland was hunted into virtual extinction. Trappers attempted to compensate by substituting sea-otter pelts harvested in the waters of the North Pacific for the fox, sable, and ermine of the Siberian taiga, but, while this produced a brief economic efflorescence in Russian Alaska, it was not ultimately successful.²⁰ Nor did the expansion of mining and metallurgy energetically undertaken by Peter the Great as part of his program to develop Russian manufacturing begin to match the

¹⁶ V. N. Tatishchev, “Obshchee geograficheskoe opisaniie vseia Sibiri,” *Izbrannnye trudy po geografii Rossii* (Moscow, 1950), 70–72. A statistical handbook on Siberia prepared by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1810 devoted only 15 pages to the Russian population compared with 110 pages on its native peoples. *Statisticheskoe obozrenie Sibiri, sostavlennoe na osnovanii svedenii, pocherpnutykh iz aktov pravitel'stva i drugikh dostovernnykh istochnikov* (St. Petersburg, 1810), 73–74, 75–200. For a discussion of the effects of the Petrine revolution on views of Siberia, see Yuri Slezkine, “Russia's Small Peoples: The Policies and Attitudes towards the Native Northerners, Seventeenth Century–1938” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1989), 81–99.

¹⁷ Perceptually, Siberia was “almost as separate [from European Russia] as if it were composed of overseas dependencies”; J. M. K. Vyvyan, “Russia in Europe and Asia,” *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge, 1960), 10: 38. For comparisons to Peru and other colonies, see *Statisticheskoe obozrenie Sibiri*, 1; V. P. Parshin, *Poezdka v zabaikal'skii krai*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1844), 1: 32–33; Iadrntsev, *Sibir' kak koloniia*, 710; E. Petri, “Sibir' kak koloniia,” *Sibirskii Sbornik*, 2 (1886): 83; Svatikov, *Rossia i Sibir'*, 13.

¹⁸ M. V. Lomonosov, “Kratkoe opisaniie raznykh puteshestvii po severnym moriam i pokazanie vozmozhnogo prokhodu sibirskim okeanom v Vostochnuiu Indiiu” (1762–63), in Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 11 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950–83), 6: 498. For the comparison to the Nile, see “Oda na den' vosshestvii na vsrossiiskii prestol Ee Velichestva Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Elisavety Petrovny 1747 goda” (1747), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 8: 203.

¹⁹ Svatikov, *Rossia i Sibir'*, 6; D. W. Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration: Government and Peasant in Resettlement from Emancipation to the First World War* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), 20. [F. I. Soimonov], “Drevniaia poslovitsa: Sibir'—zolotoe dno,” *Ezhemesiachnyie sochineniia i perevody, k pol'ze i uveseniiu*, 2 (November 1761): 449–67; Iadrntsev, “Sibir' pored sudom russkoi literatury,” 23.

²⁰ James R. Gibson, “Sables to Sea Otters: Russia Enters the Pacific,” *Alaska Review*, 3 (Fall–Winter 1968–69): 203–17.

relative economic importance furs had commanded, although it did replace the fur trade as Siberia's single most important economic enterprise.²¹ Around 1800, as D. K. Fieldhouse noted, Siberia appeared to be repeating the pattern of colonial decline exemplified by the Portuguese possessions of Angola and Mozambique and represented for all practical purposes a "relic of an earlier period of Muscovite imperialism."²² Indeed, it increasingly seemed that the only useful service Siberia continued to render was as a place of exile: an expansive storehouse for people whose presence in European Russia the authorities deemed to be socially or politically undesirable.

This waning of economic significance set a different tone for the imperial image of the Russian east. Enthusiasm for Siberia's potential gave way to an all-pervading cynicism about the value of the colony to its motherland. The generous vision of Siberia as a "gold mine" was gone for the Russian government as well as for much of the educated Russian public, replaced by the menacing picture of a vast Asiatic wasteland of barren, snowy expanses and frozen tundra. In the absence of a demonstrable mercantile value, Siberia's negative qualities as an antitype to European Russia became definitive. To the Russians of the early nineteenth century, who still looked unquestioningly on Western Europe as the ultimate model of the advanced and enlightened civilization they desired for themselves, Siberia presented a distinctly disagreeable, even ominous, prospect. It epitomized the primitiveness and lack of Western development they found contemptible, and it consequently excited a palpable disdain, an antipathy amplified by the burgeoning sense of insecurity on the part of Russians west of the Urals about the authenticity of their own claim to a European identity. A tsarist bureaucrat captured the essence of this pervasive attitude with the smug observation that "Nevskii Prospect alone is worth at least five times as much as all of Siberia," and the exaggeration of the comparison only served to underscore the high importance the Russians attached to this point.²³ The dynamism of St. Petersburg's premier avenue, with its high-fashion salons, newspaper kiosks, Western-style architecture, stock exchanges, and libraries offered the best evidence that Russia was indeed an enlightened and advanced European society. As such, it represented the antithesis of inhospitable, desolate, and uncivilized Siberia.

For many Russians, the primeval aspect of untouched Siberia was frightening. Here was an immense yet empty stretch of territory, all the more awesome in that its extraordinary size was matched by the uselessness to which nature, it seemed, had condemned it. Its harsh physical environment apparently precluded settlement and productive exploitation. It was, moreover, completely isolated, cut off by high mountain ranges from any contact with the populous Asian societies to the south and access to the waters of the Pacific on the east. Its rivers, true enough, were spectacular, and among the mightiest in the world, but useless for the constructive purposes of commercial and passenger transport, for they flowed in the wrong direction and emptied into dark and frozen bays along the Arctic coast.

²¹ A. S. Kuznetsov, "Sibirskaiia programma tsarizma 1852 g.," *Ocherki istorii Sibiri*, 2 (1971): 4–5, 15.

²² D. K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1959), 159.

²³ Quoted in A. I. Stepanchenko, *Gordost' nasha Sibir': Molodym o zavetnom krae* (Irkutsk, 1964), 5.

An article in the popular journal *Notes of the Fatherland* presented a litany of these points in 1841. After a detailed discussion of Siberia from all aspects, including extended comment on the “terrible stagnation of its Asiatic climate” that condemned its inhabitants to eternal “intellectual stagnation,” the author concluded with the following grim observation: “In a word, whatever aspect of Siberia is examined—its climate, geographical position, physical make-up, its industry, current conditions of commerce, the half-wild nature of the countries bordering on it to the south, the inadequate road systems—all this forces one to think that it will long be fated to remain a desert.” Russia would be better off, he asserted, if the “ocean of snow” that was Siberia could be replaced by a real body of water, which would at least enable convenient maritime trade with the Far East.²⁴

As a sort of complement to this picture of economic uselessness and even parasitism in the popular imagination—our author spoke of Siberia “sucking the juices out of Russia”—Siberia epitomized all that was negative.²⁵ This was a time, one contemporary observed, when the very mention of Siberia produced “sorrowful feelings as a domain of eternal wind storms and snow . . . , a dank and barren land, with gloomy penal mines.”²⁶ The poet P. V. Shumakher spent only one year in government service in Siberia during the mid-1830s but was nevertheless moved to commemorate his experience in the following verse:

O you, bitterness, cruel stepmother, Siberia,
Your snowy steppes have spread out far and wide:
Unfriendly, unfree, deserted, hostile,
Unappealing, inhospitable, and cold.²⁷

Shumakher’s designation of Siberia as unfree referred to the most graphic, and by all means most enduring, of the negative associations evoked by the region: its function as a place of exile. Siberia’s perceived severe natural conditions—its “stagnant Asiatic environment”—seemed entirely fitting to its function as an immense prison, and the two negative images were woven together and became mutually enhancing. This particular image even inspired a motif in the literature of Russian Romanticism in the 1820s and 1830s, the so-called poetic formula of Siberia. This formula involved a contrasting interplay between the wretched and inhuman natural environment of Siberia on the one hand and the exalted nobility and selfless sufferings of a hero-protagonist situated there on the other.²⁸ Its originator, Kondratii Ryleev, supplied an excellent example in an epic poem dedicated to the Ukrainian patriot Andrei Voinarovskii. Voinarovskii’s tragic

²⁴ [N. M. ?] Gersevanov, “Zamechaniia o torgovykh otnosheniakh Sibiri k Rossii,” *Otechestvennyye zapiski*, 14 (1841), otd. 4: 33 (quote), 30, 26–27. Also see N. N. Koz’min, “M. B. Zagoskin i ego znachenie v istorii razvitiia sibirskoi obshchestvennosti,” in Koz’min, *Ocherki proshlogo i nastoiashchego Sibiri* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 173.

²⁵ Gersevanov, “Zamechaniia o torgovykh otnosheniakh,” 30.

²⁶ I. D. Bulychev, *Puteshestvie po vostochnoi Sibiri: Iakutskaiia Oblast’, Okhotskii kraii* (St. Petersburg, 1856), 1; M. M. Gedenshtrom, *Otryvki o Sibiri* (St. Petersburg, 1830), 4.

²⁷ P. V. Shumakher, “Pesnia katorzhnogo” (1862), in Shumakher, *Stikhi i pesni* (Moscow, 1902), 123.

²⁸ N. N. Kurdina, “U istokov poetiki sibirskogo peizazha v russkom romantizme,” in L. P. Iakimova, et al., eds., *Literatura Sibiri: Istoriia i sovremennost’* (Novosibirsk, 1984), 21 and following. Also see Azadovskii, “Poetika ‘giblogo mesta.’”



