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‘TARTARY’ IN THE RESHAPING OF HISTORICAL THOUGHT

In June 1643, the crews of the Dutch East India Company’s ships *Castricum* and *Breskens*, under the command of Maarten Gerritszoon Vries, sailed past the north-eastern tip of the island that we now call Hokkaido (though at that time it had not yet acquired this name) and, emerging from the dense summer fog, saw the rocky outlines of the southernmost Habomai Islands. These islands in the Okhotsk Sea today mark the hotly contested frontier between Japan and Russia, but in the seventeenth century they lay at the furthestmost limits of the vast region known to Europeans as ‘Tartary’.

The origins of the term ‘Tartary’ are the subject of some debate, but it is commonly understood to be associated with the Chinese word ‘Dada’, used to describe pastoralist tribes to the north. This provided the origin for the term ‘Tatar’ (sometimes also spelled ‘Tartar’) applied to Turkic and Mongol peoples living on the eastern fringe of the Russian Empire. In the European imagination, that word in turn came to be associated with ‘Tartarus’, the Latin word for hell.¹ The narrative of Marco Polo’s travels helped to popularise the image of Tartary in fourteenth-century Europe, and it appears (for example) in Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘Squire’s Tale’, written towards the end of the century, which is set in a utopian ‘land of

1 See Susanna Soojung Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685–1922: To the Ends of the Orient* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 22, doi.org/10.4324/9780203594506.

Tartarye'.² By the early seventeenth century, then, Tartary had become fixed in the European imagination as an exotic and hazily defined region stretching to the east and roughly spanning the area from the Caspian Sea and the fringes of Persia to Japan, Korea and the Pacific coast of Siberia.



Figure 3.1. Map of Tartary based on de Vries' voyage, 1682 (Original by Giacomo Cantelli da Vignola).

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Castricum and *Breskens* had reached the easternmost limits of 'Tartary' in their search for rich islands of gold and silver, rumoured to lie somewhere to the east of Japan.³ The quest for treasure was unsuccessful, but the voyage brought back something else of great value: a detailed description of a community of people whose manners and customs were utterly unknown in Europe. This description, though unusual in its vivid and immediate quality, was just one of a multitude of travellers' tales that added to store of information underpinning the emergence of modern European images of world.

Western encounters with Tartary fed into evolving understandings of the world whose echoes continue to influence understandings of history to the present day.⁴ If the pillaging of riches from around the world by European merchant adventurers was part of the process of 'primitive accumulation', which Marx saw as feeding the rise of European capitalism, the journals brought back from voyages like those of the *Castricum* and *Breskens* were, in a sense, part of a different kind of 'primitive accumulation': the amassing of a vast store of still raw and undigested knowledge of the world, which was to feed the intellectual revolutions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. In this chapter, I shall explore some of the ways in which travellers' images of the (from the European perspective) remote regions of far eastern Tartary helped to shape crucial elements of modern thought: particularly ideas of civilisation, race and ethnicity.

After two weeks of wanderings through the Habomai and southern Kurile Islands, the *Castricum* and *Breskens* anchored off the north coast of the small island of Kunashir, and here Cornelius Coen, who documented the voyage, went ashore to be greeted by a group of six adults and three children dressed in fur robes. One man spread a straw mat on the sand, while the eldest of the group of islanders, taking Coen by the hand, led him to the mat and gestured to him to sit down. The Dutchman handed out tobacco, necklaces for the children, and small pieces of white linen for the women, who were 'so pleased that they could not exclaim enough', and rewarded him with slices of fresh halibut. After sharing some schnapps with the villagers, Coen 'took the eldest by the hand and went dancing with them up to the green plateau' where stood five or six houses of bark and thatch.⁵

3 PA Leupe, ed., *Reize van Maarten Gerritszoon Vries in 1643 naar het Norden en Oosten van Japan Volgens het Journaal Gehouden door C. J. Coen* (Amsterdam: Frederik Muller, 1858), pp. 11–31 and 45.

4 Guillaume-Thomas Reynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, trans. J Justamond, vol. 2 (London: T. Cadell, 1777), pp. 222–23. Original published in 1770.

5 Leupe, *Reize van Maarten Gerritszoon Vries*, pp. 111–12.

The following day Coen and his companions gave the villagers some rice, which they accepted 'with great courtesy', and they in turn helped the Dutchmen to load their boats with fish in preparation for the next stage of the voyage. By now, however, the receding tide had stranded the Dutchmen's boats on the sand. 'I became aware', wrote Coen, 'that the inhabitants were very concerned for us, and they gave us all the help they could, lending us a hatchet to cut firewood and giving us smoked halibut to eat. They suggested that we should come to their huts, but we stayed on the beach warming ourselves by a great fire and waiting for the high tide'.⁶

At last the tide turned, and the explorers sailed westward towards the island of Sakhalin, arriving at Aniwa Bay on the island's southern coast on 16 July, another day of mist and rain. Here again boats came out to greet them, and the villagers helped Coen and his two assistants to go ashore. The unexpected arrival of the foreigners aroused excited curiosity, and a large crowd was on the beach to meet them. Most of the villagers wore unbleached hempen garments decorated with coloured cotton, but one old, half-blind man was resplendent in a robe of blue and gold adorned with Chinese or Japanese characters. After a feast of smoked fish served in lacquer dishes, the Dutchmen and a group of villagers settled down to the serious business of trade, exchanging furs for linen and tobacco, and haggling over relative values with an enthusiasm befitting the representatives of two mercantile peoples. Watched by the wondering eyes of a small child, the guests struggled to eat dishes of salmon and vegetables with the 'two small sticks' which served as utensils. Their hosts, seeing the Dutchmen's clumsy handling of chopstick, pointed at Coen and laughingly said 'Spanola' – 'which made me think that Spaniards must have been here before'.⁷

