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978-1-107-04309-1 - The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War

Alfred J. Rieber

Excerpt

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Introduction

This study argues that the great crises of the twentieth century – the two world wars and the Cold War – had common origins in a complex historical process I call the struggle over the Eurasian borderlands. The struggle is conceived as having taken place on two levels: from above, in the course of state-building; from below, in the reaction of the subjugated peoples. The main actors in imperial state-building in Eurasia in the first phase were the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, Iranian (Safavid and Qajar), and Qing multicultural empires. In their competition for territory and resources they expanded from their early centers of power along moving, military frontiers, engaging one another in war, diplomacy, and cultural practices for hegemony over the borderlands on their peripheries. From below, the peoples of the borderlands brought under imperial rule strove to maintain their cultures, defend their autonomy, regain or achieve independence either by resisting or accommodating to imperial rule.

The impetus and inspiration for this study came from many years of teaching European, Russian, and comparative history, in the course of which a number of challenging questions kept reoccurring along lines familiar to every student of international relations and global history. How is it possible to explain that, with the exception of the wars of Italian and German unification, all the major wars and some minor ones fought in Europe and Asia from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the mid-twentieth century began in the Eurasian borderlands, those territories located on the peripheries of the multinational continental empires, which, after the civil wars and interventions from 1918 to 1920, became successor states? The list of such conflicts is impressive: the Crimean War (1854–1856); the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878); the Second Afghan War (1879); the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895); the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905); two Balkan Wars (1913–1914); the First (1914–1918) and Second (1939–1945) World Wars; the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949); and the Korean War (1950–1953). How further to explain that the continental empires, Habsburg, Ottoman, Romanov, Safavid–Qajar, and Qing, having survived their rivalry over these same territories for centuries, collapsed in revolution

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and war within little more than a decade between 1911 and 1923? Why was it, finally, that Imperial Russia was involved directly or indirectly in most of these conflicts? By posing and seeking to answer these questions in the context of *la longue durée*, the struggle over the borderlands may help to put in a new perspective the major conflicts of the twentieth century as well. The Eurasian borderlands were the multiple sites of the origins of the Cold War – the prelude to a third world war that happily was never fought – as well as the end of the Cold War with the disintegration of the East European bloc, the secession of the Soviet borderlands, and the break up of the successor states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. But these are aspects of the struggle that require separate studies. The complexity of the struggle during the imperial phase from the early modern period to the twentieth century demands a broad comparative and transnational approach. This explains the thematic organization of the book and justifies, I hope, its great length.

Chapter 1 explains and illustrates what is meant by a geocultural approach, and then applies it to three spatial concepts, Eurasia, borderlands, and frontiers shaped by complex historical processes over long periods of time. Interpreted as place, process, and symbol, these concepts reflect the changing nature of politics, warfare, and cultural practices within different physical landscapes from the early modern period to the twentieth century. The chapter also outlines the dynamic interaction between strategies of imperial expansion: conquest, colonization, and conversion, and the strategies of response:– accommodation and resistance.

Chapter 2 deals with the evolution of imperial ideologies and cultural practices as political theologies. Dynasts and ruling elites of the multi-cultural states designed them to endow imperial rule with legitimacy, provide an overarching principle of authority, and unify the divergent populations brought under their control. Chapter 3 examines the institutional foundations of imperial rule, focusing on the army, bureaucracy, and co-optation of elites as the instruments for mobilizing the human and material resources necessary to maintain a competitive position in the imperial rivalries.

Chapter 4 analyzes the prolonged struggle over the borderlands along seven Eurasian frontiers: the Baltic littoral, the Danubian frontier, the Pontic steppe, the Caucasian isthmus, Trans Caspia, and Inner Asia, locating many of the sites that will later become “hot spots” in the coming of the two world wars and the Cold War. In the period up to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, Safavid, and Qing empires occupied relatively equal power positions with respect to one another, while some minor competitors, Sweden

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and Dzungaria, and a major one, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, were eliminated. During this period resistance to imperial rule by the subjugated populations foreshadowed the full-blown nationalist movements and class conflicts of the following period. At the same time, the Russian Empire began to emerge as the hegemonic power in Eurasia. In this period, for the first time, Russia's expansion was seriously challenged from outside the parameters of Eurasia by Napoleonic France, Great Britain, and Prussia/Germany. Yet it maintained its ascendancy, despite the temporary setback of the Crimean War, until the early years of the twentieth century. Finally, during this period the gradual and fragmentary adaptation of Western constitutional ideas and cultural practices, as well as economic penetration, began to undermine the reigning ideologies and institutions of imperial rule in the Ottoman, Qajar, and Qing empires, creating internal tensions that weakened their resistance to Russian and, to a lesser extent, Habsburg expansion.

