Introduction

Conceived as a sequel to The *Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands,* this book radically shifts the focus away from a comparison of the centuries-old competition among multicultural conquest empires for hegemony in Eurasia to the Soviet Union, the central player in the renewal of that contest in the first half of the twentieth century. Many of the issues remain the same, but the cast of characters has changed. The Soviet Union was heir to much of the territory of the Russian Empire and many of its problems, both foreign and domestic, flowed from that hard-won inheritance. But its response was radically different. Its new leaders were engaged in transforming its foreign policy as part of rebuilding a multinational state. From the outset they were obliged to enter into complex and often contradictory relations with a ring of smaller and weaker successor states, constituting the new borderlands, which had replaced the rival empires all along their frontiers. In many cases these borderland states were allies or clients of the major powers and perceived by the Soviet government as hostile or threatening.

In the first decade of Soviet rule, the leaders sought to fashion a foreign policy that privileged stability by establishing normal diplomatic relations within the postwar capitalist state system while nurturing the cause of socialist revolution. But darker clouds were already gathering. By the early 1930s, they were forced to confront a more direct and formidable challenge to their policy from the rising power of Nazi Germany and a militarist Japan. The imperialist designs of the two flank powers focused initially on exercising control over the successor states all along the Soviet frontiers, although their aspirations, at least in theory, like those of the Soviet Union, also extended beyond these territories. This book, then, is a study of how the Soviet leaders, primarily Stalin, who dominated policy-making during this period, sought to combine the twin processes of transforming the state and its relations with the external world within the context of a renewed struggle over the borderlands.

The Soviet state emerged from the wreckage of the Russian Empire much weakened and diminished. The war against the Central Powers,

revolution and Civil War, and foreign intervention had stripped the old empire of its western borderlands. At one point in March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had reduced its territorial space in the west to its pre-Petrine borders, with the exception of St. Petersburg, renamed Petrograd and soon to become Leningrad. As one of the successor states of the Russian Empire, Soviet Russia had only partially recovered territories lost during the Civil War and Intervention. It had been forced to concede the loss of the former Kingdom of Poland, the Baltic Provinces (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Bessarabia and the provinces of Kars and Ardahan in the Caucasus. In the Far East during the nadir of Soviet power during the Civil War, all the Inner Asian borderlands had fallen under virtual Japanese domination. Much of the Trans Caspian borderlands (Central Asia) had broken away and Russian influence in Iran and along the Afghan border was contested. The loss of Russian influence in the Chinese borderlands of Xinjiang, Mongolia and Manchuria and the creation, if only briefly, of an autonomous Far Eastern Republic in Eastern Siberia reversed two centuries of territorial expansion and political penetration.

Although the main rivals of the Russian Empire in the west and southwest, the German Kaiserreich, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, had also collapsed in defeat, the neighboring successor states of Soviet Russia in Eastern Europe, Poland and Romania, were hostile and supported by France, which sought to reconstitute its traditional policy of barrier states (*barrière de l'est*) in the new form of a *cordon sanitaire* against Bolshevism. Relations with the new Turkish Republic, heir to the Ottoman Empire, were exceptional. Diplomatic relations were established on the basis of dividing the Armenian borderland.

The Soviet Union had also recovered some of its influence in Trans Caspia, not only in the reconquest of the former colony of Turkestan and the khanates but also in restoring its influence in Iran where a treaty gave it the right to intervene if its perceived interests were threatened by a foreign power. In Inner Asia the major threat from Japan had receded, if only temporarily. A weak Chinese central government was, however, unable to restore its influence in its borderlands, with mixed results for Soviet influence. With Bolshevik assistance Outer Mongolia had secured its autonomy from China, while warlords in Xinjiang and Manchuria had wrested their autonomy from China by maneuvering among the Russians, Chinese and Japanese.

