The Russian Empire

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INTRODUCTION: NATIONALISM AND EMPIRE
ON THE EVE OF THE WAR

The Russian Empire well deserved its place at the table of Great Powers. Though Muscovy was only a modest East European principality in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it expanded in size and influence throughout the modern age. The famous tsars (Caesars)—Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great—were all ambitious imperial conquerors. Ivan seized the Volga River and opened the pathways to Asia. Peter slogged his way to victory in the north and founded a new capital on the edge of the Baltic. Catherine annexed half of Poland and firmly established Russian power on the northern coast of the Black Sea. Their successors consolidated and continued to expand: into Transcaucasia, Central Asia, northern China, and to the edge of the Balkan Peninsula. By the end of the nineteenth century, Russia was the largest empire in the world, covering one-sixth of the dry land on earth. And, despite the access to waterways that military conquest had opened up, Russia was very much a dry land empire. Attempts to develop naval power had certain modest local successes (as against Sweden in the Great Northern War), and certain notable failures as well (as against Japan in the Russo-Japanese War). But, in the end, naval weakness and the slow pace at which Russia developed rapid transportation systems meant that Russia’s capacity to project force and power beyond its borders was mostly limited to how far its soldiers could walk.

In a sense, then, Russia was a very large man with very short arms and slow feet: impossible to ignore, very dangerous at close range, but able to be neutralized if one maintained a respectful and wary distance. We should not assume that such a man was clumsy, however. To the contrary, when it came to establishing and maintaining imperial control, the government frequently showed considerable dexterity. The history of the building of the Russian Empire is a history of accommodation as well as a history of force. The grip of our imperial man was reliable: firm when under pressure, relaxed when it suited him. The consolidation of Russian power in conquered regions normally happened by means of extensive co-optation and a resort to arms only when necessary. Indigenous elites retained power in local administrations and courts, and many were brought into the
imperial noble class.¹ The Russian Empire, in other words, fit Charles Maier’s definition of an empire as “a regime that centralized power, but enlist[ed] diverse social and/or ethnic elite in its management.”² This was an empire that succeeded through de facto decentralization and the creation of personal networks of power. Local governors and governors general were responsible for the populations and territories under their control. They maintained bureaucracies, sometimes quite bulky ones, but they derived their authority from the person of the tsar who had appointed them. It was a hierarchical structure of status and authority that ran from the emperor through his nobility to the serfs, townsmen, and other corporate groups within society such as religious and ethnic minorities in Russia’s borderlands.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, several developments made the continuation of this very successful pattern impossible. The fundamental changes brought about by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the ensuing “Great Reforms” opened the door to modern mass politics in Russia. Nationalism was a key mechanism by which mass politics developed over the next fifty years. If most nationalist movements in Eastern Europe were quite small and limited in the first half of the nineteenth century, they began to expand rapidly in the latter half.³ The Polish Rebellion of 1863 and a wave of Ukrainian activism in the 1870s frightened the imperial elite, and when Alexander III took the throne in 1881, he took the dangerous decision to launch a disruptive program of forced assimilation known as “Russification.”⁴ Russification was a failure that led to a significant and angry backlash. It did more to increase ethnic awareness among the masses in the imperial periphery than the diligent work of indigenous ethnographers or political agitators ever had.

The 1890s saw significant political developments. Both in the borderlands and in the center, illegal political parties formed: Polish nationalist parties on the left and right, the Jewish Bund, and the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party to name just a few. In addition, imperial foreign policy changed. The building of the Trans-Siberian Railway allowed politicians and economic elites in St. Petersburg to engage in aggressive fantasies about East Asia. In the very first years of the new century, Russia joined the anti-Boxer coalition, pursued a sphere of influence in Manchuria and on the Liaodong peninsula, and made forays into the Japanese sphere of influence in northern Korea. The resulting disastrous war between Russia and Japan (1904–5) sparked an imperial crisis not only internationally, but domestically as well. Russification, the emergence (and suppression) of mass

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political institutions, and the social ferment typical of a phase of rapid industrialization all produced a very combustible situation, which exploded in the early months of 1905. A serious revolution ensued, one that consumed the entire empire and threatened to topple the tsar. Russian liberal political activists successfully pressed for civil liberties and political freedoms for everyone in the empire, but they focused their attention on “Russian” concerns, such as the creation of a new parliament. Nationalists and socialists also had political aims, but these were not met quite so easily. Right-wing nationalists turned their frustrations on the Jewish populations of Ukraine and Poland, while left-wing nationalists fumed at the injustices of the new “constitutional” imperial regime.

Nevertheless, the genie of political participation and ethnic party mobilization had been released from the bottle, and the years between 1905 and 1914 were filled with complicated political battles regarding ethnicity and the imperial state. Local nationalists sparred with newly invigorated Russian nationalists on issues large and small, most notably regarding the extension of elected local governments (zemstvos) into the western borderlands. In no case, however, was separatist nationalism a real danger for the integrity of the empire. The government had not bowed to nationalists at the moment of crisis in 1905, and it would not do so after the revolutionary wave had passed. If anything, the government insisted even more provocatively on its own imperial prerogatives, as the prime minister Petr Stolypin embraced Russian nationalism as a novel and necessary governing strategy for a modern empire. He was assassinated in the borderlands, at the Kiev Opera House, in 1911.

