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978-0-521-45895-5 - Russia and the New States of Eurasia: The Politics of Upheaval

Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Soviet Union's disintegration into fifteen states is a development whose vast ramifications may lead future historians to treat it as the most important event of the twentieth century. For the first four or five decades of its existence the USSR was the self-styled exemplar of a noncapitalist form of sociopolitical organization and an inspiration to revolutionary groups in the industrial and underdeveloped worlds. After making a decisive contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, the Soviet Union sought leadership of the anti-Western bloc of socialist and prosocialist countries that emerged from the political tumult and anticolonial movements unleashed by the war. Despite the failure of the USSR's subsequent efforts to shift the global correlation of forces decisively in its favor, its military might and capacity for internal repression helped maintain a harsh but fixed constellation of political alignments among the states of Eurasia and among the peoples of the Soviet Union itself.

The collapse of the Soviet Empire has created historic opportunities and historic dangers. On the one hand, the abandonment of Marxism-Leninism and the democratization of politics within Russia, Ukraine, and other newly independent states of the former USSR have improved the possibility of global cooperation transcending the enmities of the Cold War. On the other hand, acute instability within the new states, and growing tensions among them, have created a serious risk of interstate military clashes and widespread civil war in the heart of Eurasia. Even if such a dire eventuality is avoided, the political implosion of the Soviet system has undermined the international alliances originally designed to counter Soviet expansionism and has created a major risk of sociopolitical instability extending far beyond former Soviet territories into the adjacent countries of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Because it is bound to be protracted, the post-Soviet upheaval in Eurasia will shape America's foreign policy agenda for many years to come. Even the wave of decolonization between the Second World War

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and 1960 did not witness such a sudden emergence of so many strategically located new states encompassing so much territory, so many competing nationalities, and such an accumulation of economic, ecological, and psychological scars. Nor has history ever known the collapse of a nuclear-armed state, let alone one with the world's largest military-industrial and nuclear-weapons complex. The West no longer faces the familiar Soviet strategic threat, but Western interests are challenged by a situation that is more diffuse, amorphous, and infinitely more difficult to gauge. The momentous upheaval in the former USSR thus poses a challenge that is both political and intellectual.

Contemporary analysts must devise new assumptions and research methodologies that take account of at least five profound shifts in Eurasia's political dynamics. First, the collapse of the Soviet system has inaugurated what is likely to be an extended period of state-building that has few parallels in the twentieth century. Only the collapse of the Habsburg Empire following World War I and the turbulent replacement of the Russian Empire with the Soviet state offer partial analogies. In neither case, however, had the country that collapsed played so central a role in determining the international political order and balance of power as did the Soviet Union following World War II. For closer analogies one must turn to the era of European state-building during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ Nor is the contemporary state-building process confined only to the non-Russian countries that have emerged from the wreckage of the USSR. In Russia, too, an effort is under way to construct a fundamentally new state. This process requires an analytical approach radically different from those applicable to the collective and individual dynamics of established state systems.

The central importance of state-building is closely linked to a second change in the international political landscape. Many former Soviet regions and nationalities that once seemed of marginal significance for an understanding of international relations have become critically important for charting the geopolitical transformation of Eurasia. This unfamiliar circumstance, which already has kindled new public and professional interest in the work of Western specialists on the non-Russian components of the former USSR, poses a major challenge for scholars of all stripes, but perhaps especially for the large group of Russianists who have traditionally dominated the study of Soviet affairs. To be sure, students of Eurasian developments can scarcely ignore Russia, which remains vitally important and is undergoing a profound sociopolitical crisis; but any serious study of the international politics of Eurasia must now examine the interaction among developments in Russia and developments in the other newly independent states.

Third, in each of the new states the government's long-standing

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totalitarian dominance of society has been destroyed, and foreign relations and domestic affairs have become inextricably intertwined. Even in those successor states where authoritarian regimes have been established, government policies are being buffeted by powerful socioeconomic forces that have become a fundamental determinant of external relations and have clouded the customary distinction between domestic and foreign policy. The new governments' political weakness or inexperience has often hampered their ability to generate a coherent conception of the national interest and to pursue that conception in the face of domestic opposition groups. Moreover, many issues that were internal matters in the Soviet era now belong to the realm of foreign policy but remain in the hands of the old "domestic" bureaucracies. Indeed, the web of human, institutional, and economic connections linking many of the new countries to one another is so complex, and the political agendas facing the national leaders so novel, that choices having major foreign policy consequences may sometimes be decided without giving serious attention to their foreign policy implications.