Discovering Tartary

Coen's introduction to the people of Okhotsk was a meeting of merchants: an encounter with people who traded widely, both southwards with Japan and westwards with China, who appeared to know about the existence of the Spaniards (although there is no evidence to suggest that any Spaniards had travelled further north than Hokkaido), and who spoke at least a smattering of several languages. As Philips de Bakker later described them:

6 Leupe, *Reize van Maarten Gerritszoon Vries*, pp. 112–14.

7 Leupe, *Reize van Maarten Gerritszoon Vries*, pp. 130–31.

with their shaggy beards and hair they appear very cruel, but they know how to behave towards foreigners with such honesty and simplicity that one can only judge them to be civil and refined people [*burgerlijk and beschaafde mensen*].⁸

Until the seventeenth century, European understandings of the human past and present were still confined to a narrow realm of space and time. Even Sir Walter Raleigh, the founder of Virginia and plunderer of the Orinoco, taking up his pen in the Tower of London to compose his monumental *History of the World*, perceived a world that extended no further west than Britain and no further east than Babylon, and whose temporal dividing lines were those of biblical revelation.⁹ The same geographical and chronological horizons confined works such as Bossuet's *Histoire Universelle*, written in 1680 as an edifying text for the French Dauphin.¹⁰ But by the end of the seventeenth century, as information about North and South America, Africa and East Asia accumulated, the boundaries of this narrow world were already crumbling. Voltaire's *General History*, written in the 1730s, began by pondering 'if there is nothing worthy of my attention in the other part of our hemisphere':

struck with the lustre of [the Roman] empire, and with its growth and fall, we have in most of our universal histories treated of other men as if they had no existence. Judea, Greece and Rome have possessed all our attention; and when the celebrated Bossuet happens to mention the Mahometans, he speaks of them only as a deluge of barbarians. Yet many of these nations possessed useful arts, which we have learnt from them; their countries furnished us with commodities and things of value, which nature has refused us ...¹¹

The broadening vision disturbed the intellectual certainties of European Christendom, while also bringing with it an immense hunger for knowledge of the rest of the world. Accounts of distant places, including the Okhotsk region, were translated, edited, reprinted and distributed throughout much of western Europe. Although Coen's log-book lay

8 Nicolaes Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye, ofte Bondig Ontworp van eenige dier Landen en Volken welke Voormaels Bekent zijn Geweest* (Amsterdam: François Halma, 1705), p. 134.

9 Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World in Five Books* (London: Robert White and Co., 1666).

10 Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours Sur L'Histoire Universelle*, ed. Jacques Truchet (Paris: Garnier-Flammariion, 1966). Original published in 1681.

11 Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), *The General History and State of Europe from the Time of Charlemain to Charles V with a Preliminary View of the Oriental Empire*, vol. 1 (London: J. Nourse, 1765), pp. 3–4. Original published in 1758.

neglected in the archives until the mid-nineteenth century, accounts of the voyage of the *Castricum* and *Breskens* were included by Nicolaes Witsen in his massive compilation of descriptions of the 'North and East Tartary', a book that also contains a wealth of travellers' tales about the eastern Siberian seaboard, Kamchatka, the Kurile Islands, Korea and Tibet, as well as what may be the first account of a Japanese visit to the American continent.¹²



Figure 3.2. Illustration from Witsen, showing 'Yakut, Kalmyk, Kyrgyzian Ostiak and Daurian Tungus' peoples.

Source: Nicolaes Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye, ofte Bondig Ontworp van eenige dier Landen en Volken welke Voormaels Bekent zijn Geweest* (Amsterdam: François Halma, 1705).

Not all of these accounts were as humane or as endearing as Coen's. In the very week when Coen and his fellow voyagers were being welcomed by the villagers of Kunashir, a band of Cossacks led by Vasili Poyarkov had left Siberian outpost of Yakutsk on a journey in search of the eastern

12 The Kurile Islands are also known in Japanese as the Chishima Archipelago (千島諸島). I use the term 'Kurile' here because it is the best known name for the islands internationally. Witsen's book contains two versions of a story told by a Dutch merchant in Japan, Hendrik Obé, who claimed to have met a Japanese sailor who had been blown off course on a voyage north-east from Japan, arriving at 'a great land which seemed to be the coast of a continent', and that stretched north-westward 'in the direction of Yesso [Hokkaido]'. After spending the winter there, the sailor had managed to make his way back to Japan, and, when shown Dutch maps, estimated the place that he had been to lay on the west coast of America. Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, pp. 138 and 149.

limits of the Asian continent.¹³ They went as warriors, not as merchants, with the aim of subjecting the inhabitants to Russian rule and exacting tribute (*yasak*). Poyarkov's band was soon followed by others, including the freebooter Yerofei Khabarov, who reached the lower Amur (just across the narrow sea straits from Sakhalin) in 1651. The increasing Russian presence in the east led to conflicts, not just with the small societies along the Amur, but also with the Chinese empire, which regarded those societies as its tributaries. In 1689, after Chinese forces destroyed the main Russian outpost on the Amur, the Russians were reluctantly persuaded to sign the Treaty of Nerchinsk, creating a rather hazily defined frontier between China and Russia in the mountains to the north of the river.¹⁴ In the decades that followed, the focus of Russian expansion shifted northward, towards the peninsula of Kamchatka, which was reached by the Cossack adventurer Vladimir Atlasov in 1698.

