

TURNER THESIS OF THE FRONTIER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIBERIA IN THE XVI-XVIII CENTURIES

Tatiana Vladlenovna Vorobieva^{*}, Valentina Alexandrovna Ilina^{**} and Natalya Viktorovna Kamardina^{**}

Abstract: There are ideas that influence the mentality of entire nations. One of these ideas was the theory of the frontier, which was proposed in the late XIX century by the young American historian Fredrick Jackson Turner. During the first decades of the next century the frontier thesis became the dominant among American researchers to explain their own history. Over time, it has been much criticized, has almost lost a monopoly position though has not ceased to exert influence on historical thought not only in the USA but also in other countries of the world. Giving a brief characterization of the frontier thesis, we can say that it came down to the assertion that the frontier, understood as a constant movement of American settlers to the West, their life in the wild, and the constant wars with the Indians – gave rise to America, a specific American political system, democratic institutions and freedoms.

The purpose of the present research consists in carrying out analysis of the possibility of the partial application of the frontier thesis to the study of development history of Siberia in XVI-XVIII centuries by comparing “classic” American frontier and the “Siberian frontier”.

Keywords: Frontier, frontier thesis, Siberia, Siberian frontier.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the fame of the frontier thesis was laid on July 12, 1893 at the Convention of the American Historical Association in Chicago, where thirty-two year old assistant of the University of Wisconsin, F.J. Turner made a contribution “Significance of the frontier in American history”. The historian argued that the American society was formed, above all, by open spaces of the Wild West and that exactly Wild West provided the state the democratic principles of functioning and developed American individualism. Nevertheless, for three years on, Turner frontier thesis remained without special attention.

However, in the 1900 publication of the article “Significance of the frontier in American history” has become one of the basic texts of American history. In addition, since the Presidents Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1908) and Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) were professional historians by education and supporters of the Turner frontier thesis, this theory started to exert a significant impact on government policy. In 1910 Turner became head of both the U.S. History Chair at Harvard and the American Historical Association. It may seem incredible, but the short publication

^{*} Petropavlovsk - Kamchatsky Branch of Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEP), 683031, Russia, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Bohniyaka st., 13

^{**} Vitus Bering Kamchatka State University, 683038, Russia, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, Pogranichnaya Str., 4

released in 1893 has caused a sharp and unprecedentedly long debate (this debate has still not ended). Besides historians, the debates joined anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, geologists, demographers, ecologists, ethnographers, climatologists, linguists, psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers. According to Richard Hofstadter, at that time the American historical science has transformed “into a single great society in the name of Turner” (Hofstadter, 1970, p. 83).

Let analyze the main ideas of Turner contribution. The historian began with the citation of the report of the superintendent of the U.S. census of 1890 about the closing of the settlements frontier. According to Turner, it was an event of historical importance. Turner stated that the center for the history of the U.S. “is not the Atlantic coast, but Big West... formerly American history was the history of the colonization of the Wild West. The existence of spaces of free land, their gradual decrease and the advance of American settlements westward explain the development of the United States”, while “... the frontier is the line of intense and effective Americanization” (Turner, 2009).

Thus, according to the views of Turner, the historical development of America was defined by its natural environment, where the lack of available land in the East, immensity of the land in the West and craving for freedom promoted the settlements frontier farther into the interior of the continent.

At that, Turner reviewed the advancement process in the context of the collision of barbarism with civilization. Having in mind extreme living conditions at the frontier, the historian introduced the concept of “a leap into barbarism”. In his opinion, it is the collision with the “barbarism” shaped the U.S. society, since this resulted in the development of the spirit of individualism, the formation of the American nation as “a composite nationality” (in spite of ethnic factors). Another important Turner’s subcase (though mostly developed later by his followers) is the safety-valve doctrine. The scientist has noticed that availability of free land has simultaneously contributed to the solution of social problems, therefore, the U.S. managed to avoid acute forms of class struggle (Turner, 1994).

It is worth noting that the myth of the Wild West existed even before the birth of Turner. As written by G.N. Smith, “the image of a vast and constantly growing agricultural society inland has become one of the dominant symbols of the American society of the XIX century - a collaborative representation, which determined the future of American life. Template symbol of the pleasance embraced a handful of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, a blessed labor on earth and revolved around the heroic figure of idealized frontier peasant, armed with a sacred plough - the supreme agrarian tool” (Smith, and Land 1950, p. 138).