Chapter 5 analyzes the mounting internal contradictions of imperial rule in all the multicultural states. Attempts by the ruling elites to adopt measures borrowed from abroad in the fields of education, military training, and administration, culminating in the introduction of constitutional experiments, yielded ambiguous results in dealing with rising dissension among the subjugated peoples of the borderlands. They constituted the main causes of the constitutional crises that broke out almost simultaneously in the Russian, Habsburg, Iranian, Ottoman, and Qing empires, shaking the foundations of imperial power. The concluding chapter illustrates how persistent factors in the struggle over the borderlands survived the rupture of war, revolution, and civil wars from 1914 to 1920.

This book does not seek to evoke nostalgia for empire; still less is it a celebration of nationalism, sentiments all too prevalent in historical writing since the end of the Cold War. If there are a few guiding threads through the web of circumstance and structure that alternate in this narrative, they are the complexity of state-building Eurasia; the persistence of problems that geographical and cultural diversity posed to the rulers and the ruled in their different aspirations; and the variety of responses – reform, repression, revolt – that they devised to resolve these problems. The three threads weave continuity into the narrative, which even apparent ruptures do not entirely break, allowing them to be re-knit as it were by different hands.

At this point, two brief apologies are in order. By making comparisons, demonstrating transfers, and transnational (or preferably transcultural) influences, this study seeks to analyze events and issues from multiple perspectives, which require a mix of thematic and chronological chapters. This involves some repetition, which it is hoped will instruct rather than

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annoy the reader. For example, colonization is treated in Chapter 1 as a key factor in defining Eurasian frontiers; in Chapter 4, it is reintroduced as an instrument of state policy in the struggle over the borderlands. Similarly, the role of religious institutions appears in different contexts: as a force for conversion, as the underpinning of imperial ideologies, and as an element in the crises of imperial systems.

Instead of appending a bibliography, the notes identify sources and provide commentary on the main historiographical disputes that continue to enliven scholarship on the many issues raised in the study. In a synthesis of this sort, reliance on secondary works is inevitable, and is not after all a bad thing. Over the past generation the discovery and exploration of new archival sources, the introduction of new theoretical approaches, and the relatively modest but noticeable shift away from a Eurocentric bias in historiography have greatly enriched the scholarship on empires without which the present study would not have been possible. Although the notes may appear to be abundant, they do not include all the sources consulted, and I apologize for any significant omissions.

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1 Imperial space

The concept of space has become a much disputed topic in the world of scholarship. At one extreme, the “spatial turn” has replaced the physical grounding of geography with symbolic meaning. One result has been a cartography in which space surrenders its independent existence to mental mapping. Terms such as frontiers, borders, boundaries, and place are widely employed to delineate virtually all aspects of culture. Another less radical result has been to repair the long-frayed bonds between geography and history by reintroducing the cultural factor. This is the approach used in this chapter to designate Eurasia, borderlands, and frontiers, the key components of imperial space.

My treatment differs from two widely accepted theoretical approaches: the geopolitical and the civilizational. Both stress a single factor underpinning international politics, whether physical geography or ideology. In practice they come close to endorsing determinism. Both also divide space by static linear borders. By contrast, the present study will interpret Eurasia, its frontiers, and borderlands as spaces shaped by complex historical processes forming a geocultural context in which the great conflicts of the twentieth century will be situated. My preference for the geocultural over the geopolitical and civilizational is also based in part on the fact that the discourses of geopolitics and civilization as applied to Eurasia have been ideologically complicit in the coming of the Cold War.