WAR IN A COLONIZED SPACE, 1914–1916

For the entire course of the Great War on the Eastern Front, the imperial belligerents fought with multi-ethnic armies in colonized spaces. In August 1914, Russia conducted a general mobilization, calling to the colors reservists who had finished their peacetime tours of duty years earlier to join the cadre army in the west. The composition of the army was thus determined by the recruitment choices it had made over the forty years since the adoption of “universal” conscription in 1874. Since the budget was too small to support a truly universal conscription at any time prior to the war, the state had the capacity to make decisions about which imperial subjects would serve. The exemption regime was a conscious one. Draft lottery numbers were far less important than the draft category a particular young man fell into. Some of these selection criteria were individualized: the medical exam, for instance, was an important moment of filtration. Some of them were incentive based, as with the exemptions or special treatment for particular professions. But many of them were ethnopolitical in nature. Finns were exempt from the draft, a point ratified and made clear after a botched attempt to implement

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conscription in 1901. Many peoples in the Caucasus and Transcaucasus were exempt, thanks to fears that arming recently hostile warrior peoples might be unwise. And most ethnic groups in Russian Asia, most notably the recently conquered Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks in Central Asia, were exempted because of doubts as to whether they were sufficiently advanced “civilizationally” to discharge their military duties honorably and forcefully. At the same time, many other ethnic groups—Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Latvians, and so on—were drafted on an equal basis with those in central Russia. Fears of nationalism sometimes led to policies to deploy potentially restive ethnicities on fronts far from their homes, to limit the percentage of them in a given military unit, or to restrict admission to the officer corps, but all of these groups were part and parcel of the imperial Russian army. Jews, as always, were a special case. They were drafted, but they were frequently abused, and they were prohibited from positions of leadership in the army. Many young Jewish men responded by trying to evade the draft, but most served under oppressive conditions both in war and at peace.6

Ethnic issues in the military would play a large role in the accelerating collapse of the empire in 1916 and 1917, but, for the first two years of the war, the imperial issue of greatest importance had to do with civilians. It was a fact of tremendous consequence that the combat zones and deep rears of the fighting armies were all located in colonized spaces. None of the major battles of the Eastern Front occurred in modern-day Russia, Germany, Austria, or Hungary, and only a handful lie in contemporary Turkey. Most took place in what are now Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The result of this colonial battleground is that the Russian army was, in important ways, an army of occupation even when it was fighting on its own side of the 1914 border. This dynamic of military occupation was made more intense by the decision in the first days of the war to declare all of the deep combat zones under martial law. The old system of imperial governance was superseded by military rule in a zone larger in area than Germany, commanded by men with no experience whatsoever with civilian administration.

As a result, the state began to fail. It was this transformation in the state and in governance that had the most impact on the collapse of the empire. War, not nationalist activism, crippled the empire. The rise of separatist nationalism that we will discuss below filled a vacuum created by the failure of the imperial state. That failure was not complete until 1917, but we can see the early stages of it occurring just days into the war. Imperial administrators in the borderlands, some of them experienced, were pushed out of the way. Martial law meant that they had to report to Stavka (General Headquarters) in addition to their civilian ministries in Petrograd. This confusion of authority, combined with the danger of capture by German forces, led many to flee even before major combat operations started. The ones who stayed faced perilous situations. The case of State Councillor Agafonov, the chief of the Polish border district of Nieszawa, was common. He did his best

6 These issues are discussed at length in Joshua A. Sanborn, Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925 (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).
to perform his duties during mobilization, ensuring that men and horses went to
the collection point in Kutno a bit under 100 kilometres away, and then organized
a mass prayer service on the town square of Nieszawa on 5 August 1914. A German
detachment of 200-50 men traipsing the Vistula River landed around the town
during the service, surrounding it and sending the population into a panic. Aga­
fonov was held hostage by the Germans, forced to announce various decrees, and
threatened repeatedly. When the Germans retreated a couple of weeks later, he fled
Nieszawa, first to Kutno, and then to Warsaw.7 In Warsaw, he joined many other
shaken civilian officials, most of whom had fled earlier in order to avoid his fate or
worse.

With imperial administrators stripped away, only two possible sources of gov­
ernance remained: military authorities or local authorities who remained in their
homes. These two groups—one of them heavily armed, largely Russian, and im­
perial; the other composed of unarmed local elites, many of them with nationalist
sympathies—would have an uneasy relationship. Somewhat surprisingly, the locals
did most of the governing. Stavka had no civilian administration office at the start
of the war, and it took them weeks to get even a bare-bones operation off the
ground. With no personnel and little idea of what they were doing, they were in­
effective. Combat troops on the ground intersected with local civilians, but in
haphazard ways. The opportunity arose for local elites, especially in Poland, to
govern, and they took advantage of it up and down the border zone.8 If we can
identify a moment when the institutional seedlings of new independent states were
first planted on the territory of the Russian Empire, it was here in the first days of
the war.

