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Jeremy Smith

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: the prison-house
of nations

In January 1881, Russian soldiers led by General Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev stormed the fortress of Gök-Tepe, close to the eastern coastline of the Caspian Sea. Eight thousand Turkmen tribesmen, who had defeated a Russian force two years earlier, lost their lives in the assault, against only 300 Russians. Over the next three years, troops were able to use the fortress as a base to subjugate the oasis of Merv and the town of Kushka. This represented the apogee of the Russian Empire. It was by now the third largest empire in history, surpassed in size only by the Mongol and British empires. It stretched from Poland in the west to the Pacific in the east, and from Finland and the Arctic Sea in the north to the borders of Turkey, Afghanistan and China in the south. The process had begun in the fourteenth century with the ‘gathering of the lands of the Rus’ under the leadership of Muscovy. Ivan III’s conquest of Novgorod in 1478 brought a number of Finno-Ugric people – Votiaks and Cheremis – under Muscovy’s control. When Ivan the Terrible conquered and annexed the Khanate of Kazan in 1552, Muscovy became truly a multi-ethnic empire which held sway over a large number of Muslims as well as Christians and pagans. The Khanate of Astrakhan fell to Ivan four years later, after which he turned his attention to the north, briefly occupying parts of Livonia and Lithuania before defeat at the hands of Sweden and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth forced a retreat. In

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1579–1582 a Cossack adventurer, Ermak Timofeevich, accepted a commission from the Stroganovs and, with the backing of the tsar, defeated the khan of the Sibir tribe and began a 300-year expansion of Russia across the Ural mountains and over the vast, sparsely populated expanses of Siberia.¹

From this point on the Russian Empire expanded inexorably. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this expansion averaged thousands of square miles a day. While the westward expansion was completed with the third partition of Poland in 1795, the northwestern border was consolidated with the acquisition of Finland from Poland in 1809. Growth to the south was very much a nineteenth-century affair. The Russian Empire crossed over the Caucasus mountains and acquired the Eastern Kingdom of Georgia by agreement of the Georgian king in 1801, before the mountains themselves had been brought under control. The subjugation of the North Caucasus mountains was the most prolonged and bloodiest episode in the creation of the Russian Empire. From 1817 to 1864 the highlanders of the North Caucasus held off Russian rule and inflicted heavy losses on the Russian army. The resistance imparted a special aura to the region, which attracted the attention of literary writers, artists and even circus entrepreneurs from Russia to North America.² More importantly, it provided the peoples of the North Caucasus who had fought in the rebellion – Chechens, Ingush and others – with a narrative of resistance, with the memory of a hero, Imam Shamil, of almost mythical status and with extra reason to resent Russian rule given the brutality with which the revolt was finally suppressed. Apart from a brief occupation of

¹ The whole of this section is based largely on Andreas Kappeler's detailed history: Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (London: Longman, 2001).

² Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 100–41.

Methods of rule

3

Turkish territory in the course of the First World War, the Russian advance in the Caucasus was completed with the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.

The conquest of Central Asia was also initiated and completed in the course of the nineteenth century. The eastward expansion lasted longest of all, and did not end once it reached the Pacific Ocean. Russians colonised Alaska from 1784 until it was sold to the USA in 1867. Profit from the fur trade drove this expansion across Siberia and beyond.³ Russia occupied the island of Sakhalin, in the sea of Japan, in 1853, and it was formally ceded to Russia in 1875. By the 1860 Treaty of Peking, Russia consolidated its hold on the territory around the Amur river, including a coastal strip reaching as far as the Korean border to the south, where a Russian harbour town was built and given the name Vladivostok – Ruler of the East.

METHODS OF RULE

Most of the Russian Empire was acquired by military conquest, or by diplomacy backed up by the force of arms. Pacification of a conquered territory could be brutal. But once control was established, the approach was different. After subjugating Kazan, Ivan IV gave to the Kazan nobles the opportunity to join the Russian nobility, to continue to enjoy many of their privileges and to make up an important part of the administration of Kazan and the surrounding area. This set the pattern for much of colonial rule, which relied on the co-optation of local elites into the ruling Russian class. In the nineteenth century Georgian and Armenian nobles in particular played leading roles in the army and the civilian

³ Alan Wood, *Russia's Frozen Frontier: A History of Siberia and the Russian Far East, 1851–1991* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

administration. Alexander I initially antagonised the Georgian nobility by abolishing its Bagratid monarchy. And yet, after a number of early revolts, by the 1860s the Georgian nobles were a fully integrated part of the Russian noble system. Ukrainians and Belorussians were generally treated as though they were Russians, which made it difficult for culture to flourish, but elsewhere national life for the few non-Russian intellectuals was lively, while local customs, religions and traditions were generally allowed to continue unhindered. While missionaries from the Russian Orthodox Church were active in Muslim areas, especially along the Volga, they had no special powers and only half-hearted support from the Russian state. Less-developed tribes, especially the numerous small ones scattered in Siberia and the North, were more subject to missionary activity than other peoples and, unlike other nationalities, were not invited to participate in Catherine the Great's Legal Commission in 1767. Nomads in particular were treated with suspicion, but as the empire formally assumed control of the Kazakh lands in 1822, Alexander I's chief reformer and prime minister, Mikhail Speransky, issued an administrative code for these '*inorodtsy*', which granted even them a certain amount of self-administration and safeguarded the privileges of their elites.

