

FEATURED REVIEWS

Russia in World History: A Transnational Approach. By Choi Chatterjee.

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This is a unique, amazing book whose main argument would be hard to criticize: the field of Russian history often assumes that Russia and the USSR, as despotic states, are opposed to the free west. In fact, the author raises doubts much less on Russian despotism than on the liberal west and announces the urgency of integrating Russia into world history. The limits of liberalism are global and Russia looks much less an exception than as an extreme variation of this tendency. To this aim, in seven chapters, Choi Chatterjee contrasts “exemplary individuals,” one from Russia, the other from Britain or India; biographies seek to give “a flesh and blood dimension to abstract historical processes” (8). Thus, Chapter 1 compares Rabindranath Tagore and Lev Tolstoi as examples of cosmopolitan thinkers, while Chapter 2 presents the prison experiences of Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in Russia, and of Vinayak Damodovar Savarkar, a revolutionary Hindu fundamentalist. The aim of this chapter is to show that exile and massive imprisonment of political oppositions were common to Russia and the British Empire. Chapter 3 compares Vasiliï Kliuchevskii historiography and nationalism to that of George Trevelyan, while Chapter 4 investigates the writing and activity of two revolutionaries, Emma Goldman and Manabendra Nath Roy, both challenging the Leninist/Stalinist appropriation of communism.

We then move, in Chapter 5, to the experiences of collectivization in the USSR and in British Kenya, discussed through the memoirs of Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, an educator in Kazakhstan, and of Wangari Maathai, an environmental activist in post-colonial Kenya. Chapter 6 focuses on the Cold War, which the author seeks to revisit by inserting it into a long twentieth century that, according to her, marks less a period of decolonization than of new colonizations. The author compares the process of decolonization in Poland and Egypt and gives voice to two religious feminists, Urszula Dudziak and Zainab Al-Ghazali. The last chapter, maybe the best and most passionately critical to the contemporary return of nationalisms, presents two journalists and activists, Anna Politovskaia and Arundhati Roy, one criticizing Vladimir Putin, the other the new Hindu fundamentalism in India.

This is an extremely important book in Russian studies, and the hope is that the bulk of the profession would read and appropriate it properly, without rejecting it a priori. The problem is that, in so-called area studies, the “specificity” and “uniqueness” of the area still is a decisive paradigm, and this is true not just for Russia, but also for Europe, Britain, China, and other places. From this standpoint, Chatterjee’s book is a major advance in the effort to overcome this attitude. If the main goal and argument can be definitively shared, however, the demonstration seems more open to debate. I intend to discuss two main points: sources and scales.

In this book, archives are never quoted, while titles are almost exclusively in English, with a few references to Russian works in some chapters (for example, we do not know which editions and in which languages of Tolstoi are used). This is not to doubt the author’s skills with Russian, but to raise two broader points. First, in global history nowadays, the major problem is not just the use of primary or

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secondary sources, but the fact that the bibliographies are made only of works in English, except for some references of the concerned area, Russia in this case. This is problematic insofar as excellent works have been published on the topics discussed here in Italian, German, Portuguese, Arab, Spanish, and others. Non-English historiographies are out of global history, and, for authors who contest the supremacy and control of knowledge of the west, as it is the case here, this is problematic.

A second point which is worth discussing is that all the non-British authors discussed in this book have been translated into English and benefited from huge popularity (several Noble Prizes, well acclaimed activists, and such). Why only translated authors? What were the histories and contexts of these translations, otherwise totally ignored in the book?

In the same vein, the context of the production of original sources is mostly ignored. For example, Chapter 5 brilliantly compares collectivization in Soviet Kazakhstan to land reforms in colonial Kenya, starting from the memoirs of two actors. The first, Mukhamet Shayakhmetov (born 1922) is used to discuss Stalinist collectivization in Kazakhstan. Now, Shayakhmetov was nine years old at the time of the collectivization of his village, and he wrote his memories in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is to say, in a very peculiar context. It would have been important to specify the context of the production of this memoir. The second actor, Wangari Maathai, Noble Prize for literature winner (another one), denounced in 2006 land policies that the British had adopted in Kenya in the 1950s. Again, we miss the context of production and the meaning of this memoir; intellectual history, so often convoked in this book, can hardly ignore these concerns. Instead, we find abstract considerations about lives and memoirs of these authors as “self-understanding of modernity” (123).