This is not to say that the army played no role in local civilian life. To the con­
trary, it was enormously important, but often in ways that undermined state power
and social stability, and thus the imperial system as well. There were two major
areas that the army meddled in with pernicious results: the economy and ethnopo­
litical relationships in the borderlands. The transformation of the imperial economy
at war is a large (and understudied) topic. I will touch here only upon the issue that
was most evident and important to civilians and statesmen alike: inflation.
Everyone in a position of power knew that the emergency situation created by
the war could lead to rising prices. Unfortunately, very few of them understood the
deep and inexorable reasons for inflation. Supply shrank as international trade evap­
orated, workers were mobilized into the army, and violent extraction made trade
dangerous. Demand increased, especially on the part of the massive army now
living in the borderlands. So too did the fiscal situation require the Ministry of
Finance to pursue inflationary policies in order to facilitate the feeding and

7 "Dokladnaia zapiska Nachal'nika Neschavskago uezda Statskogo Sovetnika Agafonova," n.d. (but
after 16/29 August 1914), Gosudarstvennyi arkhip Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), fond (f.) 217, opis
(op.) 1, delo (d.) 304, listy (l.) 213–15ob.

8 These developments are treated in further depth in Joshua Sanborn, "Military Occupation and
Social Unrest: Daily Life in Russian Poland at the Start of World War I," in Golfo Alexopolous, Julie
Hessler, and Kiril Tomoff (eds), Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography
equipping of the military. Nevertheless, the consensus in the military, the civilian realm, and a surprisingly large sector of the tsar’s administration was that the core reason for wartime inflation was price gouging by irresponsible speculators. Thus, some of the first edicts issued by civilian authorities like Agafonov and later military commanders were commands to tradespeople to keep their prices fixed. Officials issued extensive lists indicating the maximum prices that merchants could charge and promised dire consequences if those prices were raised. Fear of speculation also led them to arrest any merchants they found warehousing goods, as they suspected that they were saving them only to create artificial shortages that would justify higher prices. These policies gutted the borderland economy, as they made it increasingly difficult for trade to occur. Many merchants fled or went out of business. New entrepreneurs tended to work the now flourishing black market. The response by the government was to double down on their policies, not only in the borderlands, but also deep within the empire, where the ravages of inflation soon spread.

This anti-trading sentiment, in the context of both historical anti-Semitism and the more modern brand that had matured in the last decade before the war, was bound to be inextricably tied to a campaign against the Jews of the western borderland. Again, this was deeply influenced by the new conditions of the war. The campaign was spearheaded by the Russian army, especially General Ianushkevich, the Chief of Staff at Stavka. As Eric Lohr has pointed out, the army was involved in “nearly every pogrom” in 1915. Jews were threatened, persecuted, beaten, arrested, murdered, and deported in large numbers, and local officials and civilians frequently took part in the assaults. When civilians took a major role, economic frustrations rooted in inflation were often central to the conflict. But this campaign was only the most evident sign of a larger shift in ethnopolitics. The imperial government had rightly been wary of mobilizing ethnicities prior to the war, looking anxiously even at the activities of Russian nationalist groups that supported the monarchy. That restraint disappeared virtually the moment that war was declared. A massive campaign to expropriate ethnic German property developed over the course of the war. “Ruthenians” in Galicia were encouraged to embrace their non-Austrian identities. Polish, Georgian, and Armenian volunteers were allowed to form ethnic military units after years in which such a step was forbidden. Prisoner-of-war camps were combed through and sorted by ethnic group, and Slavic prisoners from the Austro-Hungarian armies were placed in better conditions and urged to unite to support the cause of the Entente.

If this was the situation in territories on the Russian side of the border, the situation in the occupied zones of Austrian Galicia was even more problematic.

10 The most extensive descriptions of the atrocities were recorded by a Jewish aid worker at the time. S. Ansky, The Enemy at his Pleasure: A Journey through the Jewish Pale of Settlement during World War I (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).
11 Lohr, “1915 and the War Pogrom Paradigm in the Russian Empire,” 47.
Price control policies were identical on both sides of the border, but the army’s administrators wreaked even more havoc by instituting unreasonable exchange rates between Russian and Austrian currencies. In addition, the third economy of looting and requisitions was much more pronounced in foreign occupied territories than it was on the Russian side of the border. By the end of 1914, much of the local population, even the Slavic portion of the population, lived in fear and resentment of Russian troops. The ethnopolitical situation became more pronounced there too, as military extremists and various other religious and political fanatics swarmed into Galicia in an attempt to remake it in their own image. With no countervailing institutions to slow them down, the only brake on their behavior was the troubled new governor general of the occupied territories, Count Georgii Bobrin'ski. Bobrin'ski was no liberal, but he was alarmed by extremism. In the end, he too lost control of the situation and ended up blamed for many of the policies he had resisted. The occupation was a total disaster, alienating potential friends and weakening Russian power in significant ways.

