Introduction

This is the story of the twilight struggle that the Ottoman and Russian empires waged for the borderlands of the Caucasus and Anatolia. Although the two empires were vastly unequal in their capabilities, the struggle yielded no victor. The instinct for self-preservation brought both empires to the same fate, ruin. Fear of partition led the Ottoman state to destroy its imperial order, whereas the compulsive desire for greater security and fear of an unstable southern border spurred the Russian state to press beyond its capacity and thereby precipitate its own collapse and the dissolution of its empire. The struggle shattered the empires, and the empires in turn shattered the peoples in their borderlands, uprooting them, fracturing their societies, and sending untold numbers to death.

The story begins at a moment of hope and promise, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. On 23 July, the sultan of the Ottoman empire renounced autocracy and declared the restoration of the constitution he had suspended three decades earlier. The announcement, as contemporary observers and later historians alike have emphasized, sparked outbursts of joy of a kind all but forgotten in the troubled empire. The nineteenth century had been a difficult one for the empire Tsar Nicholas I had derisively dubbed "the Sick Man of Europe." It had been hemorrhaging territory, resources, and people in the face of persistent predation from without and experiencing strife among its constituent peoples within. The restoration of the constitution offered hope that this unhappy history could be reversed. A legal order resting on a constitution would free the empire's servants to modernize the state's institutions, rejuvenate its strength, and enable it to hold its own against outside powers, while its guaranty of liberties promised to dissolve intercommunal tensions and transform the empire into a more harmonious place. As the revolution's "hero of freedom," a dashing young officer named Enver Bey, exclaimed, "Now by working together with all citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim, we will raise our free people, our homeland higher. Long live the people!

1

Long live the homeland!"[1] The public rejoiced in the streets, celebrants joining arms and dancing together without regard to communal identity. Imams, rabbis, and priests embraced, Greeks stepped with Turks, and Armenians stood with Kurds. It was an auspicious moment, filled with promise, and those who lived it knew it would change their lives.

Enver Bey and his associates acquired from European observers the moniker "Young Turks." They were young – Enver was only twenty-six – energetic, resolute, and capable, and they imparted to that appellation those same qualifiers. They, however, called themselves "Unionists," a derivative of the name of their underground organization, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). As their organization's title suggested, they were determined to preserve their empire's unity through the application of progressive reform. They saw themselves as men of destiny and indeed would exert a decisive influence over the fate of their empire.

Yet one decade later their empire would lie in utter ruins. The Unionists, once so bold and full of promise, would flee Istanbul in disgrace, leaving the empire they had vowed to save prostrate and at the mercy of the great powers they had sought to defy. The Balkan provinces had been lost. The Arab lands were either under foreign occupation or in revolt. Anatolia, once a cradle of civilizations, had become a graveyard of peoples. The vision in 1908 of a harmonious community had given way to violence that culminated in the destruction of two of the land's oldest communities, the Armenian and Assyrian Christians. The Turks, Kurds, and others who remained among the living were not much better off. Stalked by death and disease, they were left to subsist at times by eating grass and drinking mud. The Unionists had led their empire not to renewal but to cataclysm.

The contrast between the optimistic vision that beckoned to the Ottoman empire in 1908 and the bitter reality that met it in 1918 was stark, but perhaps not unusual. At roughly the same time, the Ottoman empire's great nemesis, the Russian empire, succumbed to revolution. It drifted into chaos, disintegrated, and fell into a paroxysm of civil wars. Yet a mere four years before his regime collapsed, Tsar Nicholas II had celebrated his dynasty's tercentenary in a grand and opulent style.[2] The tsar was, after all, the sovereign of one-sixth of the world's surface, and the expectation was that this share would increase. Russia possessed enormous natural and human resources, and its economy, though

---

[1] Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, *Makedonya'dan Orta Asya'ya Enver Paşa*, 3 vols. (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1971), vol. II, 17.
[2] Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 3–6.

lagging behind those of Western Europe, was industrializing rapidly. To
be sure, Russia had its problems. The Russo-Japanese War and the result-
ing revolution of 1905 demonstrated that the demands of interstate com-
petition were straining the autocracy's ability to rule its empire. The
tercentenary celebrations revealed beneath their pomp a widening gulf
between an archaic regime and a society becoming increasingly complex
and restless.[3] Still, these were growing pains. Overall, Russia's might was
waxing and unsettling even Germany and Great Britain.

Despite their contrasting trajectories, the Ottoman and Russian
empires met nearly synchronous demises. This fact suggested to many
that a common phenomenon, nationalism, best explains the empires'
deaths. The contemporaneous collapse of yet another dynastic, poly-
ethnic empire, the Austro-Hungarian, the emergence of a new world
order that assumed the principle of national self-determination as a
principle for state legitimacy, and the mushrooming of self-proclaimed
nation-states throughout the post-imperial spaces of the Middle East
and Eurasia testified to the seemingly irresistible power of nationalism.
Nationalism, or so it has appeared, was a universal and elemental force
capable of bringing down and sweeping away preexisting state institutions
and identities.

