

Introduction: Bringing Empire Back

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Even if one does not buy into the Leninist concept of World War I as an “imperialist war,” it appears evident that it was a war of empires. Within each of the warring empires subject peoples found opportunities to act independently, to make choices about loyalties and identities, either with the polities in which they had lived or following nationalist intellectuals and activists into uncharted waters. On the Eastern and Caucasian Fronts four empires and a cluster of smaller nation-states began the war, which concluded with the emergence of more than a dozen new nation-states, some for the first time in history, a few not to survive the final postwar settlement. As Vladimir Lenin had predicted, empires fell apart, and the imperialist war metastasized into civil wars. But coincident with a rise of social and class conflicts in the belligerent states, competitive nationalist movements undermined the efforts of liberals, conservatives, and socialists to hold the old empires together, albeit with a new political order.

At a macrohistorical level World War I was the moment when interimperial rivalries led to the collapse of continental empires in Europe. World War II would have a similar effect on overseas empires. Imperial regimes failed to domesticate nationalism even though they resorted to the most brutal forms of “pacification”—deportations, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. As Alexei Miller has argued, instead of dampening the subversive effects of nationalism, as they had attempted to do in the previous half-century, empires manipulated, even encouraged the aspirations of ethnicities. Nationalities—Jews, Poles, Armenians, Ukrainians, and Romanian-speakers—straddled imperial borders and presented special problems of shifting loyalty and identification. In the case of Bessarabia, as Andrei Cusco demonstrates, self-styled nation-states like Romania played the same game of enticing the subjects of rival states to its side. How imperial authorities constructed nationality, how they imagined and defined a people was a key determinant in how they would estimate loyalty and how they would treat particular people. Because Bessarabian peasants were Orthodox, Russian authorities considered them likely to be loyal to the empire, while Germans, Jews, and intellectuals were suspect.

Following the collapse of empires and the foundation of new nation-states, the principal explanation for the rapid transformation of European geography had borrowed from the teleology of the nationalists and depicted the triumph of nations as an irresistible assertion of a natural process. Nations were modern, empires antiquated, and the two were incompatible, indeed deeply inimical. The former were destined to succeed the latter. In more recent writings a number of historians—among them Avieli Roshwald, Mark von Hagen, Eric Lohr, and Alexei Miller—have shown that rather than empires consistently repressing nationalist impulses, they often contributed to them intentionally, particularly during the ferocious bloodletting of the world war. Empires were not about to give in and give up to nationalism but were determined to use such sentiments instrumentally to further their own imperial projects. In the first essay in this volume, Mark von Hagen reminds us, “The prewar war aims of the future belligerents were in large measure directed at rearranging imperial borders at the expense of their rivals.” The long disputed and unresolved Eastern Question was a trigger that unbalanced the balance of power in Europe, and ambitious politicians and warriors anxious to fight looked toward their neighbors hungrily. Central Europeans considered Russia, as well as the Ottoman Empire, to be so sickly that healthier and more vigorous powers could take advantage. Not only imperial governments but also famished nationalists prepared for what they hoped would be a banquet of spoils.

At the imperial level the war might be imagined as sibling rivalries, a brutal contest of cousins, but a slight change of focus from the ministries of foreign affairs and war to the movements of ordinary people reveals that more subterranean processes were at work that would ultimately undermine the existing state structures. Beyond the walls of diplomatic salons were the mobile worlds of food supply, labor migration, and the intricate interconnections of what had already become a globalized capitalist economy. All that was solid was melting into air once again. Some analysts believed that integrated markets would render war impossible, but others, like Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, were convinced that the current stage of capitalism would make conflict all but inevitable.