A convoy of exiles in western Siberia. George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System* (New York, 1891), vol. 1, p. 377.

demise in exile to eastern Siberia served for the future Decembrist as a model of a life sacrificed to the struggle for freedom and justice in the face of the most adverse conditions. Ryleev left no doubt that the region of exile itself figured as one of these adversities. The poem, written early in 1825, began with the following description of Yakutia and the Lena River:

The gloomy nature of these lands
Is always harsh and wild,
The angry river roars,
Storms often rage,
And the clouds are often dismal . . .

Fearing the winters
Both interminable, and icy,
No one will visit
This wretched country,
This vast prison house for the exiles.²⁹

This was a far cry from Lomonosov's reference to the same river as a veritable Russian Nile. The image of Siberia as a place of exile became so firmly fixed in the Russian imagination at this time that the very name *Sibir'* (or its diminutive *Sibirka*) became a popular synonym for exile or penal servitude of any sort, irrespective of whether it actually took place in Siberia or not.³⁰

The Siberian policy pursued by the Russian government reflected this negative view. With the decline of the fur trade, Siberia had become Russia's outback, and in the eyes of the government it should remain as such. This attitude was especially pronounced during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855), whose preoccupation with European affairs left him little time for the eastern periphery of the empire. The observation of his foreign minister Count Karl Nesselrode that Siberia's most useful function was as a "deep net" for criminals and other dregs of Russian society demonstrated how substantially official views had changed in little over half a century.³¹ The government's express lack of interest in the development of Siberia reflected certain pragmatic considerations as well. Most immedi-

²⁹ K. F. Ryleev, "Voinarovskii," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Leningrad, 1971), 192.

³⁰ Iu. M. Lotman, "Dekabrist v povsednevnoi zhizni (bytovoe povedenie kak istoriko-psikhologicheskaiia kategoriia)," *Literaturnoe nasledie dekabristov* (Leningrad, 1975), 40. Other colloquial Russian words derived from the name Siberia, such as *sibirnyi* (savage, cruel, or evil) or *sibirshchina* (a difficult, burdensome, and unendurable life), give some indication of the extent to which attitudes on less literate levels corresponded to these negative views. Vladimir Dal', *Tolkovnyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka*, 4th edn., 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1912), 4: 143–44.

³¹ Cited in I. P. Barsukov, ed., *Graf Nikolai Nikolaevich Murav'ev-Amurskii po ego pis'mam . . .*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1891), 1: 670. On governmental attitudes and policy toward Siberia under Nicholas I, see Kuznetsov, "Sibirskaiia programma tsarizma," 17–18; G. P. Shatrova, *Dekabristy i Sibir'* (Tomsk, 1962), 118. Under Alexander I, there remained a vestige of enthusiasm among officials for Siberia's colonial potential, notably that of M. M. Speranskii, who prepared an administrative reform of the region in the early 1820s, but this attitude had largely vanished by the second quarter of the century. Marc Raeff, *Michael Speransky: Statesman of Imperial Russia*, 2d edn. (The Hague, 1969), 259. For other positive appraisals, see *Statisticheskoe obozrenie Sibiri*, 1 and following; A. K. Kornilov, *Zamechaniia o Sibiri* (St. Petersburg, 1828), 1; K. Arsen'ev, *Statisticheskii ocherk Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1848), 25. Grigorii Spaskii's journal *Sibirskii Vestnik* (St. Petersburg, 1818–24) and its short-lived successor *Aziatskii Vestnik* (1825–27) also tried to keep alive the image of Siberia as a "gold mine."

ately disturbing was the fear that the emergence of an active, dynamic economic and civil life in Siberia might well lead the region to dissolve its ties to European Russia and proclaim independence. The specter of Siberian separatism was a terrifying one for officials in European Russia. Ironically, the comparison made by these officials themselves between Siberia and the New World colonies of the West European empires gave it substance, for, by the beginning of Nicholas I's reign, most of the New World colonies had achieved independence.³² Officials may have perceived little economic use for the territories beyond the Urals, but they considered the idea of dissolving the empire through the breaking away of its greater half inadmissible. As late as 1861, Baron P. K. Meyendorf, head of the "Siberian Committee," which oversaw governmental policy beyond the Urals, vigorously opposed the economic development of Siberia. He argued that the repercussions would be intolerably dangerous, for the government risked its eventual "separation from the metropolis, as the history of all colonies teaches."³³

THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF AN ARTICULATE AND SELF-CONSCIOUS political opposition in Russia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gave rise to a perspective on Siberia fundamentally different from the negative colonial views just described. While the emergence of this new view was not unrelated to the intimate acquaintance that many of the early opponents of tsarist autocracy had with Siberia through long periods of exile there, exiled Russians had been learning about Siberia firsthand for generations without producing any significant perceptual transformation. More important to the shift was the fact that the unorthodox convictions of this opposition concerning the needs of Russian society and their disaffection from the country's autocratic status quo prepared them psychologically to appreciate the Russian east in an unprecedented manner. Their deep concern with the reform and reorganization of Russian society ensured that they would be open to new and unorthodox ideas, and in fact they actively sought out alternative social and political models for the transformation of Russia's medieval order. In this quest, Siberia proved to possess a special attraction. While it continued to function as a geographical Other, the specific ideological quality of the traditional relationship was inverted, and, rather than supplying a negative affirmation of the positive qualities of the European metropolis, it came to represent a radical alternative in which the much-sought-after progressive models could be identified. Thus the perceptual pendulum

³² Kuznetsov, "Sibirskaiia programma tsarizma," 6–9, 11–12, 13, 25; Svatikov, *Rossia i Sibir'*, 15. Argentina gained independence in 1810, Venezuela in 1811, Chile in 1818, Mexico and Peru in 1821, and Brazil and Ecuador in 1822. Government officials in Siberia were well aware of St. Petersburg's extraordinary concern with separatist tendencies and played on these fears effectively in their communications with the capital, often toward contradictory purposes. The specter of Siberian separatism, for example, was used by the governor-general of eastern Siberia, N. N. Murav'ev, in the 1850s as a compelling reason to annex the Amur River but by his west Siberian counterpart as an irrefutable argument against annexation. Mark Bassin, "A Russian Mississippi? A Political-Geographical Inquiry into the Vision of Russia on the Pacific 1840–1865" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1983), 127, 141–42 and following.

³³ Quoted in S. G. Svatikov, "Rossia i Sibir'," *Vol'naiia Sibir'* (Prague), 8 (1930): 38.

swung, and, from a barren realm of ice and darkness, Siberia was transformed into an abiding source of hope and inspiration.

This new perspective came into full relief after 1825, articulated by the young officers banished to Siberia for their complicity in the revolt against the accession of Nicholas I in December of that year. The “Decembrists” spent decades beyond the Urals, and Siberia figured as an important theme in all their writings from this period. In the mournful poetry written during their early years of exile, the “Siberian formula” received what was probably its most powerful and moving expression.³⁴ At the same time, however, the use of this literary device did not prevent them from evaluating Siberia in a positive, even enthusiastic, light. They were much impressed by the region’s untapped natural resources, the abundance and richness of which they could evaluate firsthand. But their primary interest was attracted by a different factor, one that had previously remained almost entirely unnoted: the nature of Siberian society itself. Up to this point, Siberia had been pictured as a region either devoid for all practical purposes of human population or as populated by a colorful but sparse and not particularly significant assortment of native Asian peoples. If the existence of a Russian population was acknowledged at all, it was generally depicted as a paltry assemblage of criminal offenders, troublesome religious schismatics, and simple wanderers (*guliashchie liudi*), groups that represented another one of Siberia’s numerous inadequacies.³⁵ Yet it was precisely on Siberia’s Russian society that the Decembrists focused their attention. They further broke with tradition by identifying in it a variety of qualities that contrasted favorably with Russia west of the Urals.

The most positive quality was the absence of the hated institution of serfdom, which had not migrated with the Russians across the Urals.³⁶ This circumstance had profound implications for the nature of society there, for it meant that Siberia was free of both chattel labor and a powerful landed aristocracy. Siberian society was consequently more democratic and egalitarian than European Russia and not fragmented into a rigid hierarchy of social classes. Nikolai Basargin described how his initial dread at the prospect of exile in Siberia (“I had ceased to consider myself an inhabitant of this world”) was transformed once he arrived there and was able to see what the region was really like: “The further we traveled across Siberia, the more it gained in my estimation. The common people seemed to me to be much freer, cleverer, and even more highly educated than our Russian peasants, especially the serfs. The Siberians better understood the dignity of man, and valued their rights more highly.”³⁷ East of the Urals, many of the exiled Decembrists discovered some of the very qualities considered most necessary for the progressive advance of European Russia itself. Siberia served as a counter-example to confirm the debilitating effects of serfdom on European Russia and at the same time demonstrated that Russian society, if freed from serfdom, was capable of recognizing and respecting fundamental human rights.

Like the government officials noted above, the Decembrists also drew a parallel

³⁴ Iu. S. Postnov, *Russkaia literatura Sibiri pervoi polviny XIX v.* (Novosibirsk, 1970), 117–32; Iu. S. Postnov, *Sibir v poezii dekabristov* (Novosibirsk, 1976).

³⁵ See, for example, Gersevanov, “Zamechaniia o torgovykh otnosheniakh,” 27–28.

³⁶ Shatrova, *Dekabristy i Sibir*, 85.