Three approaches

The term geopolitics has intellectual roots in the work of German geographers in the nineteenth century.¹ Subsequently, an Anglo-American school of publicists and scholars shaped these ideas into a new theory of international relations that focused on the perceived Russian bid for control over the Eurasian land mass that would provide the natural

¹ Rudolph Kjellen, *Grundriss zu einem System der Politik* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1920), p. 40.

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resources and strategic advantage necessary to achieve global hegemony. In a much revised, but recognizable, form, their views gained widespread acceptance in the early years of the twentieth century and again in the post-Second World War debates over Soviet foreign policy, particularly in the work of influential scholars, highly placed advisors, and politicians like Nicholas Spykman, Isaiah Bowman, George Kennan, and J. William Fulbright. These ideas became the common coin of the containment policy.²

At the same time, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, another group of American publicists was building on the influential frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner in order to promote an American overseas empire. Their advocacy merged geopolitics, Social Darwinism, Manifest Destiny, and the Open Door Policy.³ This cluster of ideas also displayed a strong anti-Russian bias, and acquired a prominent place in the debates during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and in the interwar period.⁴ The perceived geopolitical threat of Russian domination of Eurasia became entangled with the ideology of an American mission, laying the foundations for American foreign policy during the early years of the Cold War. It continues to inform the historiography of Russia and Eurasia.

The civilizational approach to Eurasia also has its roots in the works of nineteenth-century theorists. One line, represented by Russian pan-Slav philosophers and publicists such as Nikolai Danilevsky and Fedor Dostoevsky, extolled the uniqueness and messianic destiny of a Russian civilization that spanned both Europe and Asia, producing something different from both. Although pan-Slavism never became an official ideology, its precepts strongly influenced a generation of Russian military

² Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944); Michael P. Gerace, "Between MacKinder and Spykman. Geopolitics, Containment and After," *Comparative Strategy* 10(4) (1991): 347–64; Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright. A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 141. The work of Spykman and MacKinder still occupied an important place in the education of American military officers in the latter years of the Cold War. See Department of Geography, *Readings in Military Geography* (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1981). For the geopolitical approach, see, for example, Dominic Lieven, *Empire. The Russian Empire and its Rivals from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (London: Pimlico, 2003), esp. ch. 6; John LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917. The Geopolitics of Expansionism and Containment* (Oxford University Press, 1997); and Milan Hauner, *What is Asia to Us? Russia's Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today* (London: Routledge, 1992).

³ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire. An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), on Turner, pp. 62–72, 95–101. For Turner's influence on Woodrow Wilson, see William A. Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," *Pacific Historical Review* (November 1955): 379–95.

⁴ Cf. Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire. The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

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proconsuls and geographers in the course of Russia's expansion to the east. The pan-Slav bugbear was taken even more seriously by statesmen and publicists in the West, reinforcing the geopolitical version of the Russian threat in the decades before the Russian Revolution.

After the fall of tsarism, two avatars of the civilizational idea appeared in Russia, apparently diametrically opposed to one another. A small group of émigré Russian intellectuals, dubbing themselves Eurasianists, interpreted the historical role of Russia as a civilization-blending element of the European and Asian cultures destined to bring spiritual unity of the world. Largely ignored in their time and repressed in the Soviet Union, a new Eurasianism has re-surfaced in the post-Soviet period as a powerful voice in the reconstruction of a new national myth within the Russian Federation.⁵

A second offshoot of the civilizational thesis was Stalin's doctrine of socialism in one country, a radical reinterpretation of Marxism–Leninism. The centerpiece of this theory was his proclamation that the success of the world revolution depended upon the building of socialism in backward Russia rather than vice versa. To the extent that this was an unacknowledged version of Eurasianism, it caused a minor scandal in the interparty struggles in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.⁶ Western observers were quick to demonstrate what they regarded as an organic link between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary ideas of Russia's unique universal destiny as proof of its innate messianism. This myth of unlimited Russian expansionism also became part of the Cold War lore.⁷

Though the term geocultural has not enjoyed the same vogue as geopolitical, it has its own intellectual pedigree in the pioneering work of the

