

Russia: People and Empire

1552–1917



Geoffrey Hosking

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Empire: 1552–1917**

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‘It is unlikely that a clearer, more stimulating account of the Russians’ extraordinary period of imperial history will be written.’ Philip Marsden, *Spectator* Geoffrey Hosking’s landmark book provides us with a new prism through which to view Russian history by posing the apparently simple question: what is Russia’s national identity? Hosking answers this with brilliant originality: his thesis is that the needs of Russia’s empire prevented the creation of a Russian nation. The Tsars, and before them the Grand Dukes of Moscow, were empire builders rather than nation builders and, as consequence, profoundly alienated ordinary Russians.

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GEOFFREY HOSKING
RUSSIA
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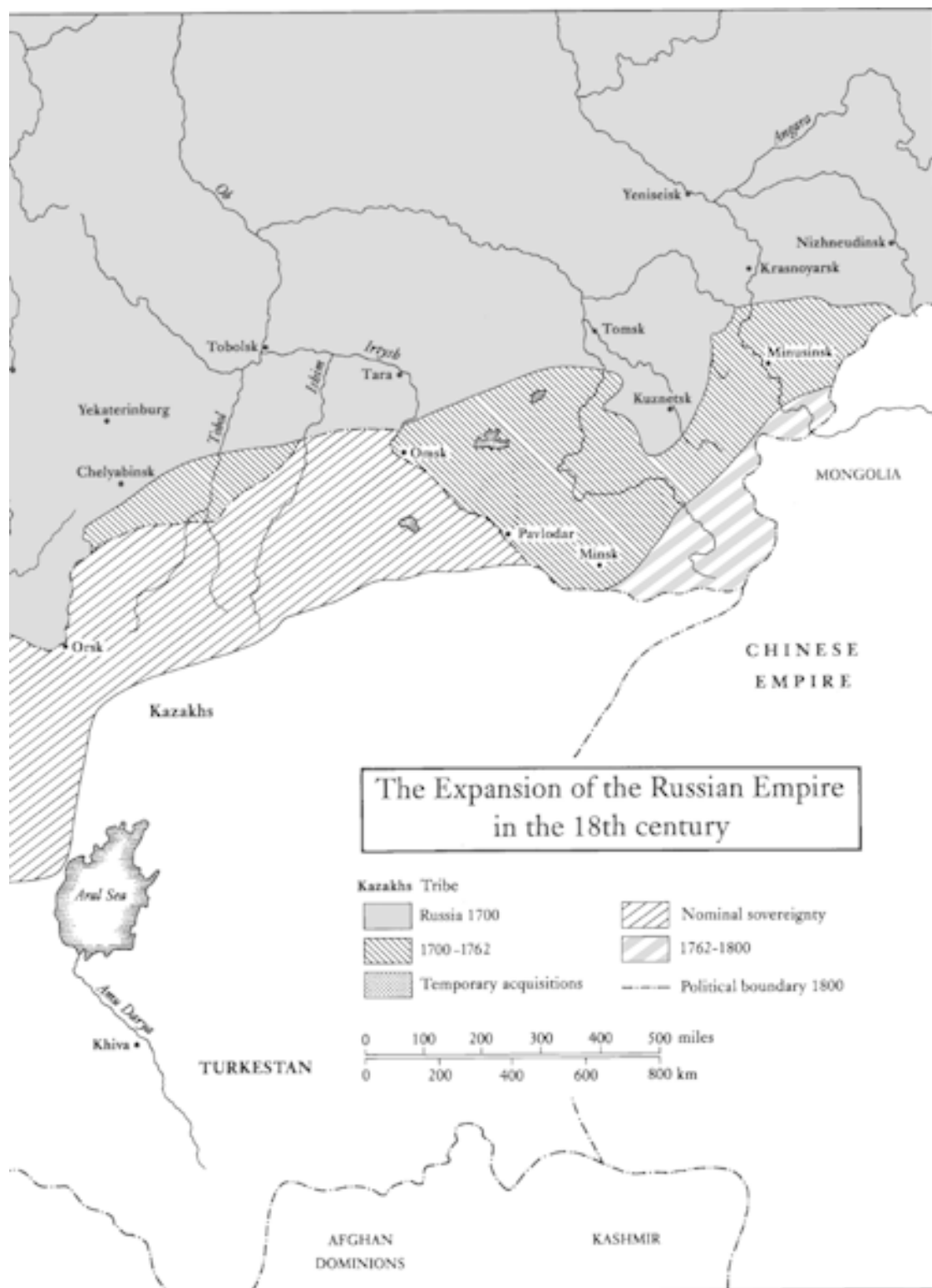
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MAPS