All of these expeditions, too, generated widely read accounts of the landscape, natural riches and human societies of the Asian north-east. The Cossack incursions into the Amur region were described by the Swedish aristocrat Philipp-Johann von Strahlenberg (1676–1747) – who had spent several years in Russia as a prisoner of war and whose writings (as we saw in Chapter 2) helped to define the border between Asia and Europe – and by the German scholar Gerhard Friedrich Muller (1705–83), and both accounts were translated into English and French within a couple of decades of their publication.¹⁵

The story of Atlasov's invasion of Kamchatka was included in Witsen's anthology, while another version, together with a description of the region's geography and population, was written and published in 1755 by the Russian botanist Stepan Krasheninnikov, who had himself taken part in a second expedition to Kamchatka in the 1740s. Krasheninnikov's

13 Gerard Muller, *Voyages et Decouvertes faites par les Russes le Long des Côtes de la Mer Glaciale et sur l'Océan Oriental*, trans. CGF Dumas, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1766), pp. 6–7.

14 FA Golder, *Russian Expansion on the Pacific 1641–1850* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark and Co., 1914), p. 64.

15 See Golder, *Russian Expansion on the Pacific*; also Gerard Muller, *Voyages from Asia to America*, trans. Thomas Jefferys (London: T. Jefferys, 1761); PJ von Strahlenberg, *Das Nord- und Östliche Theil von Europa und Asien in so Weit solches das Gantze Russische Reich mit Siberien und der Grossen Tatarey in sich Begreiffet* (Stockholm: PJ von Strahlenberg, 1730); PJ von Strahlenberg, *Description Historique de L'Empire Russien* (Amsterdam: Desaint et Saillant, 1742); Philip John von Strahlenberg, *An Historico-Geographical Description of the North and Eastern Parts of Europe and Asia, but More Particularly of Russia, Siberia and Great Tartary* (London: W. Innys and R. Manby, 1738).

account in turn was published as an English translation in 1764.¹⁶ Russia's eastward expansion led to gradual shifts and elaborations in the vision of Tartary. Von Strahlenberg treated Russian-controlled Siberia as separate from 'Greater Tartary', and divided the latter into six separate realms, stretching from 'Lesser Tartary' in the Caucasus to 'Eastern or Chinese Tartary', which embraced Tibet and regions to the north stretching as far as what is now Inner Mongolia.¹⁷

Wherever they went, explorers created 'the natives' in their own image. Poyarkov's exploration of the Amur began with an unprovoked attack on the prosperous agrarian community of Daur (Daguur), an independent Mongol-speaking group who inhabited the area around the mouth of the Zeya River, and by the time they reached the eastern seaboard his ill-equipped followers had reportedly been reduced to cannibalism, butchering both local inhabitants and their weaker comrades for food.¹⁸ The Nivkh people whom the Cossacks found living by the mouth of the Amur (and who also lived on the island of Sakhalin) are described as being:

bellicose. They sow no corn and live on wild animals. They know how to tame bears, and harness them, instead of horses, to pull their sleighs and carts and to ride on.¹⁹

(The last improbable piece of information clearly refers to the practice, shared by Nivkh, Ainu and other Okhotsk societies, of raising bears for sacrifice in the most important of their religious celebrations.)

Nivkh belligerence was not surprising. Poyarkov's techniques for extracting tribute – which succeeded in obtaining 480 furs and 16 whole pelisses of sable from the Amur Nivkhs²⁰ – relied heavily on murder and kidnapping, and created a pattern of violence that was repeated by subsequent expeditions. In 1652, for example, a party of Cossacks sent to relieve Khabarov's expedition found their route downriver blocked by a large Nivkh community, so that they could neither advance nor retreat:

16 Stepan Petrovich Krasheninnikov, 'A Translation of Stepan Petrovich Krasheninnikov's *Opisanie Zemli Kamchatki* by EAP Crowhart Vaughan' (PhD diss., Portland State University, 1970), Portland State University Dissertations and Theses, paper 353, doi.org/10.15760/etd.353.

17 Von Strahlenberg, *An Historico-Geographical Description*, p. 13.

18 Golder, *Russian Expansion on the Pacific*, p. 36.

19 Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, p. 106.

20 Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, p. 15.

In this state [says their chronicler] they remained at anchor for two and a half weeks, always in the middle of the river. At last hunger, despair and greed for a good supply of fish which they saw from their boat, hanging to dry in the village, gave them a more than heroic courage. They advanced to the village, massacred some thirty Gilliaeques [Nivkhs], took their fish, and continued to descend the Amur, whose mouth they reached three days later on 26th June.²¹

