

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Czars, Encounters, and Misunderstandings: The Russian Empire in
American Travel Writing, 1891–1914**

Maksim Pelmegov

Dissertation supervisor: Dr. Tibor Glant



University of Debrecen

Doctoral School of Linguistics, Literary and Cultural Studies

Debrecen

2025

The antecedents and objectives of the dissertation

This thesis sets out to examine how American travelers to the Russian Empire perceived and presented it in published travel narratives from the year of the publication of George Kennan's infamous two-volume *Siberia and the Exile System* (1891), based on his articles to the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, until the First World War, the conflict that had profound consequences for the world and led to the collapse of the Russian Empire. The initial idea was to study both American and Russian travelogues about one another at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The sheer amount of material and the limits set on the length of the thesis eventually prompted me to focus only on the American side.

While there is an immense volume of works on Russian-American diplomatic or economic relations, and many scholars claimed that Kennan's exposé of the exile system had a profound negative influence on American and, more broadly, Western perceptions of Russia, few explored what was written by travelers after Kennan.

Several studies, such as those by David Foglesong, David Engerman, and Viktoriya Zhuravleva, offered both inspiration and authoritative insights on the image of late tsarist Russia in the United States. But the topic of American travel writing about the empire received little attention. The only two books dedicated directly to the subject were published by Anna Babey in 1938 and Margarita Marinova in 2011. Babey's work, while outlining major topics of American travel writing on Russia and offering an immense bibliography of identified travelers

and their writings, often did not go beyond mere citations from the introduced texts. Marinova's work focused primarily on American and Russian intellectuals and novelists from the mid-1860s until 1905. But the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw monumental improvements in travel, allowing journalists, businessmen, doctors, engineers, and others from the growing middle class to travel abroad and publish their impressions for the home audience. Yet dozens of accounts written by the representatives of these social groups remain unexamined and are mostly forgotten by both the scholarship and the Russians and the Americans of today.

With this in mind, the objective of this dissertation can be summarized as follows: to examine how American visitors to the Russian Empire presented the country in travel materials published between 1891 and 1914, the period of gradual emergence of modern mass tourism, taking into consideration the historical background. More specifically, the goals are to identify the major topics in their writings; to present how American travelogues resembled or differed from one another in their conclusions based on the social status of the traveler, the goals of the trip, knowledge of the language of the destination country, the region of one's travels, and other factors; to point out similarities and differences between turn-of-the-century travelogues and Kennan's writings on Russia along with earlier, post-Civil War American travel writing; and to explore how travelers reflected the culture of their home country by writing about Russia.

Methodology

Considering that travel writing is a diverse field of study and that it requires a different perspective in the case of major power travel encounters rather than empire-colony interactions, this thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of history, literary, and cultural studies and applies general methods of travel writing studies. Infrequently employed by travel writing scholars, this dissertation puts special emphasis on the historical context in addition to providing a general overview of contacts and relations between Russia and the U.S. at the turn of the century. It provides a biography of all travelers included, with an emphasis on their respective social backgrounds, knowledge of the destination country's language, and goals and means of travel. Travel accounts are examined primarily based on their major topics and their comparison with one another, along with evaluations of the independence and coherence of the texts and specific writing techniques.

There are several key theoretical concepts that were employed in this thesis. Edward Said's monumental *Orientalism* had special importance. Although Said introduced the American vision of the Orient only from the Second World War, his concept of Orientalism as a discourse or "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" is more than applicable when discussing American perceptions of the Czar's Central Asian possessions. Ideas presented by Larry Wolff in his *Inventing Eastern Europe* proved to be

equally relevant. Wolff argued that in a way similarly to the “appropriation” of the East, Western scholars and travelers of the Enlightenment defined, mapped, organized, and overall invented both a geographic and a philosophical concept of Eastern Europe, including Russia, altering the older imaginary division of the continent between the south and the north. He stated that the most important concept was the “civilization”/barbarity dichotomy based on the overall scale of development, and Eastern Europe as a whole was placed in between them. The Western perception of the region as neither equally “civilized,” nor completely backward found its expression in American travelogues on Russia as well. In connection with Wolff, this dissertation applies the concept of “triangulation” when it comes to frequent American evaluations of Russia through the lens of Western Europe. A final important concept was borrowed from Jackson Lears, a scholar who examined American anti-modernist thought, including in his *Rebirth of a Nation*. He investigated how in the decades following the Civil War many Americans felt increasingly troubled by urbanization, immigration, the accumulation of wealth, and other factors, and how, influenced by the idea of Protestant conversion and rebirth, they sought personal and national rejuvenation. Fearing the rapid vanishing of the old ways, many longed for a more genuine, even if less modern, lifestyle, and suggested diverse ways for America at large to face the age of modernity.

