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978-1-107-03123-4 - Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation: Eritrea and East Timor Compared

Awet Tewelde Weldemichael

Excerpt

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Introduction

[W]henver there are colonizer and colonized face to face, I see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict, and, in a parody of education, the hasty manufacture of a few thousand subordinate functionaries . . . necessary for the smooth operation of business.

– Aimé Césaire¹

Caught between disintegrating European colonialism and local expansionism, the former Italian colony of Eritrea and Portuguese Timor experienced secondary colonialism in the hands of their powerful neighbors. Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in 1962; Indonesia invaded and occupied East Timor in 1975. Nationalists in the two territories waged protracted struggles for independence. Their success in the 1990s established their respective countries as the last former colonies to gain independence – and the only ones to do so from non-European secondary colonial rule.

Despite their similar histories, Eritrea and East Timor had very different liberation strategies. Geography and demography enabled the Eritrean liberation movement to implement a robust military stratagem. Eritrean nationalists decisively defeated the Ethiopian military on the battleground. Eritrea achieved its independence with a secondary reliance on diplomacy.

By contrast, fully surrounded by geographically and demographically dominant Indonesia, the half island of East Timor was structurally handicapped and unable to wage an Eritrean-style resistance. Initial military attempts to halt the Indonesian invasion failed. But, convinced that “to resist is to win,” Timorese nationalists did not lay down their weapons. Instead, they challenged Indonesia in the arena of international diplomacy, while maintaining a secondary reliance on guerilla tactics.

¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (Marlborough, England: Adam Matthew Digital, 2007), 42. Reproduced with permission of Monthly Review Press.

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In a study of these two classic cases of secondary colonialism and anti-colonial grand strategies² this book challenges accepted master-narratives of history by examining how the Third World is perceived in several important respects.

First, colonialism is almost universally understood as the West's rule over the Rest. However, as this study shows, non-Western African and Asian powers (other than Japan) have colonized their neighbors. In pursuit of their own national interest, or those of a small ruling elite, important African and Asian powers implemented policies toward weaker entities that were no less colonial and sought no less imperially grandiose than Europe's. This book reveals two important Third-World countries – Ethiopia, well known as a symbol of freedom from Western oppression, and Indonesia, the fastest to have destroyed vestiges of colonialism – as perpetrators of oppressive colonialist projects against their less-powerful neighbors.

Second, grand strategies are conventionally considered a vocation for the militarily dominant West, with the Rest occasionally featuring on the receiving end. However, this Western-centered perspective is due for a reappraisal following the proliferation of sophisticated armed insurgencies, and the rise of the Global South³ as an internationally important economic and military powerhouse. Colonial subjects have devised effective grand strategies that have enabled them to win independence against regional and global powers. The authors of these successful grand strategies have been catapulted into the canon until recently reserved for Western thinkers and military men. As this book shows, Eritrean and East Timorese nationalists drew on their respective strengths, resources, and allies to devise strategies that suited their particular circumstances against their different opponents.

Third, terrorism has been widely considered as a preserve of insurgencies in the Third World when the method has been widely used, and sometimes openly defended and endorsed by both states and nonstates around the globe. The turn of the twentieth century witnessed an accelerated paradigmatic shift that saw all movements against internationally recognized national governments lumped together as terrorist organizations, even retroactively.⁴ This state-centric understanding of terrorism focuses on the actor(s), in other words the same two or more acts are regarded

² In this context, grand strategy is the term used to describe the sum total of military, diplomatic, propaganda and other strategies that belligerents devise in pursuit of their war and peacetime interests.

³ The Global South refers to the countries, most of which are located in the Southern Hemisphere that, according to the 2005 United Nations Development Program Report, have a medium (eighty-eight countries) to low (thirty-two countries) human development of less than .8.

⁴ After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United State, the US PATRIOT ACT greatly expanded the definition of terrorism and those who support(ed) it that the newly established Department of Homeland Security withdrew the asylum status of some former

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differently depending on the identity of the actor(s). In R. Woddis's oft-repeated parody,

Throwing a bomb is bad,

Dropping a bomb is good;

Terror, no need to add,

Depends on who is wearing the hood.

This book argues that Ethiopia and Indonesia took over Eritrea and East Timor through terrorist methods and that their subsequent counterinsurgencies constituted state terrorism. By contrast, the respective independence movements displayed remarkable restraint and discipline in rejecting terrorism as a method in spite of the odds stacked against them.