³⁷ N. V. Basargin, *Zapiski* (Petrograd, 1917), 94.

between Siberia and the European colonies of the New World. The affinities they noted, however, were not with the South and Central American dominions of the Iberian empires but instead with the former colony of West European settlement to the north, the United States. Attitudes in Russia toward the young North American republic varied considerably, and its detractors were certainly as numerous as its supporters, if not more so. To advocates of political liberalization and reform, however, the United States stood as a powerful inspirational symbol, and the Decembrists were among its most faithful admirers.³⁸ The view they shared of the New World republic was little short of idyllic. Here was a country that had waged a successful war of liberation against colonial oppression and reconstituted itself as an independent political unit founded squarely on the virtuous principles of full personal liberty and constitutional democracy. The American national ethos, as they understood it, was characterized by an elemental egalitarianism that ignored inherited rank or class and emphasized instead the dignity and worth of each individual. Moreover, they perceived in American society a remarkable economic dynamism, fed by an apparently inexhaustible abundance of available fertile land and natural riches, which ensured that all honest enterprise and effort on the part of its citizens would be justly and amply rewarded.

This vision of America enabled the Decembrists to develop a new perspective on the Russian east, for the image of Siberia they ultimately formulated was essentially constructed out of categories borrowed from the North American model. In effect, it amounted to nothing less than the recognition of a parallel "second New World" in their own back yard, with the associated belief that Siberia could and would develop into the sort of society America already was.³⁹ In every important respect, Siberia seemed to them to possess the rudiments for a vigorous and thriving democracy. Siberia, like America, was a young and developing society, equally egalitarian, heedless of class distinctions, and generally unburdened by the accumulated inequities of traditional Russian society. Moreover, Siberia could draw on the same reserves of untapped natural wealth and abundant open lands to support its rapid, progressive development. The Decembrists were conscious of the extent to which the American model informed their views: "I regard Siberia no differently than the United States," declared Ivan Pushchin, and Basargin described the great similarities between Siberians and Americans in terms of their disposition, habits, and way of life. In regard to the question of human rights, he even ventured to place Siberia ahead of the United States, which, after all, still supported the institution of slavery.⁴⁰

³⁸ "To the Russian radicals, children of the Enlightenment but also fettered by the absolutist authoritarian traditions of the Russian state and church, America was the distant fulfillment of that West which had given them the visions of active participation, the gospel of the dignity of labor, and the revolutionary expectation of a new society and a new man"; Hans Kohn, "Introduction," in Taras Hunczak, ed., *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1974), 15; also see Max M. Laserson, *The American Impact on Russia—Diplomatic and Ideological: 1784–1917* (New York, 1950), 139.

³⁹ The first explicit identification of Siberia as "second New World" appears to have been made by the historian Nikolai Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo* (1816–29), 12 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1892), rpt. in *Slavistic Printings and Reprintings* (The Hague, 1969), 9: 232–33.

⁴⁰ I. I. Pushchin, *Zapiski o Pushchine i pis'ma iz Sibiri* (Moscow, 1925), 196–97; Basargin, *Zapiski*, 94, 178.

On a somewhat more abstract level, the Decembrists perceived a very important similarity in the potential represented by both regions as vast, untouched reservoirs, offering great scope of opportunity for individual betterment and enrichment, as well as for social progress. Mikhail Bestuzhev wrote back to European Russia in 1837:

Everything that you used to read in novels about America, for which people set off to improve their lot in life, and from which they returned as rich uncles to leave the fortunes they made there to their ne'er-do-well nephews, and where still today thousands are migrating from Europe to find a piece of land or to take part in America's active industrial life and with this earn their daily bread—all of this can be applied in the fullest sense to Siberia, with but one difference. Everyone is going to America, but they are all afraid to go to Siberia. In their mind, it is a savage land of exile, a kingdom of frost inhabited only by bears and bandits.⁴¹

Taken to one possible logical conclusion, the parallel with the United States referred not merely to affinities between the two societies but to an essential similarity in the nature of their relationship to Europe as well. It suggested the vision of Siberia as a land of the future able to perform the same function of salvation that North America had for the European Old World. As both a repository of land and resources and a youthful, energetic society unfettered by the bonds of oppressive feudal tradition and institutions, Siberia promised to realize the failed dreams of an exhausted European Russia west of the Urals. Returning from Siberian exile in 1837, Baron Andrei Rosen gave voice to these sentiments and speculated that "Siberia is perhaps destined to fill the role of North America, where people were banished, voluntarily or against their will, for their political or religious views, and where, by prayer and by hard work, they created in the new world all of those blessings which the old and experienced world has been seeking in vain for so long."⁴²

There was, however, another logical conclusion to the comparison of Siberia and America that the Decembrists pointedly failed to draw. While the successful struggle of the United States for freedom and self-determination constituted a noble and inspiring symbol for them, they gave no indication that they saw it as an example their own Siberian territories should emulate.⁴³ As is clear from the various plans for the political reorganization of Russia they drafted prior to 1825, despite the radical changes called for in the country's political and social order, the Decembrists remained faithful to the vision of it as an imperial entity.⁴⁴ Even after the experience of exile beyond the Urals, which produced a dramatic transformation in their view of Siberia itself, their deeper conviction that the geopolitical unity and integrity of the empire ought to be maintained—even expanded—remained intact. In regard to the question of separation, therefore,

⁴¹ Quoted in A. V. Gurevich, ed., *Vostochnaia Sibir' v rannei khudozhestvennoi proze* (Irkutsk, 1938), xi.

⁴² A. E. Rozen, *Zapiski Dekabrista* (St. Petersburg, 1917), 213.

⁴³ Shatrova, *Dekabristy i Sibir'*, 88–94.

⁴⁴ Compare P. I. Pestel', *Russkaia pravda: Nakaz vremennomu verkhovnomu pravleniiu* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 13–17; "Proekt konstitutsii Nikity Murav'eva," in V. E. Iakushin, *Gosudarstvennaia vlast' i proekty gosudarstvennoi reformy v Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 136; "Proekt konstitutsii . . . kn. S. P. Trubetskogo," in M. V. Dovnar-Zapol'skii, ed., *Memuary dekabristov* (Kiev, 1906), 102–03. Also see *Vostanie dekabristov: Materialy*, vol. 5 (Moscow, 1926), 126–27.

the Decembrists continued with few exceptions to perceive the region as a legitimate colony of Russia that required not independence but a modern, constructive colonial administration, directed at the rapid settlement and economic development of the region, and a more effective integration into the overall imperial structure.

THE STRONG REACTION TO THE COURSE OF EUROPEANIZATION initiated by Peter the Great produced yet a third cluster of images of Siberia. This reaction intensified during the reign of Nicholas I and took the ideological form of Russian nationalism. As in other European countries, nationalism in Russia began as a many-sided intellectual movement, which owed its cohesion to the common subscription of its adherents to certain basic principles. One of these was the demand for complete independence (*samostoiatei'nost'*) in all aspects of national life, a concern that immediately raised the question of Russia's relationship to Europe. With ever-greater passion, the nationalists argued that it was precisely the obsession with the West and the desire to set Russia as much as possible into a European mold that was obstructing them from recognizing their own unique identity and pursuing independently their own national destiny. They judged the much-belabored attempt to become European through adopting Western culture and Western attitudes a miserable failure that had yielded nothing more than shabby and contrived imitations. Russians must stop trying to emulate the West, the nationalists insisted, and should instead direct their attention and energies inward, toward the ultimate goal of complete self-awareness (*samopoznanie*). They hoped that this process of self-scrutiny would create a sense of Russian national exclusivity independent of Europe, for, through it, the Russians would learn to recognize and appreciate the national treasures that were theirs and theirs alone and to seek their inspiration and values in Russia's own historical legacy, its social institutions, and unique national ethos.⁴⁵

Out of this process of self-examination, the nationalists discovered a variety of meanings for the Russian east. One of the most important was represented by the historical legacy of Russian expansion beyond the Urals. The new interest in Siberian history stemmed from a more general resurgence of interest in all aspects of Russian history, to which the nationalists turned in their quest for evidence of a national dynamism, vitality, and, above all, a capacity for independent action and creative achievement. In the chronicles that recounted the daring exploits of the Cossacks and fur traders who first crossed the Urals, conquered Siberia from the remnants of the Golden Horde, and displayed extraordinary endurance and initiative in traversing, settling, and exploiting these wild domains, the Russians found that they had a wealth of inspiring material. Moreover, the

⁴⁵ On the development of Russian nationalism during the reign of Nicholas I, see especially Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825-1855* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969); Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism* (New York, 1965); Edward C. Thaden, *Conservative Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Seattle, 1964); A. E. Presniakov, *Emperor Nicholas I of Russia: The Apogee of Autocracy 1825-1855*, J. C. Zacek, trans. (Gulf Breeze, Fla., 1974); Hans Kohn, *The Mind of Modern Russia: Historical and Political Thought of Russia's Great Age* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1955).

saga of the conquest of Siberia provided them with a reassuring counterbalance to the accomplishments of the Western empires in the New World. Europe may have earned its place in the annals of world history through the feats of the conquistadores, but, for the nationalists, the record of the occupation of Siberia demonstrated brilliantly that the Russians had been no less valiant or effective in their own exploits. In the figures of such Cossack heroes as the great Ermak, Erofei Khabarov, and Vladimir Atlasov, they could point with pride to their own native Cortes or Pizarro and did not hesitate to draw this comparison.⁴⁶ "We did not discover America," wrote the historian Mikhail Pogodin in a letter to the tsarevich Alexander in 1837, "but we opened up a third of Asia, . . . and doesn't [this] supplement Columbus's discovery?"⁴⁷

This new appreciation of Siberian history called for a new historiography. The existing histories of the region, based largely on the research of the remarkable eighteenth-century German scholar Gerhard Müller for the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, had depicted Ermak and the other Siberian Cossack conquerors negatively, as the obstreperous leaders of lawless bands of brigands interested only in their own gain.⁴⁸ These works consequently offered little encouragement for the new nationalist enthusiasm and were superseded in the 1830s, when a revisionist historiography of Siberia written exclusively by Russians began to appear.⁴⁹ In this new work, the conquerors of the Russian east were depicted in a manner more appropriate to nationalist sensibilities, as courageous and deeply patriotic sons of Russia whose deeds were animated by the overriding desire to enhance the glory of the fatherland.⁵⁰ Indeed, the nationalist exuberance of one historian led him to reject emphatically the suggestion of a parallel between Cortes and Ermak, with the argument that Ermak's accomplishments so surpassed those of the Spaniard that any comparison was implicitly denigrating for the Russians.⁵¹

The conquest of Siberia as part of Russia's national saga was further popular-

⁴⁶ See Nikolai Shchukin, "Podvigi russkikh na Amure v XVII stoletii . . .," *Syn otechestva*, Kn. 9, otd. 1 (1848), 27–28, 52; Seymour Becker, "Contributions to a Nationalist Ideology: Histories of Russia in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Russian History/Histoire russe*, 13 (1986): 331–53.