In the far north and Kamchatka, where the encounter between the Russians and the local Koryak, Itelmen and Kurile Ainu inhabitants was particularly violent, explorers' accounts were similarly unflattering. Krasheninnikov, who visited the region after it had been ravaged by a renegade Cossack band under the leadership of Danilo Anziforov and Ivan Kozirevski, carefully distinguished the various cultural and linguistic groups of the region, and reached the conclusion that the Kamchadals or Kamchadales (Itelmen), who inhabited the southern part of the Kamchatka Peninsula, were related neither to Japanese nor to Tatars.²² His accounts of the indigenous people, though, repeatedly echo the dehumanising attitudes of conquerors towards the conquered. He wrote that the 'Kamchadales' were uncivilised in their habits, 'their instincts are animal instincts; and they have no conception of the spiritual aspects of the soul',²³ and described the Koryaks as 'hot-headed, stubborn, vindictive and cruel'.²⁴ He did, however, go on to observe that 'they are convinced that they have the best way of life in the world; they consider everything foreigners tell them as deceits, lies and untruths'.²⁵ Only the Ainu-speaking inhabitants of the southern tip of Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands won some praise. They were, said Krasheninnikov, 'gentle, loyal, upright and honest', and as 'infinitely more civilized and polite than their neighbours', though elsewhere he also remarked that:

the customs of the Kuriles [i.e. Kurile Ainu] resemble those of the Kamchadales so much I would not here give a separate description of the former, if there were not some difference between these two peoples.²⁶

21 Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, pp. 50–51.

22 Krasheninnikov, 'Translation', pp. 347–48.

23 Krasheninnikov, 'Translation', p. 347.

24 Krasheninnikov, 'Translation', p. 483.

25 Krasheninnikov, 'Translation', p. 483.

26 Krasheninnikov, 'Translation', pp. 502 and 504.



Figure 3.3. Engraving of a 'Kamchadale' woman from Krasheninnikov's *Opisanie Zemli Kamchatki*.

Source: SP Krashininnikov, *Opisanie Zemli Kamchatki*, vol. 1 (St Petersburg: Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk, 1755), plate 3.

Whether they were regarded as bellicose and slovenly or civil and educated, the very existence of these unfamiliar societies disturbed the established categories of European thought. Within the vast, mysterious and vaguely defined realm of 'Tartary', the outlines of many different peoples – Uzbeks, Yakuts, Mongols, Koryaks – began to take shape. Von Strahlenberg wrote:

It is evident what false conceptions we have hitherto had, in Europe, of this north-eastern part of the world, by supposing it to be entirely inhabited by Tartars, and by no other nation. Just as in the time of the Assyrian monarchy, and the Children of Israel, it was believed that all the nations which lie beyond Assyria, Greece and Persia were called Gog, Goy and Magoy, or Gojim and Magojim: These denominations were not in themselves wrong; but they were not the proper names of those nations, whereby they called themselves, but only appellatives ... which were given to all remote nations, whose particular names were unknown.²⁷

²⁷ Von Strahlenberg, *An Historico-Geographical Description*, p. 55 (spelling and punctuation modernised).

Dawning awareness of the complexity of human populations created a new sense of Europe, not as a world unto itself, but as a small part in a wider order of things. As von Strahlenberg came to realise, the national divisions and rivalries that dominated the politics of seventeenth-century Europe faded into insignificance from the perspective of some Asian observers who 'call us Europeans, in general, Frangs or Franks, without distinction'.²⁸

Organising Difference: Herder's Visions of Spatial Diversity

This realisation had profound implications for the European understanding both of past and present. The medieval vision of 'world history' had been shaped by manageable geographical bounds. The flow of human destiny (as we have seen) moved from Israel, Egypt and Babylon through Greece and Rome to the Holy Roman Empire and its European neighbours; and, since the narrative of history was made up of the deeds of kings and princes, the rise and fall of royal houses provided a natural phrasing to the rhythms of historical time. But widening European knowledge of global geography coincided with the stirrings of democratic sentiments in which 'the people' themselves claimed a place as the subjects of history.

While we read history, it seems as if the earth was only made for a few sovereigns, and for those who have flattered their passions. Historians, like kings, sacrifice the human race to a single man. Have there been none but princes on the earth? And must almost all the inventors of arts be unknown, while we have chronological accounts of such numbers of men, who have done a great deal of mischief, or at least have been of very little service to society?²⁹

If the people were as important as the princes, then even obscure and distant societies without kings might become participants in the narrative of world history. The spatial and temporal frontiers that had made sense of the past melted away into air, and new lines through time and space were needed to give structure and meaning to the history of the world. From this intellectual ferment emerged the geographical and chronological taxonomies that formed the basis of modern historical understanding,

28 Von Strahlenberg, *An Historico-Geographical Description*, pp. 55, 192–93.

29 Voltaire, *General History*, p. 2.

not only in Europe itself but, ultimately, throughout the world. The shifts, the tensions and the controversies in Enlightenment historical thought are themselves the subject of a vast amount of historical research, and it would be impossible to do justice to their richness and complexity here. By looking a little more closely at the way in which travellers' tales of Tartary were incorporated into European knowledge, though, we can further illuminate the way in which the new borderlines through time and space discussed in the previous chapter were developed and became fixed in the modern imagination.

The redefining of spatial boundaries found its clearest and most poetic expression in the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). Herder, whose voracious reading of travellers' tales encompassed numerous accounts of 'Tartary', was particularly intrigued by the almost endless diversity of human customs and beliefs described by the writings of European explorers. In his *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–91), Herder argued that all shared a common human nature, but that each society, moulded by its natural environment and its inherited traditions, manifested that human nature in a particular way. Climate and geography exerted a particularly powerful influence. Extreme temperatures, he believed, induced physical insensitivity, while temperate climates promoted balanced and harmonious temperaments. Even the inhabitants of Kamchatka, whose way of life (as revealed by the writings of Krasheninnikov) contradicted this thesis, were incorporated into his theorising as an exception which proved the rule:

I was astonished, for instance, to observe in the mythology of the Kamtschadales, dwelling so far to the north, a lasciviousness, that might have been more naturally expected from a southern nation: but their climate and genetic character afford us some explanation of this anomaly. Their cold land is not without burning mountains and hot springs: benumbing cold and melting heat there contend against each other; and their dissolute manners, as well as their gross mythological tales, are natural offspring of the two.³⁰

The influence of natural environment was deepened, Herder argued, by becoming embedded in the traditions and customs passed down through the generations. So each society adapted to its particular place in what we would now call the ecosystem, and the transportation of people to

30 JG von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, ed. FE Manuel (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 46.

radically new environments, or sudden human efforts to transform the natural landscape, were doomed to disaster. Herder's reflections on the past, indeed, have a curious resonance in our own time of environmental concerns:

Nature is everywhere a living whole, and will be gently followed and improved, not mastered by force ... All newcomers from a foreign land, who have submitted to naturalise themselves with the inhabitants, have not only enjoyed their love and friendship, but have ultimately found, that their mode of life was not altogether unsuitable to the climate: but how few such there are! How seldom does a European hear from the native of any country the praise, 'he is a rational man like us!' And does not nature revenge every insult offered her?³¹

From these speculations Herder sketched a picture of a world divided between a multitude of clearly defined 'peoples' or 'nations' (*Völker*), each with its own distinctive traditions, beliefs and ways of life. The sense of national identity, such a potent force in late eighteenth-century European thought, was not (to Herder) a product of local political or social forces, but an innate part of the human heritage, engraved on every soul by the relationship between community and natural environment. Every Volk had its own social integrity and its own historical trajectory:

thus nations modify themselves, according to time, place and their internal character: each bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of comparison with that of all others.³²

Here, for an instant, one can almost glimpse an image of a global history without hierarchies of development; where each Volk, in working out its own destiny, is equal to every other. But Herder was also the child of an age of European expansion, which made such radical cultural relativism almost impossible. So concepts of scientific and moral superiority creep back into his comparisons between historical trajectories, and certain 'standards of perfection' – particularly those of the 'temperate middle region' of the world – turn out to be more perfect than others.³³ And, despite the accumulating knowledge that had challenged the image of a vast, undifferentiated 'Tartary', Herder's vision of the world suggests how tenacious and enduring that vision was, for his interpretations of

31 Von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy*, p. 33.

32 Von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy*, p. 98.

33 Von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy*, p. 85.

European civilisation repeatedly fall back on contrasts with Tartary perceived as a place of 'erratic hordes' and 'wandering people' whose barbarism poses an eternal threat to European stability and enlightenment:

Eastwards, on the right hand, observe that vast elevated region, Asiatic Tartary; and in reading of the troubles that threw Europe into confusion in the middle ages, exclaim with Tristram Shandy, 'this was the source of all our misfortunes'.³⁴

Herder represents a broadly spatial concept of difference, in which the bewildering diversity of humanity becomes a matter of place on the map, of climate and geography. The opposite extreme, in which difference was understood as a product of time, is perhaps best represented by Herder's French contemporary, Marie-Jean Antoine de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94): a passionate believer in the perfectibility of humanity, who died, probably by his own hand, after being arrested by the forces of a revolution he had hailed as the dawn of the coming utopia.

Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, composed in the weeks before his death, follows a course not unlike that of many medieval histories, from Greece to Rome to Western Europe. Now, however, the story to be told is not a story of the revelation of divine providence, but of the gradual unfolding of human reason. The path is not always smooth: at times knowledge is lost and the wise sink back into superstition. But eventually, with the growing size and complexity of human societies, the increasing division of labour, and the development of ever more sophisticated methods of classifying and storing knowledge, a door is opened to a world in which everything can be understood by all:

Since, as the number of known facts increases, the human mind learns how to classify them and subsume them under more general facts, and, at the same time, the instruments and methods employed in their observation and their exact measurement acquire a new precision ... so truths that were discovered only by great effort, that could at first only be understood by men capable of profound thought, are soon developed and proven by methods that are not beyond the reach of common intelligence.³⁵

34 Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Outlines of the Philosophy of a History of Man*, trans. T Churchill (New York: Bergmann Publishers, 1800), p. 487.

35 Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. J Barraclough (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955), p. 185. Original published in 1795.

While British contemporaries like Adam Smith saw human economies as evolving through hunting, pastoral, agricultural and commercial stages of development, Condorcet proposed a more elaborate 10-stage hierarchy from a tribal existence focused on the satisfaction of 'simple needs' to a modern civilisation inspired by 'the doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of the human race'.³⁶ Each of these stages marked the emergence of a more complex division of labour, allowing knowledge itself to be divided up between a growing number of specialist groups, and thus to expand into a perfect system of human omniscience.

In this scheme of things, the multiplicity of social forms beyond the fringes of Europe represent various stages of the development of the human race. 'All peoples whose history is recorded fall somewhere between our present degree of civilization and that which we still see amongst primitive tribes.'³⁷ Like Rousseau and Montesquieu before him, Condorcet derived his image of the earliest ages, the dark times before the light of written records, from 'the tales that our travellers bring back to us about the state of the human race among the less civilized peoples'.³⁸ But, living in an age of revolution, Condorcet (far more than his predecessors) saw the history of the world in terms of revolutionary changes that carved the past into stages, as sharply bounded in temporal terms as Herder's Volk were in spatial terms.