All of this came crashing down in 1915. The Austro-German offensive that began along the Gorlice–Tarnów line under General Mackensen in the spring of 1915 was wildly successful, driving Russian troops and occupying forces not only out of the Galician territories they had conquered in 1914, but deep into the Russian Empire as well. By the end of the summer, Russia had lost all of its Polish territories and big chunks of contemporary Ukraine. The army had been pushed back into the Lake Narach area of Belarus and to the gates of Riga in Latvia. The old Russian Empire would never return to Poland (though it would, briefly, to parts of Austrian Galicia), but the experience of ethnic mobilization, local governance, and finally military organization would become tremendously important for nationalist elites in the years to come.

In the imperial metropole, the military defeats of 1915 deeply undermined the legitimacy of the tsarist regime and tore at the fabric of Russian society. The political opposition, which had decided in a burst of patriotic spirit in 1914 to support the tsarist regime, changed course in 1915. It faulted the government not only for the shoddy leadership that helped lead to the military disasters, but also for its handling of civilian affairs. The stream of refugees and deportees that flowed to central Russia and Siberia in 1914 turned into a torrent over the course of the summer of 1915. They joined the tens of thousands of Armenian refugees who had fled to Russian territory for protection during the Turkish-sponsored genocide of that same year. Of the six million displaced persons, more than half had been driven away between April and September 1915. Local authorities and civilian ministers alike worried that these migrants would spread disease, put a burden on the economy, and bring the chaos of the front lines tangibly home. In many ways,

12 Peter Holquist, "The Role of Personality in the First (1914–1915) Russian Occupation of Galicia and Bukovina," in Dekel-Chen et al. (eds), Anti-Jewish Violence, 54.
they were not mistaken. But there were other unexpected effects as well. Most of
the refugees, being civilians from the borderlands, were not ethnically Russian. As
they arrived into the foreign territory of the Russian central provinces, impover­
ished and endangered, they turned to one another and their own political elites for
help. As a result, refugeedom quickly became a nationalizing experience, as Polish,
Latvian, Armenian, Jewish, and other ethnic aid societies took on the main tasks
of organizing relief.14 The “refugee question” was just one of the troubled political
issues that highlighted the imperial dimension of the war to Russian politicians
and public activists. The disaster of the Galician occupation, the Armenian geno­
cide, the raising of ethnic military units, the attempts to undermine enemy em­
pires through nationalist recruitment in prisoner-of-war camps (and through
intelligence operations): all these were key features of the growing political crisis.
That crisis now had to be fully understood not simply as a question of autocratic
legitimacy, but as an imperial crisis full blown.

That crisis was temporarily eased between the fall of 1915 and the summer of
1916. The army proved able not only to stop the enemy advance into its territory,
but even to engage in significant conquest of its own. The major gains came against
the Ottomans to the south. In late 1915 and early 1916, increased German and
Ottoman activity in Persia spooked the British and Russian authorities who had
placed the weakened country under their joint sphere of influence in 1907. The
British asked the Russians to send troops into Northern Persia to fend off the threat,
and the Russian command acquiesced. General Baratov led a successful expedition
that occupied Hamadan and Qom in December 1915 and made plain the nature of
Russian military and political pre-eminence in the area. That dominance was weak­
ened after an ill-advised effort to relieve British forces besieged at Kut-al-Amara in
April 1916 ended in wastage from disease and an Ottoman counter-offensive, but
the Russian Empire was still clearly alive and kicking in the Middle East. This was
even more apparent during the successful invasion of Eastern Anatolia, when Gen­
el Iudenich proved able to capture the major strategic locations of Erzerum and
Trabzon in early 1916. Russian forces gained ground in Europe as well, when a
spring offensive led by General Brusilov on the South-Western Front allowed Rus­
sian forces to move back into much of the occupied zone they had conquered and
then fled over the previous year. Once more, questions of Galician occupation came
to the forefront, though this time chastened administrators moved more cautiously
than they had in the first year of the war.

STATE COLLAPSE AND DECOLONIZATION, 1916–1918

The rally of Russian arms in 1916 could not save the old regime. In the first place,
the military victories were uneven and indecisive. Conquering Northern Persia,
Eastern Anatolia, and Eastern Galicia was impressive, but it would not end the
war. Not only did the Germans remain firmly entrenched along the northern sector of the line, but the Russians also did not knock the weakened Ottomans and Austrians out of the war. In the second place, the military commanders who found success (mostly Ludenich and Brusilov) did so by pioneering departures from the status quo, not by reaffirming it. Indeed, Brusilov was forced to engage in fierce battles with other front commanders and his own superiors to be allowed to try a new tactical and strategic direction, and, even when he demonstrated his effectiveness, they refused either to change their own ways or even to support his offensive in substantial ways.