Therefore, since the days of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, both the American intellectual elite and the carriers of consumer consciousness were perceived peasant as an untapped reservoir of wealth and “safety-valve” which will enrich American society and will provide it with prosperity.

During the XIX century, writers, starting with the novels of James Fenimore Cooper (translated into all major languages of the world), formed a literary genre of the Western. Its success, materialized in the second half-century in the mass circulation of cheap books (dime novels), reached its peak in the mid-twentieth century through the cinematization of the Wild West novels by film makers of Hollywood. Therefore, in a popular form of the Western movie, the concept of the frontier has made a at large significant impact on world culture. But not only American popular literature was an inspiration to Turner. In the second half of the XIX century popular image of the Wild West began to attract the attention of politicians and historians.

“Availability of free land automatically adjusts the tyranny that, in the absence of slavery, makes the existence of an oppressive regime impossible, as nationals can always avoid reprisals by the sovereign, leaving him and establishing settlements in unoccupied territories,” wrote an Italian scientist Apollo Loria in his book “The economic foundations of society” (1885), while citing the U.S. as an example (Webb, 1997, p. 279). Ideas, similar to Turner thesis, can be found in the book “Aristocratic ideas about democracy”, published in 1865 by American journalist Edwin Lawrence Godkin, as well as in publications of dozens of other thinkers (Nixon 1999).

Thus, the frontier thesis was not completely an original idea of Turner. The merit of the historian is that he transformed the knowledge and ideas of previous generations in ready-historical concept, thus creating the basic narrative of the U.S. history.

For more than a century the Turner thesis has undergone significant modification, and therefore not much left from its authentic form. The idea expressed during historian’s lifetime that the foundation of the democratic system in the U.S. was based on Protestant ethic and the doctrine of liberalism, imported to America from Europe, rather than frontier, was definitively established after the Second World War. At the same time, experts in the field of comparative studies have proved that the U.S. frontier is not the unique phenomenon, but just an episode of the global process of the “European expansion”. Gradually historians have rejected social Darwinist idea of the determining influence of the environment on society. The idea of the Western lands as a safety-valve was revised as well and seen not to such an extent as originally imagined by Turner. In the 1960-ies, when the science refused the treatment of the Indians as barbarians, the interpretation of the frontier as a zone of collision between “civilization” and “barbarism” lost its relevance. At the same time, the concept of the black people’s and other minorities’ role in the development of Western lands were reflected in emerging research works. The latter tendency has especially strengthen in the contemporary period (i.e. since the second half of 1980-ies) and inspired attempts of individual representatives of the “new Western school” to reject completely the frontier thesis. Another critical

approach to Turner thesis, which emerged in the 1960-ies and was developed later by the “new West school”, was the U.S. environment story that put an emphasis on the effects of the pioneers’ activities, which became catastrophic for the natural environment (Nash 1991).

At that, none of the critics has questioned a significant (though not defining) influence of the Western frontier on the development of democracy in the United States and the spirit of American individualism. Therefore, at this point historians are not inclined to discussions on rightness of Turner thesis, as it was in the early 1990-ies. But the concept of the frontier as a zone of pioneer settlements in the supposedly “free” lands at the boundaries between “civilization” and “barbarism” has gradually lost its scientific value. Now researchers mostly appeal to the concept of the frontier as a zone of intense interaction between different cultures that was introduced in 1940 by Owen Lattimore (Bogue 1998).

Finally, despite the diversity of interpretations and approaches, many historians agree that the theory of the frontier is a historical myth, an important component of identity and an inexhaustible source of nationalism of the U.S. citizens. (Block 1990)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the views of Turner and the research of domestic historians we carry out a comparative analysis and try to figure out what aspects of the American frontier, as described by Turner, are similar to the Russian development of Siberia. To do this, we compare the main points of the Turner thesis with the realities of life in Eastern Siberia in the XVI-XVIII centuries.

Historians have often noted that the frontier thesis is the product of a particular epoch and it cannot be unconditionally transferred to other “frontiers”. In Russia, a frontier territory is referred to Siberia and the Far East in XVI-XVIII centuries, as bright manifestation of the frontier. One of the topics of Russian history, most close to the frontier thesis, is the development of Siberia. Conterminous existence of settlers, service class people, and industrialists as well as their constant clashes with indigenous peoples and the relative lack of control of the central government, have repeatedly attracted the attention of researchers.

Today the most famous interpreters of frontier thesis in the Russian historiography are A.S. Khromykh, D.Ya. Rezun, M.V. Shilovsky, O.N. Sudakova, and A.D. Ageev, who within their own historical interests are trying to apply the frontier thesis elements in their research.

