

When Race Is a Language and Empire Is a Context

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Historians of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union are discovering the problem of race for themselves. Sporadic attempts in the past to find a place for “race” in Russian and Soviet historical narratives got little traction within the field.¹ Now the impetus clearly comes from outside, raising awareness about possible forms in which structural racism may reveal itself within our own professional community and inspiring hope that adapting “race” as a topic and a framework in research and teaching can enhance the relevance of our field in general. I contend, however, that this political impetus can produce lasting and meaningful results only if it generates momentum for deeper methodological reflection. In 2010, when AAASS changed its name to ASEES, the rejection of the Slavic- and Russo- centrism was not accompanied by a basic reevaluation of the political and epistemological foundations of exclusion and inclusion that structure our disciplinary boundaries and approaches. We did not have a

1 See Discussion, *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1–65, including Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges”; Francine Hirsch, “Race without the Practice of Racial Politics”; Amir Weiner, “Nothing but Certainty”; Alaina Lemon, “Without a ‘Concept’? Race as Discursive Practice”; and Eric D. Weitz, “On Certainties and Ambivalences: Reply to My Critics.” See also the forum, “The Multiethnic Soviet Union in Comparative Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 231–303 including Adeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective”; Adrienne Edgar, “Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet “Emancipation” of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective”; and Peter A. Blitstein, “Cultural Diversity and the Interwar Conuncture: Soviet Nationality Policy in Its Comparative Context.” See also Eugene M. Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 1 (2007): 13–40; Maxim Matusевич, ed., *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, 2007); Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, DC, 1986); Vera Tolz, “Discourses of Race in Imperial Russia, 1830–1914,” in Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David, and Dominic Thomas, eds., *The Invention of Race: Scientific and Popular Representations* (London, 2014), 133–44; Vera Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford, 2011); Alaina Lemon, “‘What Are They Writing about Us Blacks’: Roma and ‘Race’ in Russia,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 13, no. 2 (1995): 34–40; David Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal, 2019); Andrew Sloin, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington, 2017); Edyta M. Bojanowska, *A World of Empires: The Russian Voyage of the Frigate Pallada* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018); Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology) (Lincoln, 2013); Mogilner, “Racial Psychiatry and the Russian Imperial Dilemma of the ‘Savage Within,’” *East Central Europe* 43, no. 1–2 (2016): 99–133; Mogilner, “Classifying Imperial Russianness: Race and Hybridity in the Nineteenth–Early Twentieth Century Russian Imperial Anthropology,” in Richard McMahon ed., *National Races: Transnational Power Struggles in the Sciences and Politics of Human Diversity, 1840–1945* (Lincoln, NE, 2019), 205–40.

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broad discussion about the categories of difference, including race, that could analytically queer, hybridize, and diversify what used to be designated as “Slavic” or “Russian” studies. My hope is that this time around, the discovery of “race” as a useful category of analysis will be accompanied by a thorough epistemological critique of the existing canons and paradigms, and as a result “race”—to paraphrase Geoff Eley’s remark about “gender”—will be able to “swiftly graduate from being a ‘useful category of historical analysis’ into a necessary one, whose benefits promise a higher form of understanding.”² Therefore, my question in this essay is twofold: Why, until recently, has our field remained so reluctant to engage racial epistemology, and what “higher form of understanding” does “race” offer to students of Eurasia?

In my book *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (2013), I attempted to answer the second part of the question by showing that “race” served as one of the languages of imperial self-reflection and modernization. Various actors from above and from below embraced it and adapted to their specific imperial situations. “Race” as a language of imperial modernity relied on the authority of science. Racialization helped to anchor population groups in *longue durée* “objective” structures, nominally differentiated as cultural or biological but in practice always hybrid. Populations were mentally assembled into ontologized, objectified, and knowable groups, which could be further managed through scientific politics. The language of race was globalizing; it enabled comparisons and hierarchies. In the Russian empire, the role of “race” was especially pronounced as a language of social critique of the “archaic” empire, framing the calls for both the empire’s modernization (along the liberal “empire of knowledge” or the empire-of-nations model) and anticolonial resistance through collective self-racializing. This was due to the dynastic regime’s reluctance to embrace race as an official idiom of empire, instead relying on categories such as mother tongue, social estate, or regional belonging. As I show in my new book project, “A Race for the Future: Scientific Visions of Modern Russian Jewishness” (due Fall 2022 from Harvard UP), this political asymmetry encouraged self-racializing as a subaltern strategy for disentangling one’s national body from the imperial mix and resisting empire as an “unnatural” formation that hampered the “authentic” development of “natural” nations.³ Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky, a leading representative of the racializing trend in Russian Zionism, clearly articulated these oppositions in 1903: “Natural factors produce *race*. A complex, roaring mishmash of economic factors distorts and changes racial traits to such an extent that the impact of race historically disappears. . . . However, if progress eventually brings some order into this maelstrom of multiple and

² Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005), 7.

