

Introduction:
The traditions of Imperial Russian foreign
policy—problems of the present, agenda for
the future

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As Karl Marx himself would have readily acknowledged had he lived long enough, communism was not the first Russian specter to haunt Europe. It was preceded by centuries of a more conventional foreign policy that alarmed and confused Europe all the more because it was not a conventionally European style of foreign policy.¹ The subject itself has been controversial and emotional for several centuries, and the fortunes of its historiography were unhappy during the cold war. At the present juncture in world affairs, few subjects stand more in need of reappraisal.

PRESENT PROBLEMS

The condition of the study of Russian foreign policy is sad, even distressing, and in my conception it is part of our purpose here to call attention to the fact and to appeal to our colleagues in the fields of history and foreign policy to join us in an effort to revive it.

The most obvious reasons for the problems in the field of study are undoubtedly attributable to the cold war. If the age of *perestroika* and *glasnost* offered us a priceless opportunity to address the issue anew, the present aftermath of the cold war has improved the prospect. Until recently, Russian scholars were rarely able to use foreign archives, and foreign scholars were often denied access to Soviet archives, a situation that tended to discourage researchers from investing their time, labor,

I am indebted to Alfred Rieber, Robert Jones, and an anonymous reader for the Wilson Center for their helpful suggestions. They are not, of course, responsible for the contents.

¹Paul Blackstock and Bert F. Hoselitz, eds., *The Russian Menace to Europe: A Collection of Articles, Speeches, Letters, and News Despatches, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952).

and careers in a field of work so much less promising than others. Problems of access have recently diminished dramatically, as several of our presentations here will show.

The cold war further rendered scholarship on both sides of the former iron curtain unnecessarily partisan, even unscholarly. Just as Soviet scholarship was characterized by a distinctively defensive attitude, especially regarding the concept of bourgeois historiography, so have Western students of Russian foreign policy, both academics and politicians, reacted to the secretive disposition of the keepers of Russian historical records with a suspiciousness that sometimes misled their evaluations of it. Examples abound. There is the remarkable liveliness of the “Testament” of Peter I, which has not yet been buried in the graveyard of historical fiction. There is that fund of opinion chronicled by J. H. Gleason as *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950). Of course this opinion was not confined to Great Britain. Admittedly, the veil of secrecy and suspicion was occasionally pierced, as it was by Philip Mosely in *Russian Diplomacy and the Opening of the Eastern Question in 1838 and 1839* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), the product of his nearly unique work in Soviet archives in the early 1930s. Still, research such as Mosely’s remains altogether too rare.

In a surprisingly revisionist essay worth a good deal more attention than it has received, Emanuel Sarkisyanz has appropriately characterized the problem.

The notion that tsarist imperialism has a unique character remains deeply rooted. From the time of the Napoleonic Wars, and earlier, a political mythology has grown up around it. . . . Soon after the proclamation of the Cult of Reason in Western Europe, qualities of diabolical cunning or inscrutable motives for an international plot with unseen forces came to be attributed to the gigantic and therefore fear-inspiring empire of the tsar . . . seeming to present Russia’s conquests of the eighteenth century as proof that its tsars aspired to world domination.²

Of course, there were no more effective agents of such propaganda than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.³ The time would seem now opportune to repudiate such mythology, to replace it with a more sober

²Emanuel Sarkisyanz, “Russian Imperialism Reconsidered,” in Taras Hunczak, ed., *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1974), 45–46.

³Blackstock and Hoselitz, *The Russian Menace to Europe*.

appraisal of Russian policy, and the chapters of this book show a distinct willingness to undertake the task.

FUTURE AGENDA: TYPES OF WORKS NEEDED

What imperatives do the new conditions of scholarship recommend to us? One is the publication of more documents. The old Imperial Russian Historical Society made available in its distinguished *Sbornik* a large quantity of sources on eighteenth-century foreign policy, but the coverage is spotty, and the work was interrupted by the Revolution. The old Soviet series *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v epokhu imperializma, 1878–1917* (Moscow, 1931–39) was equally significant, and it would be useful to reprint this series, since the poor-quality paper has deteriorated so much that the work is scarcely usable. The more recent series edited by A. L. Narochnitskii and others, *Vneshniaia politika Rossii XIX i nachala XX veka* (Moscow, 1960–), is a collection of enormous significance, but thus far it scarcely extends beyond the reign of Alexander I (1801–25), and its progress has been disappointingly slow. In addition, more publication from private papers, for example Petr Andreevich Zaionchkovskii's editing of the Miliutin diaries,⁴ would be useful.