The prewar years, and even more so the war years, were moments when reimagining maps was in the air. Borders were both sacred and manipulable. New homelands were being conceived for “nations” that were still cohering around national myths, common languages, and articulated histories. Empires were rethinking how they might prosper in a fluid and unpredictable world. The question on the agenda was survival in a fiercely winner-take-all, zero-sum-game competition. Peoples who were in the way had to be removed—Jews, Avars, and Armenians—and running roughshod

over them was justified by new science that confidently asserted that some races were superior to others. Existing nation-states and stateless nations had their own ambitions—to expand their territory, regain ancient lands, or even the capital, Constantinople or Vilnius, of a long-deceased imperial state. On the Left socialist internationalism collapsed before patriotic concerns, with notable exceptions—the martyred Jean Jaures in France, the Bolsheviks and internationalist Social Democrats in Russia, and the Bulgarian “Narrows”—who would have to wait until war weariness would resurrect transnational class affinities. Religion as well, Christianity and Islam, failed to transcend national boundaries, and coreligionists inspired by God and Country killed each other with a sense of just cause.

Notoriously empires did not limit their borders to the national composition of desired territories. They were promiscuous in expanding for whatever reason seemed appropriate. Sometimes strategic concerns were paramount; at other times consolidation of the “nation” might be deployed. Russian rulers, who thought of Ukrainians as “Little Russians” and therefore an integral part of the Russian people, were anxious (in the words of General Aleksei Brusilov) to “take back” Galicia, “which despite its being a constituent part of Austria-Hungary is a Russian land, populated, after all, by Russian people.” Here an empire justified its expansion in the name of the national principle, recovery of the territory of its own *herrenfolk*. The Ottomans did the same in their campaigns into Caucasia, discovering the Turkic connection with the local “Tatars” (Azerbaijanis). When convenient, however, the imperialist claims could be made on religious or state security grounds.

The vision of many nationalists that understandably has seen empires as the destroyer of nations ignores the constitutive effects of imperial rule on nation building, which were particularly visible through the 19th and early 20th centuries. Even more palpable was the generation of nationalisms by the wartime policies of the great landed empires of Europe. Wilhelmine Germany and its Austrian allies promoted the fortunes of Ukrainians in a move to detach the western borderlands of the Romanov empire from the tsar’s domain. The Ottomans encouraged Caucasian Muslims to declare an independent Azerbaijan. The Central Powers recruited prisoners of war as potential nationalist opponents of imperial Russian rule, while the Russian general staff permitted the organization of Slavic POWs from Austria-Hungary into armed units. In a clear case of unintended consequences the formation of a Czechoslovak Legion under one Russian government led to events a few years later that helped to initiate the Russian Civil War against another. Future leaders of Eastern European states, among them Józef Piłsudski and Josip Broz Tito, served time in Russian military camps.

Nationalists also worked with empires opportunistically, attempting to exploit the rivalry between Germany and Russia. Poles dreamed of war between the powers that had partitioned their country over a century before. Georgian nationalists sought German assistance in their drive for independence, and even some moderate socialists flirted with a German orientation. Nation-states proliferated late in the war and at its conclusion but, as Joshua Sanborn points out, not as ethnically homogeneous as proposed in the slogan of national self-determination but as “new multinational states.” One might go as far as to point out that national liberation ended up in the formation of mini-empires disguised as nation-states. Certainly in postwar Poland, with its inclusion of vast lands in which Ukrainians, Belorussians, Germans, and Jews lived, “making” a Polish nation meant assimilation of some, e.g., the Slavic peoples, and the exclusion of others, e.g., Jews and Germans.

War and the undulations of the fronts meant the weakening of state power in the peripheries of the empire. Precisely where the national composition of the population was least like that of the central parts of the warring states, there the imperial powers had the least dominion over their subjects. This was most evident in the Polish lands and Right-Bank Ukraine, in Galicia, and in eastern Anatolia. Once the revolution brought down the Romanov empire, the South Caucasus, Finland, Ukraine, and the Baltic region rapidly slipped from under central Russian authority.