To survive at all, the Bolshevik leadership appeared to renounce for the time being their world revolutionary aspirations. After an initial internal debate and several abortive revolutions in Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria, they entered into negotiations to establish trade or diplomatic

relations with their new neighbors and the major capitalist powers. But leaders of the outside world were not deceived; to them it was, as Kipling had put it earlier, "the truce of the bear." In fact, by 1921 the Bolshevik leaders had reached a crucial decision to domesticate their foreign policy. And they had begun to construct a state system on that basis. It was in theory, and to a degree in practice, a federal structure that allowed for expansion through the incorporation of new soviet republics. This was the state system that Stalin had done much with Lenin to construct. Over time, Stalin would gradually stand on its head Lenin's initial design of the relationship between the state and revolution; the revolution abroad would become increasingly dependent upon the strength of the Soviet Union rather than the success of socialism in Russia being dependent on the spread of revolution in the advanced capitalist West.

In constructing a new foreign policy, the leadership of the Soviet state and the Communist Party faced in more aggravated form a set of persistent factors with which their predecessors had grappled. What I have called persistent factors constitute a dynamic interplay among geography, demography and culture in the long-term process of state-building in Eurasia. These factors are not fixed or immutable. That is to say, they are not permanent. Rather, they evolve over time both in their separate and distinctive character and in their mutual interaction. Stated in another way, they evolve in the course of an evolutionary historical process, creating conditions that cannot easily be altered by the action of statesmen; even under great external pressures or internal upheavals they resist significant change. The existence of persistent factors sets limitations on the range of policy choices but does not determine a particular course of action. Different leaders will pursue different styles in conducting foreign policy, but they ignore only at their peril the restraints placed upon them by the persistent factors. Concrete examples will help to reduce this concept from the realm of abstraction to the arena of practical politics. But first, one more caveat. Because of their deep embeddedness in a country's history, they affect the formation of both domestic and foreign policy, so that the two aspects of statecraft cannot, and in this study will not, be separated.

In Russian and Soviet history four persistent factors have shaped the making of foreign policy together with implications for domestic policy. They are a multinational social structure; porous or permeable frontiers; cultural alienation; and relative economic backwardness.[1] Taken

[1] For the impact of persistent factors on imperial Russian foreign policy, see Alfred J. Rieber, "Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay," in Hugh Ragsdale (ed.), *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy* (Washington and Cambridge: Woodrow

together they constitute a unique combination that distinguishes Russian and Soviet foreign policy from that of any other great power. Each requires a brief explanation. The multinational demography of the Soviet Union resembled to a large extent that of the Russian Empire, despite the loss of Finnish, Polish, Ukrainian, Moldovan and Armenian populations on the periphery. What made it so distinctive was first the number of nationalities, second the pattern of their concentration and dispersal, and third the lack of a clear-cut ethnographic line dividing the same national groups on either side of the Soviet frontier. Depending on how they were identified in the Soviet Union – and Stalin himself was inconsistent on this issue – there were between sixty and over a hundred nationalities representing all the world's great religions: Orthodox, Latin and Protestant Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism as well as numerous sectarians and animists. The peoples of the Soviet Union also spoke an enormous variety of languages, although Russian was the lingua franca of the ruling and local elites and the educated public. But the erratic imperial policies of assimilation had not eliminated strong regional identities where clusters of nationalities retained their distinctive cultural ethos and spoke their own languages in day-to-day exchanges. The nationalities were highly concentrated on the periphery of the state; but Russians and Ukrainians also had been widely dispersed throughout the country by a lengthy process of colonization over the centuries. As Stalin was quick to realize, the Russian settlers, mainly workers and minor officials, could form the iron framework around which a multinational state could be erected. But the problem remained, as it had persisted over time, of how to reconcile the dominant cultural and political position of the Russians with the aspirations of the nationalities for some form of cultural or political autonomy.

The Soviet Union had inherited the task from the Russian Empire of protecting and securing the longest and most turbulent frontier of any state in Eurasia. As a result of conquest, migration, colonization and resettlement over the previous several hundred years, the frontiers from the Baltic to the Sea of Japan had frequently shifted, becoming over time porous and permeable. These large-scale population movements

Wilson Center and Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 315–59. I have slightly altered some of the terminology. "Multicultural" has given way to "multinational" in order to reflect the evolution of ethnic groups into nationalities. "Cultural alienation" replaces "cultural marginality" which was criticized for implying inferiority: this had not been my intention. For the application of persistent factors to the Soviet period, see my essay, "How Persistent are Persistent Factors?" in Robert Legvold (ed.), *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 205–78.