Of more general interest, there is a conspicuous dearth of works of general coverage and of a broadly interpretative nature. The best history of Russian foreign policy by a single author may still be in a venerable old work of Michael T. Florinsky, *History of Russia* (2 vols., New York, 1955). In any event, the paucity of such works makes ours a very difficult field for the nonspecialist to handle, and even for the specialist, works that integrate the monographic studies are useful. I would cite the following among the few exemplary works of this kind: Baron Boris Nol'de, *Formation de l'empire russe* (2 vols., Paris, 1952–53); M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774–1923* (New York, 1966); and the latter's Soviet counterpart, V. A. Georgiev and N. S. Kiniapina, *Vostochnyi vopros vo vneshnei politike Rossii: konets XVIII-nachalo XX v.* (Moscow, 1978). In addition, several collaborative efforts are in varying degrees useful, though they do reflect other political atmospheres and objectives and differ significantly from the present one as described in the criteria of the Preface: Ivo J. Lederer, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy: Essays in Historical Perspective* (New Haven, Conn., 1962); Taras Hun-

⁴Petr Andreevich Zaionchkovskii, *Dnevnik D. A. Miliutina, 1873–1875*, 4 vols. (Moscow: N.p., 1947–50).

czak, ed., *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1974); and Michael Rywkin, ed., *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917* (New York, 1988).

Two other styles of work in the field add rich dimension and perspective to an older and narrower form of diplomatic history that drew too exclusively on foreign office documents. One is that of the social scientist who takes into account both the influence of social and economic factors on politics and the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy. Dietrich Geyer's *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860–1914*, trans. Bruce Little (New York, 1987) is just such a work. The subtitle exemplifies the *historische Sozialwissenschaft* that inspires his inquiry, and the methodology of the book may serve as a model for anyone who works in the field.

The other approach is that of the humanist who, not content with the bureaucratic regimen recorded at the Quai d'Orsay or the Staatsarchiv, searches both for the personal qualities—the distinctions and the foibles—of the statesmen charged with policy and for the moral imperatives in the *Zeitgeist* of their time and place. A good example of this style of work is George F. Kennan's *Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York, 1984). Under the names of the principals of the story—the foreign ministers, ambassadors, chiefs of staff, premiers, and tsars—the index of the book invariably contains an entry on the “character and life” of the individuals, and the treatment of this subject in the text both makes the development of the story more comprehensible and illustrates how the fortunes of empires and of generations sometimes hang on the personal idiosyncrasies of statesmen.

Something of these methods is found in the studies in the present volume.

FUTURE AGENDA: TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS

Inherent in our subject are various questions that are not dealt with satisfactorily in the existing literature, and to the extent that it is feasible, it is clearly desirable to seek commonly coherent themes in a work contributed by a variety of authors, a work like the one we are undertaking here. I want to suggest, with the advice of my colleagues, a framework in which we might proceed. What I seek is our common focus on a critical characterization of Russian foreign policy.

The inadequacies of the foreign-policy system of the first Russian state,

that of Kievan Rus' (ca. 862–1240), are obvious enough. Something like a tribal confederation of semi-independent principalities, Kiev was both blessed and cursed in its princes, mayors, bishops, *veches* (elected town councils), *boyar dumas* (councils of a prince's retainers), and *tysiatskiis* (military captains) by an unusual degree of political pluralism. The advantage of such a system was that it conferred a substantial degree of freedom. The disadvantage was that it so divided the state within that it could not effectively face its foes without. As Kiev disintegrated under the blows of its superior enemies, the steppe nomads, the society that composed it surrendered the rich plains of the south and moved to the forests of the north, to an environment sufficiently different as to require new forms of political and economic organization.

