



8-2023

### Book Review: Steven Sabol. *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization*

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#### Recommended Citation

Bedeski, Robert (2023) "Book Review: Steven Sabol. *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 89: No. 89, Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol89/iss89/19>

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**Steven Sabol. *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization*  
Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017**

Reviewed by Robert Bedeski

America and Russia are derivative civilizations from the same Greco-Roman source, with very different results. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, Russia proclaimed itself to be the Third Rome as it lifted the Tatar yoke. Although the U.S. did not become a country for another three centuries, the colonial experience and culture remained closer to England's – a nation proudly conscious of its lineage.

Both faced the challenge of expansion into their hinterlands and the problem of dealing with the native peoples already there. For the Americans settlers and pioneers, the mostly nomadic tribes were seen as uncivilized savages and taking their lands and hunting grounds was justified in the name of progress. To author and Professor Steven Sabol it was a form of colonization – that child of imperialism. Scholarship in recent decades has become more sympathetic to indigenous peoples as victims of racism and genocide – a term providing scholars with an interpretive framework. It included both cultural and physical genocide, and some claimed it started when the first Europeans landed. The framework echoes and possibly stimulated current Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Whether a great migration or raw colonization, the spread of settlers onto the plains of the American West displaced the tribes and detached them from their indigenous culture. Missionaries sought to convert them and government agents made treaties that usually cost them title to ancestral lands.

Sabol is even-handed in describing how European-claimed land came under American jurisdiction with slight concern about the then current inhabitants. The main value of his work is to demonstrate the similarity and differences between American and Russian “civilizing mission” as they moved respectively west or east. He specifically addresses the internal colonization of the Sioux and the Kazakhs and how this was not so different from European imperial conquests in Asia and Africa. Scholars such as Hobson have argued that the American empire did not begin until the Spanish-American War – distinct because it was fought overseas.

The American approach to indigenous peoples was more paternalistic than the Russian, or as he put it, “to guide the Sioux from dark barbarism to the enlightened path of civilization.” (24) Russian policy was more to exclude the Kazakhs from assimilation and to guide them away from their nomadic lifestyles in order to integrate them into civilized ways. In both cases the colonizers maintained a social and cultural distance from the natives.

The Sioux were hunting and herding nomads whose social structure changed as they moved further west from areas bordering the Great Lakes. Constantly on the move, there was little chance to form sedentary hierarchies. Similarly, the Kazakhs did not move as a single group and there was little collective consciousness that could be described as incipient nationalism. Their nomadism dictated movement which favored fragmentation over unity. The days when Attila or Genghis Khan or Tamerlane could unite nomadic tribes into an empire were long past, as guns and manufactured luxuries neutralized the warrior spirit and complex bows. Horses were a mainstay of the Kazakhs as a source of meat and kumis, the fermented mare's milk.

Disease and military defeats decimated Indian populations, leading many to expect the ultimate extinction of the natives. With introduction of horses onto the Great Plains, the Sioux and the Comanche prospered as buffalo hunters. The herds provided meat and other necessities, becoming the basis of their livelihoods. When white men came and often wholesale slaughtered buffalo to near extinction, it inflicted a major disaster for the tribes.

In the matter of religion, the Sioux accommodated their beliefs to acceptance of nature and the world around them. Rituals such as the Sun Dance and Purification Lodge did not reflect any organized theology. Kazakhs, in contrast, were Sunni Moslems though their nomadic life was not conducive to an established church with mosques and mullahs. To the Russians, the Kazakhs were "people with a consecrated book" and had less need of Christianity through conversion than the Sioux, who were pagan and barbarous to Americans.

Americans in large numbers began moving into the interior after the Revolution, while Russians had crossed the Urals centuries earlier. After two and a half centuries of Tatar rule Ivan IV's ("the Terrible") victory over Kazan opened the eastern regions. After the Bolshevik Revolution the Kazakhs were reorganized into the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan. A large influx of Slavs in the 1950s was one result of Khrushchev's "Virgin Lands" project. By late 1989, the Republic had nearly the same number of Slavs and native Kazakhs.

Sabol's *Touch of Civilization* is a well-documented and eminently readable comparison of American and Russian internal colonialism. It is balanced in both governments' treatment of local populations. Nor does he adopt the "genocide" approach to his subject. Legal measures adopted to deal with and often treat the native populations fairly are described. American and Russian civilizations spread into sparsely settled lands and sought to establish an agricultural hegemony over what was considered a backward and disappearing nomadic way of life.

This comparison of two modes of colonialism has great merit in reducing American belief in uniqueness of dealing with indigenous people.

The major difference between the Kazakhs and Sioux themselves was that the former had been exposed to contacts, migrations and conquests from adjoining civilizations and so could be described as more cosmopolitan than the Sioux, who remained tribal and largely isolated from "civilization" until the nineteenth century. Despite some adaptation and assimilation, American Indians still suffer from double cultural shock of demised nomadism and the machine civilization of the surrounding world.