⁴⁷ N. P. Barsukov, *Zhizn' i trudy M. P. Pogodina*, 22 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1888–1910), 5: 171.

⁴⁸ Müller referred to Ermak contemptuously as "nothing more than a fugitive cossack . . . and chief of a troop of banditti"; G. F. Müller, *Conquest of Siberia, and the History of the Transactions, Wars, Commerce, etc. carried on between Russia and China* (London, 1842), 9. Also see G. Miller [Gerhard Müller], *Opisanie sibirskogo tsarstva i vsekh proisshedsikh v nem del . . .*, V. Lebedev and I. Golubtsov, trans. (St. Petersburg, 1750), republished in part in the late 1930s as *Istoriia Sibiri*; Johann Eberhart Fischer, *Sibirische Geschichte von der Entdeckung Sibiriens bis auf die Eroberung dieses Landes durch die russische Waffen*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1768); Mirzoev, *Istoriografiia Sibiri*, 87–88, 94. On Müller, see J. Lawrence Black, *G.-F. Müller and the Imperial Russian Academy* (Kingston, Ont., 1986).

⁴⁹ P. A. Slovtsov, *Istoricheskoe obozrenie Sibiri*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1838–44); P. I. Nebol'sin, *Pokorenie Sibiri: Istoricheskoe issledovanie* (St. Petersburg, 1849). For recent discussions of the historiography of Ermak's campaign, see R. G. Skrynnikov, *Sibirskaiia ekspeditsiia Ermaka* (Novosibirsk, 1982); David N. Collins, "Russia's Conquest of Siberia: Evolving Russian and Soviet Historical Interpretations," *European Studies Review*, 12 (1982): 17–44.

⁵⁰ Another indication of the strong nationalist inspiration underlying these works was that they emphasized for the first time the importance of the common people (*narod*) to the conquest and colonization of Siberia. Collins, "Russia's Conquest of Siberia," 20–21.

⁵¹ Nebol'sin, *Pokorenie Sibiri*, 138–40; Mirzoev, *Istoriografiia Sibiri*, 223. Nebol'sin's interpretation of the Siberian chronicles was the object of an uncharacteristically vituperative critique by Sergei M. Solov'ev, whose monumental history of Russia began to appear in this period. *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, 15 vols. (Moscow, 1960–66), 3: 715–23.

ized in Russian belles-lettres. An assortment of self-styled “historical novels” based on the tale of Ermak’s exploits appeared during this period,⁵² and a number of dramatic works for the theater were composed on this theme as well. The playwrights included such notables as the historian and publicist Nikolai Polevoi and the Slavophile Aleksei Khomiakov.⁵³ The appeal of Siberian history proved infectious for no less a literary giant than Alexander Pushkin himself. The great poet was attracted by the charisma of the Cossack conquerors of Siberia, whom he saw as courageous, almost superhuman, figures embodying the glory of Russian national history. Already in the 1820s, he wrote of his desire to compose an epic poem about Ermak, and at the time of his death he was collecting material on the Russian Far East, apparently in preparation for a work about Atlasov, the conqueror of Kamchatka.⁵⁴

Throughout all this literary attention, it may be noted, the Romantic “poetic formula” of Siberia persisted: the principal focus was on the heroic deeds of the Russians, while the region itself, depicted in the dimmest of colors, represented nothing more than a stage for the performance of these deeds. As in the poetry of exile, this bleak setting was intended to bring out into yet fuller relief the noble and glorious self-sacrifice of the Cossack protagonist. The alien desolation of the Siberian landscape was embellished through depictions of the native peoples encountered by Ermak as depraved pagan savages, a prospect that offered the Russians an easy opportunity to cast themselves in the appealing role of Christian crusaders bearing a mission of civilization and spiritual enlightenment. In Polevoi’s play, for example, the hero’s victory in a wrestling match with a Siberian Tatar prince occasioned the following reflective aside:

⁵² A. A. Shishkov, *Ermak: Povest’ v stikhakh* (Moscow, 1828); P. P. Svin’in, *Ermak ili pokorenie Sibiri: Istoricheskii roman XVI veka* (St. Petersburg, 1834); I. Glukharev, *Inoki, ili vtorichnoe pokorenie Sibiri* (Moscow, 1834); F. Isaev, *Ermak, pokoritel’ Sibiri: Istoricheskii roman v 2-kh chasti* (Moscow, 1845); P. I. Nebol’sin, *Ermak: Istoricheskii rasskaz dlia detei v 2-kh chasti* (St. Petersburg, 1849). The popularity of this theme is indicated by the fact that the anonymous work *Ermak, pokoritel’ Sibiri: Istoricheskii roman v 2-kh chasti* (Moscow, 1839), had gone through five editions by 1845.

⁵³ *Ermak, zavoevatel’ Sibiri, Istoricheskaia p’esa* (Moscow, 1827); A. S. Khomiakov, *Ermak: Tragediia v piati deistviiakh* [1832], *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1900–14), 4: 305–418; N. A. Polevoi, *Ermak Timofeich, ili Volga i Sibir’: Dramaticheskoe predstavlenie v 5-ti deistviiakh* (St. Petersburg, 1845). The Ermak theme became so well-worn that in the mid-1840s Fedor Dostoevsky poked fun at it in his novel *Poor Folk*. See *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Leningrad, 1972–88), 1: 51–53 (I am grateful to Professor Victor Terras for calling my attention to this reference). For a discussion of the literary image of Ermak in various periods, see S. Rozhnova and N. Kurdina, “Ermak istoricheskii i literaturnyi,” *Sibirskie Ognii*, 12 (1981): 156–64.

⁵⁴ Letter of February 23, 1825 to N. I. Gnedich, in A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols. (Leningrad, 1977–79), 10: 100; A. S. Pushkin, “Zametki pri chtenii *Opisanii zemli Kamchatki* S. P. Krasheninnikova,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 9: 321–49. On the subject of Pushkin’s Siberian interests, see especially V. I. Selinov, “Proshloe Kamchatki v krughe istoricheskikh interesov Pushkina,” in G. F. Kungurov, ed., *A. S. Pushkin i Sibir’* (Irkutsk, 1937), 152–54; Georgii Vernadskii, “Pushkin kak istorik,” *Uchenye Zapiski Russkoi Uchenoi Kollegii v Prage*, 1 (1924): 63; A. A. Bogdanova, “Pushkin i Sibir’,” *Uchenye Zapiski Novosibirskogo Pedagogicheskogo Instituta* (Seriia istoricheskogo-filologicheskogo), 7 (1948): 8; A. V. Gurevich, *Pushkin i Sibir’* (Krasnoyarsk, 1952), 51–73; E. Titov, “Pushkin—Sibir’—Amerika,” *Sibirskie Ognii*, 3 (May–June 1937): 113–26. Pushkin had an opportunity to learn about Siberia from his correspondence in the mid-1830s with his old friend the Decembrist V. K. Kiukhel’beker, exiled east of Lake Baikal. Pushkin corresponded as well with one of the great experts on Siberia, Grigorii Spaskii. V. I. Saitov, ed., *Sochineniia Pushkina*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1906–11), 3: 26, 278–80, 359–62, 385–86. For a recent tendentious depiction that vaguely identifies a Great Russian chauvinism in Pushkin’s views of Siberia, see S. Iu. Kuniaev, “Velikii put’,” in A. Perlovskii, ed., *Sibirskie stroki* (Moscow, 1984), 5–6.