Far from possessing their own internal standards of perfection, therefore, remote societies represented for Condorcet distinct steps along a single evolutionary path. First came the stage where humans lived in tribes and subsisted by hunting and gathering, occasionally supplementing wild food with a few edible plants grown around their huts.³⁹ Next, animals were domesticated, tribes grew in size and differences of wealth appeared. Up to this point, societies everywhere shared a primeval cultural uniformity, but in the third stage, with the coming of fully fledged agriculture, the story 'loses its uniformity'.⁴⁰ The division of labour becomes more complex; tribes form themselves into kingdoms; alphabets are created and wise men begin to study the heavens and lay the foundations of mathematics and chemistry. The way is now open for the beginning of recorded history and the rise of Greece in stage four.

36 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, pp. 14 and 142.

37 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, p. 8.

38 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, p. 8.

39 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, pp. 14–18.

40 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, p. 25.

For those societies that, through indolence, conservatism or timidity, had been stranded in the earliest phases of development, Condorcet foresaw only two possible futures. Most – those ‘large tribes ... who wait only to find brothers amongst the European nations to become their friends and pupils’ – would be caught up in the great wave of freedom and enlightenment spreading outward from Europe. The rest, ‘driven back by civilized nations, ... will finally disappear perceptibly before them or merge into them’.⁴¹ The worldwide triumph of reason was irresistible. Only one event could have the power to block its course: a new invasion of Asia by the Tartars, and this, says Condorcet firmly and without elaboration, ‘is now impossible’.⁴²

Condorcet’s model of human progress, in other words, had two key features. One was that it assumed the existence of a *single* vision of the truth: a vision to which human understanding gradually but unfailingly draws closer. Second, and most importantly, Condorcet’s vision identified the accumulation of knowledge with the creation of ever larger and more centralised knowledge systems, held together by ever more comprehensive generalisations about the truth. In Herder and Condorcet we can see the emerging skeletal shape of an intellectual construct that sustained understanding of small, non-state societies almost until the present day. The kaleidoscopic diversity of social forms, described by the explorers of America, Africa and the eastern limits of ‘Tartary’, was arranged into comprehensible patterns within two hierarchies that were conceptually distinct but always in practice interrelated in complex ways. Spatially, each society could be seen as a unique Volk, carrying within itself a Platonic essence formed by environment and tradition. Temporally, each could be placed in a long sequence of human development – a sequence divided by unmistakable revolutionary markers that separated one stage of history from another.

In the nineteenth century, as philosophies of the past dispersed into the narrower disciplinary channels of history, archaeology and anthropology, these two dimensions of understanding were reworked and combined in many different ways. Some scholars placed greater emphasis on spatial and cultural difference, others on developmental stages, but most used some combination of both dimensions to explain the cultural diversity of the modern world.

41 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, p. 177.

42 De Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, p. 178.

The Rise of Racial Thinking

Herder's mosaic of autonomous Volk was given harsher dividing lines by the idea of biologically distinct races. In the early stages of European expansion, physical difference had commonly been understood in Biblical terms, a heritage of descent from separate branches of Noah's family after the flood. But the Linnaean classification of the natural world into scientifically defined species and subspecies suggested the possibility of extension to the human world. In 1749, just 14 years after the appearance of Linnaeus's great taxonomy of nature, the French scientist Georges Buffon published his *Histoire Naturelle, Général et Particulier*, an encyclopedic overview of the living world, which began with the formation of the earth and worked its way down the chain of being from humans to moulds and mushrooms. The section entitled 'Of the Varieties of the Human Species' begins with a description of 'a race of men of uncouth figure, and small stature' inhabiting Lapland and the northern coasts of Tartary: a group described as being:

so different from all others, that it seems to constitute a distinct species; for if there be among them any distinction, it arises only from a greater or less degree of deformity.⁴³

This was the first time that the word 'race' had been applied specifically to subdivisions of the human species. As Bronwen Douglas has emphasised, in Buffon's work 'race' was still a vague and malleable term, in which human variation was still seen as being shaped by climate and nutrition.⁴⁴ In its initial formulation, it referred loosely to '1. The colour; 2. The figure and stature; and 3. The dispositions of different peoples'.⁴⁵ Here travellers' tales of dwarves and monstrosities, and Renaissance ideas of the relationship between physical beauty and the state of the soul, jostle with the search for unifying scientific principles, and with speculations about the historical migration of peoples from Asia to the Americas. But by the early nineteenth century, 'race' was rapidly hardening into a fixed hereditary boundary, and French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1769–1832), English physician James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848) and Scottish anatomist

43 Georges Buffon, *A Natural History: General and Particular*, trans. W Smellie, vol. 1 (London: Thomas Kelly and Co., 1866), p. 252.

44 Bronwen Douglas, 'Climate to Crania: Science and Racialization of Human Difference', in *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race, 1750–1940*, ed. Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), pp. 33–96, doi.org/10.22459/fb.11.2008.02.