⁵ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "The Emergence of Eurasianism," *California Slavic Studies* 4 (1967): 39–72; Ilya Vinkovetsky and Charles Schlacks, Jr. (eds.), *Exodus to the East. Forebodings and Events. An Affirmation of the Eurasians* (Idyllwild, CA: Charles Schlacks, 1996); and Ilya Vinkovetsky, "Classical Eurasianism and its Legacy," *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* 34(2) (Summer 2000): 125–40. The revival began even earlier with the work of Lev Gumilov, *Iz istorii Evrazii* (Moscow: Issskustvo, 1993) and *Drevnaia Rus' i velikaia step'* (Moscow: DI-DIK, 1997). See also Aleksandr Dugin, *Misterii Evrazii* (Moscow: Arktogeia, 1996) and the journal *Vestnik Evrazii*.

⁶ S. V. Tsakunov, "NEP: evoliutsiia rezhima i rozhdienie natsional-bolshevizma," in Iu. N. Afanas'ev (ed.), *Sovetskoe obshchestvo. Vozniknoveniie, razvitie, istoricheskii final*, 3 vols. (Moscow: RGGU, 1997), vol. I, pp. 100–12.

⁷ See, for example, Thomas Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, 2 vols. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1919); Hans Kohn, *Pan Slavism. Its History and Ideology* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1953); Carl J. Friederich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); James Billington, *The Icon and the Ax* (New York: Knopf, 1966).

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precursors and early theorists of the Annales School.⁸ The basic assumption underlying the geocultural outlook is that climate and soil, the contours of the land, abundance or lack of navigable rivers, proximity to seas, all present possibilities as well as imposing constraints on human action. But they do not determine historical development, the distribution and concentration of power, or specific policy choices. Geocultural factors may shape what Lucian Febvre has called “privileged places for the birth of viable political entities, regions that favor the growth of states.”⁹ However, even privileged places are not bound by natural frontiers, but emerge from the interaction of cultures, the evolution of collective communities, and the rationalizing action of rulers and ruling elites. For centuries societies and polities have sought to fix their outer limits in the search to satisfy basic needs for group identity, stability, and security.¹⁰ Yet, by its very nature, the process of locating “the other” on the far side of a real or imaginary demarcation line has constituted a potential threat. Thus, boundary maintenance became an ambiguous process.¹¹ In light of these insights the Eurasian frontiers and borderlands will be treated in this study as fluid rather than fixed and immutable concepts, subject to change over time, not wholly imagined, yet endowed with ideological meaning by intellectuals and politicians to serve statist aims, whether imperial or national.¹² By treating Eurasia as a contested geocultural space, Russian expansion is placed in a different context, as a product of a centuries-old struggle among rival imperial powers.

From the geocultural perspective, four interrelated but distinct processes shaped Eurasian space. First, over long periods of time, from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries, large-scale population movements – migration, deportation, flight, and colonization – scattered a great variety of culture groups drawn from Germanic, Slavic, Turkic, Mongol, and Chinese ethnolinguistic groups, and Christian (Roman Catholic,

⁸ Paul Vidal de la Blache, *Tableau de la géographie de la France* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1903, reprinted 1979 and 1994) and André-Louis Sanguin, *Vidal de la Blache. Une génie de la géographie* (Paris: Belin, 1993), pp. 327–33. For a similar analysis by a sociologist, see Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

⁹ Lucian Febvre, *La terre et l'évolution humaine* (Paris: A. Michel, [1922] 1949), p. 339. See also the work of Carl O. Sauer summarized in his presidential address to the American Association of Geographers in December 1940, “Foreword to Historical Geography,” available at: www.colorado.edu/geography/giw/sauer-co/1941_fhg/1941_fhg.html.

¹⁰ Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières. Un tour du monde géopolitique*, new edn (Paris: Fayard, 1991), pp. 77–79.

¹¹ Cf. Frederik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Differences* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1969), who stresses the importance of boundaries in maintaining the stability and continuity of ethnic units.

¹² Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (New York: Verso, 1991).