³ As an example of the work from this project where I make the above argument, see: Marina Mogilner, “ARA Relief Campaign in the Volga Region, Jewish Anthropometric Statistics, and the Scientific Promise of Integration,” *Science in Context* 32, no. 1 (March 2019): 5–24; and “Between Scientific and Political: Jewish Scholars and Russian-Jewish Physical Anthropology in the Fin-de-Siècle Russian Empire,” in Jeffrey Veidlinger, ed., *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*, (Bloomington, 2016), 45–63.

diverse economic interests . . . then the race principle, which hitherto has been overshadowed by other influences, will draw itself up and blossom.”⁴

When political, cultural, and scientific debates of the turn of the century are viewed from this perspective, they reveal a common underlying rhetorical repertoire aimed at the denaturalization and delegitimization of empire. As in the quote above, it included references to primordial purity and authenticity framed by scientific concepts of evolutionism and kinship and expressed in rigid identity categories.⁵ Hybrid, situational, layered, and even local forms of belonging were rejected on scientific, political, and aesthetic grounds. Take Jabotinsky, who formulated a basic colonial dilemma common to all non-Russian intellectuals in the Russian Empire—whether Ukrainian, German, or Georgian—as the dilemma of provincialism, nature, and purity versus metropolitan position, urbanity, and hybridity. In his polemical texts, the non-Russian cultures in the empire stood for a “village,” a remote provincial nook, and the act of abandoning this village was described as migration to a big colonial urban metropolis symbolically designated as Rome: “Every mediocre man prefers Rome to a village.”⁶

Such discourses of coloniality and purity generated responses that went far beyond the conventional ideological repertoire. Thus, one commentator noted the rejection of mimicry in Jabotinsky’s critique of Jewish self-betrayal: “You [Jews] are very able, but any village boy can dance the *Kamarinskaya* [Russian folk dance] better than you. Hence, here is my advice for you: *Do not grimace, stay true to yourself the way nature and your long history created you.*”⁷ Being a natural product of his racial base and national soil, the dancing Russian village boy was an apt metaphor for non-Russians’ participation in Russian culture as futile mimicry (grimacing, aping). Jabotinsky kept addressing his followers and opponents with challenging statements and images like the Jewish “mimic man,” that required intellectual and emotional investment to be properly understood. “From the days of Bar Kokhba we have not actively participated in our history,” Jabotinsky wrote in 1904. The modern Jew was “no self” (*ne ia*), and “one has to wash out the alien layer of him to get to his ‘self.’”⁸

The imperative of authenticity had an intellectually paralyzing effect on those whose identifications were hybrid (“Russian Jew”) or who did not want to streamline and modernize them (to cease being Muslims or

4 Altalena, “Vskolz’: O natsionalizme,” *Odesskie novosti*, no. 5874 (January 30, 1903): 4. Altalena was one of Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s pen names.

5 For an analysis of this rhetorical repertoire, see the thematic cluster in *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte / History of Science and Humanities* 43, no. 1 (March 2020) including Marina Mogilner, “The Science of Empire: Darwinism, Human Diversity, and Russian Physical Anthropology,” 96–118; Bruce Grant, “Missing Links. Indigenous Life and Evolutionary Thought in the History of Russian Ethnography,” 119–40; and Riccardo Nicolosi, “The Darwinian Rhetoric of Science in Petr Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid. A Factor of Evolution (1902)*,” 141–59.

6 Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky, “Pis’mo (O ‘Evreiakh i russkoi literature’),” *Svobodnye mysli* (March 24, 1908): 3.

7 Emes, “Evrei i russkaia literatura,” *Rassvet* 3 (1908): 8–10 (emphasis added); Ibn-Daud, “Zametki,” *Rassvet* 5 (1908): 16 (16–18).