The delimitation of the dissertation topic

Both articles and book-length accounts are examined in this thesis. They were considered part of the primary source corpus if their major topic was travel and if they were wholly or at least to a reasonable degree about a visit to Russia. This dissertation had to exclude memoirs, social or political treatises about Russia without the presence of travel, as well as the materials or official reports of scientific expeditions (however, the latter were consulted in some cases). It also leans toward travelogues written by Americans who were not permanent residents in Russia, since the latter's perception of the country alters fundamentally from casual or even frequent travelers, and since I was specifically interested in how the residents of the U.S. reflected their countrymen's culture. This dissertation employs a thematic and a regional approach simultaneously, and it is divided into three parts and a total of seven chapters. The first chapter provides a background to American travel writing on Russia at the turn of the century – with an overview of Russian-American relations and contacts at that time and a brief discussion of topics and impressions in earlier American travel writing. It also attempts to identify the preconceptions American travelers had about Russia before visiting it based on two other sources – geography textbooks and travel guides. The second chapter focuses not only on Kennan's prominent study of the exile system but on all of his published travel accounts, three in a period of four decades. The second part of the thesis delves into American travel accounts responding to two major events in the empire at the turn of the

century – the famine of 1891–1892, when individual Americans organized a relief campaign and sent five steamers with food and necessities to Russia alongside relief commissioners, and American reports on the 1905 Revolution. In these cases, Americans traveled primarily within European Russia. The final part examines journeys to three non-European areas of the empire – Siberia via the Trans-Siberian Railway, Russian Turkestan, and the Northern Pacific. In the case of the latter, both Russian and American travel accounts were analyzed since this area represented a space of mutual travel encounters, and because the discussed authors there described the same area, at the same time, and even met each other and noted down this encounter in their travelogues.

The results of the dissertation

The analysis of American travel writing published after Kennan’s exposé of the exile system offers to reevaluate the commonplace scholarly statement that it was Kennan’s key text that had a considerable negative impact on the American perception of Russia. While Kennan did have a substantial influence upon the perceptions of later visitors, the thesis argues that it was not only his exile system study that had a profound influence on how later American visitors saw the empire but also another, rather overlooked but continuously popular travelogue, *Tent Life in Siberia* (1870, with a revised edition in 1910). The examination of all of his travel narratives reveals the dynamic evolution of Kennan’s perceptions and what I call the “dual vision” of Russia. In *Tent Life*, a

young and devout Kennan, who spent the years 1865–1867 in Northeastern Siberia working on the failed project of the Russian-American Telegraph, displayed his experience with an evident parallel to the settlement of Western territories at home, and Russia was presented as a “civilization” that was gradually assimilating exotic natives. Yet a few of his comparisons between Russia and America were not in favor of the former, while a portion of his comments on native life contributed to their misunderstanding. When he ventured into Siberia twenty years later to explore the exile system, he already knew Russian but also faced a profound spiritual crisis. He resolved it by embarking upon a zealous crusade in favor of the abused political exiles, at the expense of seriously misinterpreting the Russian anti-tsarist movements. He developed a much more critical image outside of his examinations of penitentiaries. The empire on the whole was deemed to be outside of the real “civilization” that consisted of the U.S. and Western Europe. Unlike in *Tent Life*, Kennan on many occasions showed a self-confident attitude, pointing to the enormous economic potential of Russia and its resources and simultaneously the empire’s failure to develop them, calling for the application of superior American know-how and business skills in developing Siberia. He went as far as suggesting that the well-educated and noble political prisoners he met looked at the U.S. as a model to emulate. From the 1890s onwards, he engaged in a lifelong battle against tsarism. However, despite his continuous criticism of Russian absolutism, in the revised 1910 edition of *Tent Life* Kennan, in his sixties

and with all his experience and expertise on Russian developments, revived the original narrative of Russia as a creative and “civilizing” force, discarding any criticism of the Russian monarchy, its treatment of exiles, or its inability to develop the country. What might be seen as a paradox can, perhaps, be illuminated when one takes into consideration that the aging Kennan grew conservative in response to the advent of modernity in his home country. Republishing his popular, decades-old tales of tough life in the north among natives reflects his own and his compatriots’ discomfort about America’s development and longing for a frontier-era experience and polar travel that tested one’s character.