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Orthodox, and Protestant), Judaic, Muslim, and Buddhist believers over vast distances. The result was, in metaphoric terms, a demographic kaleidoscope of unparalleled variety and complexity rather than a mosaic. In the course of these movements, certain areas acquired the characteristics of what anthropologists have called shatter zones where numerous ethno-religious groups intermingled with one another in close proximity, creating conditions of potential conflict.¹³ Second, beginning in the sixteenth century, a number of major centers of political power (Sweden, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Muscovy, the Habsburg, Ottoman, Safavid, and, later in the seventeenth century, the Qing empires), seeking to enhance their security, stability, and resource base, expanded on the margins of their core lands into territories separating them from one another, here to be called complex frontiers, with shifting, contested, and often blurred boundaries, reflecting the changing outcomes of the military, demographic, and cultural competition. Third, the attempt to conquer these disputed territories and incorporate them as borderlands within the body politic of the increasingly multicultural state systems became an external struggle that profoundly affected the process of state-building in Eurasia. Fourth, within the borderlands an internal struggle developed as the subjugated peoples continuously sought ways to defend against linguistic assimilation and religious conversion, and to preserve local autonomy or regain their independence. They adopted a variety of strategies ranging along a broad spectrum from violent revolution to cooperation. The centers of power reacted with an equally varied set of strategies ranging from compromise and toleration to repression. Both the external and internal struggles over the borderlands were frequently entangled as the rival states encouraged subversion among their enemies and the conquered populations sought support from the outside, thus blurring the conventional distinction between foreign and domestic policies within imperial space.

These four processes unfolded unevenly over time, and involved different combinations of multicultural states, marked by a rough chronological division into three periods. From the earliest recorded history to approximately the sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, a cyclical pattern

¹³ By virtue of their ethnic, religious, and linguistic complexity the shatter zones of the Eurasian borderlands have no counterpart in Western Europe, where frontier zones are almost invariably characterized by the encounter of only two ethnolinguistic groups, as in Alsace, Schleswig, Savoie, Istria, Flanders, or the Scottish Highlands. For a similar view, see Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), which appeared too late for me to take advantage of its rich content.

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defined the relations between nomadic and sedentary societies. In the second period, the emerging, relatively centralized multicultural states began to expand into the frontier areas and incorporate conquered peoples into borderlands. In the third period, beginning in the late eighteenth century, the Russian Empire gained ascendancy over its main imperial rivals in the struggle to acquire and to consolidate new borderlands. The fourth and shortest period, lasting a few decades before the First World War, was marked by a series of imperial crises culminating in the collapse of the major multicultural dynastic states, the Russian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Qajar, and Qing empires.

Geocultural diversity in Eurasia

From the earliest period Eurasian space was shaped by the encounter between diverse types of pastoral nomadic societies practicing a great variety of economic strategies, and sedentary societies engaged in an equally broad range of agricultural systems and small manufacturing. Nomadic groups ranged from the tundra and taiga of the northern latitudes, south through the mixed forests and treeless grasslands to the semi-arid steppe, deserts, and eastern highlands, extending in broad, irregularly shaped bands from the Danube delta to the coasts of the Sea of Japan. The appearance of pastoral nomads may have been the result of a long process of interaction between the forest, oases, and fringe of the steppe with cultivated lands.¹⁴ Owen Lattimore described the “flanks of the main body of steppe society” as “an almost infinite series of combinations of steppe-nomadic, hunting, agricultural and town life.”¹⁵ Similarly, historians of the Ottoman Empire have pointed out the fallacy of dividing nomads and settled peasants into rigidly separate categories. Their interaction depended much on the physical geography, fertility of the soil, climatic factors, and crop yields.¹⁶

In the early period, the physical environment of Eurasia was more favorable to a nomadic than to a sedentary way of life. The continental climate, with long winters and dry hot summers, the inadequate supplies

¹⁴ Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, 2nd edn (New York: Capitol Publications, 1951), esp. pp. 113–14, 158–63, 450–54.

¹⁵ Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History. Collected Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 248. See also Joseph Fletcher, “The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 46(1) (1986): 11–52; and Peter Perdue, *China Marches West. The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press), pp. 30–32.

¹⁶ Rhoads Murphey, “Some Features of Nomadism in the Ottoman Empire. A Survey Based on Tribal Census and Judicial Appeal Documentation from Archives in Istanbul and Damascus,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* 8 (1984): 190–92.