The book concludes with an analysis of how the divergent routes taken by Eritrean and East Timorese nationalists led to different political systems on independence. It aims to add to the growing body of knowledge of both the Eritrean and the East Timorese political systems. Because regime types are intrinsically linked to domestic and regional peace and/or conflict, this analysis will help our understanding of the prospects of peace in the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia.

Just as their grand strategies were divergent, so, too, were the postindependence political systems in Eritrea and East Timor. For Eritrea, surviving domestic, regional, and global hostility while overcoming the mighty Ethiopian military necessitated secrecy, iron-fisted military discipline, and fierce autonomy from outside powers. These characteristics became deeply ingrained among Eritrean cadres during their struggle. After independence, the newly formed Eritrean government succumbed to these habits, instituting a monistic order.

The challenges of waging simultaneous diplomatic resistance and guerrilla warfare with leaders physically separated and autonomous, forced the East Timorese resistance to become a loose, amorphous body. Unable to indoctrinate and discipline all disparate elements of the resistance, the East Timorese independence movement settled for polyphony – even cacophony – among its specialized guerrilla, clandestine, and diplomatic fronts. They succeeded in making occupation unsustainable until Jakarta granted the East Timorese the right to decide their future in a United Nations-supervised referendum. In spite of the international community's pressure and the donor-based economy binding East Timorese leaders to their stated democratic ideals, however, collaboration rapidly gave way to fierce and often violent political contestation after independence. The lack of a power center and cohesion

Eritrean independence fighters because the nationalist movement that they once belonged to have now been determined to have been terrorist.

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led to a precarious start for the East Timorese state, which continues to suffer from loose control, shaky institutions, and arrested reconstruction.

Imperialism by Adjacency and Colonialism

Empires are political arrangements under which various groups are bound together with a single individual leader (or a small group around the leader) assuming supreme military and legislative power over a territory embracing more than one political community.⁵ Taking it as classic among the empires that rose and fell across time and space, Anthony Pagden contends that imperial Rome's fundamental qualities "as limited and independent or 'perfect' rule, as a territory embracing more than one political community, and as the absolute sovereignty of a single individual" lasted until recently.⁶ Such formal or informal relationships, whereby "one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society . . . can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social or cultural dependence."⁷ Where they come into existence through nonviolent means, empires inaugurate and live off their attendant structural violence that is inevitably sustained by military might. This generally associates empires with military rule, and, more particularly, colonial or conquest empires with physical violence.

Extant theorizing on imperialism offers little help in explaining secondary colonialism much less Ethiopian and Indonesian colonial expansionism, which followed from their deep-seated expansionism. Committed to preparing the ground for socialism, classical Marxism offers structural explanations of imperialism as a materially driven phenomenon, and colonialism as its "highest stage."

In Marxism, according to Tom Kemp, the explanation for colonialism as an aspect of imperialism "has to be sought in material conditions rather than in ideology and politics."⁸ Subsequent and differing discourses on imperialism placed the industrially advanced West at the center of diverse peripheries (that were also diverse within themselves).⁹ That is why Patrick Wolfe critiqued the debate for being structured around misleading oppositions, one of which is "between the internal and the external, variously

⁵ Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World. Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 14–17; and Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 45.

⁶ Pagden, *Lords of All the World*, 14–17.

⁷ Doyle, *Empires*, 45.

⁸ Tom Kemp, "The Marxist Theory of Imperialism" in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen and Rob Sutcliffe (London: Longman, 1972), 17.

⁹ For a succinct analysis of the various theories of imperialism until the end of the past century, see Patrick Wolfe, "History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 1997):388–420.

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manifesting as European versus colonial, core versus periphery, developed versus developing, etc. . . . this opposition is false because its two terms co-produce each other.”¹⁰ These oppositions are, however, accurate in cases of secondary colonialism because, at least in Wolfe’s own terms, the center and the periphery did not produce each other for the simple fact that they all constituted peripheries of other rival centers.¹¹

Nevertheless, whereas some non-Western, noncapitalist powers are recognized as empires, the colonialism of their imperialism is overlooked – and even celebrated in some circles – on grounds of causation, race and supposed distance that ought to be between the colonizer and colonized.¹² Imperialism, wrote the renowned Edward Said, for example, “means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism’, which is almost always a *consequence* of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on *distant* territories” (emphasis added).¹³

How “distant” is distant enough for imperial acquisition and domination to be deemed colonial? Although existing literature on empire does not sufficiently address this question, and Japanese imperial/colonial domination in Asia seems to have little bearing on this discourse, Said continues that Russia “acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence.” Said, of course, stopped short of suggesting that Russia’s swallowing of “whatever land or people stood next to its borders . . . ”¹⁴ was different from Western European colonial acquisition in Asia and Africa. For the repertoire of power, and the discourses and narratives of imperial domination transcend causative and geographical discrepancies. Moreover, if imperialism is “simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire,” as Michael Doyle puts it,¹⁵ its colonial essence does not change, regardless of whether it was driven by faraway capitalism or expanded overland to adjacent territories for strategic interests of nearby powers.