As the pagan idol fell, so will fall
 The infidel before the Orthodox faith,
 And divine grace and light will shine
 Over the Siberian realm, which hitherto
 Has stagnated in the darkness of idolatry.⁵⁵

In its capacity as the benevolent civilizer of Asia, the nationalists could locate yet another example of Russia's noble and humanitarian national achievement.⁵⁶

The urge for self-awareness had an explicitly geographical dimension as well. The nationalists bewailed the ignorance of Russians about their own country, and on the pages of nationalist journals such as Pogodin's *Muscovite*, exasperation and scorn were vented on "our Europeans," in other words, those Russians who were "enraptured by foreign [European] lands and do not appreciate the diversity of our fatherland."⁵⁷ As a response to this situation, a variety of descriptions and travel accounts of Siberia aimed at the general reading public began to appear in the 1830s. Readers in Moscow and St. Petersburg were treated to evocative portrayals of the region's multifarious characteristics: its physiography, climate, flora and fauna, the colorful ethnographic diversity of its native populations, and the folk traditions of the Russians there. Russian traditions, as might be expected, received particular emphasis. One author spent much of her book describing how ancient Russian folk customs and rituals, long forgotten in European parts of the country, survived in an unadulterated form in Siberia, and to illustrate this she appended a lengthy collection of old Siberian wedding songs.⁵⁸ In contrast to historical fiction, these works depicted Siberia in a positive light, for the intention was to make Russians aware of the exotic and unappreciated wonders within their own empire. The proliferation and popularity of such regional descriptions testified to the fact that, seen through nationalist eyes, the prospect of Siberia could now fascinate and even inspire, as well as appall.⁵⁹

In an emphatic departure from the grim poetic formula, some Romantic writers discovered that in Siberia's unspoiled landscape they could regain a pure, inspirational bond with the organic natural world, a bond long lost in civilized and despiritualized European Russia. Although Siberia was never to become the sort of Olympian realm that Romantic authors in Western Europe created in the form of the "Orient"—that "sea of poetry," in Victor Hugo's expression, saturated with transcendental meaning and spiritual depth—some Russian poets during this

⁵⁵ Polevoi, *Ermak Timofeich*, 93.

⁵⁶ In the introduction to his history of the conquest of Siberia, Nebol'sin wrote: "Russians for some reason grow uncomfortable when . . . they hear the new epithet 'the civilizer' given to England. They [should] know that our Russia, no less than England, can have pretensions to the title 'enlightener,' that we also had our Cortes and our Pizarros"; *Pokorenie Sibiri*, 2.

⁵⁷ M. Zenzinov, "Pis'mo k redaktoru iz Nerchinska," *Moskvitianin*, part 3, no. 11 (1844): 234–35.

⁵⁸ E. A. Avdeeva, *Zapiski i zamechaniia o Sibiri* (Moscow, 1837), 67, 95–142. Also see A. I. Matros, *Pis'mo o vostochnoi Sibiri* (Moscow, 1827); I. S. Pestov, *Zapiski ob Eniseiskoi gubernii Vostochnoi Sibiri* (Moscow, 1833); N. S. Shchukin, *Poezdka v Iakutsk* (St. Petersburg, 1833); F. I. Beliauskii, *Poezdka k Ledovitomu moriu* (Moscow, 1833); P. A. Slovtsov, *Progulki vokrug Tobol'ska v 1830 g.* (Moscow, 1834); Gedenshtrom, *Otryvki o Sibiri*; Parshin, *Poezdka v zabaikal'skii krai*.

⁵⁹ See the unsigned review of Matros, *Pis'mo o vostochnoi Sibiri*, in *Syn Otechestva*, 114 (1827): 193–96.

period nevertheless found it possible to find inspiration and regeneration through sojourns east of the Urals.⁶⁰

Still more material for positive images became available at this time with the emergence of a regional literature, as Siberian writers such as Polevoi, Ivan Kalashnikov, Nikolai Shchukin, and others began to use themes and settings from their homeland as a basis for their stories. Here again, the Russians derived their inspiration for a new image of Siberia from an American model: the genre of American frontier literature developed throughout the 1820s and 1830s in the works of James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper's novels were all quickly translated into Russian, and they enjoyed there a remarkably widespread and enduring popularity. Among other things, their success suggested that the theme of a native Russian frontier east of the Urals might be developed in the same way, and the writers just noted set about to do precisely that.⁶¹ The similar treatments of the two frontiers were not lost on the more astute readers in European Russia: critic Vissarion Belinsky, for example, who was quite taken with Cooper's depictions of the American original, was less than impressed by his Siberian followers and referred to them with ill-concealed condescension as "our Siberian Coopers."⁶² Their works extolled the wild and elemental beauty of the Siberian landscape and the frontier character of its society, engaged in a life-or-death struggle to tame and cultivate primeval expanses. The result was an image that in many respects did resemble the North America of Cooper's tales. The exotica of Siberia was depicted positively, so much so that, in some cases, the region appeared as a sort of natural fairyland. Nikolai Shchukin, for example, began his story *The Settler* (1834) with the following extravagant description of eastern Siberia:

How vast and varied is your world of nature, Siberia! And how contrasting the peoples and tribes that inhabit you! Your granite mountains, reaching up to the clouds, are splendid under their snowy blankets. And meadows, fragrant with the aroma of flowers, entice the gaze of the traveler with their diversity. Cliffs and chasms, silhouetted picturesquely against mountains covered with dense forests, reveal flanks overgrown with blossoming bushes: from lofty heights the mountain slopes gleam golden with thick ears of ripening grain. Here the mightiest rivers in the world, coursing rapidly into the depths of the ocean, carry on their crests the fruits of your industry. Streams as clear as crystal flow from the

⁶⁰ "Là, en effet, tout est grand, riche, fécond"; Victor Hugo, *Les Orientales* [1829] (Paris, n.d.), 4; Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 12–13. See, on Russian poets, E. P. Kovalevskii, *Sibir': Dumy* (St. Petersburg, 1832). For discussions of Romanticism and the Russian east, see M. K. Azadovskii, "Buriatiia v russkoi literature," *Zhizn' Buriatii*, 1–2 (January–February 1925): 10–19; Azadovskii, "Poetika 'giblogo mesta'"; Slezkine, "Russia's Small Peoples," 147–50. Even more than Siberia, however, the Caucasus to the south served as an ersatz Orient for Russian Romantic writers. See Layton, "Creation of an Imaginative Caucasian Geography"; Susan Layton, "Marlinsky's 'Ammalat Bek' and the Orientalisation of the Caucasus in Russian Literature," in Derek Offord, ed., *The Golden Age of Russian Literature and Thought* (forthcoming); William E. Brown, *A History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, 4 vols. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1986), 2: 87.

⁶¹ For a discussion of this formative period of Siberian literature, see Postnov, *Russkaia literatura Sibiri*, 173–314; Gurevich, *Vostochnaia Sibir' v rannei khudozhestvennoi proze*, iii–xxiii; M. K. Azadovskii, "Sibirskaiia belletristika tridsat'kh godov," in Azadovskii, *Ocherki literatury i kul'tury Sibiri*, 5–105; B. I. Zherebtsov, "O sibirskoi literaturnoi traditsii: Nabludeniia i zametki," *Sibirskii literaturno-kraevedcheskii sbornik*, 1 (1928): 23–50.

⁶² V. G. Belinskii, "Literaturnye mechtaniia" (1834), *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 1948), 1: 10; G. F. Kungurov, "V. G. Belinskii o tvorchestve pisatelei-sibiriakov," *Uchenye Zapiski Irkutskogo Gosudarstvennogo Pedagogicheskogo Instituta*, 12 (1957): 21–24.

heights of the clouds, and falling from rock to rock disappear into bottomless gorges. Bursting forth anew from deep underground, they rush into Lake Baikal, pulling heavy stones in their wake. Dig deep into the mountains and you will find silver, gold, and glittering jewels. And then won't you agree: Siberia is a rich land!⁶³

Through this rather mediocre prose, the author seems indeed to have taken his cue from Cooper, who played heavily on the natural wonders of the American West, the exotic and inspirational grandeur of its titan forests and the vast sweep of the Great Plains.⁶⁴

A REVEALING VARIATION on the images of Siberia generated by Russian nationalism was developed by Alexander Herzen, one of the most brilliant and engaging intellectuals of the period. Herzen's perspective, which combined an emergent nationalism with the older tradition of political opposition to the Russian autocracy, presented a unique example of the important function Siberia could fulfill in the development of a new, radically de-Europeanized vision of Russia. Herzen's first contact with the Russian east dated from 1835, when as a young man in his early twenties he was sent in so-called administrative exile to Viatka (present-day Kirov) as punishment for his activities in a student group critical of the regime. He spent a total of five years in exile, in Viatka and later in Vladimir. At the time of his banishment, Herzen's political opposition to the status quo in Russia was more or less clearly formulated, but his nationalism per se had not yet taken shape. The West still represented an admirable model for him; he still had faith in Peter's mission, indeed, he believed that the desired political reform of Russian society would come about precisely through its complete merging into the European mainstream.⁶⁵ He looked on his impending exile as a fate not much better than death, and he embarked on it with a dread similar to that of the Decembrists. In his autobiography, he described how en route to Viatka he was overcome by a sense of gloomy foreboding and was moved at a way station to jot down the verses from Dante's *Inferno*

Through me you enter the woeful city,
Through me you enter eternal grief.

as being "equally well adapted for the road to Siberia as to the gates of Hell."⁶⁶