8 Jabotinsky, “Sidia na polu . . .” *Evreiskaia zhizn’* 14 (April 10, 1905): 21.

southern Russians and become Tatars or Ukrainians). For example, Vladimir (Waldemar) Bogoraz (Tan), a Jew and Russian writer, populist, exile, and ethnographer, felt helpless: “I cannot reject my double nature. To what extent I am Jewish, and to what extent I am Russian—I myself do not know. If you want to find out, carve out my heart and weigh it.”⁹ Bogoraz (Tan) was not new to the concept of race, discourse of purity, and politics of nationalism, but he preferred to safely apply “race” to the primitive Siberian natives as objects of his benevolent evolutionary ethnography and to speak of racism in connection to Russian nationalism of the imperial authorities. As a reporter for the liberal newspaper *Russkie vedomosti* at the trial that followed the 1903 pogrom in Gomel’, Bogoraz interviewed Ivan Kotliarevskii, the chair of the special tribunal and one such modern Russian nationalist. “Jewish assimilation does not exist,” Bogoraz reported Kotliarevskii’s words, and continued:

Anthropology denies it; it teaches that in the course of four thousand years, the Jewish type has remained unchanged. . . . “I also read Renan,” Kotliarevskii remarked with modesty. Nothing has changed from ancient times. Jews were always an alien element amid other peoples. Neither schools, nor Russian language and literature, nor aspirations of Jewish youth for higher education can help this. Jewish nationality [lies] deeper than the language. “But you [sound like] a Zionist!” I responded involuntarily (1904).¹⁰

Bogoraz rejected the language of racial groupness as embraced by both antisemites and Zionists, even though the former subscribed to a hegemonic vision of Russian nationalism whereas the latter shared in the anticolonial nationalism of the oppressed. At the same time, he lacked an alternative idiom of modern groupness that would be suitable for the time of rising mass politics in the empire that encouraged nationalism from below and from above. His discourse embodied what Jodi Byrd has described as “colonial cacophony,”¹¹ whereas the power of Jabotinsky’s discourse rested in the “claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different. The colonial world is a Manichaean world.”¹² Bogoraz’s reaction to this pressure was telling. He protested Jabotinsky’s binary opposition between the central/Russian (“a wide and bright hall”) and the provincial/Jewish (“dark corner”): “You want to set up a new closet [for us].” To Jabotinsky’s argument that racial animosity is normal when nations cannot pursue “normal national life,” Bogoraz retorted: “I do not feel the desire to take revenge on the Odessa tramps [*bosiaki*] and Volhynia *soiuzniki* [members of the nationalist Union of the Russian People]. They are not to blame; the demons inside them are to blame. . . . ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”¹³ Bogoraz’s

9 V.G. Tan, “Evrei i literatura,” *Svobodnye mysli* (February 18, 1908): 3; see also O. L. D’Or, “Lichnye nastroyeniia: Otvet V.I. Zhabotinskomu,” *Svobodnye mysli* (March 31, 1908): 3.

10 V.G. Tan, “Posle pogroma (iz gomel’skikh vpechatlenii),” *Russkie vedomosti* 356 (December 24, 1904): 3.

11 Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, 2011), 75.

12 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963), 6.

13 Tan, “Evrei i literatura,” 3–4.

reactions were revealingly centered on the issue of the individual agency and responsibility of those whom he perceived as passive victims of racism and nationalism projected by the authorities. Jabotinsky, to the contrary, insisted that all racial/national groups that he imagined as populating the agonistic imperial political field were embracing collective agency and responsibility as a precondition for political citizenship by overcoming subalternity and purging their inner imperial hybridity. Decades later Frantz Fanon summarized the goal of such a purge in one aphoristic sentence: “Decolonization unifies this world by a radical decision to remove its heterogeneity, by unifying it on the grounds of nation and sometimes race.”¹⁴

