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### Title

Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper (review)

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4b86x0ps>

### Journal

Journal of World History, 36(1)

### ISSN

1045-6007

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### Publication Date

2025-03-01

### DOI

10.1353/jwh.2025.a950288

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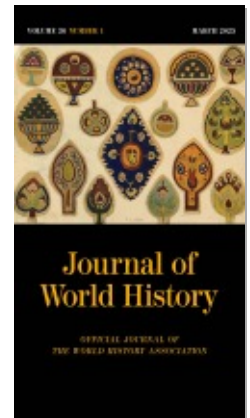
*Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia* by  
Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper (review)

Leonardo Moreno-Alvarez

Journal of World History, Volume 36, Number 1, March 2025, pp.  
165-168 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2025.a950288>



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incompatibility of terms.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, on a final reading of the book it is hard to not find law, especially international law, as not much but cynical rationalizations and cover over done deeds—International law as the scion of imperial laws is left as perhaps the greatest work in the “prose of counterinsurgency.”<sup>6</sup>

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*Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia.* By JANE BURBANK and FREDERICK COOPER. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. xiii + 301 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-25037-3. \$35.00/£30.00 (hardcover).

In the final chapter of their award-winning *Empires in World History*, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper engaged with several questions about the aftermath of imperial collapses: How did the political turmoil of the twentieth century affect empires? How do former imperial centers and former colonies make sense of their past as they attempt to move towards a new political future? How did the perception of colonialism as a political ideology during the twentieth century? Burbank and Cooper—NYU professors emeriti and winners of the 2023 Toynbee Prize—have returned to some of these questions in *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia*. In this book, the authors trace a highly readable map of ideas through which politicians and intellectuals from former colonial powers, as well as from former colonies, imagined alternatives to imperialism in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars. By going beyond traditional continental divisions, these three concepts “addressed a critical political issue of their times—the power of the world’s great empires and the uncertainty of how to escape and supersede them” (p. 14).

<sup>5</sup> Many are cited by Benton: Samuel Moyn, *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021); Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Chapter 1 deals with the concept of “Eurasia,” mainly through the writings of early-twentieth-century authors N. S. Trubetskoi and Petr Savitskii. Writing after the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in Russia, and in reaction against the nascent Soviet state, these authors presented Eurasianism as an alternative to Western European imperialism. The multiplicity of cultures of the Eurasian steppes that once had been controlled by nomadic conquerors was an alternative to the purported universalism of “Romano-German” empires. In this way, Eurasianism, as a political ideology, attempted to simultaneously criticize European imperialism and valorize Asian difference—in a way that was still favorable to Russian interests.

Chapter 2, “Eurafrica,” focuses on the conceptual integration of Europe and Africa from a point of view, not of difference, but of complementarity. Both African and French leaders used the concept to imagine very different post-war (and post-imperial) political order that included former French colonies within the post-war European order. Politicians as different as like Charles DeGaulle and Léopold Senghor favored forms of French federalism, albeit very different in the degree of autonomy they envisioned for the inhabitants of the former colonies. The authors explain very clearly how, for French politicians, the idea of Eurafrica was an attempt at retaining integration with the former colonies after the end of empire, while for its African proponents, the idea was “a demand for redistribution of resources and power” (pp. 145, 150). By the end of the 1950s, however, it had become clear that the discussions about a new European Economic Union would not take African voices about the future government of the continent into account.

The intellectuals and politicians behind the concept of Afroasia, the focus of the third chapter of the book, did not have an interest in complementarity but rather sought to fully leave European influence and its colonial legacy behind. This is the longest and most ambitious chapter of the volume, which traces the development of international solidarity networks from the 1920s until the 1980s. The authors give detailed accounts of the role of international organizations like the League Against Imperialism (1927–1937), the Bandung Conference (1955), the Non-Aligned Movement (est. 1961), and the OSPAAAL (1966–2019) in reinforcing the ideas of self-determination and state sovereignty and, in the end, presenting colonialism as an unacceptable ideology in international relations. Like the movements themselves, this chapter expands well beyond the geographical limits of Asia and Africa, eventually opening a space for the participation of Latin American countries which, unlike many of the Asian and African

countries, had gained statehood during the first wave of decolonization of the early nineteenth century, but had nevertheless remained in a condition of subordination to former colonial powers.

The wider scope of this chapter makes tracing a continuous line of the development of ideas more challenging than in other chapters. The authors, however, present a clear argument about how the differences in goals and methods among representatives of former colonies, as well as other contradictions, made these kind of international cooperation projects slowly crumble through the 1970s and 1980s. By the latter decade, these international solidarity movements had lost the power they had possessed after the end of the Second World War. Furthermore, by then “development” had replaced “sovereignty” as the primordial concept in international political discourse.

Chapter 4, “Eurasia Redux,” deals with the return of Eurasianism as a political ideology in the 1990s, after the second collapse of a Russian empire in the twentieth century. Post-Soviet Eurasianism emerged as an alternative to the federalist option under one-party rule that had existed for several decades. Burbank and Cooper show a direct genealogy between the Eurasianists of the 1920s and those active in the 1990s. The most important of the latter were, Lev Gumilev (son of the poet Anna Akhmatova and author of outlandish theories linking ethnic and political formations to cosmic rays), and Alexander Dugin, who presented the creation of a Russian Eurasian Empire (closely linked to Orthodox Christianity) as the fulfillment of Russia’s “National idea” (p. 243). This new variety of Eurasianism did not try to eliminate imperialism, but rather attempted to redefine a geographic space as one of (Russian) civilizational continuity opposed not to a vague “West” but to a more specific “Atlantic.” A short conclusive chapter 5, “Reflections,” revisits the arguments of the book and summarizes the significance of the three political concepts studied in it.

In *Post-Imperial Possibilities*, Burbank and Cooper have written a book that will be of interest to scholars of imperialism and colonialism on a global perspective, regardless of area of specialization. Although the authors readily admit that this book is a history of the thought of political and intellectual elites, the ideas explored in this book decisively show the importance of studying contingencies, paths not taken, and lesser-known branches of political thought. As the authors make clear from the dedication of the book (to the people of Ukraine) and from the first pages of their introduction, one of the most consequential aspects of the post-Soviet Neo-Eurasianism of Gumilev and Dugin is the influence that this ideology gradually gained over the

thought of Vladimir Putin, who used the idea of a historical destiny linking Russia to the steppe lands of Eurasia as justification for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, in February 2022, for the invasion of Ukraine. World historians would thus be remiss to ignore the impact that once-marginal ideas can have.

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