Even after the emancipation of the Russian peasantry in 1861, and in spite of the severe overpopulation of central Russia, migration was tightly controlled. Peasants were still tied to their land through the powers of the communes and obligations to pay redemptions on land granted them under the Emancipation. Meanwhile the state kept a tight check on population movements. Most migration into the non-Russian lands was, then, illegal – peasants escaping poverty or redemption payments, or fleeing justice. Much of this flight at the time was towards the newly conquered lands of Central Asia. The illegal status of these migrants encouraged them to engage in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Methods of rule*

5

friendly relations with the local population. The generals who led the Russian conquest also reached a series of accords with local Muslim leaders, regulating relations between the imperial forces and the local population, and leaving cultural and other forms of self-government in local hands. As a result, ethnic relations between Russians and Muslims remained fairly calm until the 1880s.⁴

Decrees of 1871 and 1881 allowed for regulated peasant migration, and a special decree of 1886 allowed for Russian rural settlement in Turkestan, but permission was still difficult to obtain. Illegal migration accounted for between 60 and 85 per cent of all migration in the late nineteenth century,⁵ and in Turkestan Russian settlers flocked to the main towns in spite of official agreements to keep them away. A mass wave of migration in the 1880s transformed Tashkent not just in its demography but also in its infrastructure, with a ramshackle Russian quarter arising on the outskirts of the city against the wishes of planners who had hoped to use the city as a beacon of ordered Europeanness to enlighten the Muslim population. Legal migration, however small a part of the overall numbers it may have represented, also ensured that the army and governing institutions now had a care to protect the Russian population, a shift in attitude which was to further antagonise locals. Competition for land, the collapse of urban infrastructure, and insufficient water, medical and hygiene resources all contributed to both ethnic tensions and illness. The two came together in 1892 when inter-ethnic rioting broke out in the wake of a cholera

⁴ Jeff Sahadeo, 'Epidemic and Empire: Ethnicity, Class and "Civilization" in the 1892 Tashkent Cholera Riot', *Slavic Review*, 64, 1 (2005), 123–4.

⁵ Charles Steinwedel, 'Resettling People, Unsettling the Empire: Migration and the Challenge of Governance, 1861–1917', in Nicholas B. Breyfogle, Abby Schrader and Willard Sunderland (eds.), *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland and Colonization in Eurasian History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 130.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

epidemic that swept through Tashkent.⁶ Throughout the Russian Empire, cities expanded rapidly with the industrialisation drive of the last two decades of the nineteenth century, with managers, foremen, white-collar and skilled workers, tradesmen, technicians and entrepreneurs creating a large chain of legal migration alongside the less controlled migration of unskilled labour.⁷

NATIONAL INTELLECTUALS

In the nineteenth century, nationalism was mostly the concern of an intellectual elite that had little contact with or influence over the peasantry who made up most of the population of all the non-Russian groups. The main exceptions were Finland and Poland, the former because there was a system of universal education sponsored by the Lutheran Church, meaning one of the highest literacy levels in the world; ‘Fennomania’ was tolerated so long as its main targets were the Swedish language and nobility. In response to the tsar’s manifesto of 1899 restricting Finland’s autonomy, however, the Finnish national movement turned against the Russian tsar, albeit peacefully at this stage. In Poland the national movement was led by the aristocracy and had some support from urban and rural Poles. But it could not command the loyalty of most Polish peasants. In spite of fierce resistance, the two great Polish rebellions of 1830–1831 and 1863–1864 were put down by the Russian army as the rebels ran out of supporters.

But for the other nationalities the nineteenth century, especially the second half, was an important period for the development of small national movements based on intellectual circles which were

⁶ Sahadeo, ‘Epidemic and Empire’.

⁷ Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4.

able to win mass support in the revolutionary years of the early twentieth century. A Ukrainian national group developed around the Society of Saints Cyril and Methodius, but was forced underground by tsarist persecution and had to operate in an environment where Ukrainian-language publications were effectively banned. The Georgian national movement which grew up around Ilia Chavchavadze in the 1860s was mostly concerned with the gathering of all the historic Georgian lands under one roof. Hence they were able to side with the Russian Empire and celebrate the tsar's victories against Turkey in 1878–1879, while some Georgian academics also began to turn their attention to the competing territorial claims of the Abkhaz people.