In the early Soviet context, racializing continued to perform a similar function of modernizing groupness along the guidelines of modern sciences and validating local national projects so that they could be incorporated into the Bolshevik evolutionist “affirmative action empire.”¹⁵ Race-thinking also helped to naturalize social class (consider concepts such as “class origin” or the stigma of parents’ class belonging) and objectify Soviet biopolitics as a version of the postcolonial purge. Recent studies have traced the roots of the central late Soviet biosocial category of groupness, *etnos*, which included somatic elements usually coded as “race” and anchored ethnicity in a biological genealogy, to the same turn-of-the-century moment of intensive and comparative reflection on the nature of imperial diversity as an impediment to modernization or as its “natural condition.”¹⁶ The Jabotinsky–Bogoraz example illustrates the fundamental conflict that turn-of-the-century political, intellectual, and social dynamics made apparent—the typical “tension of empire” between the empirical reality of irregular human diversity and the scientific and political ideal of neatly bounded homogeneous collectives, framed in the categories of universal western modernity.¹⁷ Exploring “race” from this perspective means engaging in a Foucauldian archaeology of race-thinking by identifying the conditions of possibility of knowledge that enabled certain types and forms of social imagination.

The ubiquity of race in Russian history and the multiplicity of its political meanings in various circumstances can be accurately explained only by resorting to the concept of empire as a context-setting category.¹⁸ Depending on an imperial situation, “race” can be a weapon of the weak or an instrument of oppression and exclusion, or both at the same time,

14 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 10.

15 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

16 David G. Anderson, Dmitry V. Arzyutov, and Sergei S. Alymov, eds., *Life Histories of Etnos Theory in Russia and Beyond* (Cambridge, Eng., 2019); and Marina Mogilner and Sergei Glebov, “The Transatlantic ‘Imperial Situation’: Archie Phinney, Early Soviet Ethnography, and Native American Visions of Progress,” *Ab Imperio* 21, no. 1 (2020): 27–38.

17 For more see Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, Jan Kusber, Marina Mogilner, and Alexander Semyonov, “New Imperial History and the Challenges of Empire,” in Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber and Alexander Semyonov, eds., *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2009), 3–32.

18 Alexander Semyonov, “Empire as a Context Setting Category,” *Ab Imperio* 9, no. 1 (2008): 193–204.

because race is a language and narrative in need of deciphering rather than a self-evident framework. Moreover, scholars in our field explore “race” that did not always connote color or any visible physical difference, and did not derive its authority from the support of the confluent centers of political power and modern knowledge production, which did not always coincide in the Russian empire. The discovery of “race” thus becomes tantamount to the rediscovery of Eurasia as an imperial space—irregularly hierarchical and heterogeneous, characterized by the politics of exceptionalism and a constant renegotiation of differences. Taking empire seriously as a context-setting category for the history of Eurasia turns “race” from a “useful category of historical analysis” into “a necessary one, whose benefits promise a higher form of understanding” (Eley).

So, what prevented this seemingly obvious development from happening earlier? Among various possible explanations I would single out one—the divergence between the “imperial” and “modernity” paradigms in Eurasian studies. I can address this problem here only sketchily and only inasmuch as it concerns “race.”

Since the 1990s, “Russian” studies has pursued two main directions of conceptual innovation: through critical and creative adaptation of the Foucauldian modernity paradigm and through the deconstruction of “Russia” as an imperial formation. Laura Engelstein’s daring *Keys to Happiness* launched the debate about Russia’s “combined underdevelopment” and politics of expert modernity.¹⁹ A pathbreaking contribution to the field, the book was characteristically blind toward empire as a formative context for the “underdeveloped” Russian modernity. To take just one example: Engelstein’s innovative gender-centered discussion of the physician Praskovia Nikolaevna Tarnovskaia’s anthropological study of Russian female murderers and prostitutes (a “Russian” contribution to the European canon of criminal anthropology) entirely overlooked Tarnovskaia’s obsessive concern with race. Tarnovskaia’s struggle to ensure the homogeneity of her “material in terms of race” remained unnoticed and hence irrelevant for the book’s argument.²⁰ Unlike Tarnovskaia, Engelstein treated peasants as a unified object of projections by modern experts in a not-quite modern state.

19 Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, NY, 1992); and Engelstein, “Combined Underdevelopment: Discipline and the Law in Imperial and Soviet Russia,” *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (April, 1993): 338–53.