A fourth fundamental change is that in the new states the lines of influence between domestic and foreign affairs now run in both directions. Students of international politics sometimes assume the nation-state as a given and explain international events as a consequence of the character of particular states or of the "anarchic" international environment in which these states exist.² In the tremendously fluid post-Soviet environment, however, the new states' foreign relations are likely to have a telling effect on the political arrangements that crystallize within the new states themselves. This observation extends well beyond the proposition that material aid from the Western democracies and Japan may facilitate peaceful transitions in the former Soviet republics. It implies that the ability or inability of the leaders of the new states to manage their relations with other countries will have a critical long-term impact on the institutionalization of domestic political relationships. If the international environment appears to warrant the maintenance of powerful military and police bureaucracies and invites attacks on the domestic political opposition as a tool of foreign enemies, the domestic order will be pushed in an authoritarian direction. If the external environment provides a convincing basis for arguing that internal differences do not endanger the new state's existence and that powerful coercive institutions are unnecessary, the chances for the creation of a liberal domestic order will be enhanced.

Finally, the former USSR has been transformed from a secretive regime about which useful data were sometimes impossible to acquire into a group of countries releasing masses of information too large for scholars to evaluate in a timely fashion. Whereas Western analysts of

the USSR previously adopted narrow scholarly specialties in an effort to sift nuggets of information from mountains of low-grade ore, they now find themselves pushed to specialize by the very wealth of the information sources that have become available. The field of post-Soviet studies will be in flux for many years to come, and deeper Western understanding of trends in Eurasia will depend on detailed research in archival and other specialized sources. However, the extraordinary fluidity of developments in the former Soviet republics has created a pressing need for efforts to synthesize specialized knowledge, even though that knowledge remains far from complete, in order to gain a better sense of the complex interactions among various political, social, and economic trends. Such syntheses can enable Western observers to identify important concatenations of events and reduce the chances that we will once more be caught off-guard by massive changes in the Eurasian political landscape.

The purpose of this book is to provide a broad overview of the relations among the post-Soviet states and neighboring countries and to analyze some of the key variables that will shape those relations during the coming years. Focusing on the interaction between the internal affairs and foreign relations of the newly independent states, the book examines the impact of (1) the historical legacies of the new states; (2) the resurgence of ethnicity and debates over national identity; (3) the revival of religion; (4) political culture and the emergence of new sociopolitical groups; (5) economic determinants of the new states' foreign policies; (6) national attempts to recast foreign policy priorities and institutions; (7) developments within the post-Soviet armed forces and steps to create separate national military establishments; and (8) trends and debates concerning the future of nuclear weapons. Each of these variables is taken up in a separate chapter of the book and is examined first with respect to Russia, then with respect to the western belt of new states extending from Estonia to Ukraine, and finally with respect to the southern tier of new states extending from Georgia to Kyrgyzstan.³

The aim of the book is also to clarify the international impact of these major factors, not to attempt a comprehensive history or a definitive explanation of all the events transpiring in Eurasia. The book concentrates primarily on the post-Soviet states and devotes less attention to the policies of established countries in neighboring regions, even though the responses of neighboring countries to the collapse of the USSR will do much to shape Eurasia's future political geography. The coverage of specific post-Soviet states also varies substantially. Readers, for example, will find fuller discussion of large new states such as Russia and Ukraine than of small new states such as Moldova and Georgia. In part

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this distribution of coverage reflects our judgments about the relative importance of various political actors.

The forces that destroyed the USSR and are shaping the behavior of the newly independent states have deep roots in tsarist as well as Soviet history. In the following chapters we examine these forces topically and in considerable detail. The analysis in those chapters, however, assumes a general understanding of the functioning and evolution of the tsarist and Soviet systems. Hence we begin with an overview intended to provide nonspecialist readers with essential background information and to clarify for specialists the vantage point from which we approach our subject. In order to put later findings in context, the remainder of this chapter sketches the evolution of the nexus between state power, nationalism, and foreign relations in the tsarist and Soviet eras.