World War I profoundly affected people’s identities, in some cases imposing or reinforcing ethnic identifications, in other cases creating new identities like “refugee.” Ethnicity could be advantageous in some instances, as when one sought help from a “national” committee, but a dangerous disadvantage at other times, for example, when a new occupying power appeared that saw you as a disloyal foreign national. Eric Lohr proposes that a special, contingent form of nationalism, which he calls “war nationalism,” sprung up in the fog of war. In the first year of fighting the Russian military expelled half a million Jews from lands it had occupied and stood by while Cossacks and Poles looted the stores and homes of Jews. Tens of thousands of Germans living in Russian Poland suffered the same fate, and as a result they were compelled to identify more intensely as Germans than as the Russian subjects they had been. Such permissive violence and enforced discrimination only sharpened the lines between religions and ethnic groups, particularly in the shatter zone of Russia’s western borderlands. The lands contested by rival empires had been battlefields on which differences of all kinds and presumptions of entitlement were fought over long before they became the “Bloodlands” that some have argued were the result of particular dictatorial regimes.

Looking at the Great War as an early phase of decolonization, as Joshua Sanborn suggests, opens the question of how liberating was national self-determination. Those who proclaimed that right, like Lenin, hoped that the great imperial state would somehow hang together as the continent moved from capitalism to socialism. War and revolution, however, led to new forms of imperial power, and in the vast landscape of Central Asia a colonial counterrevolution was carried out by Russian settlers. The struggle for food and social order pitted Muslims who favored greater autonomy against Soviet forces that promoted subordination to the center. Tashkent Communists fiercely fought against various Muslim forces, in one case in alliance with Armenian nationalists. Marco Butino shows that the shifting lines of battle depended repeatedly on a desperate fight for food. Alliances formed and were broken between “bandits” and Reds, but ultimately Moscow considered the Turkestan Muslims too unreliable to be granted significant local authority.

The final disposition of Russia’s border territories was decided more by expedience, opportunity, and physical force than by decisions made by nationalized majorities. Bessarabians, for example, at first identified primarily with the Russian Empire, in which they had lived for over a century. In the year of revolution, 1917–18, when socialists dominated local politics, national activists sought autonomy within a federal democratic state. But with the Bolshevik victory in Petrograd and the collapse of the Russian economy, nationalists made a desperate choice to unite with the Romanian state. Lithuanians were torn between a Russian and a German orientation. Their principal enemy, the Poles, dominated Vilnius and other cities and had ambitions to include the traditional Lithuanian capital in their resurrected state. After losing Vilnius to Poland in 1920, Lithuanian nationalism focused on recovering the treasured city, even though its population was heavily Polish and Jewish. The Soviets returned Vilnius to Lithuania in 1939, but at a high price—occupation.

Ukraine, as Boris Chernev shows, secured its independence from Russia by subordinating the new republic to the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk, the first treaty of the end-of-war settlement. Bolsheviks were driven out of Ukraine, and German and Austrian soldiers guaranteed the country’s limited sovereignty. Now that the nationalists had a Ukraine, they had to make more complete Ukrainians—to promote the Ukrainian language and integrate the Russian-speaking cities into the new Ukrainian state. Under the Ukrainian parliament, the Rada, as well as under the Hetmanate and the Austrian-sponsored “Red Prince,” Wilhelm von Habsburg, moderate programs of Ukrainization were carried out, laying a foundation for later Soviet indigenization policies. For Chernev the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was a positive step in the history of Ukrainian state building. For Russian nationalists (and for Vladimir Putin today) Brest-Litovsk was an act of treason by the fledgling

Bolshevik regime. The treaty is still seen as proof that European imperialism has always been anxious to weaken Russia by stripping it of its borderlands.

Before and during the First World War Russian political analysts debated the future contours of their multinational state. Ilya Gerasimov illustrates the variations in Russian liberal thought around the question of how imperial continuity might be reconciled with national self-determination. Liberal intellectuals, most notably the leader of the Kadet Party, Pavel Miliukov, generally supported the war aims of the Russian Empire. Miliukov advocated expansion of the empire to include all of Poland and the eastern provinces of Ottoman Anatolia in order to form coherent national autonomies of Poles and Armenians under the scepter of the tsar. But he not only linked empire to nation in his design but also favored Russian conquest of Constantinople and the Straits as essential for the empire's future. Other visions for maintaining Russia as an empire came from Russians' familiarity with British historical writing on the British Empire. Former Social Democrat turned liberal Petr Struve was enamored of the British model, as he understood it from his reading of the historian John Robert Seeley. Maksim Kovalevskii, a principal leader of the Progressive Bloc, also saw the British Empire (or at least a well-scrubbed idealized version of that empire) as a model for Russia.