The travelers who came to the empire after Kennan reflected the growth of the middle class and the emergence of travel writing as a popular and respected genre, with one of the discussed visitors being a professional travel writer. However, they came primarily from Eastern or Midwestern states, similarly to most post-Civil War travelers. The common topics that figured in most travelogues correlated with those in Kennan’s accounts and earlier American travel writing on Russia. Apart from comments on travel conditions and conventional descriptions of nature, villages, or cities, the authors often made remarks on the Russian peasantry or other social groups like nobles or Cossacks, religion and the Orthodox Church, and Russian domestic policy (including the monarchy and the exile system). However, just as Russia embraced early industrialization, and railroads appeared in non-European regions, new topics emerged, including natives and Russian policy both in Siberia and

Central Asia, while the old ones were debated and reconsidered. Naturally, those who visited Russia during the famine in the early 1890s and the 1905 Revolution presented commentary on the state of the country in those unique circumstances. Other accounts discussed the then relevant international affairs, especially in East or Central Asia, and thus reflected the growth of American attention to Asia and foreign relations in general.

The travelers who visited Russia after Kennan reiterated an ambivalent image of the empire in line with its “dual vision.” They continued to judge Russia through the lens of “civilization,” its development, and comparisons with the U.S. and Europe (triangulation) or more generally the West/East dichotomy. Those who witnessed the empire during the famine (the relief commissioners, such as newspaper editor William Edgar and businessmen Rudolph Blankenburg and Francis Reeves, the latter also involved in ecclesiastical work) and the revolution (journalist Stanley Washburn and one of the so-called “gentlemen socialists” Kellogg Durland) and traveled mostly within European Russia evaluated the country based on triangulation with Western Europe more frequently. They presented it as more backward or outside of Western “civilization,” similarly to Western evaluations of Eastern Europe shown by Wolff and like Kennan in his oeuvre on the exile system. Some of them echoed Kennan in presenting Russians as wishing to pursue the American way of development and/or offered advice on what Russians should do to overcome their problems. Yet the

visitors who explored Asian regions, especially those who tried the Trans-Siberian Railway (the selected authors include businessman John Bookwalter, military surgeon Nicholas Senn, and civil engineer Lindon Bates, Jr.), drew constant parallels with the “taming” of the American West or the settlement of the American continent. These visitors echoed Kennan’s *Tent Life* in lauding the “civilizing” march of Russia and praised the development of those distant regions, thinking of the empire as part of the West, with an Orientalist discourse present in Russian Turkestan when analyzing the writings of the already mentioned John Bookwalter and diplomat, journalist, and professional travel writer William Curtis. Finally, another major point made in *Tent Life* was often reiterated, regardless of the circumstances, the region of journey, or thoughts about the empire in general – that Russians were inevitably hospitable to Americans and happy to see them. In sum, the image of Russia in American travel writing, both in Kennan’s narratives and those written later, was complex and ambivalent, rather than wholly or increasingly negative.

Yet American travelogues on Russia revealed just as much, if not more, about the “Self” as the “Other.” A look at the content of the travelogues with the knowledge of Russian history in mind leaves one perplexed, as mistakes, simplifications, exaggerations, and questionable parallels were plenty. Many travelers revealed a Manichean look at Russia and the outside world in general, coupled with statements that revealed general unawareness of real developments. It transpires that,

with the rise of their country as an economic leader and increasingly a major power in the world, in many cases they thought of their historical experience as a standard and projected it on Russia. Many of them, like Kennan in his study of the exile system, outlined the empire's rich resources that could be developed by U.S. businesses, acting as supporters of increasing American economic presence in Russia, regardless of the region of travel, showcasing what I call the "imperial view." Although fewer travelers suggested a religious transformation of Russia, it is undeniable that, with many comments on Orthodoxy and its influence on common people, the American outlook on the empire had not only secular but also deep Protestant roots, especially considering that the turn of the century saw monumental American missionary efforts to bring Protestant Christianity to the rest of the world.