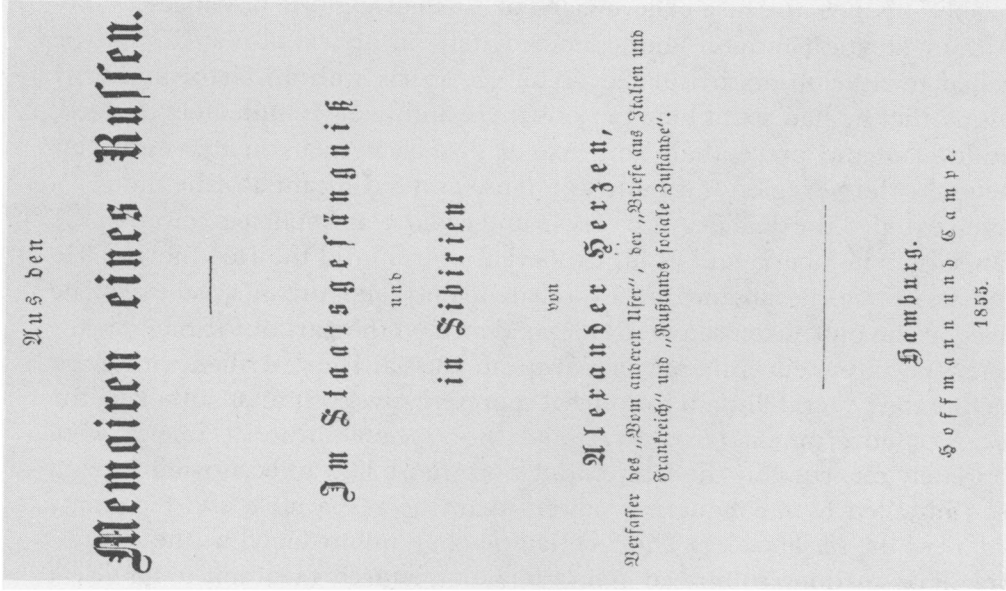
Herzen's reference to the "road to Siberia" was in fact gratuitous, for the town of Viatka, in the upper basin of the Kama River, was situated due north of Kazan and consequently several hundred miles west of the Urals. Herzen never actually saw Siberia, and his information about it came entirely from hearsay and second-hand accounts. His physical location proved to be irrelevant, however, for

⁶³ Quoted in Kungurov, "Belinskii o tvorchestve," 19–20. For a similar depiction of the Siberian landscape, see Polevoi's story "Sokhatyi (Sibirskoe predanie)," in *Dennitsa: Al'manakh* (Moscow, 1830), 272–[349].

⁶⁴ Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise*, 31.

⁶⁵ Malia, *Herzen*, 96–97, 125–27.

⁶⁶ A. I. Gertsen, *Byloe i dumy*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v 30-kh tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–65), 8: 219; the verse is from *The Inferno*, Part 1, Canto 3.



Alexander Herzen at the time of his exile to Viatka, and the title page to the first German edition of Herzen's account of his "Siberian" exile. A. I. Gertsen, *Sobranie Sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954), vol. 1, p. 273. The portrait is by A. L. Vitberg and hangs in the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

his psychological need to envision an alternative to official autocratic Russia in the form of a geographical Other was as strong in him as in the Decembrists. Predictably, his negative pre-exile images of Russia's eastern provinces evaporated in an identical fashion almost immediately on arrival at Viatka, and he proceeded to develop an articulated vision of Siberia with an air of authority suggesting that he had spent long periods there and knew it intimately. Indeed, on the level of the perceptions and images that concern us in this essay, his interaction with the region was quite as intense and significant as if he did.

Herzen extolled the qualities of freedom and egalitarianism he perceived in the Russian society in Siberia and in his exuberance far outdid the Decembrists. He was impressed by the absence of a landed nobility and urban aristocracy; he marveled at the outspoken sense of independence on the part of the Siberians, a characteristic rarely encountered in European Russia. He described with great satisfaction the general disdain for official representatives of tsarist authority, the *chinovnik*, or government bureaucrat, and the *gendarme*, who in Siberia were appropriately regarded by the local population "more like an occupying foreign garrison installed by a conquering power" than the respectable and legitimate upholders of the social order. The Siberian peasant, unburdened by the oppressive weight of serfdom, compared in his estimation entirely favorably to his Great Russian counterpart, in terms of both physical well-being and intelligence. The great distances in Siberia and the associated isolation of rural settlements made the Siberian much more self-reliant, resourceful, and—of no little importance—ready when necessary to manifest resistance. Herzen noted the relatively infrequent contact of the average Siberian with the church, owing again to the great distances and isolation, and saw this as decidedly beneficial, for it has "left his mind freer from superstition" than his counterpart's in European Russia.⁶⁷

Underlying these positive manifestations of Siberian society, Herzen perceived a deeper principle at work. On reflection, it seemed obvious to him that Siberia's very backwardness, its lack of advanced development and refinement, had conditioned the qualities that so impressed him. To be sure, the backwardness he had in mind did not refer to a complete absence of civilization, for Herzen did not follow Rousseau in a categorical rejection of modern enlightened and developed society per se, nor did he share (as, indeed, few Russians did) the Romantic conviction about the inherent superiority of man in his natural state. It was, after all, not Siberia's indigenous native peoples—who in principle could have offered abundant material for a Russian variation of the "noble savage" theme—that he found appealing but rather its Russian population, and he valued the rudimentary institutions of Western society they had established. Nevertheless, when compared to the cosmopolitan enlightenment of Europe, including European Russia, Siberia remained undeniably primordial, with its absence of accumulated historical traditions and patterns, its elemental rawness and outspoken lack of cultivation. While it was precisely these qualities that in the past had occasioned such abhorrence, they proved to be powerfully attractive to Herzen. He described

⁶⁷ Gertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8: 256–57.

his reactions in an enthusiastic letter written to friends back in Moscow shortly after his arrival in 1835:

What is Siberia?—here is a country that you do not know at all. I breathed in the icy air of the Urals: it was cold *but fresh and healthy*. Do you know that Siberia is an entirely new country, an America *sui generis*, precisely for the reason that it is a land without aristocratic origins, the daughter of the Cossack and brigand, which doesn't remember its forebears, a country in which people are renewed, closing their eyes on their entire past . . . Here everyone is an exile and everyone is equal . . . Back there [in European Russia] life is enjoyable and enlightened, but the most important things are freshness and newness.⁶⁸

Siberia was a society *in statu nascendi*, unspoiled as yet by an oppressive autocratic tradition, which, in exchange for the urbane sophistication of Europe, possessed all the energy, dynamism, and plasticity of youth.

The fundamental contradiction between this newly discovered virtue of historical youth and Herzen's older faith in the West European tradition was resolved in the years following his return from exile in 1840. He became increasingly skeptical of the assumption that the progressive reform of the Russian social and political order was possible only through its far-reaching Europeanization. Along with the other nationalists, Herzen turned his attention inward and began to scrutinize Russia itself for native elements that would make possible a different, specifically Russian, course for future development. His most famous discovery in this regard—suggested at least in part, rather ironically, by the studies of a conservative German agricultural economist, Baron August von Haxthausen⁶⁹—was the rural social institution of the peasant commune (*obshchina*), unique to Russia, which Herzen imagined could serve as the natural basis for a future socialist society and make it unnecessary for Russia to repeat Europe's long and painful period of capitalist development. Out of this same quest, Herzen became increasingly preoccupied with the positive qualities he had noted in the Russian east, and, as his perspective evolved, these qualities were gradually dislodged from their specific geographical context. More and more, it seemed to him that the characteristics of youthful freshness and lack of oppressive tradition, which in the 1830s had appeared unique to Siberia and in favorable contrast to traditional society in Russia west of the Urals, actually fit Russia as a whole: not, to be sure, official imperial Russia represented by the autocratic despotism of Nicholas I but rather the genuine Russia of the unspoiled common people (*narod*). From this standpoint, Russia's youth, its inexperience, and even its lack of historical contribution to world civilization could all be seen as factors working in its favor, for they would allow Russia to avoid repeating Europe's tortured and ultimately stymied process of development. The latecomer has the advantage of being able to reap the benefits of everyone else's experience and mistakes, he reasoned, and

⁶⁸ Letter of July 18, 1835 to N. I. Sazonov and N. Kh. Ketcher in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 21: 45–46. For a fuller discussion of this passage, and Herzen's exile in general, see Bassin, "Russian Mississippi?" 54–55.

⁶⁹ August von Haxthausen, *Studien über die innern Zustände, das Volksleben, und insbesondere die ländlichen Einrichtungen Russlands*, 3 vols. (Hanover, 1847–52). Herzen had met and had a lengthy exchange of views with von Haxthausen in 1843, during the latter's sojourn in Russia. S. Frederick Starr, "Introduction," A. von Haxthausen, *Studies on the Interior of Russia*, E. L. M. Schmidt, trans. (Chicago, 1972), xx, xxxiii; Malia, *Herzen*, 310–11.

concluded defiantly that “progress itself is nothing but this chronological ingratitude.”⁷⁰

With this, the original contrast between Siberia and Russia was transformed into a juxtaposition between Europe or the Old World on the one hand and all of Russia on the other. What had been Siberia’s historical youth, and associated dynamism and potential, now became Russia’s and entered the nationalists’ arsenal of recently discovered native virtues, where it helped illuminate a vision of Russian national exclusivity from and superiority over Europe.⁷¹ As a telling indication of this transformation, the older view of Siberia as an “America *sui generis*” was subtly but unmistakably recast, with Russia itself substituted for Siberia.

Herzen was still very far from this notion in the 1830s, at which time he reaffirmed Siberia’s affinities with the United States and pointedly rejected any suggestion of a comparison between America and Russia.⁷² Signs of a change were apparent in his thinking already in the mid-1840s,⁷³ but it was fully articulated only after he departed Russia in 1847 to take up permanent residence in the West. His disappointment with the materialism and injustice of European society, his deep despair over the failed revolutions of 1848, and finally the eruption of collective European belligerence against Russia in the form of the Crimean War all convinced him that the Old World had lost its potential for creative action. The principal arenas for the development of civilization in the future would have to be found elsewhere, and the alternative was ready at hand. He could point confidently to the elemental affinities between the United States and Russia as youthful, vigorous societies. Throughout the 1850s, he proceeded to expound a vision of an imminent transition in world civilization, a sort of historical succession, in the process of which the dynamism and energy of these non-European realms would triumph over and replace the “dreary stagnation” that dominated in Europe.⁷⁴ Here, then, was the identical juxtaposition between the Old and New Worlds—and all the attendant implications—that had been drawn by the Decembrists, with the one fundamental difference that European Russia had been shifted out of the Old World and into the New.