The Tsarist Experience

The history of the tsarist empire is a chronicle of the tsarist elite's efforts to balance the requirements for the development of international power against the domestic prerequisites for the maintenance of autocratic rule. Geared to the twin purposes of strengthening the empire's position in the international arena and supporting the nobility's privileges at home, the tsarist state dominated society virtually up to the revolution of 1917. Members of the small noble class were expected to serve in the armed forces and civilian governmental apparatus; in exchange the tsar gave them promotion within the official table of ranks, land, and, until 1861, serfs. Although the state periodically accelerated the development of key sectors of industry and commerce, particularly those essential for the generation of military power, its stability rested on the political inertness of the bulk of the population. This inertness was maintained not only by political coercion but by a high level of illiteracy, which impeded the dissemination of subversive political ideas and, despite several popular uprisings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, helped ensure popular acceptance of the claim that the tsar ruled by divine right.

Together with the preeminent importance of the state apparatus as a channel of upward mobility, the tsarist government's insistence on keeping all political initiative in its hands also constituted a major obstacle to the emergence of independent social and economic groups. By the second half of the nineteenth century a tiny but active intelligentsia had coalesced and begun to champion notions of society's interests that clashed with the official tsarist ideology. Although this development constituted one step toward the creation of a civil society, a deep cultural gulf separated the intelligentsia from the peasantry,

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which bore the political and economic imprint of centuries of bondage long after the abolition of serfdom in 1861.⁴ For example, during the 1870s the intelligentsia's effort to promote political reform in the countryside was met with peasant incomprehension and hostility. Sizable urban social classes opposed to the state's political tutelage began to develop only late in the nineteenth century. Although the autocracy needed to foster and tap the economic energies of these classes in order not to fall behind in the quickening international race for military power, it treated them with a political ambivalence that demonstrated its inability to govern a dynamic society effectively.⁵

The tsarist state's relations with the outside world were a complex mixture of defensive and aggressive behavior. In the course of its history Russia was repeatedly exposed to the risk of occupation and dismemberment at the hands of foreign enemies, including the Mongols, the Ottoman Turks, Poland, Sweden, France, and Germany. The history of recurrent military conflict helps explain the tsarist polity's autocratic character and its preoccupation with the accumulation of military power. But these characteristics were based as well on the driving ambitions of such monarchs as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great. They were also rooted in the pre-nineteenth-century practice of distributing large quantities of captured peasants and land to individual nobles as rewards for military service, and in the ideology of Russian imperial expansion that gained currency by the nineteenth century. Although the Russian sense of military and political vulnerability was generated partly by the country's objective circumstances, the fact remains that the internal dynamics of the tsarist system contributed to a vast geographical extension of the empire between the fifteenth and the late nineteenth centuries.⁶

This expansion transformed tsarist Russia from a country with a large measure of ethnic homogeneity into a multiethnic empire. Before the nineteenth century, tsarist annexation of non-Russian territories was primarily a function of *realpolitik*. These "borderlands" served as sources of tribute and as buffers in Russia's relations with other great powers, particularly the great powers of Europe. The tsarist polity was not a nation-state, and the tsar's legitimacy was undergirded by dynastic loyalty and religious tradition rather than by a modern form of Russian ethno-nationalism.⁷ Although the inhabitants of some non-Russian regions were subjected to pressures to restructure their local institutions along Russian lines and to convert to the Orthodox faith, in a number of cases St. Petersburg tolerated the existence of distinctive local political institutions, and for the most part it did not demand the cultural russification of its non-Russian subjects.⁸ The tsar's noble servitors, for instance, included large numbers of Baltic Germans and other non-

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Russians, and until well into the nineteenth century many tsarist aristocrats had a poorer command of the Russian language than of German or French.⁹ Combined with tsarism's relative openness to the cooptation of non-Russian elites, Russia's colonization of contiguous territories rather than separate continents blurred the understanding of the tsarist political elite – and the understanding of later students of imperialism – that Russia was involved in an imperialistic enterprise.¹⁰