Secondary colonialism is not always the outcome of imperialism powered by capitalism in the Marxist sense. With their imperial thrusts made possible and sustained by geopolitically driven alliances with, and dependence on, bigger imperial systems of global reach, secondary colonial powers were in many respects different from their European predecessors. It, thus, requires discursive reinterpretation of the value of geopolitics to secondary colonialism that was as much homegrown as in the service of more powerful, faraway empires. So, too, does the political wherewithal that turn such an

¹⁰ Wolfe, “History and Imperialism,” 398.

¹¹ Ethiopia is an exception in a sense that as an independent empire state, it was on the periphery in contrast to the other three, which were formal colonies.

¹² Japanese colonial adventures in Asia seem to have little bearing on this discourse.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ Doyle, *Empires*, 45.

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asset into tangible and consequential alliances. For that, the post-World War II international system offers many useful tools.

Margery Perham concluded as early as 1961 that the United Nations “provided a world platform from which to anathematise colonialism and it also established new principles and agencies with the help of which the attack could be pressed home.”¹⁶ Secondary colonialism is perhaps better understood within the context of a post-World War II international order that enunciated a paradigmatic shift as to what constituted colonialism. The Atlantic (and the United Nations) Charter resurrected Wilsonian ideals of self-government and liberty. Articles 1, 55, 56, and 73 of the UN Charter, and the Universal Declaration for Human Rights gave fuller expression to Wilson’s objection to colonialism on grounds of human rights and rights of non-self-governing peoples to decide their political future. International legal prohibitions against lateral expansion are of the same stock as against European colonialism. And that is discernible beyond the political correctness of United Nations references to territories under secondary colonialism as “dependencies” and “non-self-governing.”

In 1960, the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples equated depriving non-self-governing territories of the right to decide their future to the denial of their people’s fundamental human rights.¹⁷ Then, Resolution 1541 spelled out how non-self-governing territories could end their dependent status through an inclusive, transparent process and their free and informed decision.¹⁸ Short of a “freely expressed desire on the part of non-self-governing peoples and through an informed democratic procedure verifiable by the world body,”¹⁹ the acquisition of former European colonies by other states is secondary colonialism. With none of the conditions of Resolution 1541 met, Ethiopian and Indonesian rule over Eritrea and East Timor, respectively, becomes no less colonial than Great Britain’s over Kenya or France’s over Vietnam. For colonialism is the imposition of an alien political entity’s rule over another polity or territory – race and geography may be contributory factors, but are not its defining features.

Whereas the UN General Assembly decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1950 took place without plebiscites involving the informed

¹⁶ Margery Perham, *The Colonial Reckoning: The End of Imperial Rule in Africa in the Light of British Experience* (London: Collins, 1961), 52.

¹⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), December 1960.

¹⁸ UN General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV): “Principles which Should Guide Members in Determining whether or not an Obligation Exists to Transmit the Information Called for Under Article 73 e of the Charter,” December 1960.

¹⁹ UN General Assembly resolution 1541 (XV): “Principles which Should Guide Members in Determining whether or not an Obligation Exists to Transmit the Information Called for Under Article 73 e of the Charter,” 15 December 1960.

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participation of Eritreans,²⁰ Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975 “constituted an act of aggression forbidden by the United Nation Charter and customary law” and deprived the former Portuguese colony “of its right to self-determination [through] military intervention.”²¹

Horn of African and Southeast Asian twentieth century imperialism by adjacency, therefore, did not lead to what Albert Memmi tellingly characterized as “profitable purgatory” in which European colonizers enjoyed “exorbitant rights.”²² Similarities of the physical environment, ethnographic overlap or proximity, and possible shared historical experiences between the adjacent colonizer and colonized lessened the secondary colonizers’ “suffering” that their European counterparts had to endure in pursuit of their distant colonial projects. And the overall lack of rights and privileges in the secondary metropolitan center precluded the regime of exorbitant rights that European colonialism instituted in the colonies.