20 P.N. Tarnovskaia, *Zhenshchiny-ubiitsy: Antropologicheskoe issledovanie s 163 risunkami i 8 antropometricheskimi tablitsami* (St. Petersburg, 1902); Tarnovskaia, “Antropometricheskie issledovaniia prostitutok, vorovok i zdorovykh krest’ianok-polevykh rabotnits (zasedanie 21 noiabria 1887 g.),” in *Protokoly zasedanii obshchestva psikhiatrov v S.-Peterburge za 1887 god* (St. Petersburg, 1888); Tarnovskaia, *Vorovki (antropologicheskoe issledovanie)* (St. Petersburg, 1891); Tarnovskaia, *Novye raboty po kriminal’noi antropologii: Doklad i seksii Russkogo obshchestva okhraneniia narodnogo zdavitiia, 27 dekabria 1891* (St. Petersburg, 1892); Pauline Tarnowsky, *Etude anthropométrique sur les prostituées et les voleuses* (Paris, 1889). For more on Russian criminal anthropology, Tarnovskaia, race, and so on, see Mogilner, *Homo Imperii*, 328–46.

Since then, empire-blindness has never been truly overcome or reflected upon by representatives of the “modernity school.”²¹ A more recent revision of Engelstein’s original argument by Daniel Beer in *Renovating Russia* is emblematic of this selective vision.²² In his rich and important book, Beer issues a call to fully appreciate the disciplinary power of late imperial biomedical discourses and experts and their influence on the Bolshevik version of modernity. He never questions the imperial/colonial/subaltern positionality of these “experts,” however, and the objects of their biopolitics. For example, one of Beer’s protagonists is the Kiev University neurology professor, Ivan Sikorsky, an advocate of modern population politics who was interested in uplifting the peasant population through sanitizing measures and psychiatric control. Beer does not expose this Foucauldian expert as a leading representative of modern Russian racial nationalism, who advocated transformation of the old empire into a nation-state surrounded by inferior colonial peripheries. To this end, Sikorsky developed racial hierarchies and biopolitical mechanisms of consolidation of the racially uniform Russian metropole segregated from territorially contiguous colonies. He argued that the time had come to do away with the archaic imperial arrangement in the name of the “Russian people and the state created by this people.”²³ This inevitably meant a clash with competing visions of Russian imperial or nationally non-Russian modernity that informed approaches by many other protagonists of Beer’s book. From the modernity paradigm perspective, however, these semantic-producing contexts remain invisible. Thus, Beer identifies in Sikorsky’s studies of “mental” epidemics among Russian peasant sectarians a typical liberal trope of peasant backwardness. His otherwise nuanced analysis misses the imperial psychiatrist’s main agenda: to selectively construct the boundaries of a Russian racial/national norm and protect it from “mentally contagious” (and hence not quite “Russian”) sectarians.

The empire-blindness of the modernity paradigm is not accidental and exposes its roots in the Foucauldian concept of modernity. Its subsequent “rerouting” by Ann Stoler “through the history of empire” that allowed “race” to be reincorporated into the original Foucauldian design passed over the modernity school in our field.²⁴ Similarly, the modernity school never seriously engaged with the imperial “strategic relativism” thesis that problematizes monological explanatory narratives in the imperial situation.²⁵

21 See, for example, David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York, 2000).

22 Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, NY, 2008).

23 Ivan Sikorsky, *Chto takoe natsiia i drugie formy etnicheskoi zhizni?* (Kiev, 1915), 52. For more on Sikorsky and “race,” see Mogilner, *Homo Imperii*, 167–200.

24 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC, 1995), 8.

25 The term “strategic relativism” is coined as an opposite to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s characterization of the modern episteme of groupness as “strategic essentialism.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1987), 205. Correspondingly, “strategic relativism” should be understood as a discourse and stance that relativizes the bounded and internally homogeneous nature of the constituent elements of the sociopolitical space and governance and produces a situation

James Clifford's exposure of Foucault's "scrupulous ethnocentrism" and Stoler's critique of the "metropolitan" view of modernity by locating its shaping "outside those forced fields in which imperial knowledge was promoted and desiring subjects were made" contributed to the imperial turn in Eurasian studies and their direct engagement with postcolonial critique but not the modernity school itself.²⁶ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the new take on empire as an idiom of irregular diversity was missed by a field still largely defined by the "strategic essentialism" of the modernity paradigm. Even Jane Burbank's "imperial rights regime" model, highly influential in comparative studies of imperial subjecthood and citizenship, does not seem to resonate with the scholars of legal history in Russian studies.²⁷ Vera Tolz's or my own works on race as an important imperial semantic field in need of thorough contextualization coexist with the *Sonderweg* approach, especially strong when it comes to "race," which appears consonant with the empire-blindness of the modernity school. Regardless of the accumulated body of historical scholarship on "race" and the general consensus in contemporary humanities and critical theory,²⁸ the conversation in our field is still often structured by the artificial segregation of cultural and biological categories of groupness, and Russian and Soviet modernities are still often interpreted as race-free ("archaic" empire and regime operating through social idioms).²⁹ Due to this lack of dialogue between the imperial and modernity "schools," Russian history continues to be defined, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty's classical formula, "in terms of lack, of absence, or an incompleteness that translates into 'inadequacy.'"³⁰