It is, therefore, little surprise that historians of the Ottoman empire
and the Middle East have traditionally approached the late Ottoman
period not so much as the final era of an empire but as the prelude to (or
resumption of) several distinct national histories. The presentation of late
Ottoman history as the story of the awakening of ethnonationalist aspi-
rations and the emergence of nationalist movements among the empire's
subjects has the merit of providing a relatively simple framework that
can explain both the splitting away of the empire's non-Turkish subjects
and the emergence of the Turkish Republic in Anatolia. Thus histori-
ans of Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Albanians, Kurds, and others can all
share nationalism as the organizing theme for their histories and treat
the late empire as a realm of competing nationalisms, despite substantive
differences in their approaches, sources, and conclusions.[4] A common

[3] Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*,
abridged edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 383–96.
[4] Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford University
Press, 1968); Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London and New York:
Routledge, 1993); Stanford Shaw, *From Empire to Republic: The Turkish War of National
Liberation*, 5 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2000); Stanford Shaw and Ezel Kural
Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. II, *Reform, Revolution, and
Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press,
1977); Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian
Genocide* (New York: Zed Books, 2004); George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story*

4   Shattering Empires

perspective underlies their works. The consensus answer to the question posed above of what explains the radical disjuncture between the hopes of 1908 and the outcome of 1918 is straightforward: a clash of irreconcilable nationalisms.

Nationalism as an organizing theme has not dominated Russian historiography as much as it has Ottoman and Middle Eastern historiographies. For most of the twentieth century, the question of the origins and inevitability of the Russian Revolution, pitched generally as a question of contending political visions at the Russian center rather than as a struggle of ethnic or other groups at the imperial periphery, had tended to dominate Russian historiography. The exploration of questions of nationalism was not entirely ignored, but it was left to specialists in the non-Russian areas of the Russian empire and thereby marginalized. Like their counterparts studying the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East, these scholars strove to distinguish their chosen regions and peoples from the center and searched for the seeds of nationalism in them.[5] One partial but important exception to this tendency to relegate nationalism to the particular was Richard Pipes' *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism*.[6] Although arguably it too readily accepted the nationalist framework, it did attempt to integrate the stories of the struggles in the imperial borderlands with that of the center. The fact that Pipes' work, originally published in 1954, was reissued as a largely unrevised second edition in 1997 is a testament both to its inherent value and to the relative lack of debate through four decades on the role of ethnicity in the break-up of the Russian empire and the creation of the Soviet Union.

of the Arab National Movement (Safety Harbor, FL: Simon Publications, [1939] 2001);
A. I. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Richard Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 2nd edn. (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000).

5 Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State*, tr. Nancy Festinger (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1992); Hakan Kırımlı, *National Movements and National Identity Among the Crimean Tatars, 1905–1916* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996); Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

6 Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1954] 1997).

The collapse of the Soviet Union into its constituent national republics, however, refocused the attention of scholars on the polyethnic character of that state and that of its predecessor, the Russian empire. We now possess numerous studies emphasizing the empire's variegated ethnic character, its non-Russian areas, and the evolution of the empire's nationality policies.[7] Calling attention to the way "[s]cholars of the end of the Ottoman, Habsburg, Soviet, and German continental empires have established that the rise of nationalist ideas and practices among the core ethnic groups in each case proved to be among the most important challenges to the viability of the imperial polity," Eric Lohr has argued that "a type of Russian nationalism played a more important role in the last years of the Russian empire than most scholarship has granted."[8] Terry Martin, in what in a sense amounts to a reply to Pipes' juxtaposition of Bolshevik communism against native nationalisms, returned the question of ethnicity to the origins of the Soviet Union by exploring how the Bolsheviks worked with, rather than repressed, nationalism.[9]

Scholars today are comfortable with the idea of nationalism as a global phenomenon. Its seeming ubiquity has moved many to liken it to an irresistible force of nature.[10] Indeed, so embedded is the national idea in our language that scholars, including political scientists who as a disciplinary imperative strive for clarity and precision in nomenclature, speak of "international" relations when what they are really discussing is interaction between states.

There is nothing illegitimate, wrong, or inherently mistaken in undertaking an investigation of the origins of nation-states or national movements. The studies of the aforementioned and cited authors in the fields of Middle Eastern and Russian history have all made lasting contributions to scholarship. But a problem does arise when the focus on nationalism and national identities occludes the impact of other dynamics.

This work takes a different tack. It eschews the national perspective that sees the late Ottoman and Russian empires as mere preludes

---

[7] See, for example, Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, tr. Alfred Clayton (New York: Longman, 2001); Theodore Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

[8] Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 8.