During tsarist Russia's last century, however, the dynamics of imperial domination underwent a dramatic change. The rise of modern nationalism elsewhere in Europe and the gradual modernization of tsarist society awakened national feelings among the Great Russians.¹¹ The same phenomenon occurred in several non-Russian portions of the empire, particularly in western regions such as the Polish and Ukrainian provinces. Intensifying Russian and non-Russian nationalist sentiments thus fed off one another – not least because of the large numbers of Russian settlers who continued to migrate from Central Russia into the various border regions. As noted below, Russian nationalism itself posed a significant political challenge to the dynastic claims of divine right that had customarily been invoked to legitimize tsarist rule. Nonetheless, the proliferation of nationalist movements inside the empire helped persuade tsarist officials that a policy of russification was an essential means of cementing together the empire's diverse social components.

The ruling elite's concern with the political cohesion of the empire was linked to broader developments in international politics. Fore-shadowed by the French Revolution, a wave of nationalist movements during the mid-nineteenth century created new states in Italy and Germany, threatened the existence of Europe's multinational empires, and affected the foreign relations of all the great powers. For example, the tsarist government's military suppression of the rebellion that broke out in its Polish provinces during 1830 contributed to Russia's estrangement from the British and French constitutional monarchies and its closer alignment with the conservative Habsburg and Prussian polities.¹² Later in the century, the stirrings of nationalism among the Russian empire's Ukrainian and Baltic populations threatened to make the western borderlands susceptible to separatist movements inspired from abroad, especially from Imperial Germany. Urged on by an increasingly nationalist Russian public, the tsarist authorities therefore launched a policy of cultural and linguistic russification that was particularly harsh in the western provinces. The spread of heterodox thinking, the emergence of nationalist intellectuals, the expansion of popular education, and the growth of publishing all combined to make Russia's hold on the borderlands a problem not just of administrative and military subordination but of political control in a broader cultural sense.

Due to the spread of modern nationalism, the exertion of such control had become a matter of vital consequence for tsarist foreign policy.

Tsarist efforts to cope with these novel challenges came to an end in 1917. The tsarist autocracy's collapse was caused, *inter alia*, by the gradual erosion of belief in the regime's legitimacy not only among persons with advanced education but among the mass of poorly educated workers and peasants; by the autocracy's inability to cope with the unprecedented political and economic demands of mobilizing the country for total war; and by the emotional impact of millions of battlefield deaths and widespread human suffering. Not least among the causes of the regime's collapse were errors of political and military leadership that cost the tsar and his ministers the substantial popular support they had previously derived from Russian nationalism. Once primarily a source of political support for the regime, conservative Russian nationalists now joined Russian liberals in condemning the autocracy for the nation's suffering and defeats on the battlefields of World War I.¹³ Although tsarist officials had employed Russian nationalism and russification to buttress the empire against centrifugal forces, they never fully managed to neutralize the populist current that identified the Russian people, rather than the monarch, as the ultimate source of political authority. Under the acute strain of protracted war, state-sponsored Russian nationalism escaped the autocracy's control and contributed to its destruction.

From Lenin to Stalin

It is particularly ironic that the Bolsheviks, who proclaimed themselves opponents of all forms of nationalism and prophesied its early disappearance, ultimately became the bearers of a new form of state-sponsored Russian nationalism. Although more decisive political action by the liberal provisional government that succeeded the tsarist regime might have discredited Lenin and his colleagues as pro-German collaborators working to bring about Russia's military defeat, the provisional government lost this crucial political opportunity early in the fall of 1917.¹⁴ Once the Bolsheviks seized power and civil war broke out, an unusual combination of circumstances enabled them to present themselves as defenders both of Russia and of the empire's non-Russian minorities. Western and Japanese intervention in support of the White forces allowed the Bolsheviks to depict themselves to Russians as defenders of the Russian fatherland against foreign invasion; this factor was particularly important to the Bolsheviks' success in recruiting large numbers of former tsarist officers into the newly organized Red Army.

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At the same time, the commitment of the principal White leaders to the restoration of the Russian empire allowed the Bolsheviks to win the support of many non-Russians with the promise of full civil rights, including the right of national self-determination, for all the empire's nationalities.