Most importantly, though, the Russian victories could not fix what was broken politically and socially in the empire. Soon enough, those problems emerged in ever more deadly forms. The first to break was the economic system, particularly in terms of labor. Thanks to the massive mobilization of men into the armed forces, the Russian Empire suffered from labor shortages throughout the war in virtually every sector of the economy. As in other combatant countries, the labor force changed to adjust to the new circumstances. Women moved into many roles previously unavailable to them, not only in the industrial economy, but in the countryside too, where they were forced to do the “men’s work” around the village in addition to their own taxing pre-war duties. But even this was not sufficient. As a result, the state turned to forced labor. The most obvious supply of this labor was the prisoner-of-war population, which reached two million strong and which was widely deployed in rural and urban areas alike. But from the very start of the war, army commanders had commandeered local labor to perform crucial infrastructure work too. The need for this labor grew increasingly acute. Even before the territorial gains over the spring and summer, generals were desperately pleading for more labor. They soon learned that the pool of prisoners of war had run dry, and they already knew that no more local labor was available. So many had fled as refugees that there was no surplus at all. As a result, in May and June of 1916, the Council of Ministers put together a plan to draft ethnic minorities exempt from military service into forced labor brigades. The bulk of these workers were to come from the areas of Central Asia that had been annexed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Nicholas II ordered the draft in an imperial rescript on 25 June 1916.15

If we were to pinpoint a moment when imperial rule moved from a crisis situation into a revolutionary situation, it would be here, in the summer of 1916 in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. All the pathologies of Russian imperial control were on display in 1916: lack of foresight, bungled implementation, corruption, and brutality. Since they had not planned to draft these men, they had no registration lists. With no registration, officials turned to co-opted local elites to tell them who was eligible for the draft. Many of these drew up lists of their enemies rather than of the young men in their districts and excluded those who had paid them off.

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15 For more on this labor crisis, see Joshua A. Sanborn, "Unsettling the Empire: Violent Migrations and Social Disaster in Russia during World War I," *Journal of Modern History*, 77 (June 2005), 290–324.
Conscription began on 2 July, and riots began just two days later, in Khojent. They spread rapidly, and Turkestan had to be placed on martial law on 17 July. In August, disorder erupted in Syr Daria, where detachments of rebels thousands strong attacked the major Russian rail lines. By September, the whole steppe was consumed. Rebel violence, which had originally been targeted at local elites, and then at imperial officials and institutions, was now increasingly directed at Russian settlers. The homesteads of 9,000 Russian families were destroyed, and more than 3,500 colonists died. An openly anti-colonial civil war was under way. The Russians drafted 110,000 Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz, but tens of thousands of these men died, fled, or were incapacitated. Semirechie alone lost 20 percent of its population and 50 percent of its livestock (see Fig. 9).\(^{16}\)

As 1917 dawned, then, the empire was very different from how it had been two and a half years earlier. The western borderlands were under either foreign occupation or the increasingly coercive military regime. Nationalists were quietly gaining influence as the failing state created an ever larger political vacuum. In the Middle East, the empire was expanding, but only within the context of ever more evident ethnic war in the region.\(^{17}\) In Central Asia, rebellion had torn apart local societies and led to vicious colonial reprisals. Still, the Romanov dynasty remained, and


with it the more than 300 years of personal and institutional authority that organized political life across the entire expanse of the empire. While the monarch remained, so too did imperial control.

It was thus the February Revolution that marked the beginning of the end. The demonstrations and riots that brought the capital to its knees were little concerned with empire as such. The protests began with complaints about food shortages and soon expanded to include criticisms of the war effort and the competence of the government. Within days, they were demanding an end to the autocracy. With no domestic political support, even amongst the military high command, the tsar was forced to abdicate. His departure left a huge symbolic and institutional hole in the middle of the political system, a fact that even concerned some of the most ardent critics of the monarch. The bodies that replaced the autocracy—the revived Soviets of urban workers and soldiers and the Provisional Government headed by liberals from the parliament and from the major war aid agencies—shared a basic platform of civic equality and national self-determination. What future would the empire have in such conditions? This was a question that all minority nationalists had to ask over the course of 1917, but it was one insufficiently appreciated by the liberal politicians who accepted ministerial appointments in the new government. Those men envisioned a future in which Russian chauvinism and national supremacy would come to an end, allowing for a multi-ethnic state based on the ideals of equality and mutual respect. But they also assumed that this state would retain its sites of power in central Russia, would use Russian as its language of state, and would remain within its current boundaries. Moreover, they continued to envision Russia as a charter member of the imperial club of Great Powers.

These tacit assumptions constituted a major blind spot for liberals, and they ruined many a political career over the course of the revolutionary year of 1917. The first such casualty was Pavel Miliukov, the leader of the Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) Party. Miliukov was completely undone by imperial issues. One of Miliukov’s first acts as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs was to affirm that Russia would continue to meet its alliance obligations and would continue to fight the war against “Prussian militarism.” His uncompromising stance alienated many on the left, and he almost immediately had to walk it back. He reassured the allies that Russia would stay in the war, but he also promised that the government would “open a way to the expression of the popular will” regarding the continuation of hostilities. He continued to insist on imperial war aims as well, most notably that Russia would take control of the Straits upon the successful conclusion of the conflict. This opened a political space to attack Russia’s liberal leadership as more committed to imperial gain than to the welfare of its own soldiers and citizens. Socialist politicians immediately took their opportunity. Moderates like Irakli Tsereteli articulated a policy of revolutionary defensism in which the army would continue to fight, but only to preserve the revolutionary democracy and the homeland. They would seek a peace based on the slogan of “no annexations or indemnities.” When Miliukov balked, the newly returned Vladimir Lenin took the opportunity to push the discourse in a more radical direction, proclaiming in the very first of his famous April Theses that the Great War was an “unconditionally predatory imperialist
The conflict soon moved to the streets, where crowds of protesters railed against “Miliukov-Dardanelleski” and demanded his removal. Days later, both Miliukov and the Minister of War Aleksandr Guchkov resigned rather than cede control over Russian foreign policy to the Soviet.\(^{18}\)

