

"The Empire of the Steppe: Russia's Colonial Experience on the Eurasian Frontier"

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Russia was a quintessential Eurasian empire. Like its imperial symbol, the double-headed eagle facing east and west, Russia emerged in response to challenges and influences from both Europe and the steppe. While the European dimensions of the Russian empire are more apparent, the role of the Great Eurasian steppe has long remained unrecognized or misunderstood. The impact of the steppe, it turns out, was a crucial factor in the formation of the Russian state and its imperial political culture. The influences from the steppe arrived in two waves: first, when Russia was a subject-state to the Mongols and the Golden Horde during the 13-16th centuries, and second, when Russia, in a dramatic reversal of roles, embarked on building its own colonial empire in the steppe during the 16-19th centuries. At all times, the evolution of the Russian empire was inseparable from the developments on its Eurasian frontiers. This lecture will discuss the evolution of the Russian empire in the Eurasian context and will place Russia within the broader perspective of the European and Asian empires.