The predicament of the modernity school's strategic essentialism is even more pronounced in the historiography of the Soviet period. Until recently,

of uncertainty, incommensurability, and indistinction. For more, see Gerasimov et al., "New Imperial History and the Challenges of Empire," 20.

²⁶ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 15; and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 265.

²⁷ Jane Burbank, "An Imperial Rights Regime: Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 397–431.

²⁸ The contemporary consensus is well summarized by Etienne Balibar, "Culture can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin." Etienne Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (London, [1988] 1999), 22.

²⁹ For the most consistent articulation of the *Sonderweg* discourse on race, see: Nathaniel Knight, "Ethnicity, Nationality and the Masses: *Narodnost'* and Modernity in Imperial Russia," in David L. Hoffmann and Yann Kotsolis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York, 2000), 41–64; and Knight, "Vocabularies of Difference: Ethnicity and Race in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 667–83. For a refutation of such an approach from a history of science and ideology perspective and with emphasis on Eurasia and eastern and central Europe, see Richard McMahon, ed., *National Races: Transnational Power Struggles in the Sciences and Politics of Human Diversity, 1840–1945* (Lincoln, NE, 2019).

³⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representation* 37 (Winter 1992): 5.

Soviet proletarians “spoke Bolshevik” in historical studies only in Russian, only in one register (Soviet/class consciousness), and only in the subjectivity language supplied to them by the Soviet expert regime in Moscow. Empirically, the inadequacy of this reading of the Soviet past is obvious, and the ambiguity of “class,” “gender,” “nationality,” and “race” in the Soviet context requires an approach informed by the strategic relativism for an accurate rendering of the complex Soviet society in flux. But methodological work toward this end has been inconsistent. Peter Holquist’s groundbreaking exploration of the birth of modern population politics within the ranks of educated elites of the Russian imperial army has generated interest in the culture of statism and the persistence of “expert modernity” from the Russian empire to the early Soviet Union. However, Holquist’s original sensibility toward imperial societal complexity and diversity has been lost along the way.³¹ The recent centenary of the Revolution of 1917 generated a stream of publications discussing its various aspects, but not its imperial character (along the lines of Jerry Adelman’s “imperial revolution” paradigm).³² Terry Martin’s and Francine Hirsch’s pioneering studies of Soviet nation-building inspired massive scholarship on the dialectics of imperial (universalist, supranational) and national in the Soviet project.³³ These, however, did not have the effect of destabilizing the very conceptual apparatus that is used to account for Soviet modernity. No wonder our field is losing scholars who specialize in Central Asia or the Baltics as they tend to ally themselves with Ottomanists, students of Muslim modernity, or eastern Europeanists—the fields more open to postcolonial questioning of their analytical categories, to decentering the metropole, and deconstructing Russocentric canons of “Russian” history and literature (often exhibiting the same empire-blindness from another extreme, by completely ignoring the context of the Russian Empire as irrelevant).

To reassemble the crumbling field of Eurasian studies on a new common basis, an analytical reincorporation of empire as a context-setting category is needed. With it, “race” would acquire a legitimate place as a category of practice and a category of analysis that helps us to understand the social, cultural, and political dynamics of a complex imperial formation that we collectively explore.

31 Peter Holquist, “To Count, to Extract and to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia,” in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York, 2001), 111–44.

32 Jeremy Adelman, “An Age of Imperial Revolutions,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April, 2008): 319–40. The important exceptions are Ilya Gerasimov, “The Great Imperial Revolution,” *Ab Imperio* 18, no. 2 (2017): 21–44; and some contributions to the volume by Eric Lohr, Vera Tolz, Alexander Semyonov, and Mark von Hagen, eds., *The Empire and Nationalism at War* (Bloomington, 2014).

33 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).