Nor did Ethiopian and Indonesian secondary colonialism inaugurate the “bifurcated state” of “citizens” and “subjects” of late European colonial despotism. Mahmood Mamdani shows such a state as comprising a vast majority of rightless rural subjects and urban middle- and working-class natives who are neither subject nor citizen.²³ Unlike European colonizers who were preoccupied with the native question, secondary colonizers sought to impose their preferred or elite identities (as opposed to that of their own marginalized periphery) on the colonized by erasing the identities (languages, cultures, histories and aspirations) of the latter. Because of the two factors – the aforementioned regime of rightlessness in the metropolises and ethnic and/or ethnographic similarities with the secondary colonial subjects – Ethiopia and Indonesia insisted that Eritreans were “Ethiopian” and East Timorese “Indonesian,” respectively.

²⁰ On February 15, 1950, the UN Commission for Eritrea issued its first communiqué inviting “any individual or any group of individuals from among the inhabitants of Eritrea who so desire to send, as soon as possible and no later than 28 February 1950, to the Commission at its headquarters in Asmara any written statement relating to the future status of Eritrea” (emphasis added). “Communiqué by the Commission to the Inhabitants of Eritrea Inviting Written Statement by Individuals or Groups,” 15 February 1950 (available at UCLA Research Library Special Collections, Ralph Bunche Papers, Box 92, “Eritrea Mission Cables”). According to the Fifth Confidential Report of the Principal Secretary of the Commission, Petrus J. Schmidt, to UN Secretary General Trygve Lie, the Mission ended its fact-finding in Eritrea on March 25, 1950. In less than two months, a disharmonious group of five quarreling envoys who also represented conflicting interests of their respective countries (or that of their allies) decided the fate of a people in less than two months.

²¹ Roger S. Clark, “The ‘Decolonization’ of East Timor and the United Nations Norms on Self-determination and Aggression,” *International Law and the Question of East Timor* (1995):73.

²² Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 5, 8.

²³ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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Lacking longevity and stability, Ethiopian and Indonesian secondary colonial systems are best characterization as *imposed provincialism* plagued by *counterinsurgency*. Yet, secondary colonialism in Eritrea and East Timor bore a strong resemblance to European colonialism. First, the colonial and secondary colonial centers imposed their administrative structures, languages, and rituals on the subjects who were not only expected to accept losing their own rights but also to sing their colonizers' praise songs. During the Dutch centennial independence celebrations in the Dutch East Indies (future Indonesia), Soewardi Soerjaningrat, an astute product of colonial education, wrote in the Dutch language, "If I were a Dutchman, then I would hold no independence celebrations in a land where we deny the people their independence."²⁴ In the same way that Soewardi's thinking and writing offered a conceptual basis to challenge Dutch colonialism, so, too, did Indonesian- and Ethiopian-educated East Timorese and Eritrean nationalists challenge their subjugation on the very principles that their colonial masters expected them to celebrate their lot.

As a result, and this is the second resemblance between European and secondary non-European colonial experiences, a native's imitation of the secondary colonizer was as much needed as rejected by the latter. Homi Bhabha has shown how the mimicry of Europe's colonial subjects was desired by the colonizer as it provided "a reformed, recognizable Other" at the same time that it was disavowed for its disruptive effect.²⁵ Out of conviction, or pure opportunistic expedience, Eritreans and East Timorese spoke Amharic and Indonesian, sang to their actual or mythical glories, and did their bidding, not only in their home territories but also in secondary metropolises of Addis Ababa and Jakarta.

The ambivalent secondary colonial masters celebrated such Eritreans and East Timorese as much as they reminded them of their otherness. Whereas the subordination of loyal East Timorese to Indonesian officials of inferior talent and experience is visible throughout the administration of and counterinsurgency across that territory, the legal advisor to Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie was candid in disclosing how hailing from Eritrea was "a chink in the armor" of Eritreans in the employ of the Emperor in Addis Ababa.²⁶

And finally, beyond the figurative penetration, opening up and fertilization of the colonized lands, colonial masters found luscious appeal in

²⁴ Quoted in R. E. Elson, "Constructing the Nation: Ethnicity, Race, Modernity and Citizenship in Early Indonesian Thought," *Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 3 (2005):145–160.

²⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 86–88.

²⁶ John H. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay. A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, 2nd ed. (Hollywood, CA: Tsehai Publishers 2006), 138. See also Amare Tekle, "A Response to Professor Bahru Zewde" of January 22, 1999, at <http://www.dehai.org/conflict/articles/bahru.html>.