Khromykh A.S. makes a particular emphasis on the fact that the territories, where various civilizations with different level of development meet with each other, are characterized by the interaction of the colonists with local residents, which necessarily leads to the emergence of a new community based on a synthesis of material and spiritual culture of the autochthonous and migrant populations

(Khromykh, 2012). Shilovsky M.V. and Rezun D.Ya. suggested three types of interactions: external – in relation to the territories and ethnic groups, internal – with respect to people who find themselves outside the promotion, and intra-civilizational, which is formed between veterans and new frontiersmen (Rezun and Shilovsky, n. d.). Carrying out a historiographical overview, Sudakova O.N. believes that the structural elements of the culture of the Siberian frontier, emphasized by historians, allow formulating the concept of “Siberian culture” in the framework of the frontier thesis. It is an open system that has developed as a result of contacts between the aboriginal peoples of Siberia and the representatives of various ethnic groups migrating to the region (Sudakova, n. d.).

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

We will start a comparison between the American frontier and the colonization of Siberia with statement about the mobility of the frontier. American frontier was moving from East to West. At that, it is always emphasized that the movement occurred only in one direction. The Indians were unable to win back their territory from the colonists. Russian frontier was moving similarly, though from West to East.

The American colonists faced almost boundless continent, and exactly the same endless land was Siberia for the Russian trailblazers.

At the American frontier, it was possible to meet representatives of different peoples and adherents of various religions. Thus, most of the settlers were Germans, Scandinavians, and Polanders. They were free to cultivate their own culture and often American politicians have expressed concern that the new cities could be not American in the sense that they dominated by an “alien” traditions. The same can be said about the distribution of the various religious sects at the frontier, where no one bothered them. It is also worth noting that the American frontier was strengthened centrally – for money and at the initiative of the state.

Somewhat different, though largely similar situation was in Siberia. Colonization of Siberia started on commercial grounds. Most of the pioneer industrialists came from Pomerania, a smaller portion were residents of the central regions of European Russia, and the small part consisted of local residents. However, the development of Siberian territories quickly became a matter of state, which sent for these purposes service-men, Cossacks, archers, and gunners, increasing further state presence at the expense of the Cossack community of the Don, peasants and urban residents, citizens of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Belarusians, Polacks, Lithuanians, etc.), who were taken captive or switched to the Russian service. Despite the fact that the people of the Siberian frontier were multicultural, polyethnic force that promoted the Russian frontier to the East, they were always associated exclusively with the Russian ethnos, whose uncontested dominant religion was Christianity.

It is the Orthodox religious system of values that determined the mentality of the Russian people, became the unifying element for the motley mass of frontiersmen, whose spiritual needs and ideals were largely associated with Christianity. Orthodoxy retained a vital value such as goodness, mercy, justice, tolerance, etc., which in the conditions of the frontier had become particularly significant. In the unpredictable conditions of the development of new areas associated with risk and uncertainty in the existence of frontiersmen, religion has played no small role in their adaptive activity practices. According to Kromykh A.S., Christian behavior was the hallmark of Orthodox Siberians and was manifested in relation to the aboriginal population, which was perceived as people like themselves and did not think about their extermination (Khromykh 2012, p. 236). In future Christianity was in demand not only in the implementation of spiritual but also social needs: the baptism of infants, wedding, illuminating space, etc. The practice of building churches when building burghs became very common. As early as in the first quarter of XVII century in Siberia, there were 34 churches and 13 monasteries, mostly located in the Western part of the region (Khromykh 2012, p. 302-303).

According to Turner, one of the characteristics of the frontier population was their mobility. The American colonists could fundamentally change the place of residence several times in life. Turner clearly describes how a settler loaded the cart with the skins of animals and other humble belongings and moved to another place. At that, the reasons for migration were often mundane, rather than military. For example, another state or another part of the frontier offered the best land lease conditions.

At the same time, for the Russian people, the development of Siberia was closely associated with ideas about the labor activities, and primarily, agricultural labor. The value of agricultural labor was established as one of the constants in the ethnic consciousness. Cultural and economic type of agriculture was brought by Russian settlers to Siberia, where it was not so common before. Although at the beginning of the XVII century, the number of peasants living in Siberia was less than industrial and service class people (about 17.3% of the total number of Siberian inhabitants), they were the most stable and dynamically developing class of the Siberian frontier and according to M. Yadrinsev were the main representatives of colonization in the East (Yadrinsev 2003, p. 167). Agriculture was an important job for other groups of population. The arable land was acquired by almost all the frontiersmen regardless of their social class: the Cossacks, Siberian nobles and their children, tradespeople, etc.