The vision of an elemental Russian-American affinity reached a high point in the late 1850s. It was stimulated by developments in the far southeastern corner of Siberia itself, where the Russians were busy with the occupation and annex-

⁷⁰ “Discours d’Alexandre Herzen . . .” (1855), *Sobranie sochinenii*, 12: 251.

⁷¹ Malia, *Herzen*, 143–44.

⁷² Writing to a friend in 1838, for example, Herzen described the dismay that Tocqueville’s comparison between the two countries caused him. Letter of August 20 to N. Kh. Ketcher, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 21: 386. Also see the play he wrote in 1839, based on the experience of William Penn’s Quaker settlement, in which North America was depicted as a remote foreign country, without any suggestion of affinities with Russia; “Vil’iam Pen,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 196–250; David Hecht, *Russian Radicals Look to America 1825–1894* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 23; Alexander Kucherov, “Alexander Herzen’s Parallel between the United States and Russia,” in J. S. Curtiss, ed., *Essays in Russian and Soviet History in Honour of Geroid Tanquary Robinson* (Leiden, 1963), 34.

⁷³ Malia, *Herzen*, 308.

⁷⁴ Alexander Herzen, “Pis’mo k Dzhuzeppe Matstini o sovremennom polozhenii Rossii” (1857), *Sobranie sochinenii* 12: 349; “Staryi mir i Rossiia” (1854), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 12: 169; Laserson, *American Impact on Russia*, 206–11; Kucherov, “Alexander Herzen’s Parallel,” 36–37; Edward Acton, *Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary* (Cambridge, 1979), 82.

ation of the Amur and Ussuri river regions from the Chinese empire. Herzen, along with most of the Russian public in the period immediately following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, was thrilled by the prospect of these territorial advances. Not only did they demonstrate the country's unbroken spirit and continuing capacity for resolute self-assertion but they did so in a manner that turned Russia dramatically away from Europe to face its sister nation across the Pacific, a development happily greeted by the Americans. Herzen celebrated the conclusion of the Aigun Treaty in 1858, which formalized these territorial acquisitions, with a lead article in his newspaper *Kolokol*, and this brief essay stands as a culmination to the process I have been describing. The debacle of the Crimean War, he wrote, left no question about the pointlessness of Russia's attempts to enter the European community. However, it provided Russia with the opportunity to take its "moral liberation" from the West. The events of the day were revealing Russia as a youthful organism, "a strong and capable embryo," in Herzen's phrase, which had as its primary task to look inward and discover "elements of the future in the crude principles of its own life." In this struggle to reestablish its independence and national dignity, Russia had only one true ally. Deep affinities overcame all differences between their societies and drew them together to share a common destiny:

Both countries abound in strengths, an ability to change, a spirit of organization, and a persistence that knows no obstacles. Both are poor in tradition and take as their first step a complete break with the past; both swim through endless valleys searching for their borders, and from different sides have traversed awesome expanses. They have everywhere marked their path with cities, villages, and colonies, up to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, the 'Mediterranean of the future' . . . At the time of Europe's gloomy sepulture, when everyone has something to bewail, [the Russians] from one side—and the Americans from the other—have put the cradle back together!⁷⁵

To the extent that Herzen asserted Russia's youth, its plasticity, freshness, potential for progressive future development, and independence from the European Old World—to this extent, it may be said that his nationalist vision had been Siberianized. Indeed, he unwittingly drew attention to this very point, for, although he titled his article "Siberia and America" and evoked thereby the original comparison of the 1830s, he did not mention Siberia once in the text; all of his points were concerned exclusively with Russia. Herzen eventually noted this discrepancy, and, when he reprinted the article verbatim ten years later, it bore the more accurate title "America and Russia."⁷⁶

The parallel Herzen drew in the above passage between the transcontinental colonizing movements of the two countries suggested a new dimension to the

⁷⁵ Iskander [Alexander Herzen], "Amerika i Sibir'," *Kolokol*, 29 (December 1, 1858): 134. This piece was a response to an article that appeared in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, congratulating the Russians on their new enscotement on the Pacific. The Americans were so enthusiastic that the publishers of the *Evening Bulletin* actually had a leaflet, printed in English, inserted into the edition of *Kolokol*, encouraging the Russians to pursue the development of the Amur region with all due haste. Laserson, *American Impact on Russia*, 216–18. Also, see Svatikov, *Rossia i Sibir'*, 40–42. For a study of the views of Russia's educated public on expansion in the Far East at this time, see Mark Bassin, *Visions of the Amur: Nationalism, Imperial Expansion, and the Emergence of Russia as a Modern Pacific Power* (forthcoming).

⁷⁶ "Amerika i Rossiia," *Kolokol*, 228 (October 1, 1866): 1861–62.

vision of Russia as a “civilizer” beyond the Urals. Rather than simply affirm an arrogant self-satisfaction with the conquest and spiritual redemption of an ignorant heathen population, Herzen emphasized the creative accomplishments of the Russians in response to the challenge of mastering an inhospitable natural environment. For this type of endeavor, the United States offered the essential contemporary prototype, and in his treatment of this point Herzen repeated the conceptual process of assigning a significance to Siberia appropriated from the North American model. Just like the Americans in their restless expansion across the North American continent, the Russians had worked to advance civilization through their activities in “taming” and making productive the primeval expanses of Eurasia.⁷⁷ Herzen saw this process exemplified in the Russian occupation of the Amur Valley, but he felt that it had been characteristic of the Russian presence beyond the Urals throughout the centuries. The parallel with the United States seemed so appropriate that he even used the American frontier experience as a metaphor to describe Russia’s own expansion across Siberia. In a letter to Giuseppe Mazzini, he likened the first colonists of the Urals and western Siberia to the settlers in North America homesteading “on the virgin lands of Wisconsin or Illinois” and maintained that the Siberian experience “was right out of one of Fenimore Cooper’s novels.” And, just like the Americans, the Russians had accomplished their own miracle, for they had brought empty territories into the pale of modern civilization by erecting cities, hospitals, and schools and introducing modern commercial activity.⁷⁸ Depicted from this perspective, the occupation and development of Siberia served admirably as evidence of the Russian capacity for independent historical achievement.

Yet, at this point, in regard to the apparent parallel in their respective colonizing movements, Herzen’s comparison between Russia and America foundered on a subtle but nonetheless fundamental ambiguity. While on one level, he was most eager to interpret Russian expansion to the Pacific positively, as the same sort of healthy and dynamic organic growth that characterized the United States, on a deeper level, the same process was imbued with a thoroughly negative significance, for it was an expression of the incorporation of foreign peoples and regions under the despotic aegis of the Russian imperial autocracy. Herzen tried to accommodate this ambiguity with the rather obscure identification of a “dualism” between popular and governmental colonization,⁷⁹ but it was the negative perspective that dominated, for an intractable opposition to the imperial system symbolized by St. Petersburg represented one of his most abiding political principles. For Herzen, the empire was something entirely foreign to Russia, a “Germanic-Tatar despotism” as he liked to call it, comprised of a misshapen and perverse blend of European absolutism and Oriental tyranny, all artificially

⁷⁷ Kucherov, “Alexander Herzen’s Parallel,” 36.

⁷⁸ “Pis’mo k Dzhuzeppe Matstsinu,” 350.

⁷⁹ “I-r” [Alexander Herzen], “Rossiia i Pol’sha,” *Kolokol*, 67 (April 1, 1860): 556; also see “Pis’mo k Matstsinu,” 349–50. This ambiguity was epitomized by the fact that Herzen could compare Russian expansion not only with the United States but with the British empire as well; see Iskander, “Rossiia i Pol’sha,” *Kolokol*, 32–33 (January 1, 1859): 259.

grafted onto Russia by Peter the Great.⁸⁰ In unmistakable contrast to the free and healthy expansion of the United States, the Russian empire had grown by coercion and military decree, a process Herzen described disagreeably as an “oozing” (*prosochit’sia*) out of the original Russian hearth to the Baltic, to Persia, and to the Pacific. The imperial formation that resulted was destructive not only to the interests of the Russian nation itself but to all of the peoples and lands banded together, entirely against their natural inclinations and best interests, as part of it.⁸¹

Herzen believed that the destruction of official Russia would unquestionably involve the loosening of this band to allow the non-Russian borderlands to pursue an independent existence as they saw fit. In the first instance, he made this point in support of the liberation of the empire’s western provinces of Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, and the Ukraine, but at the same time clearly included Russia’s territories east of the Urals as well.⁸² The notion of the “liberation” and independence of Siberia was not entirely new, but Herzen was the first to give it public expression.⁸³ He asserted in effect that the right of self-determination belonged not only to national groups but to territorial units as well, if they were internally cohesive and distinct from the Great Russian center. Siberia in his eyes represented such a unit. In all probability, he initially received this idea from Siberia itself, where the flurry of excitement and activity accompanying the annexation of the Amur had stimulated ideas about the potential for Siberia’s development as an independent political entity. In the early 1860s, Herzen had a number of correspondents in Irkutsk—among them, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin—who advocated the notion of Siberia’s formal separation from Russia,⁸⁴ and Herzen himself eagerly endorsed the notion. In 1862, for example, he editorialized: “We recognize the right to an independent existence [*samobytnost’*] not only of every nationality, having separated from others and having natural borders, but of every geographical region [*geograficheskoe polozenie*] as well. If Siberia tomorrow were to separate from Russia, we would be the first to greet its

⁸⁰ “Staryi mir i Rossiia,” 172; Iskander, “Rossiia i Pol’sha,” *Kolokol*, 65–66 (March 15, 1860): 539, 543; *ibid.*, “Pis’mo k Matstsini,” 352.