contributed to creating borderlands on the peripheries of empires inhabited by very mixed and floating populations in which no one group held a majority; they were quite literally shatter zones. These shatter zones differed, for example, from mixed frontier societies in Western Europe by virtue of the large number of different religious and linguistic groups concentrated within them and the frequent shifts in the demographic equation.[2] Over long periods of time, these borderlands had been contested by competing imperial states, the Russian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Iranian and Chinese empires leaving a residue of competing historical claims. By contrast, similar territorial conflicts in Western Europe and elsewhere involved only two competing external powers and with few exceptions were limited to brief periods of time (e.g. Alsace actively only from 1870 to 1945).

The postwar settlement had drawn arbitrary lines of demarcation all along the Soviet frontiers, leaving the same nationalities facing one another across state boundaries. Many of these groups had participated in the Civil War and their loyalty remained doubtful in the eyes of the Bolshevik leaders. Stalin above all perceived the condition of divided nationalities as a two-edged sword: a potential threat of intervention and an opportunity for expansion. And he well knew the history of subversion and rebellion in the borderlands which he absorbed from the history of his native Georgia and which he had witnessed in 1905 and again during the Civil War. Finally, the existence of the mixed populations on the frontier also facilitated smuggling, illegal immigration and the penetration of ideas from abroad considered subversive by the Soviet government. Under Stalin measures were taken to intensify border surveillance and increase border guards. But porous frontiers also worked in reverse by allowing Soviet agents and propaganda to infiltrate the outer world. For Stalin the problem remained how to seal off the Soviet frontiers from external penetration, but also to transcend them through the medium of foreign Communist parties whose actions he sought to orchestrate from Moscow.

If the number, variety and location of the nationalities along the lengthy porous frontiers posed enormous questions of security, as they always had for the Russian Empire, then the cultural alienation of Russia from the rest of the world perceived by foreign observers and even some Russians

[2] Frontier societies in Western Europe were in the twentieth century almost everywhere bi-national; for example, German and French in Alsace-Lorraine; German and Danish in Schleswig; French and Italian in Savoy; Italian and Croatian in Istria; German and Polish in Silesia and Pomerania. In the Inner Asian borderlands the mix was generally between Chinese and Manchu or Chinese and Mongol, although in Xinjiang the frontier was complex enough to deserve the term "shatter zone."

delayed the entry of the Russian Empire into the European state system and its cultural world. Two centuries of Mongol rule, the acceptance of Christianity from Byzantium rather than Rome, and the sheer physical distance from the centers of European civilization have often been given as the reasons Russia did not participate, or only belatedly and partially, in the Renaissance, Reformation and early stages of the Scientific Revolution. From the time of Ivan IV (the Terrible) until Peter the Great Russia's rulers had tried unsuccessfully to gain European recognition as full-fledged members of the Christian Commonwealth. The conquest of the Muslim khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan and expansion into Siberia seemed to draw the Russians deeper into Asia, away from Europe. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Muscovy, as it was then known, was omitted from the registers of Christian states and the celebrated peace plans for Europe, like those of William Penn. Peter the Great and Catherine the Great expended great efforts to demonstrate that Russia, then a self-proclaimed empire, was part of Europe politically and culturally. But neither they nor their successors were successful in convincing large segments of European opinion, or even some of their own subjects like the slavophiles, who preferred to regard Russia as a distinct, indeed unique, entity. The long and unresolved debate among foreign observers and pre-revolutionary Russian intellectuals and officials, not to speak of Orthodox churchmen and religious sectarians, over whether the empire (or some part of it) belonged to Europe or not was revived and given a startling reverse spin under Bolshevik rule.

In 1917 it was the Bolsheviks who proclaimed their ideological separation from the rest of the world, but this time as a state and society building socialism – the most advanced form of European civilization. Stalin envisaged himself as a supreme modernizer, yet he could take pleasure from time to time in boasting that he was an Asiatic! Paradoxes of cultural identity multiplied. The early proclamations of world revolution were taken at face value by the rest of the world, including substantial elements of the old social democratic parties who split off to form Communist parties, and under the aegis of the Soviet Union to join the Third International or Comintern. How could the Bolsheviks reconcile their claims for both uniqueness and universality?