The Bolshevik commitment to the concept of self-determination was shaped more by calculations of power than by considerations of principle. In the European borderlands, vigorous anti-Bolshevik resistance and Western political pressure led to the establishment of Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as independent states. However, the outcome was quite different in former tsarist territories that had less diplomatic salience or whose fate was more difficult for the West to influence. In Ukraine and the Caucasus the Bolshevik government disregarded its prior declarations and dispatched the Red Army to conquer national regimes that had declared their independence during the Civil War.¹⁵ Nonetheless, in the decisive phases of the Civil War the promise of self-determination was effective in mobilizing non-Russian groups and contributed substantially to the defeat of the Whites. Due to the exhaustion of most of the Western powers during World War I and their preoccupation with working out a postwar settlement in Central and Eastern Europe, the postwar foreign intervention on behalf of the Whites was not sufficiently powerful to overcome the political factors working in favor of the Bolsheviks.¹⁶

Despite its strong admixture of political expediency, the Bolshevik attitude toward nationality problems had a more positive side in the 1920s. During most of that decade the Communist Party leadership attempted to chart a course that curbed Russian chauvinism and treated non-Russian national groups more fairly than had been the case in the late tsarist era. The key features of the policy were the stress on the indigenization, or *korenizatsiya*, of personnel in the political-administrative apparatus of the non-Russian regions; a significant measure of autonomy in the institutional division of powers between Moscow and the regions; greater latitude for the use of indigenous languages in non-Russian regions; and a relatively lenient policy toward the development of distinctive national cultures.¹⁷ Because most of the non-Russian nationalities consisted of an unusually high proportion of peasants, the pro-peasant New Economic Policy introduced by Lenin during the same period effectively worked in favor of the non-Russian population. Underlying the regime's whole approach during the 1920s was the expectation that more evenhanded economic treatment and greater concessions to the cultural needs of non-Russians would gradually win their unqualified loyalty to the Soviet state.¹⁸ Had this policy been

maintained, it is conceivable “that the Soviet Union could have continued to evolve as a viable multinational state in which friction among the various nationalities would have been minimal.”¹⁹

The adoption of a relatively accommodating policy toward the non-Russians also meshed with Bolshevik foreign policy. During the 1920s Lenin and other party spokesmen condemned the tsarist treatment of non-Russian ethnic groups as a blatant example of imperialist exploitation that, they claimed, had been brought to an end by the advent of the world’s first socialist regime. The Bolsheviks’ more forthcoming policy toward the non-Russian nationalities tied in with Lenin’s foreign policy strategy of exploiting national sentiments among the victims of Western colonialism as a means of weakening the major capitalist states. Vigorously condemning Western imperialism, Bolshevik spokesmen pointed to the improved fortunes of the non-Russian peoples inside the USSR and urged the emerging national elites of Western colonies and dependencies to align themselves with the USSR.²⁰ In addition to its impact in Asia and Africa, this stratagem had some effect in Eastern Europe, where several governments were pursuing policies highly inimical to the national minorities within their borders. The Bolsheviks’ relatively benign policy toward Soviet Ukrainians and Belarusians, for example, exerted a strong pull on the Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities living under the harsh treatment of the new Polish state created at the end of World War I.²¹ The regime’s moderate treatment of Soviet Azerbaijanis had a similar impact on the Azerbaijani population of Iran.²² One mark of the success of the USSR’s “anti-imperialist” line is that in later decades observers of many political persuasions came to regard imperialism as a form of behavior peculiar to developed capitalist regimes rather than a historical characteristic of most major powers, Soviet Russia included.

Of all the Bolsheviks’ early decisions about the handling of ethnic relations inside the new socialist state, the most fateful may have been the decision to give a formal political expression to the territorial identity of major ethnic groups. The result was the creation of a series of “national republics,” ultimately numbering fifteen, within the federal governmental structure of the USSR. Viewed historically, this step was not entirely surprising, in that many of the non-Russian minorities had resided in specific homelands both before and after their incorporation into the tsarist empire. The decision was also consistent with the strand of Bolshevik doctrine that identified territoriality as a key feature of nationhood.²³ Perhaps most important, the creation of national republics appealed to Lenin and some other Bolshevik leaders as a way of defusing potential national opposition to the fledgling Soviet state when it sought to consolidate its power after the Civil War.²⁴