45 Buffon, *Natural History*, p. 252.

Robert Knox (1791–1862) were earnestly debating whether all humans had evolved from a single common stock, or whether the various races were products of separate acts of divine creation.⁴⁶ So writers like Gustav Kossina (1858–1931) were able to redefine Herder's 'culture' groups as products, less of environment than of distinct and eternal genetic types, and to identify the shared features of European culture and language as a legacy of characteristics inherited from a common 'Aryan' ancestry.⁴⁷

Condorcet's historical stages, meanwhile, were redefined from a materialist and archaeological perspective by the nineteenth-century Danish scholars Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865) and JJA Worsaae (1821–85), who divided the past into Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages. From a social and anthropological viewpoint, the stages of development were also rewritten by the American scholar Lewis Morgan (1818–81), who perceived a past divided into a stage of 'Savagery' (subdivided into Lower, Middle, and Upper Savagery), a stage of 'Barbarism' (similarly subdivided) and a stage of 'Civilization'. Morgan, like Condorcet, read the past from the present:

The remote ancestors of the Aryan nations presumptively passed through an experience similar to that of existing barbarous and savage tribes. Though the experience of these nations embodies all the information necessary to illustrate the periods of civilization, both ancient and modern, together with a part of that in the later period of barbarism, their anterior experience must be deduced, in the main, from the traceable connection between the elements of their existing institutions and inventions, and similar elements still preserved in those of savage and barbarous tribes.⁴⁸

Morgan's stages, in turn, were borrowed by Karl Marx and (more systematically) by Friedrich Engels, who described their author as 'the first person with expert knowledge to attempt to introduce a definite order into the prehistory of man',⁴⁹ and who used the savagery–barbarism–civilisation sequence as the framework for his analysis of the evolution of the human family from random promiscuity to monogamous household.

46 Douglas, 'Climate to Crania', pp. 40–44; Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 29–46, doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-05452-7.

47 See BG Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 163–67.

48 Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization* (Calcutta: Bharati Library, 1896), pp. 7–8, doi.org/10.1522/030110918.

49 Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State in the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan*, ed. EB Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 87. Original published in 1891.



Figure 3.4. Thomsen expounding the ‘three age’ system, illustration by P Marquardt, 1846.

Source: Wikimedia commons, public domain.

Theory influenced the angle of vision of the practical ethnographer, and ethnographic fieldwork fed back into the refinement of theory: Lev Shternberg, the pioneering ethnographer of Eastern Siberia and Sakhalin (whose work is discussed further in Chapter 6), was profoundly influenced by his reading of the first edition of Engels's *Origin of the Family* (which he encountered while he was in prison as punishment for his involvement with the Russian revolutionary group Narodnaya Vol'ya [The Will of the People]).⁵⁰ Engels suggested that the earliest forms of primitive communal society had practised group marriage, in which individuals do not form sexual partnerships, but members of the group may have sexual relations with any adults of the opposite sex within the group. Later, when he started to research the social patterns of the Nivkh of Sakhalin, Shternberg used Engels's theory to explain the complex patterns of sexual relationship that he found in Nivkh communities (though this interpretation was later to be challenged by others). Then, in the 1890s, Engels discovered Shternberg's Sakhalin research, and used its conclusions as a vindication of his theory of group marriage in the revised version of his *Origin of the Family*, arguing that Shternberg's findings reaffirmed his own vision of 'the similarity, even the identity in their main characteristics, of the social institutions of primitive peoples at approximately the same stage of development'. For:

most of what [Shternberg's] report says about the Mongoloids on the island of Sakhalin also holds for the Dravidian tribes of India, the South Sea Islanders at the time of their discovery, and the American Indians.⁵¹

Even in the mid-twentieth century, theorising on the global past was deeply marked by the influence of Herderian notions of Volk and of stage theories reminiscent of Condorcet's notions of progress. The immensely popular writings of the Australian-born archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe (1892–1957), for example, presented a picture of a world divided into 'culture groups', each possessing its own 'national character'. 'Culture groups' were separated by environment and tradition, not biology (Childe was a trenchant critic of scientific racism); yet every group could also be placed on a broad single stairway of progress whose steps were separated

50 YP Al'kor, 'L. Y. Shternberg kak Issledovatel' Narodov Dal'nevo Vostoka', in *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy, Negidal'tsy, Ainy*, ed. LY Shternberg (Tokyo: Nauka Reprint, 1991); see also Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 55–57.

51 Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, p. 239; see also Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture*, pp. 55–57.

by successive revolutions. Childe's historical stages are fewer and simpler than those set out in the *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, but they closely follow the schema suggested by Condorcet's Stages One to Four. First came a hunter-gatherer phase, succeeded by a Neolithic or agricultural revolution. The resulting agricultural society was then transformed by an urban revolution, which gave rise to the development of specialist craft production, complex social hierarchies, large-scale monumental architecture and permanent systems of recorded information.⁵² Each revolution was, of course, implicitly analogous to the Industrial Revolution (a historical landmark first conceived by the elder Arnold Toynbee⁵³ in the late nineteenth century).

In these stages, once again, the image of small societies in remote regions like the Okhotsk area was invoked to represent the remote human past. The patterns of bones and skulls from bears found in some of the earliest European cave dwellings, for example, were equated with:

the rituals still performed by hunting tribes in Siberia to avert the wrath of the bear spirit and ensure the multiplication of bears to hunt. Perhaps, then, we have here proof of hunting magic, if not worship, before the last ice age. In any case even the rude Neanderthaler had an ideology.⁵⁴

Childe's map of the past was particularly schematically satisfying because it could be superimposed upon Lewis Morgan's chart of human evolution. The agricultural revolution marked the threshold between 'savagery' and 'barbarism', and the urban revolution the threshold between 'barbarism' and 'civilisation'.⁵⁵ Childe was more sensitive to spatial difference than Morgan: no one civilisation was quite like another, and some had disappeared leaving little trace of their achievements. Each, however, contributed to a current that moved irresistibly onward:

progress is real if discontinuous. The upward curve resolves itself into a series of troughs and crests. But ... no trough ever declines to the low level of the preceding one, and each crest out-tops its last precursor.⁵⁶

52 Vere Gordon Childe, *New Light on the Most Ancient East* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1934).

53 Arnold Toynbee (1852–83) was the uncle of Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889–1975), the author of *A Study of History*.