While it is difficult to talk about any kind of national movement among the Muslims of the Russian Empire, an important intellectual trend, Jadidism, emerged from Crimea and spread, especially to Kazan in the Volga Tatar region, but to some extent also in Central Asia. The aims of Jadidism focussed on modernising education, and it provided a secular vision of Islamic culture which combined progressive European ideas with Islamic customs. Jadidist circles in Crimea and Kazan were influential in organising around national demands in the twentieth century. Jadidism also had some influence in Azerbaijan, but there a national movement was more in evidence from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. By the twentieth century, ideas of distinct nationhood were beginning to emerge among Kazakh and Turkmen intellectuals, but their numbers remained small and their ideas unclear.

It was an Armenian political party which first made the link between national and revolutionary politics. The Dashnaktsutiun (Revolutionary Armenian Federation) or Dashnak party was founded in Tbilisi in 1890. Its members adopted socialist ideas and were able to work together with the revolutionary Russian parties,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

but their main concern was for the Armenians across the border under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Hence they did not initially oppose the Russian Empire, but when the tsar ordered the confiscation of Armenian church property in 1903 the Dashnaks already had in place an organisation that was capable of responding. They were able both to lead large demonstrations and to organise assassinations of tsarist officials, successfully combining social and national demands in their mobilisation of Armenians.

By then the Russian Empire was about to erupt into revolution. Although the beginning of the revolutionary movement in the capital St Petersburg is marked by the event of Bloody Sunday in January 1905, in some areas the revolution had already started. While Armenians were demonstrating in Tbilisi, Georgian peasants had responded to economic pressures by taking control of a large part of western Georgia in 1904 and establishing the Free Republic of Guria, which lasted for almost two years. With extraordinary rapidity, the Georgian branch of the Mensheviks – a branch of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party – found themselves at the head of a peasant socialist movement which had no precedent in world history. The coincidence of class and national demands under Menshevik leadership made nationalism especially powerful in Georgia.

In the oilfields around Baku, an industry-wide strike in December 1904 secured the first general collective wage agreement in the Russian Empire. Muslim, Armenian and European workers co-operated in the strike movement, but two months later, playing on the growing rivalry between Muslim and Armenian traders in the streets of Baku itself, Russian authorities including the army were complicit in fuelling ethnic violence which continued for days and left hundreds dead. If the aim was to divide the oil-industry workforce it was perhaps overachieved. When conflict erupted again in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*National intellectuals*

9

September 1905, this time it spread to the oilfields, but as well as fighting each other, Muslims and Armenians set fire to oil wells and destroyed company buildings.⁸

The reverberations of Bloody Sunday were clearly felt by Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians, who responded much as their Russian counterparts did. But the revolutionary wave also produced a mass audience for national ideas among the non-Russians, and those ideas were gratefully received among those such as the Latvians who were well organised in the cities and were strongly pulled towards socialist ideas.

The turn towards russification in the reigns of the last three Russian tsars had one more important impact. Relations between local peasants and Russian settlers in the Fergana valley and Semirech'e region of Central Asia had continued to deteriorate in the wake of the later nineteenth-century migrations. In 1916, the government decided to subject Central Asian Muslims to a general call-up for the first time. Although this call-up was not to the army, but to work behind the lines in place of those who were at the front line, it was either misunderstood as a military draft or was in any case sufficient cause for the Muslims to rebel. As the rebellion spread from the cities to the countryside more than 3,000 Russians were killed and 10,000 settler farms destroyed. Muslim deaths probably exceeded 100,000, and hundreds of thousands more fled over the border into China. Government reprisals included confiscation of more land, which was handed over to Russian settlers, providing an additional grievance shortly before the whole empire was engulfed again in revolution.

⁸ For a fascinating contemporary account, see J. D. Henry, *Baku: An Eventful History*, reprint edn (London: Ayer, 1977).

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ON THE EVE OF REVOLUTION

The peoples of the Russian Empire differed not only in obvious outward markers such as language and religion, but also in terms of levels of economic development and the social position of most of the members of each nationality as well as the degree of social stratification within the nationality. Most non-Russians were peasants, as were most Russians, but there were important distinctions in terms of the urban population and in the nationality of the nobles who ruled over the peasants. As this is essential to the background of events in 1917–1920 and beyond, a brief tour of the major nationalities of the Russian Empire on the eve of the Russian Revolution follows.⁹

The Belorussians and Lithuanians of the northwest of the Empire shared a common history in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were mostly peasants and had little sense of national identity. Both continued to be subject mostly to Polish landlords. The Belorussians shared the Orthodox religion and were linguistically close to the Russians, whereas Lithuanians were more distinct through their Catholic religion, although this was also a factor further strengthening the dominance of Polish culture. A Belorussian socialist party, Hramada, had been in existence since 1902, but it could barely compete with the Russian socialist organisations. Estonians were also mostly peasants, ruled over by German landowners. The incipient Estonian national movement was strongly influenced by ties to Finland, which shared a similar language and religion. Latvians were the most urbanised of

⁹ This section is based largely on the ‘typology of nations’ given in Ronald Grigor Suny, *Revenge of the Past*, 30–76.