At the same time, when talking about social mobility, numerous examples are found in the study of the sources describing the formation of Siberian Cozakkdom, which was the service class, the most demanded in the conditions of the frontier. The lack of people led to the fact that the Cozakkdom was actively replenished by

descents from various social groups – the exiled Polish confederates, newly-baptized men, townspeople, and peasants (Bykonya, 2007). At the same time, service class people were drawn into paperwork, because there was lack of specially trained people since administrative staff in the new territories was just formed. Service class people, who formed the “strike force” of the frontier, performed in general many different functions, not typical to representatives of their social group in Central Russia. They collected taxes, built burghs, monitored the internal order, etc.

Both the American frontier in the early XVII century and the Siberian frontier where characterized by meeting of two cultural systems – the “civilized” (American and Russian) and native (Indian and Siberian) worlds. Cultural differences were manifested during the interaction of the systems at both frontiers. For each system the other one was an important external stimulus. Both American and Russian frontiersmen, who have found themselves at the frontier, could not fail to feel the influence of another aboriginal culture.

However, unlike the American frontier, pre-existing model of adaptation of Russian frontiersmen was based on the establishment of a dialogue with the indigenous population. Researchers note the complementarity of Russian frontiersmen during the colonization of the Volga Region and the Urals. “Russian long live in the dwellings of the natives, drink and eat together with them from the same vessels, marry “women of different faiths”, “sponge children”, and “visit each other’s homes” (Nikitin 2010, p. 82). In the context of the Siberian frontier, this was common practice.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The dialogue was not the only form of relationship between Russian explorers and Siberian tribes. There were many known examples of conflict relations, manifested in the form of military clashes between frontiersmen and local population. The main reason for the clashes of the local population and the Russian people was the fur-trade.

The inclusion of the territories, newly colonized in the economic system of the U.S., into an active coastal trade was accompanied by the building of roads and channels on the great American rivers. This gradually brought new lands not only to economic but also to political life. And over time some parts of the frontier became dominant in the regional politics of the state.

Highlighting the peculiarities of the Siberian frontier, A.D. Ageev indicates three important factors: climate, space, and capitals (Ageev 1997, p. 30) The development of Siberia from the very beginning was under the “patronage” of the Russian state that in literature got the name of the trade-industrial colonization (i.e. development). In the course of such colonization the vast intact natural resources of the land served for a long time the interests of industrialists, merchants, feudal

nobility, and the state as well, its interests towards financial strengthening and enhancing foreign trade relations with the countries of Asia and Europe.

The state (treasury) collected annually a huge amount of valuable skins and furs from Siberian peoples (in the European part of Russia, fur tribute was collected only from the Perm “foreigners”) through the levy of tribute, tithes duties – from trading and industrial people, purchase from individuals, exchange of beads, bugle, flour, etc. with the Siberian yasak, confiscation of illegally acquired furs from the waywodes and service-men, and other ways. The fur was not only used for sale, but served expensive state gift for sovereign rulers of foreign countries, as well as gift to imperial dignitaries for their service. It was given also to service class people instead of salary.

Now let get back to Turner’s main thesis which can be undoubtedly used when talking about the history of development of Siberia: “the frontier created America.” The American frontier occurred on Indian lands where there was no state mechanism, while the Indians have lived under tribal system. Russia emerged on a land with a hundred years of experience in state life.

CONCLUSION

The Turner frontier thesis explained why the American people and American government were so different from Europeans. Unlike their predecessors, who sought the origins of American institutions in the European tradition, Turner argued that exactly the frontier was the decisive factor that has shaped the American character, whereas the availability of free land in the West was the main driving force behind the development of America. It is at the frontier, where “barbarism” meets with civilization, there was “intense and effective Americanization” of newcomers and their adaptation to new environmental conditions. It is the collision with the “barbarism”, a meeting of the colonist with the “savage” shaped the U.S. society and led to the development of the spirit of individualism and strengthening of American democracy.

In a professional sense, the frontier thesis is an example of productive historical-geographical approach, whose heuristic value stimulated research of frontier and border areas of many eras and regions, and thus it may be partially applicable to the study of the development of Siberia in XVI-XVIII centuries.

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