If liberals had difficulty coming to terms with the imperial character of their foreign policy, the same was true with their domestic policy as well. The end of the dynasty gave hope to nationalists in the borderlands that the political situation would change dramatically. Nationalists in Finland, Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere began dreaming up new ideas, new programs, and new institutions. In Ukraine, for instance, just four days after Kiev had learned of the success of the revolution in Petrograd, Ukrainian politicians established the Central Rada (Parliament) as the hub of the nationalist movement, with the famous historian and cultural figure Mykhailo Hrushevsky as its chairman. The Rada “presided over the impressive revival of Ukrainian political and cultural life.”\(^{19}\) Banned newspapers reappeared, ethnic military units were formed, and a dialogue between new political parties was established. Still, gestures towards independence were made cautiously and infrequently. The Rada declared only autonomy, not independence, when it took its first major constitutional step in June of 1917, a pattern that would be repeated in Finland. Even autonomy was too much for Russian liberals (not even to speak of those on the Russian right). The Provisional Government reacted with suspicion towards the emergence of national ideals, especially on the eve of a major military offensive in Ukraine, and it negotiated with the Rada only under great duress and at the cost of the resignation of most of the Kadets in the government.\(^{20}\)

With the imperial consensus fraying and snapping in the metropole, the peripheries of the empire descended into violent disorder. Once again, combat played an important role. The Russian army, still convulsing with Revolution, launched a desperate offensive in Galicia in June. The offensive succeeded briefly, but, when the Central Powers counter-attacked, the Russian lines broke, this time for good. Units disappeared, fought each other, ransacked towns, burned manor houses, and dispersed violently toward their homes. The late summer of 1917 was a period of open anarchy in Ukraine, with not just imperial control but state control as such evaporating into an orgy of violence. In August, the city of Riga, which had held firm as the northern tip of the front in Latvia, surrendered to German forces. In Petrograd and Moscow, the position of old regime imperialism became less and less tenable. The Soviets not only became more powerful, but increasingly fell under Bolshevik dominance. Instead of hunger, they promised food; instead of class dominance, they promised land; instead of war, they promised peace; and, instead of empire, they promised national


self-determination. In October, they seized the capital, arrested the ministers of
the Provisional Government, and proclaimed that all power in Russia had passed
to the Soviets.

If the February Revolution had been the signal to nationalists to press for au­
tonomy, the October Revolution was the sign to secede. Not only had the Bol­
sheviks used self-determination as a slogan, but they were also plainly going to
have a difficult time surviving even in their Central Russian urban strongholds.
Prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power, Russia had been shorn of Poland, Lithu­
ania, and much of Latvia. Soon after the coup, forces hostile to the Bolsheviks
holed up in Estonia, close to the capital. Finland achieved its independence
through negotiations with Lenin and the Council of People’s Commissars over
the New Year’s holiday. Ukraine began fighting a civil war in earnest, especially
after the Rada signed a separate peace with Germany in order to fend off the Red
threat (see Fig. 10). For nationalists in Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and
Ukraine, “independence” now meant dependence on the ambitious German Em­
pire, a condition that became even more acute in March 1918, when the Bol­
sheviks ceded nearly all of these borderlands to German suzerainty in the Treaty
of Brest-Litovsk.

In the Caucasus, nationalists were pinned between the collapsing Russian Em­
pire and the barely more healthy Ottoman state. The Ottomans sought to press
their advantage immediately after Brest-Litovsk. Chafing at the large-scale repopu­
lation of Eastern Anatolia by Armenian refugees under Russian protection, they
sponsored assaults by Kurdish paramilitary groups as a way of reducing Armenian
power and stoking the violent discord between the two groups. Just as importantly,
the Young Turks changed their views on the desirability of creating an independent state in the Transcaucasus. Enver Pasha now viewed such a state favorably as a potential buffer against the Russian disorder and a means of restraining Armenian sentiment by diluting it in a multi-ethnic state. It turned out, however, that many nationalists in the region were also committed socialists, and they at first wanted to throw their lot in with “Russian democracy.” The fragile young Transcaucasian Seim (Parliament) called for war with advancing Ottoman forces in April 1918 rather than give up on the Revolution, but its resistance lasted only a short time. On 22 April 1918, the Seim declared independence at the point of Ottoman bayonets.

