

W. Bruce Lincoln, *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2007), xxii + 500 pp.

The book reviewed was originally published in 1994. It has now been released in a paperback edition. The author died in 2000. The book starts, strangely as it seems at first, with an account of the Mongol invasion of Russia, but that actually provides a nice contrast to the real content of the book, when the tide turns the other way and the Russians inexorably expand, occupy and exploit Siberia. (The geographical definition of Siberia is a generous one, including at times the Urals, the Far North, the Far East and even Central Asia.) The book is made up of 52 shortish chapters, dealing usually with a particular episode or individual, for example, Ermak, the Demidovs, Speranskii, the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Lena goldfields massacre. Lincoln uses the episodic approach skilfully to provide a strong sense of the dramatic historical sweep of the subject matter.

It is a story of at times stirring heroism and extraordinary endeavour, but it is above all a grim tale of cruelty, corruption, and cultural and environmental destruction. One assumes that among the hundreds of thousands of settlers who flooded east and their 'native' offspring, there were those who had 'normally' happy lives, raising a family, holding down a job, enjoying some leisure time at home or in nature, but they do not feature in this book. Although the conquest of the title involved little battlefield violence, it was an unremittingly violent and oppressive affair. The book does not venture beyond the Soviet period (it is divided between the Tsarist and Soviet periods roughly 60:40). One doubts that Lincoln would have written in sunnier terms if it had.

Given the dates of original publication and the death of the author, inevitably there is no mention of the revival of interest in the place of Siberia and remote Russia more generally in Russian society and economy occasioned by the 2000 publication of Parshev's book *Pochemy Rossiia ne Amerika?* (Krymskii-Most) and Hill and Gaddy's *The Siberian Curse* (Brookings, 2003). Parshev answered the question posed in his title simply: 'it's too cold', arguing that Russia's and above all Siberia's demanding climate condemned Russian economic activity to be always less competitive than that of other countries. As a consequence Russian would always have to take its own unique – essentially highly state interventionist and authoritarian – route of political and economic development. Hill and Gaddy were less deterministic, noting that there was a strong element of policy choice,

particularly in the Soviet era, about the location of large amounts of economic activity in cold and very high-cost areas.

Lincoln does not address the issue directly. The state is far from absent from his account, including the strategically and militarily driven Great Relocation of industry to Siberia during and after the Great Patriotic War. This gives support to the Hill and Gaddy argument. But there is nevertheless in Lincoln's account also an inexorability about the 'conquest', including by individuals determinedly independent of the state and involving industrial development that started long before the Great Relocation. Those phenomena were prominent because of the enormous wealth to be won from the region's natural resources, resources which made Russia a great, albeit incompletely great, power. It was hard and expensively won wealth, but it hardly represented a negative on the economic balance sheet.

Those resources are still producing wealth today, although the shift towards ever more remote deposits outside Siberia proper has begun. Although the exhaustion of Siberian deposits is some way off, it is worth pondering how Siberia will fare, in particular the large-scale industry so decried by Hill and Gaddy, when the resources are no longer locally available to 'pay' for it.

Today Siberia (narrowly defined), its industrial economy in particular, is relatively neglected by researchers, compared to the great attention devoted to the Far North and Far East. That work needs to be done before the question of whether Siberia is a 'curse' can be resolved.

Lincoln's book provides good background for someone undertaking that task. Lincoln writes stylishly and the book reads very easily. It makes no claims to being a piece of original research, but nevertheless the specialist will appreciate having such an accessible account of a large and important story. The general reader will enjoy and learn from it.

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