54 Vere Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 35.

55 See particularly Childe, *What Happened in History*.

56 Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 252.

For Childe, like Condorcet, possessed a profound faith in human progress, even though, like Condorcet, he died by his own hand. His utopia was not the liberal utopia of the French revolution, but the socialist millennium promised by the Russian Revolution: a vision that was shattered as the clouds of Cold War gathered in the 1950s.⁵⁷

Race and Progress in Modern Thought

Scientific racism – which saw humans as divided into subgroups, with culture and character irrevocably tied to physical appearance – was of course comprehensively criticised and discredited by scholars in the early to mid-twentieth century;⁵⁸ but the popular imagery generated by nineteenth-century racial theorising proved much more difficult to exorcise from the social landscape, and persists into the twenty-first century, where it remains an enduring source of human conflict. Meanwhile, the vision of unilinear human progress through a series of defined stages from ‘primitive society’ to ‘civilisation’ came to permeate our language so deeply that its vocabulary continues to lay traps for our thought despite the extensive academic criticism to which this vision has been exposed. The words ‘savagery’ and ‘barbarism’ may have been banished from the academic vocabulary, but the term ‘civilisation’ with all its positive connotations – and still commonly attached to large state-structured societies and the monuments they build – survives, and continues to be actively promoted in some quarters. In its shadows still lurk the ‘others’: those who failed to achieve linear history’s standards of civilisation.

‘North and East Tartary’ (to use Witsen’s phrase) played an important part in the shaping of these yet-to-be-exorcised visions of the world. As the furthestmost limit of the Eurasian landmass (from the Western European point of view), it provided a rich and malleable source of images of ‘others’ through which the European place in global culture and world history could be defined and confirmed. Can we use the history of an area like the Okhotsk Sea region, which was turned into a ‘frontier zone’ by the expansion of nation-states (Russia and Japan in particular), to develop

57 See Sally Green, *Prehistorian: A Biography of V. Gordon Childe* (Bradford-on-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1981).

58 See, for example, Ashley Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

other vocabularies and foster other ways of imagining the past? The area around the Okhotsk Sea has tended to escape the historical gaze precisely because it is, from the viewpoint of nation-state and civilisation history, liminal – a place on the fringes of nations and empires, occupied by a multitude of small societies (Ainu, Nivkh, Uilta, Itelmen and others) that never formed nation-states and had few written records of their past. It is seen as a remote frontier zone on the boundary between Russia and Japan, and thus (in area studies terms) on the boundary between Russian or Eastern European studies and (East) Asian studies. If we place this region not at the fringes of vision but at the centre, how might that change the way we see history as a whole?

Some indirect answers to that question can perhaps be found by revisiting John Smail's well-known 1961 essay on 'the Problem of an Autonomous History of Southeast Asia'.⁵⁹ Smail set out to consider the vexed question of whether it is possible for a 'Western' historian to write history from an 'Asian' perspective. In doing this, Smail made very clear that the very categories of 'Western' and 'Asian' perspective are deeply fraught by historical and cultural complexities, and that the notion of 'perspective' itself also needs to be unpacked. Writing history from the perspective of a particular society might, Smail observed, mean several things. It could mean that the historian tries to adopt the worldview of the people whose history is being written. The people of the Okhotsk region, of course, had a multitude of indigenous histories. The stories passed on around smoky fires in the long northern winters told of origins and becomings, of human societies in relation to the flow of time. There were also more recent retold memories, not yet rounded into the mellow forms of myth: 'before the Russians came there were plenty of bears, sables and reindeer, but since they arrived and burnt the woods the rich [have] become poor'.⁶⁰ Even the contemporary descendants of those storytellers, though, are probably too far removed to be able to immerse their imaginations fully in the circle around the hearth of an eighteenth-century *aundau* or *torakh takh* (Uilta or Nivkh winter house). There is certainly no way that a foreign historian, schooled in the more sharply bounded discipline of modern historiography, could enter into the world of such imagined pasts.

59 John RW Smail, 'On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): pp. 72–102.

60 Charles Hawes, *In the Uttermost East* (London and New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903), p. 275.

There are, though, two other possible meanings of historical perspective. As Smail put it, “‘perspective’ might be used either in the sense of angle of vision (standpoint, looking over someone’s shoulder) or in the sense of evaluation of relative importance’.⁶¹ There is nothing to stop historians from looking over any shoulder they choose. In doing this, we have to recognise that all history writing is a matter of imagination as well as fact, and that imagination has profound limitations, particularly when twenty-first-century academics attempt to think their way back into a world vastly different from anything that they have experienced. But this act of imagination, used with caution and a consciousness of its limitations, may, I think, open up angles of vision that can give us new insights into historical events far beyond the limits of the locality from whose perspective we try to imagine the world. In the process, it can open up fresh perceptions of ‘perspective’ in its second sense: ‘evaluation of relative importance’. In other words, the attempt to imagine the past from unexpected standpoints can provide a way of reassessing our senses of importance, and of recognising that the neglected histories of very small non-state communities have crucial importance to the way that we understand the human past as a whole. In the next two chapters, I shall attempt to use such a shift in perspective as a means of challenging some common assumptions about the relative historical importance of the societies of the Okhotsk region, and of shedding some new light, not only on the histories of the region’s small indigenous societies, but also of the neighbouring and more distant large states which sought to subject and subsume them.

61 Smail, ‘On the Possibility of an Autonomous History’, p. 82.

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