The transfer brought a modicum of protection from the steppe nomads, who found the forests of the north an impediment to their economy and to their military. On the other hand, the move exacted a high price from the Russians. The forested north did not afford the economic assets of the agricultural plains of the south. Hence poverty replaced prosperity, aggravated by nomadic incursions and the insecurity of commerce. To make matters worse, within a matter of generations, it turned out that the flourishing civilization beside which the migrating Russians had settled was to form a more serious and more enduring military threat than the one from which they had fled in the steppes. Poland-Lithuania was the northeastern outpost of that Latin Catholic civilization that was eventually, with its Protestant and secular successors, to acquire the power, through the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, to threaten the independence of virtually all the nations of the earth. Caught between the Mongol East and the Latin West, requiring an ever stronger apparatus of state, and depending exclusively on the *yarlyk* (right of investiture) of the Mongol khan for their power during two centuries, the princes of Russia overcame the divisive forces of pluralism that had characterized Kiev and built in Muscovy an imposing political monism, the absolutism of modern Russia.

This process has been called by the *gosudarstvenno-iuridicheskaiia shkola* (the etatist-juridical school) of Russian historiography the “hy-pertrophic model of statecraft.” In contrast to Western Europe, where a variety of relatively independent social institutions—the clergy, the nobility, the burgers—developed, defined, and limited the nature of the state, in Russia it was the state that developed, defined, and limited the nature of society. In Russian circumstances, according to this argument,

an illiterate and technologically backward people, scattered widely over a large and poor land and lacking anything like naturally defensible frontiers, was compelled to deliver the protection of its independence into the hands of what a later age might plausibly describe as an instrument of the political vanguard, that is, the vigilant Russian absolutism. Hereafter, the role of the state in Russian life increased dramatically, and that of the people decreased proportionally. As Kliuchevskii observed, the state grew fat while the people grew lean. The demands of strategic security fused a closer and tenser relationship between foreign policy and its domestic support system—the service state and serfdom—than was common in the nations of western Europe. Servitude to the state was the price paid by the populace for national independence.

In spite of the sacrifice that it exacted, the Muscovite government served the nation in some respects remarkably well. The most immediate foreign-policy goal of the early Muscovite state was throwing off the Mongol yoke. Soon thereafter, Ivan IV improved the security of the nation by his conquest of the Tatar territories in the Volga basin, Kazan' and Astrakhan' (1550s), and the government continued to address itself seriously to the apparently genuinely national goal of "the gathering of the Russian lands."

At the same time, the hypertrophic state naturally appropriated the leading role in the economic life of the nation. Economic motives must explain the policy of Ivan III (1462–1505) and Ivan IV (1533–84) on the Baltic coast and the support that Ivan IV gave the Stroganovs and Ermak Timofeevich in northeastern Russia. The eastward movement across Asia brought Siberia under Russian dominion by the end of the seventeenth century.

One of the implications of Muscovite statecraft, however, was ominous for the future of Russian foreign policy. The near-exclusive aggregation of initiative in the hands of a Leviathan superstate asserted at least the potential to sever the connection between national opinion and national policy.

In the meantime, the seventeenth century brought national crisis and national revival in the *Smutnoe vremia* (Time of Troubles, 1598–1613). Thereafter, the Swedish and the Polish threats were contained, and eventually the Romanovs were able to acquire the ancient Russian patrimony on the left bank of the Ukraine (1667).

By the end of the seventeenth century, then, the foreign policy of Russia had achieved impressive, if incomplete, success. The Mongol threat had

been mastered. A good deal of economic development had been registered in the northeast and around the Baltic. The gathering of the Russian lands had been completed and exceeded in the east by the conquest of Siberia. In the west, the Baltic littoral, east-central Poland, and the right bank of the Ukraine—all of which Russians evidently considered part of their national patrimony—remained to be claimed. And that part of the Ukraine attached to Russia by Alexis Mikhailovich (1645–76) formed a distinctly dissident part of the state. The achievement of the Muscovite state in foreign policy was arguably a genuinely national achievement, even if a costly one.