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their female colonial subjects.²⁷ “Wherever they have gone,” writes Wolfe, “male colonizers have impregnated native women.”²⁸ Ethiopia’s project of “Amharizing” (the ethnicity of Ethiopian rulers) Eritrea by fighting the war in the wombs of Eritrean women and harvesting Eritrean children to Amhara fathers²⁹ is analyzed in Chapter Six.

There is circumstantial evidence that Indonesia had similar policies toward East Timor when the latter became a destination for Indonesian transmigration and, at the same time, was a garrison province, with soldiers made to live as civilians among the East Timorese people. Although this deliberate intermixing had immediate security objectives,³⁰ its long-term Indonesianizing influences were as important as the transmigrants.³¹ Ironically and ominously perhaps, male colonial subjects and women of the colonizing societies fell for each other.³² Defeating secondary colonialism, however, required as intricate grand strategies of liberation as those of imperial domination.

Grand Strategy and the Global South

When the nineteenth-century Prussian military thinker Karl von Clausewitz wrote of war as “the continuation of policy by other means,”³³ he argued that waging war required more than just military strategy aimed at winning

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

²⁸ Wolfe, “History and Imperialism,” 416.

²⁹ “Eti Kale-ay Kwinat” reproduced in Alemseged Tesfai, *Two Weeks in the Trenches: Reminiscences of Childhood and War in Eritrea* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2002), 167ff. Alemseged also offers the true story context to that play in *The Other War: An After Word*, 211ff.

³⁰ Samuel Moore, “The Indonesian Military’s Last Years in East Timor: An Analysis of its Secret Documents,” *Indonesia* 72 (October 2001):20–23.

³¹ Bhabha articulates such a dual purpose of European colonial discourse – equally relevant to secondary colonial situations – when he minimally identified it “as an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for the ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited.” Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 70.

³² In *The Colonial Reckoning*, Perham alludes to male colonial subjects, who find their way to the colonial metropolises, finding luscious appeal for white women and eager to prove their prowess to them as if to prove a point to the colonizing male. Along the same lines, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969) offers sexualized metaphor of the dynamics of colonizer-colonized relationship with his inscrutable character Mustafa Sa’eed bragging to liberate Africa with his penis. This work was first published in Arabic in 1967 as *Mawsim al-Hijrah ila ash-Shamal*.

³³ Karl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 99.

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battles.³⁴ In 1943, leading grand strategy scholar Edward Mead Earle further advanced that view, arguing that given increasing complexity of war and society, effective strategy required the consideration of economic, psychological, moral, political, and technological factors as well as traditional military ones.³⁵ This came to be called grand strategy, “an art in the Clausewitzian sense,” according to Paul Kennedy, that relies upon the regular review of one’s goals and both military and nonmilitary capacities to best serve one’s interests in war and in peace.³⁶

Such conventional discussion of grand strategy presupposes the agency of state actors, often major Western powers. More recent Western scholarship and policy even speak of statecraft as the centerpiece of grand strategy. In the footsteps of Henry Kissinger, Charles Hill takes this point even further by assigning grand strategic significance to Western literary classics from Homer to Jane Austen and more.³⁷ Nevertheless, one does not have to imbibe Western literary classics, or wear a suit and tie, be housed in imposing buildings, or conduct oneself in a certain conventional way, to be able to plan and oversee the implementation of an elaborate and farsighted plan of action. Nor does one have to go through West Point, Sandhurst, or Saint-Cyr to command an army in one battle after another without losing sight of the war. Liberation movements in the colonies developed masterly grand strategies whose effectiveness can be measured by their success in gaining independence against many odds. Indeed, experience shows that these liberation movements can defeat even regional and global powers with legions of military theorists steeped in conventional lore. They have also won against statesmen conversant in Western literary classics.

In some important respects, the Eritrean and East Timorese liberation movements acted like sovereign states contesting Ethiopian and Indonesian power. Although Eritrea and East Timor did not have the official international recognition enjoyed by Ethiopia and Indonesia, their liberation movements displayed incremental statelike sophistication that contributed to their ultimate success. This is a condition that Trotsky famously called a state of “dual authority,” in which a “state” within a state issued orders and offered its followers statelike services, or the hope thereof, and gradually eroded the internal legitimacy of the latter. However, unlike Trotsky’s characterization of that period as a condition of “Dual Impotence,”³⁸ dual

³⁴ Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, rev. 2nd ed. (London: Meridian, 1991), 353.

³⁵ Edward Mead Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy. Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943), viii.

³⁶ Paul Kennedy (ed.), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 5–6.

³⁷ Charles Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

³⁸ This best captures the state of affairs in Russia after the 1917 revolution when both the bourgeois government and the Soviets claimed to control the state and issued understandably