One of the consequences of this approach is that the book makes use of atemporal and ahistorical considerations such as “like Kant. . . Tolstoy” (27), or “anticipating Gramsci and Foucault, Tolstoy. . .” (29). These remarks are common in analytical philosophy or in some comparative literature where ways of thinking are compared without any historical background. The fact that most of the actors discussed here have been popular and translated into English raises the question of their “marginality,” as mentioned in the introduction and in most chapters. Marginality to whom and where? Paradoxically not in the “West” (!), where all the discussed authors are translated and celebrated. This means that we should maybe think of the west or Britain in a less essentialist way: not only because Portugal is not Britain, but also because, within the Anglo-American worlds, different attitudes emerged vis à vis Russia or India than their authors and activists discussed here.

This complex attitude of the “West” is well discussed in several works raising the very same argument of this book (put the Russian history into a global context and avoid simplistic ideological oppositions) and that are not properly acknowledged here.¹ Russia in a global, transnational approach already has an important

1. Among the others: David Moon, *The American Steppes: The Unexpected Russian Roots of Great Plains Agriculture, 1870–1930* (Cambridge, Eng., 2020); Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (London, 2003); Aleksei Miller, ed., *Rossiiskaia imperiia v sravnitel'noi perspektive: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 2004); Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, eds., *Imperial Rule* (Budapest, 2004); Kimitaka Matsuzato, *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire* (Sapporo: 2007); Alessandro Stanziani, *After Oriental Despotism* (London, 2014), *Bondage* (New York, 2014), *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History* (New York, 2016), and *Labor at the Margins of Empire* (New York, 2018); Alexander S. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand, 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India* (Oxford, 2008). See also the special issues on this topic in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian*

historiography. The difference with this book is in the way similarities and entanglements are proved; much of the quoted historiography adopts what Carlo Ginzburg would qualify as a morphological approach to history: a reconstruction, after a proper critical investigation of sources, of historical dynamics. Here, at the opposite, we are in a Foucauldian, Saidian approach in which discourse and representations constitute the bulk of the historical investigation. This was the leading approach among the second generation of subaltern studies (Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Gyan Prakash) from which this book draws inspiration. There is a risk here; take, for example, if the Gulag in the USSR and imprisonment camps in India are put side by side (Chapter 2). No doubt, colonialism was brutal, I fully agree.² But the question is not just on the scale (do we compare in number of prisoners, of deaths?) but on whether they responded to the same logic and historical structural dynamics: Chatterjee suggests a positive answer, which is less proved than assumed.

This is where the question of the scales matters; Chatterjee wishes to put “exemplary” individuals at the core of her analyses instead of abstract historical contexts. This is a widespread trend nowadays, and yet, the question arises of why individual trajectories must be opposed to structural trends? They may reveal complementary and not contrasting sides of historical dynamics. Indeed, biographies and individual lives may be caught in several ways; microhistory, in particular in the Anglo-American worlds, is often confused with biographies, life stories, or even village and regional monographs that are considered as “representative” for the whole. At the opposite end, in its original approach (Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi), individual trajectories were relevant not because they were “representative” (they actually criticized this approach), but because they helped to raise relevant questions and angles otherwise ignored.³ Chatterjee seems to follow this last line of reasoning while adding a new angle; she seeks to include microhistory lives into a transnational, comparative history, which is lacking in the Italian microhistory. This is quite important, and innovative in the field of Russian studies, even if, here again, many works in global microhistory published in recent years should have been mentioned.⁴ And yet, in these works, the transnational and global dimensions of lives is put at the frontstage not to contrast, say, Britain to Russia, but precisely to show how actors may move beyond area studies and empires. After all, this is the case for most of the leading actors discussed in this book: they move through multiple spaces and empires whose comparisons dominate while the trajectories of the studied actors reveal above all trans-imperial experiences. The chosen angle aims at stressing broader similarities between Britain and Russia but fails to properly stress the roles of connections and therefore to explain why similar processes took place in different areas at the same time. We need both the angles (comparisons and connections), too often opposed to one another in global history.

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History: “Subjecthood and Citizenship, Part II from Alexander II to Brezhnev,” issue 7, no. 3 (Summer 2006) and “Models on the Margins: Russia and the Ottoman Empire,” issue 12, no. 2 (Spring 2012).

2. Stanziani, *Labor on the Fringes of Empire; Capital terre* (Paris, 2021).

3. Giovanni Levi, “Les usages de la biographie,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 44, no. 6 (1989): 1325–36.

4. Christian De Vito and Anne Garritsen, *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour* (London, 2018). See also the special issues devoted to global microhistory in *La microhistoire globale: affaire(s) à suivre*, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 73, 1 (2019); “Global History and Microhistory” in *Past and Present*, vol. 242, supplement 14 (November 2019).