The persistent factor of economic backwardness proved the most difficult to tackle, as it had under the tsarist regime, because its resolution was deeply entangled in the nexus of foreign and domestic policy. To be sure definitions of economic backwardness depend upon the object of comparison, the standards of measurement and the perceptions of observers. In the case of Russia, the object of comparison was always "the West" and remained so in the Soviet Union. The standards of

measurement were often subjective, but the advent of more accurate statistics in the late nineteenth century reenforced the impression that Russia still lagged behind the most industrialized countries in most categories. From the earliest period in its history the development of the economy was restricted by unfavorable climatic and geographic factors: short growing seasons, poor soil, extreme temperatures, a land-locked location, widely dispersed if abundant natural resources and the existence of a bonded, communally organized peasantry that was only beginning to undergo a transformation along the lines of individually owned landed proprietors when the revolution overtook the process. The expansion of the state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eased some of these problems; the rich Black Earth region of Ukraine was annexed in the late eighteenth century, and colonization began by the end of the nineteenth century to populate most of the lands formerly occupied by nomads. But their exploitation was often hampered by the means employed to acquire them. Long and costly wars were necessary to conquer the Eurasian borderlands. These required the imposition of heavy burdens on the tax-paying population and the service nobility, raising the question of the extent to which Russia was a militarized state.

In the nineteenth century as the Industrial Revolution took hold in Western Europe, Russia fell further behind in military technology and railroad construction. It lost three out of four wars over the borderlands in the last century of the empire (the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War, defeating only the Ottoman Empire in 1877–8). Russia's industrialization was slowed by the lack of investment capital, the social conservatism of its merchant class, an inadequate transportation system and the continued attachment of most of the peasantry to the land up to the 1880s. Economic backwardness never translated into dependency on the West as it did in other declining empires in the Middle East and Asia. But foreign loans, technology transfer and patterns of trade exposed Russia to pressure from abroad, and influenced the formation of its alliances. During the First World War Russia's needs for loans obliged the government to make concessions to foreigners that encroached upon its sovereignty.

The war and the Civil War led to massive population displacement and losses, de-urbanization and in the countryside a reversal of the process of individual landownership, leaving Bolshevik Russia relatively more backward in relationship to Western Europe than the tsarist government had been in the last decade of its existence. A key question shaping their foreign policy, as the Bolsheviks fully realized and debated, was whether to rely more heavily on developing commercial relations with the capitalist West, the acknowledged political antagonist, or to fall back

on domestic resources. Stalin's decision was to come down on the side of greater autarchy. Surely one of his most important decisions, he carried it out under the shadow of war scares, which, genuine or not, linked industrialization to the requirements of foreign policy.

Persistent factors shape the contours of the problems. But individual policy-makers devise their own solutions. Stalin responded as a Marxist man of the borderlands. This book argues that Stalin's *Weltanschauung* was shaped by two powerful existential and intellectual influences. The first was his early life experiences growing up in the Georgian cultural milieu precariously surviving under the pressure of russification within the shatter zone of the South Caucasus. The second was his evolution as a professional Marxist revolutionary also shaped by the socioeconomic peculiarities of an underdeveloped borderland. Both these elements must be considered in seeking to come to terms with the much disputed problem of the role of ideology in Stalin's policy-making. In addressing the interconnected problems of state-building and foreign policy, he forged a tripartite ideology incorporating his perception of the nationalities problem in the borderlands, his endorsement of Russian political hegemony in the Soviet Union and his interpretation of revolutionary Marxism. He was not always consistent in balancing these elements. His synthesis may have lacked philosophical sophistication. But he was both flexible and uncompromising in manipulating it to reach the pinnacle of power in the party, state and international Communist movement. This interpretation would be incomplete, however, without injecting into the analysis a strong dose of Stalin's arbitrary, violent and ruthless personality traits. His actions threatened at times to undermine the edifice he was striving to construct; he was responsible for the death of millions, including not only of those who stood in his way but also those who sought to participate in the same endeavors.