[9] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[10] See, for example, Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 1; Ernest Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 70; Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977), 98.

to the establishment of their successor states in favor of a framework
that situates events in the Ottoman and Russian borderlands in their
imperial setting and places the two in their global geopolitical con-
texts. It treats the Ottoman and Russian empires as *state actors* rather
than as manifestations of proto-nationalist ideologies or holding tanks
of nationalist movements and argues that interstate competition, and
not nationalism, provides the key to understanding the course of his-
tory in the Ottoman–Russian borderlands in the early twentieth cen-
tury. At the same time, it devotes significant attention to substate actors,
demonstrating how the dynamics of global interstate competition inter-
acted with local and regional agendas to produce new forms of political
identity.

States, anarchy, and global society

A few preliminary words should be said in regard to the book's concep-
tualization of interstate relations. The book takes as its starting point
Charles Tilly's influential thesis that the modern state's origins lie in
competitive violent interaction between human beings for wealth and
resources. The need of sovereigns to generate greater military power than
their rivals possessed drove the expansion not merely of armed forces but
also of the multiple state institutions and bureaucracies necessary to sus-
tain the armed forces. As Tilly succinctly put it, war made the state, and
the state made war.[11]

Several important implications follow from tracing the origin of the
state to a process of intense competition among multiple entities. The
first is that states do not exist as autonomous units. Rather, they function
as parts of a system. The process of state-building in one polity impacts
that in others in such a way that the internal development of one state
cannot be understood unless seen in the context of its relations with
other states and of its place in the system of states. Systems, moreover,
produce effects that are greater than the sum of the bilateral relations of
any two of their parts. Just as the history of a given state's development
cannot be written without reference to its relations with other states,
those relations cannot be grasped outside the systemic context in which
they are created. Systems generate their own effects that are independent

---

[11] Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making" in *The Formation
of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1975), 3–84; and Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,"
in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda
Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–91. A more refined and
nuanced explication of his concepts is provided in Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European
States AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

of the direct actions or desires of their components. Outcomes therefore cannot be interpreted directly as the products of the intentions of system components.[12]

Second, states do not exist solely, or even primarily, as representations or outgrowths of their societies. They originated and exist as members of an interlinked community with "horizontal" ties to each other. These ties are, in fact, often more important for understanding state behavior than the state's "vertical" links to its subjects. The identification of the state with society and the belief that the state's primary function is to provide services to its subjects are comparatively recent developments that stemmed from the state's need to exchange those services for ever-greater resources in order to prevail in warfare. Recent history, alas, provides ample evidence of the illusory nature of modern states' claim to serve the interests of the societies they ostensibly represent.

Third, the anarchic nature of the interstate system impels state elites to be outward-looking. Above the community of states there exists no higher sovereign to enforce law or otherwise regulate behavior and protect its members. Under these conditions states ultimately must rely only on their own capabilities for survival.[13] As theorists of global politics and interstate relations emphasize, anarchy mandates competition between states because any one state's gain in relative power constitutes an implicit threat to others and therefore compels a response from them to offset those gains, such as "self-strengthening" or forming alliances. A necessary preoccupation of state elites is the relative power of their state. In other words, those elites are particularly sensitive to outside challenges and attentive to their state's place in the interstate system. External threats regularly emerge as primary stimuli for internal reform, sometimes to the benefit of a state's inhabitants, oftentimes to the detriment. The state's preoccupation with its relations with other states is reflected in the fact that traditionally the most prestigious posts in a state following that of the executive leader have been those that handle warfare and foreign relations.

Some have contested such structural determinism in interstate relations, arguing that anarchy is "what states make of it." How states respond to anarchy, they contend, is historically and culturally contingent, not uniform and universal, and anarchy does not necessarily lead to competitive behavior.[14] This debate need not concern us, for there is no dispute

[12] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[13] For the most concise and influential statement of this point, see Kenneth Waltz's ambitiously titled *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[14] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, 46, 2 (Spring 1992), 391–425.

that in the period we are investigating the interstate system did resemble a Hobbesian "war of all against all" wherein life for the weak was "nasty, brutish, and short." The early twentieth century was a time of intense great power rivalry and high imperialism. Coercion smashed borders. Territories submerged and even disappeared under colonial rule. As Dominic Lieven points out, between 1876 and 1915 fully one-quarter of the world's surface changed hands.[15] It is no coincidence that a historical description of interstate relations in the early twentieth century presaged the starkest explication of the consequences of anarchy, John Mearsheimer's theory of "offensive realism."[16]

To observe that the interstate system is an anarchic one is not to contend that it knows no order. States develop and maintain shared modes of interaction and conventions to manage their quotidian relations, regulate more exceptional issues of war and peace, and arbitrate such questions as who qualifies as a state. The informal rules of a society, while not comparable to a legal codex enforced by a central authority, do shape and channel the interaction of the society's members.[17] These shared understandings or norms thus are not subsidiary to power relations, but are interwoven with them. Understanding interstate relations thus requires that keen attention be paid to the norms of global society as well as to the relative distribution of material power among states.