Less than a month later, the empire unraveled still further. The revolt of the Czech Legion along the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway in May 1918 opened the possibility for anti-Bolshevik forces to form their own government in Russian Asia, which they promptly did. The “Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly,” or Komuch, spread its power along the Volga River in the wake of the Czech Uprising in the summer of 1918 and then moved further east. Bolshevik power was dwindling. In August, the Komuch and the Czechs took Kazan’, the city on the Volga that had served as Ivan the Terrible’s first imperial conquest in 1552. Its western borderlands under German control, its Caucasian territories pressed in by the Ottomans, and wide swathes of the south and east under the command of various statelets and warlords, Russia under Bolshevik rule was reduced to the borders of old Muscovy. The story of the Russian Empire in the Great War was one of complete and total collapse.

**CONCLUSION: THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF EMPIRE IN THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR**

Somewhat surprisingly, the utter imperial collapse did not spell the end of imperialism, even of the open and acquisitive sort. All across the former borderlands in 1918 and 1919, avowed Russian imperialists fleeing Bolshevik rule rubbed shoulders with nationalists seeking autonomy or independence. These “White” Russians had learned no substantive political lessons from the previous years of turmoil. Many insisted, as they had throughout 1917, that fundamental changes to the state and territorial order had to await resolution through the Constituent Assembly. That body, long promised during 1917, had met just once in 1918 before being dispersed by Bolshevik soldiers. Elites on the periphery, even had they possessed the limitless patience required to place their hopes upon the Assembly, had little interest in its restoration. The events of 1917 had demonstrated to anyone paying attention that Russian politicians across the spectrum from moderate socialist to arch-conservative envisioned a large and indivisible Russian state that would retain its imperial conquests.

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The behavior of White generals and politicians confirmed their basic chauvinism and willful political blindness on a daily basis. It was obvious that the Revolution had weakened the power of the center and had allowed for political and military entrepreneurs on the periphery to establish regimes of local and regional control. Indeed, the White armies and political cells were themselves manifestations of this fundamental decentralization of power and violence. White warlords emerged early and constituted a major anti-Bolshevik force in many regions, most notably in Siberia. General Denikin's "Volunteer Army" in South Russia and General Iudenich's Northwestern White Army in Estonia were also very much local in scope, even if they had grander political goals. Yet, these White leaders seemed both mystified and offended by other regional political and military actors, even those that promised support for the anti-Bolshevik crusade. Denikin, for example, huffed angrily at the pretensions to autonomy expressed by the Cossack governments that hosted his men along the Don and Kuban rivers. He also haughtily rejected the desperate pleas of Hetman Skoropadskii for assistance in Ukraine, despite the fact that Skoropadskii was the best Ukrainian politician he could hope for, saying that "the Volunteer Army did not recognize as legal authority in Little Russia the authority of Hetman Skoropadskii, who had used forces which were hostile to Russia [i.e. Germany] for the purpose of creating an independent Ukrainian state." Similarly, Denikin rebuffed attempts by the Georgian government to seek mutual protection from the threat of the Red Army. Instead, he sought reparations for "Russian" property lost when Georgia had declared independence. In the end, the Whites chose to attack Georgian troops militarily (at Sochi) rather than to seek a marriage of convenience. Similar tales could be told regarding Iudenich's behavior in Estonia and Admiral Kolchak's government in Siberia. Unreconstructed imperialism was one of the main reasons that the anti-Bolshevik forces were unable to coordinate their efforts in the Russian Civil War.

Ethnopolitics were also evident in the policy of White armies toward civilian populations. Most notably, 1919 became a year of White terror against the Jewish population of Ukraine. Many different anti-Bolshevik groups participated in the slaughter. The troops of Symon Petliura and the Ukrainian Directory were most prominent, accounting for 40 percent of the violent incidents, but units of the Volunteer Army also participated, promising to destroy the "diabolical force that lives in the hearts of Jew-Communists." The assaults began in January in Volynsk and soon spread to the rest of Ukraine. The scale of depredation was much larger than that encountered in pre-war pogroms and even exceeded the violence surrounding the mass deportations of Jews during the Great War. In some cities, as many as one in three Jews was murdered. The violence was marked by humiliation, rape, and torture. More than 1,500 pogroms took place. Estimates of the number

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of murdered Jews vary widely, from a low of 50,000 to a high of 200,000. Hundreds of thousands more were wounded or crippled.\textsuperscript{25}

White anti-Jewish terror was just one aspect of the kaleidescope of violence that descended upon the former empire between 1918 and 1921. As state control evaporated and the economy collapsed entirely, criminal violence increased. Hordes of people crisscrossing the territory also brought violence in their wake: POWs from the Central Powers returned home by foot, urban residents fled starving cities and sought food in the countryside, and political refugees hopped trains, rode horses, and walked to find regimes that would welcome them. Disease also ran rampant in these conditions. Then there was the warfare itself. In the Civil War, every town, every village, was a potential battleground. Some of the fighting was low-level skirmishing between intruding platoons or food requisition forces and hastily organized self-defense forces. Some took place between larger formations, as in the battles in Siberia and South Russia between the largest White and Red Armies. Finally, there were large-scale revolts and incidents of political violence. In July 1918, the left wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which had made common cause with the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution, broke free in a demonstrative rebellion. They assassinated the German Ambassador, briefly took hostage the head of the Cheka (the Soviet political police), and fomented a large uprising in the city of Iaroslavl under Mikhail Murav'ev, a defector from the Red Army. The Bolsheviks proved able to counter the military threat through a bloody invasion and terror campaign in Iaroslavl and beyond. Just as importantly, though, the defeat of the Left SRs, who had fought for decentralization and a loose confederation of socialist governments, left the way clear for Bolshevik centralizers to reimagine the formation of a new centralized state on the lands of the former empire. On 10 July 1918, they did just that, creating a draft constitution at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets that ensured centralized party control at all levels of the government.\textsuperscript{26}