⁸¹ Many decades later, in the 1890s, when a massive new wave of peasant migration from European Russia east to Siberia had begun, and work was finally undertaken on the construction of a transcontinental railway across Siberia to the Pacific, a parallel between the colonizing movements of Russia and the United States was again drawn, this time more directly and without any of Herzen’s ambivalence. See P. P. Semenov, “Znachenie Rossii v kolonizatsionnom dvizhenii evropeiskikh narodov,” *Izvestiia Imperatorskogo Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva*, 28 (1892): 349–69; Vernadskii, “Protiv solntsa.”

⁸² “I-r,” “Proklamatsiia ‘zemli i voli,’” *Kolokol*, 160 (April 1, 1863): 1318; “Ukraina,” *Kolokol*, 61 (January 15, 1860): 499–503; Iskander, “Rossiia i Pol’sha,” *Kolokol*, 65–66 (March 15, 1860): 539, 541.

⁸³ This prospect had, for example, been discussed by the Petrashevskii circle in the 1840s. V. A. Desnitskii, ed., *Delo Petrashevtssev*, 3 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1937–51), 1: 462; P. E. Shchegolev, ed., *Petrashevtsy: Sbornik materialov*, 3 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1926–28), 2: 252–53; 3: 18, 244.

⁸⁴ *Pis’ma M. A. Bakunina k A. I. Gertsenu i N. P. Ogarevu* (St. Petersburg, 1906 [reissued as Vol. 111 of *Slavistic Printings and Reprintings* (The Hague, 1968)]), 123; V. Modestov, “Zagranichnye vospominaniia,” *Istoricheskii Vestnik*, 12 (April 1883): 122; “Iz Sibiri,” *Kolokol*, 131 (May 1, 1862): 1092. The young Peter Kropotkin, serving in a Cossack regiment in eastern Siberia at this time, reported that even Governor-General N. N. Murav’ev was attracted by the notion of an independent “United States of Siberia”; *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York, 1971), 169, 184.

new life. The territorial unity of the state does not coincide at all with the well-being of the peoples [who inhabit it].”⁸⁵

RUSSIAN VIEWS OF SIBERIA were examples of the same sort of “imaginative geography” that resulted from European attempts to depict and understand the non-European world as a whole. In Russia, as in the empires to the west, the character and significance of colonial domains were represented in terms of categories and attributes meaningful in the first instance to those doing the representing, and thus the considerable differences in the images of the Russian east that were constructed in the early nineteenth century reflected more than anything the growing political and cultural fragmentation of European Russian society in this period. For the autocratic status quo, Siberia was nothing more than a withered and useless remnant of past colonial glory, and the prospect of its wild and primeval environment and inhabitants terrorized the civilized sensibilities of those Russians west of the Urals still consciously striving to become as European as possible. By contrast, reformers and political opponents of this status quo could see Siberia very differently, as the home of a democratic and egalitarian society, a positive alternative to Russia west of the Urals in which the notion of the rights of man had a meaning and was respected. In a real sense, they believed that Siberia afforded a precious glimpse into the sort of future they desired for Russia as a whole. Russian nationalists, seeking militantly to countervail the conscious self-conscription of their compatriots into the sphere of European civilization, constructed their own Siberia: both an illustrious historical chronicle that bore witness to the grand exploits and accomplishments of intrepid Russian explorers and settlers, and a geographical wonderland, the unique richness and diversity of which added brilliance and luster to the image of the fatherland as a whole. Finally, in the thinking of Alexander Herzen, Siberia became a prototype for a new nationalist vision of Russia as a radically de-Europeanized New World, and its qualities were subtly generalized to characterize the entire country.

A number of the images of Siberia discussed in this essay have displayed a remarkable endurance and may easily be identified in contemporary attitudes in the Soviet Union. The study of these contemporary images would offer a rich and rewarding theme for further research. Despite official disclaimers, the traditional mercantile-colonial attitude unmistakably persists, and Siberia continues to be regarded as a repository of valuable resources—today no longer furs but rather petroleum, natural gas, coal, metallic and mineral ores—available for economic exploitation by other parts of the country. The experience of the economic development of Siberia over the past two decades lends credibility to Leslie Dienes’s suggestion that the function of Siberia as an “energy colony” remains

⁸⁵ [Alexander Herzen] “Russkim ofitseram v Pol’she,” *Kolokol*, 147 (October 15, 1862): 1214. It is interesting to note that despite the considerable attention Soviet scholars have given to Herzen’s views on Siberia, his support of Siberian separatism has up to now remained unmentioned. V. G. Kubalov went as far as to deny that Herzen ever entertained the idea that Siberia could be an independent entity. A. I. Gertsen *i obshchestvennost’ Sibiri* (Irkutsk, 1958), 58–59; also see Mirzoev, *Istoriografiia Sibiri*, 214–18.

uppermost in the minds of the planners in Moscow.⁸⁶ Along with this, the vision of Siberia as Russia's undeveloped frontier is kept alive, and perceptions of this frontier remain characterized by the same polarity between positive and negative discernable in the nineteenth century. The poet Evgenii Evtushenko, himself a Siberian, frequently used the motif of his homeland in his early writing and evoked a thoroughly positive sense of the region's primeval strength and force, the toughness and reckless, irrepressible self-confidence of the Siberians themselves.⁸⁷ By contrast, for the European Russian imagination, Siberia can still conjure up strongly negative associations as a sort of barbaric Wild West: an exotic and untamed environment far removed from "civilization," where the animals are all enormous, savage, and fearsome, the inhabitants still worship pagan idols, and the "law of the taiga" reigns supreme.⁸⁸

Even the vision of Siberia as a New World and a guarantor of Russia's future prosperity survives. This interest comes today from a very different source than in the nineteenth century, for, while Siberia formerly was appealing by virtue of its democratic qualities and its affinities with a progressive model from the West, at present this image is fostered as part of a manifestly conservative, even reactionary perspective. Nevertheless, on a deeper level, the parallels are apparent. In both cases, this view is the product of articulated political dissent, which rejects the despotic corruption—in the form of tsarist autocracy or Soviet communism—of the center and believes that it has located a promising alternative in Russia's remote geographical periphery. Both focus on Siberia's freshness and lack of development, spared from despoliation and left with abundant resources and unbounded territorial expanses for settlement and constructive exploitation. This circumstance then ensures what is the most important point, the critical potential of Siberia for healthy growth and development in the future, a potential that in an important sense can offer Russia a chance to start anew. This view of Siberia was developed with some intensity during the mid-1970s in essays by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He called for Russia to end its preoccupation with the West and its Third World entanglements and to concentrate exclusively on developing its own internal resources, most of all those of unspoiled Siberia, which comprises the bulk of what he refers to as the Russian Northeast. These regions, he asserted, are "our hope and our reservoir,"⁸⁹ and explained his point in the following terms:

⁸⁶ Leslie Dienes, "Economic and Strategic Position of the Soviet Far East," *Soviet Economy*, 1 (1985): 150.

⁸⁷ See especially Evtushenko's poems "I am of the Siberian breed" (*Ia sibirskoi porody*), "The Winter Station" (*Stantsiia zima*), or "Where do I come from?" (*Otkuda rodom ia?*), Evgenii Evtushenko, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1975), 1: 40, 93–120, 154–55.

⁸⁸ Some examples are Andrei Skalon, "Mishkin sneg," *Sibirskii rasskaz* (Novosibirsk, 1975), 355–70; Nikolai Kuzakov, *Liubov' shamanki* (Moscow, 1975). Reacting very much as did Nikolai Iadrintsev some 125 years ago (see n. 8 above), the Siberian writer Anatolii Chernousov has denounced this contemporary penchant for shallow Siberian exotica. "Vcherashniaia ekzotika," *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 12 (1975): 6–7. Also see V. G. Rasputin, "Sibir' bez romantiki," *Chto v slove, chto za slovom?* (Irkutsk, 1987), 27–65.

⁸⁹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, H. Sternberg, trans. (New York, 1974), 29 (quote), 27, 31–32.

Fortunately, we have . . . a home, a spacious and unsullied home preserved for us by history—the Russian Northeast . . . The Northeast is a reminder that Russia is the Northeast of the Planet, that our ocean is the Arctic, not the Indian Ocean, that we are not the Mediterranean nor Africa and that we have no business there! These boundless expanses, senselessly left stagnant and icily barren for four centuries, await our hands, our sacrifices, our zeal and our love . . . [W]e should be directing our forces and urging our young people toward the Northeast—that is the far-sighted solution. Its great expanses offer us a way out of the worldwide technological crisis. They offer us plenty of room in which to correct all our idiocies in building towns, industrial enterprises, power stations and roads. Its cold and in places permanently frozen soil is still not ready for cultivation, it will require enormous inputs of energy—but the energy lies hidden in the depths of the Northeast itself, since we have not yet had time to squander it . . . Only a free people with a free understanding of our national mission can resurrect these great spaces, awaken them, heal them, beautify them with feats of engineering.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Repentance and Self-Limitation," *From under the Rubble*, A. M. Brock, *et al.*, trans. (Boston, 1974), 140–42.