Global order and the proliferation of the national idea

During the nineteenth century, the doctrine of nationalism became increasingly influential in global society, and by the twentieth century it provided "the hegemonic political discourse of sovereignty" and a fundamental principle of global order.[18] The national idea, the belief that the world should be divided among governments ruling over ethnically homogeneous territories, owed its ascent not to its power of description – even today, the vast majority of states contain ethnically heterogeneous populations – but to its power of prescription. As William H. McNeill and

---

[15] Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 46.

[16] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). Mearsheimer acknowledges the influence of G. Lowes Dickinson's books, *The European Anarchy* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1916) and *The International Anarchy, 1904–1914* (New York: The Century Co., 1926).

[17] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, [1977] 2002).

[18] Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, "Introduction," in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19.

Elie Kedourie have emphasized, the national idea emerged from Europe and carried an inherent normative preference for the organization of human societies into nation-states.[19] It supplied a blueprint not just for the structure of individual human societies, but also for the proper structure of all humanity. This normative preference for the organization of human societies into nation-states influenced earlier generations of historians no less than statesmen. Thus historians routinely interpreted the break-up of the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires as a lesson in the irresistible potency and reach of nationalism. Like most memorable "lessons" of history, this one derives power from its normative content. If empire means the domination of one "nation" over other "nations" and the denial of the inherent right of the latter to self-determination, then the destruction of empire becomes a moral necessity, and its occurrence a cause for celebration. The example of an empire's collapse ceases to be a mere historical event and becomes a cautionary tale, thereby acquiring a certain power in the imaginations of both scholars and their audiences. In the twentieth century the very word "empire" became an almost universal word of opprobrium.[20]

Yet a closer inspection of the historical record at the end of World War I reveals the lesson of imperial collapse to be far from clear-cut. Not all empires met their end in World War I. Indeed, several of them expanded, most notably the British, French, and Japanese. The common determining feature of the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires was not their imperial structures so much as the fact that they had all been defeated militarily. Had the war's military outcome been different – and it was a very closely run affair – so the list of collapsed empires would have been different. As this study argues, nationalism, understood as the mobilization of groups based on ethnicity for the purpose of asserting a claim to political sovereignty, was at least as much a consequence as a cause of imperial collapse.

In recent decades scholars have written at tremendous length on nationalism. Most case studies of nationalist movements try to locate the origins of their subjects in varying constellations of social, economic, and intellectual factors – e.g., industrialization, print capitalism, proliferation of schools, the formation of intellectual classes – that give rise to

---

[19] William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, [1966] 1993).

[20] See, for example, Mark R. Beissinger, "The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 11, 2 (1995), 149–84; and Dominic Lieven, "Empire: A Word and Its Meanings," the first chapter of his comparative examination of empires, *Empire*, esp. 3–7.

such movements. But, as John Breuilly has warned, to search for the apolitical preconditions of nationalism "is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and that politics is about power." Because power in the modern world is principally about control of the state, the "central task is to relate nationalism to the objectives of obtaining and using state power."[21] The story of nationalism in the Middle East and Eurasia, therefore, must be understood as part of the story of the construction of the modern state in those lands, and that story is a geopolitical one. Political scientists have examined the influence of nationalism on interstate politics, and historians and others have explored the ways in which states create and impose ethnonationalist categories and identities. The way global order has fostered nationalist movements, however, deserves more attention.

As noted above, the national idea emerged in Europe, where it provided an important principle, at first implicit and then increasingly explicit, for the conduct of diplomacy and statecraft. The projection of European power around the globe necessarily brought with it the European vision of political order. The correlation between the emergence of "nationalist" movements around the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the assertion by the European great powers of political dominance across the globe is not a coincidence.

The doctrine of nationalism stemmed from an ontology that understood ethnicity as an autonomous category of being deserving of political expression.[22] Not least important, it carried an inherent normative preference for the organization of human societies into nation-states. This is a critical but often overlooked point. Kedourie put it succinctly:

Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It pretends to supply a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a government exclusively its own, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organization of a society of states. Briefly, the doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government.[23]

[21] John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1982] 1993), xii, 1.

[22] For an overview of how ethnicity acquired such importance, see Josep R. Llobera, *The God of Modernity: The Development of Nationalism in Western Europe* (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1994), 157–76. See also the works of Isaiah Berlin: *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 49–69, 207–37, 238–62; *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 1997), 333–55; and *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Rise of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

[23] Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 1.