This brings us to the issue of Red imperialism. Lenin had long advocated for a centralized and disciplined party, and the entire leadership believed that a dictatorship was necessary to consolidate and develop the Revolution. He was not, to say the least, a principled advocate for decentralization. Nor, of course, did he believe that the Revolution should be limited only to the Great Russian ethnic heartland. The Revolution and its revolutionaries were always multinational. Where territories were able to be contested, the Red Army would be sent to conquer, regardless of pre-war borders or patterns of ethnic settlement. To Lenin's credit, he recognized that it would be easy for colonized peoples to see Red troops not as liberators but as a renewed wave of Muscovite power. This was particularly problematic because the pre-war pattern of colonization had created ethnically Russian working classes in urban conclaves in the imperial borderlands. Thus, a “dictatorship of the


\textsuperscript{26} Lincoln, \textit{Red Victory}, 129.
proletariat” that relied upon urban soviets as its local political base would run a serious risk of tainting the communist project with the stain of chauvinistic colonialism. In certain places, such as the regions in Central Asia that had seen the ethnic bloodbath of 1916–17, this outcome was particularly likely and dangerous. These fears were fully borne out. Central Asia became a vicious arena of ethnic exploitation in which indigenous people were excluded not only from political power but also from access to needed resources. A terrible famine devastated the region. Unsurprisingly, violent rebellion soon followed as groups of desperate and discontented men joined together to protect their lives and cultures from the new batch of Slavic oppressors.27 These uprisings in the borderlands were more than annoyances. They threatened Soviet rule as such. The Bolsheviks could start the process of re-creating the state through conquest, but if they failed to come to accommodation with non-Russian peoples, their rule would be permanently jeopardized.

Thus, the Bolshevik leadership cast about for solutions to the imperial dilemma in ways that neither their predecessors in the tsarist nor Provisional governments had contemplated and in ways that their White opponents steadfastly refused to countenance. Lenin’s solution was both pragmatic and ideological. The Bolsheviks acknowledged the recent revolutionary history of empire and nation (and their own slogans in 1917) by affirming the rights of nations to “self-determination” and by establishing a long-desired federal system in the state apparatus. At the same time, they pursued their own vision of revolutionary politics by insisting upon dictatorial control for a single party—their own—that was centralized and strictly hierarchical. Just as, in Stalin’s famous phrase, the party would pursue a policy that was “national in form, socialist in content,” so too did it plan for a somewhat Potemkin federalism, one federal in principle but Bolshevik in practice. It was not meaningful devolution or decentralization in any real way.28

In reality, the process of state and empire building in the Civil War was far more messy. It had to be. The economy was in free fall, vicious fighting was taking place everywhere, some of the land was occupied by foreign armies, and much of the rest was taken from time to time by anti-Bolshevik movements and by garden-variety warlords. It was difficult to transmit timely instructions to local officials from Moscow, and, even when those directives were received, they were often ignored. Just as importantly, the correlation of forces varied widely. What worked in Minsk could very well be destructive in Tashkent. Still, a certain pattern emerged, especially over the course of 1919: the Red Army and Cheka would enter a territory bubbling with conflict and defeat the forces that opposed them, killing the recalcitrant and seeking leverage with important groups and figures who wavered politically. This group of wavering borderland actors often included indigenous elites. Local Bolsheviks would attempt to punish and exclude these nationalists, while Moscow would insist on attempting to co-opt them.29 The outcome of these conflicts and negotiations again depended on the time and place, but by the end of the

27 See Buttino, Revoliutsiia naoborot.
29 For more details on this process, see Pipes, The Formation of the Soviet Union.
war a new imperial space had been created with its center in the Kremlin. By 1921, the Bolsheviks had retaken much of the territory that the tsars had controlled. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland had become independent states, but Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and all of Russian Central Asia were incorporated into the new communist federation. Conquered by the Red Army and governed by the Party, local societies and elites lived under no illusion that they enjoyed self-rule. Nevertheless, it was just as obvious that this was a different kind of empire: Russian chauvinism was publicly denounced (if not always weakened in practice), the Red leaders rejected the term “empire” itself, and the traditional structures of power had been forever disrupted. A new “affirmative action empire” was created as the top leadership sought to create a new political elite in the borderlands that would ensure Bolshevik hegemony at the same time as it reassured locals that the communist project was their own. That project, too, would run aground, but not before creating lasting political and social effects in the Soviet political space.30