The two major notions on American culture revealed by travel accounts seem to be its exclusionary character in that period and the struggle between modernist and anti-modernist beliefs. The majority of travel accounts were written by whites and Christians, often middle-class, and, simply put, were intended for the same audience. The mere opportunity to travel abroad and publications on this experience served not only to mold how all Americans should perceive the world but to avow and reinforce the position of this group in American society at the expense of exclusion and derogatory remarks about others, ranging from immigrants and African Americans to Jews. In other words, travel did turn into knowledge, power, and the assertion of domestic authority. Few

challenged strengthening beliefs in the hierarchy of races and cultures at home or the superiority of the more progressive and “civilized” West over the rest. And yet, some travel accounts about Russia showcase deep concerns of Americans about the developments in their country, ranging from excessive urbanization to the power of corporations and wealth. For all the rhetoric about American business opportunities and Russian development, for several authors, especially those who tried the Trans-Siberian Railway and often drew parallels with the closed American frontier, the empire offered a sort of pre-modern space. There they could get away from “overcivilization” in favor of a more genuine lifestyle and find something resembling the traditions rapidly vanishing at home. The travelogues about Siberia, as well as a special case of the engineer and miner Washington Vanderlip, Jr., who went to the same area in Northeastern Siberia where Kennan worked in the 1860s to find gold and lived among local natives, suggest that many Americans, whether travelers or readers, did indeed long for personal, spiritual, and national rejuvenation. In the case of Russia, it was most often connected with the values and the romanticized past experience of the American frontier. In other words, Russia not only was praised or criticized compared to the U.S. or Europe, but simultaneously played the role of the object of the American mission for some and the source of values that America itself, with its rapid change at the turn of the century, was missing or rapidly losing for others.

Conference Papers

- 1) *The Trans-Siberian Railway in American Travel Writing, 1900–1903* (15th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, 27–29 January 2022)
- 2) *Gold Rush in the Cold: Russian Far East Expeditions in Russian-American Travel Writing, 1898–1900* (16th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English, University of Miskolc, 26–28 January 2023)
- 3) *Rye Bread and Friendship: Russian Famine of 1891–1892 and American Relief Officials’ Travel Writing* (11th World Congress of the International American Studies Association, University of Silesia in Katowice, 07–10 September 2023)
- 4) *Deserts, Natives, and Sylvan Cities: Russian Turkestan in American Travel Writing, 1890s–1910s* (24th International Colloquium of American Studies & Biennial Conference of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies, University of Ostrava, 05–06 October 2023)
- 5) Presentation of the doctoral project during the Annual Spring Academy Conference (Heidelberg Center for American Studies, University of Heidelberg, 18–22 March 2024)

- 6) *A Visit to the Exhibition of All Nations: The Image of the United States in Vasily Sidorov's Travel Writing* (20th Maple Leaf and Eagle Conference, University of Helsinki, 14–17 May 2024)
- 7) *Greatness or Instability? The Chicago World's Fair and the United States in Nikolai Ziorov's Travel Writing* (14th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association for American Studies, University of Szeged, 24–25 May 2024)
- 8) Presentation of the doctoral project during the Doctoral Symposium of the European Society for the Study of English (University of Lausanne, 27–28 August 2024)
- 9) *A Railroad Defining Russian Future: The Trans-Siberian Railway in Nicholas Senn's "Around the World via Siberia" (1902)* (Conference of the European Society for the Study of English, University of Lausanne, 26–30 August 2024)



Registry number: DEENK/547/2025.PL
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Maksim Pelmegov

Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

MTMT ID: 10100888

List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

1. **Pelmegov, M.:** Deserts, Natives, and Sylvan Cities: Russian Turkestan in American Travel Writing, 1890s - 1910s.
Pro&Contra. 2, 5-32, 2023. EISSN: 2630-8916.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33033/pc.2023.2.5>
2. **Pelmegov, M.:** Reviews: Russia and America: Remembering Bondage Together.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 29 (2), 460-464, 2023. ISSN: 1218-7364.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30608/hjeas/2023/29/2/14>
3. **Pelmegov, M.:** Gold Rush in the Cold: Russian Far East Expeditions in Russian-American Travel Writing, 1898-1900.
Eger J. Am. Stud. 17, 107-123, 2022. ISSN: 1786-2337.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33036/EJAS.2023.107>

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

4. **Pelmegov, M.:** A Visit to the Exhibition of All Nations: The Chicago World's Fair and the United States in Vasily Sidorov's Travel Writing.
Journal of Russian American Studies. 8 (2), 52-78, 2024. EISSN: 2473-7348.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17161/jras.v8i2.23088>

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

16 October, 2025