The part of the Russian patrimony that remained to be claimed in the west, however, was the most challenging item on the agenda of Russian foreign policy, and the growing disparity of culture and technology between Russia and the West evidently required a cultural revolution in Russia before the issue could be adequately addressed. At this point, in any case, the Petrine revolution occurred, initiating our proper subject of concern here, the foreign policy of Imperial Russia. Peter's idea of statecraft, the *Polizeistaat* (or, to give it the unsatisfactory name found in our textbooks, enlightened despotism)—borrowed, as was so much of his outlook, from western Europe—was compatible with the old hypertrophic model of state, but it was infinitely more ambitious, more dynamic, and more developmental, in foreign no less than in home affairs.

In the new imperial era, it was not diabolical cunning but rather other features that made Russian foreign policy so curious. The foreign policy of eighteenth-century Russia was remarkably idea-driven, and the ideas that drove it, like those that moved eighteenth-century Russian statecraft in general, came from western Europe.

Let us consider the economic dimension of foreign policy, for example. We read in many older Soviet histories that the policy of the state until 1861, the beginning of the Great Reforms of Alexander II (1855–81), reflected the economic interests of the *dvorianstvo* (nobility). Yet when we look hard for the evidence, around the opportune areas of the Baltic and the Black Sea, for example, we find that the commitment of the *dvorianstvo* to economic development lagged far behind that of the state.⁵ We might therefore conclude that economic determinism is a mere fiction in the formulation of Russian policy. Yet perhaps there is a more productive way of looking at the question. If we consider the stubborn

⁵Robert Jones's essay in this volume will illustrate an exception to this rule.

persistence with which the Russian state focused on the Baltic question from the time of Ivan III to the time of Peter I (1689–1725), we must necessarily wonder if the concept of economic determinism, somewhat reformulated, of course, is not in fact an appropriate explanation of the “urge to the sea.” Was the Russian state not imitating, in a modified fashion, the old example of Novgorod? Peter I’s nearly fantastic scheme of making Russia the commercial entrepôt between Europe and Asia is well known. The attitudes of Catherine II (1762–96) toward the Black Sea and her own schemes of creating a Russian bourgeoisie reflect the same trend of policy. The dynamic new state of eighteenth-century Russia embraced the western European doctrine of mercantilism, and the state preceded the people in the pursuit of both the commercial and the territorial imperatives of self-conscious aggrandizement.

More generally and more provocatively, does not the relationship of state and people first observed in Muscovite government, and subsequently in the government of St. Petersburg, apply to the question of nationalism as fully as it does to that of commercialism? Admittedly Peter’s Baltic aspirations and Catherine’s Balkan aspirations are perfectly plausible in the nationalist tradition. The Persian campaign, however, is not. Catherine’s acquisition of the right bank of the Ukraine is arguably consonant with the Russian conception of the national tradition, but the second and third partitions of Poland are not. To quote Emanuel Sarkisyanz again: “Foreign policy, imperialist and otherwise, concerned not the people but the state. Thus the state was far removed from the people, and foreign policy much more so.”⁶ To put the question more provocatively yet, is it too much to suggest that the reworking of the international objectives of the Petrine state in the eighteenth century constitute the denationalization, the deracination, of Russian foreign policy?

In Imperial Russia, several different strata of opinion either had or might have had a bearing on the formulation of foreign policy: dynastic, *gosudarstvennoe* (etatist), *dvorianskoe* (of the nobility), *intelligentnoe* (of the intelligentsia), and *narodnoe* (of the *narod*, the masses). The antagonism to the foreign policy of Peter and Catherine on the part of the *dvorianstvo* and the *narod* suggests that the policy of the period must be narrowly dynastic.

The last decade of the eighteenth century forced a revision in the nature of Russian foreign policy nearly as drastic as that of the first decade, and

⁶Sarkisyanz, “Russian Imperialism Reconsidered,” 52.

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the reasons are not far to seek. During the eighteenth century, the government of Russia had followed a policy of nearly uncritical Westernization. Yet in 1789, the country that appeared to Russians to represent all that was progressive and enlightened in the West began to display the spectacle of slaughtering royalty and nobility. The royalty and nobility of Russia reacted in horror and undertook to ban the further Westernization of the country's culture.