1 Stalin, man of the borderlands

Soviet policy toward the borderlands was largely the work of Lenin and Stalin. But it was Stalin, a product of that milieu, who completed the structure in his own image.[1] He was raised, educated and initiated as a Marxist revolutionary in the South Caucasus, a borderland of the Russian Empire.[2] At the time of his birth in 1878, the region had become a crossroads, intersecting the movement of people and ideas from Western Europe, Russia and Trans Caspia. In his youth Iosif or "Soso" Dzhugashvili filtered elements of all these currents into a revolutionary ideology of his own making and tested it in its unique kaleidoscopic social and ethnic setting.

In his youth, the circulation of European and Russian books in translation, students from imperial universities to the region and the migrations of seasonal workers from Iran helped to spread radical political ideas among the small Armenian, Georgian and later Azerbaizhan intelligentsia. The economic life of the region was also undergoing significant changes. Burgeoning pockets of industrialization formed around the oil industry in Baku, textiles and leather manufacturing in Tiflis (Tbilisi) and Batumi, and mining in Kutais. A small proletariat was emerging in a multicultural environment. Dzhugashvili's first experiences as a revolutionary agitator were played out in three of these cities: Baku, Tiflis and Batumi where he encountered the complexities of class and ethnic strife. Already as a seminary student in Tiflis, the young Soso, like many of his contemporaries, identified himself with several strands of this borderland

[1] An argument can be made that Lenin too was a man of the borderlands, having been born of mixed ethnic background, raised in the old frontier town of Simbirsk and educated at Kazan University where Tatar, Chuvash and Russian cultures intermixed. Cf. Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 16–18, 28–9, 67.

[2] Born under the name Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, he was called by the diminutive Soso well into manhood. His most famous pseudonym was "Koba," a youthful nickname taken from the bandit hero of a Georgian novel and still used by his comrades in the 1930s. He only adopted the name Stalin in 1912 when writing his first article for *Pravda*. For the complex process of his naming, see Alfred J. Rieber, "Stalin: Man of the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 5 (December, 2001), pp. 1677–83.

culture. Woven together, they helped to shape his beliefs, attitudes and politics. In the process he constructed an identity that combined native Georgian, borrowed Russian and invented proletarian components.

While many of his contemporaries in the revolutionary movement forged their careers and spent their lives in the South Caucasus, Stalin, as he began to call himself in 1912, projected himself onto the all-Russian stage, bringing with him as he rose to power trusted comrades from his early days as a labor organizer and propagandist. Along the way he propagandized a vision of the state that mirrored his presentation of self as a representative of three interlocking identifications: an ethno-cultural region (Georgia) as a territorial unit, Great Russia as the center of political power, and the proletariat as the dominant class.[3] Out of this amalgam he fashioned a foreign as well as a domestic policy which, once in power, he continued to test by trial and error in the great contest against the burgeoning threat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the flank powers that challenged Soviet interests in the Eurasian borderlands.

As a revolutionary and statesman, Stalin embodied a particular historical type of man of the borderlands. Unlike a Napoleon or a Hitler, also born into the peripheral cultures of great national powers, he did not attempt to efface all traces of his cultural origins or even to identify himself wholly with his adopted land, at least until quite late in his career. Even then the character traits shaped in part by the dominant culture of his formative period remained embedded in his mental universe. His attitudes toward relations between the Great Russian center and the nationalities of the periphery and between the Soviet state and the outside world reveal a set of deep and unresolved ambiguities. Georgian culture was not only the source of his mother tongue but also of images, reference points and patterns of behavior that marked his public as well as his private life. Yet he could be harsh in his criticism of the backwardness, provincialism and arrogance of the Georgians.[4]

Russia was his second, adopted culture, not only for the spare, functional usage of its language, but for its rich literary heritage. It was also the transmitter of conspiratorial, revolutionary Marxism that appealed to his lower-class origins, his intellectual pretentions, and, in its "hard" Leninist form, his authoritarian personality. Russia became for him the locus and fulcrum of power. Still, the attraction of full assimilation had its

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 1651–91. Cf. Erik van Ree, "The Stalinist Self: The Case of Ioseb Jugashvili (1898–1907)," *Kritika* 11:2 (2010), pp. 257–82.

[4] Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Dvadtsat' pisem k drugu* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 56–7. Cf. Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 432–3, who interprets this evidence to conclude that Stalin had substituted a Great Russian for a Georgian identity.