

Evergreen Imperialism: The Making of the Tsarist “Tropics” in the South Caucasus

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Abstract

In the early 19th century, Tsarist Russia extended its rule over the territories south of the Caucasus Mountains, large swathes of which had an environment that differed sharply from the rest of the empire. Broad segments of the Russian society believed that this southernmost imperial possession, with its warm climate, abundant sunshine, and evergreen vegetation would serve as a breeding ground for tropical plantation crops, much sought after by metropolitan commerce, medicine, and industry. In doing so, they advocated the vision of the South Caucasus as Russia’s own nearly tropical mercantile colony. By the turn of the century, decades of acclimatization efforts done by learned societies, botanical gardens, experimental stations, state-run estates, large enterprises, and private entrepreneurs had brought resounding success, turning the eastern Black Sea coast into an area of cultivation of “exotic” plants, including extensive plantations of tea. The talk will explore how, in the absence of colonies in the tropics, the Russian Empire invented a quasi-tropical realm of its own in the South Caucasus and became an unexpected participant in the global network of inter-tropical transfers of plants.

Bio

Oleksandr Polianichev has his Ph.D. from the European University Institute in Florence (2017). Since 2019, he has been a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University in Stockholm. He is a historian of Tsarist Russia with a focus on the Caucasus. His research interests are broadly related to empire, colonialism, trade, and environment. Currently, he is working on the project “Tropics of Tsardom: Plants and Empire in the South Caucasus, 1880s-1917,” funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and focusing on the acclimatization of tropical and subtropical vegetation on the eastern Black Sea coast. His most recent publication is a chapter “A Rada for the Empire: An Invented Tradition of Cossack Self-Governance during the 1905 Revolution,” in Ivan Sablin and Egas Moniz-Bandeira, eds., *Planting Parliaments in Eurasia: Lineages, Concepts, and Mythologies* (London: Routledge, 2021).