Revolutionary France also seized the initiative in international affairs and multiplied the power of the nation in arms many times over by the introduction of Lazare Carnot's *levée en masse*. The old monarchies of Europe, so concerned throughout most of the eighteenth century to aggrandize their territories and their economies at the expense of their neighbors, were suddenly thrown on the defensive, Russia among them. Moreover, the disappearance of Poland in 1795 brought the Russian Empire to the more formidable and stable frontiers of Prussia and Austria and thereby reduced the prospect of easy expansion. New ideas among Russian statesmen contributed to the change of outlook as well. N. I. Panin and V. P. Kochubei, probably reflecting the outlook of the *dворянство*, championed a kind of new political thinking, arguing that Russia's interest lay not in the incorporation of yet more undeveloped and indigestible territory but rather in the preservation of peace in order to engage in the internal development of an empire already the largest on earth. In this period, then, Russian policy grew more conservative.

Alexander I (1801–25) flirted with the ideas of a kind of proto-*intelligent* before embracing, in the fall of Michael Speransky, the *dворянство*. Baron F. I. Brunnov argued for Nicholas I (1825–55) and Crown Prince Alexander Nikolaevich the virtues of preserving the status quo in foreign affairs. The most striking example of Russian adherence to the conservative Concert of Europe was the intervention against the Hungarian revolution in 1849.

It was, however, the more aggressive legacy of Catherine II and Peter I that continued to agitate the memory of Europe. Nicholas I, K. V. Nessel'rode, and Brunnov were committed to the preservation of the Ottoman Empire on the principle that a weak neighbor was a better neighbor than a strong one. Lord Palmerston and others, however, misunderstood, seeing in Nicholas's concerns not the intention to preserve "the sick man" but the atavism of Catherine's "Greek Project." In the Crimean War (1854–56), virtually all of Russia's former partners in the Concert turned against the country to thwart ambitions that Russia did

not entertain. The Peace of Paris imposed in the Black Sea clause an indignity intolerable to the pride of a great power, forbidding Russia to defend its own frontier on that coast. In this wound lay the roots of the nationalist revolutions of 1859–71, the transformation of the balance of power, and the origins of World War I. Thus began—this time to a great degree under the influence of an irate Russian intelligentsia—what was perhaps the most tragic period of Imperial Russian foreign policy.

The Peace of Vienna had left two revisionist nations in Europe, Italy and Germany, among a number of status quo powers. The Peace of Paris moved Russia onto the side of the revisionist nations. St. Petersburg was angry with most of the powers, excluding Prussia, which alone had taken no part in the Crimean coalition, but the ingratitude of Austria for the Russian assistance of 1849 was the bitterest pill to swallow. In 1859, a Russian army stationed on the border of Austria contributed to the defeat of Vienna at the hands of the French and the Italians. In 1866, Russia watched without concern as the Prussians defeated the Austrians on the way to unifying Germany. When the Prussians engaged the French in 1870, a Russian army on the border of Austria guaranteed that Vienna would not seek revenge for the defeat of 1866. In the aftermath, Bismarck announced the German Empire, and Russia announced, with Bismarck's support, the abrogation of the Black Sea clause. Thus Russia contributed mightily to the creation of the state that was the instrument of its own destruction in 1917.

From 1871 to 1890, Russia, goaded by the Panslav agitation of the intelligentsia, pursued a policy of incautious imperialism in the Balkans and twice met with defeat. In 1894, the French alliance was formed, pledging the fate of a conservative nation to the support of a radical republic against the monarchical governments between them. Only six people in the Russian Empire were informed of the pledge. Two of them, Alexander III (1881–94) and the chief of staff, General N. N. Obruchev, were in favor of the alliance. Minister of Foreign Affairs N. K. Giers and Minister of War General P. S. Vannovskii were opposed to it. The remainder of the apparatus of state, the intelligentsia, the *dvorianstvo*, and the *narod* were not consulted.⁷ By this time, the Caucasus and Central Asia had been conquered almost by oversight. Whose interests were served by the conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the campaigns

⁷George F. Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).