The imperialist visions of leading Kadets and Progressives contrasted with that of the journalist Maksim Slavinskii, who advocated that Russia develop a nationality policy that recognized the full cultural development of the peoples within the empire while simultaneously promoting a universal imperial citizenship for all subjects of the empire. Slavinskii's precocious example of multiculturalism both eschewed russification, on the one hand, and a French-style civic citizenship without any acknowledgment of ethnicity, on the other. The Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevskyyi spoke of Russia as "an empire of nations" (*imperii narodov*) that in the future needed to grant national-territorial autonomy to the various subject peoples. The Left Zionist Abram Kastelianskii went even further, taking a firm position in favor of nations as the political form of the future and condemning empires to history's dustbin. Even with the fall of the tsarist empire and the Bolshevik proclamation of national self-determination and federalism as the basis for the Soviet state, Russian theorists continued to imagine forms of imperial cohesion different from the nationality policies of the Communists. Sergey Glebov provides a guide through the thickets of Eurasian thought in the postwar period. Disempowered émigrés proposed a fundamental unity of Eurasian civilization that submerged difference within deep commonalities of language and culture that justified a single great state stretching from Eastern Europe to the Pacific.

War, one would think, is indelibly etched in people's memories. But Tomas Balkelis reveals that World War I has faded from Lithuanian national memory, while the subsequent wars of independence and the conflicts with Poland remain vivid. The Great War seems also have been erased from Russian and Soviet national memory, as Vera Tolz tells us. But official efforts at constructing historical memory are hard at work in Putin's Russia. Victors in World War II, Russians are seen as victims of World War I and the Russo-Polish War of 1920. Russian officials and nationalist writers have deployed themes of victimhood, always popular means to mobilize a people against another, to counter accusations that Russians have been perpetrators of atrocities. To relativize the Polish narrative about the Katyn massacres during World War II, post-Soviet publicists and historians have fixated on the Russian POWs who suffered and died in Polish camps in the early 1920s. The elastic term "genocide," which too many journalists and scholars use promiscuously, has been applied to the case of the POWs in Poland. While the Russian side implied that Katyn was revenge for the deaths of Russian POWs in 1920, the Poles claimed that Katyn was revenge for Piłsudski's victory over the Soviets.

Whereas in the Yeltsin years (roughly the 1990s), the sufferings of Soviet people under the Communists were detailed, in the Putin-Medvedev years (from 2000) the brutalities of Stalinism were de-emphasized. Around 2010 the Kremlin decided to reinvigorate commemoration of the Great War. By seeing 1914 as the more important point at which Russia stepped on the world stage, 1917 and all that could be pushed into a shallow memory hole. The Putin government shifted from equating Russia and the USSR to a new narrative sharply distinguishing the two. A return to the perspectives of the Yeltsin decade, the light shines again on imperial Russia and leaves the 70 years of Soviet Power in the dark.

It may be that Lenin will still have the last word. If Struve learned about empire from J. R. Seeley, Lenin acknowledged that he learned about imperialism, a newly coined word, from J. A. Hobson. Appalled by the ferocity as well as the stupidity of the war, he tried desperately to understand it from his Marxist perspective. The war was imperialist—annexationist, predatory, plunderous, a war for the redivision of the world, the partition and reparation of colonies, spheres of influence, and of finance capital. Today we would use different words and phrases, as the authors in this volume do, but the sanguinary engagement of empire and nations that brought down centuries-old monarchies and established vulnerable successor states continues to defy easy explanation. No grand theories or all-encompassing narratives suffice any longer, but the road to understanding, as this collection shows, requires a renewed appreciation of the nature, ambitions, and limitations of empire.