Introduction

Rus' was the victim of *Rossiia* Georgii Gachev

If this book were in Russian, the title would contain two distinct epithets: *ruskii* for the people and *rossiiskii* for the empire. The first derives from *Ras'*, the word customarily employed to denote the Kievan state and the Muscovite one in its early years. The second comes from *Rossiia*, a Latinized version probably first used in Poland, which penetrated to Muscovy in the sixteenth century and became common currency in the seventeenth – precisely during the time when the empire was being founded and extended.¹

In that way the Russian language reflects the fact that there are two kinds of Russianness, one connected with the people, the language and the pre-imperial principalities, the other with the territory, the multi-national empire, the European great power. Usage is not absolutely consistent, but any Russian will acknowledge that there is a considerable difference in tonality and association between the two words. *Rus'* is humble, homely, sacred and definitely feminine (the poet Alexander Blok called her 'my wife'); *Rossiia* grandiose, cosmopolitan, secular and, *pace* grammarians, masculine. The culturologist Georgii Gachev has dramatized the distinction: '*Rossiia* is the fate of *Rus'*. *Rossiia* is attraction, ideal and service – but also abyss and perdition. *Rossiia* uprooted the Russian people, enticed them away from *Rus'*, transformed the peasant into a soldier, an organiser, a boss, but no longer a husbandman.'²

The theme of this book is how *Rossiia* obstructed the flowering of *Rus'*, or if you prefer it, how the building of an empire impeded the formation of a nation. So my story concerns above all the Russians. There have been many books in recent years about the non-Russian peoples of the empire, and the problems of their national development.³ It is time to redress the balance in favour of the Russians, whose nationhood has probably been even more blighted by the empire which bore their name.

Russians, especially in the nineteenth century, have always believed that their distinctiveness – some saw it as their curse – derived from an underlying problem of national identity, but few western historians have taken the notion seriously, preferring to dismiss the Russian obsession with the national problem as an excuse for imperial domination or reactionary politics. I believe the Russians are right, and that a fractured and underdeveloped nationhood has been their principal historical burden in the last two centuries or so, continuing throughout the period of the Soviet Union and persisting beyond its fall. Such an assertion may surprise Russia's neighbours, who are accustomed to regard Russian nationalism as overdeveloped and domineering. This is an understandable optical illusion, but an illusion nevertheless, as I shall try to demonstrate.

Social scientists have been reluctant to define the term 'nation', and indeed, whenever the attempt is made, there invariably turn out to be one or two anomalous 'nations' which do not fit the definition. I shall nevertheless try to pin the notion down. A nation, it seems to me, is a large, territorially extended and socially differentiated aggregate of people who share a sense of a common fate or of belonging together, which we call nationhood.

Nationhood has two main aspects. One is civic: a nation is a participating citizenry, participating in the sense of being involved in law-making, law-adjudication and government, through elected central and local assemblies, through courts and tribunals, and also as members of political parties, interest groups, voluntary associations and other institutions of civil society. The second aspect of nationhood is ethnic: a nation is a community bound together by sharing a common language, culture, traditions, history, economy and territory. In some nations, for historical reasons, one aspect predominates over the other: the French, Swiss and American nations are primarily 'civic', while the

German and East European nations have tended to emphasize ethnicity.⁴ I believe that both aspects of Russians' nationhood have been gravely impaired by the way in which their empire evolved.

Would it have been better for Russians if they had been able to form a nation? I believe it would have made their evolution less unstable, polarized and violent, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The nation-state has proved to be the most effective political unit during that time, not only in Europe but throughout the world, because it is the largest one compatible with creating and sustaining a feeling of community and solidarity, such as induces loyalty and reduces the need for coercion. National identity plays an important compensatory role in a period when the operations of the market have tended to break down older, smaller and simpler forms of social solidarity. In an era of large-scale warfare it is even more crucial, as Charles Tilly has commented:

Because of their advantages in translating national resources into success in international war, large national states superseded tribute-taking empires, federations, city-states and all their other competitors as the predominant European political entities and as the models for state formation. Those states finally defined the character of the European state system and spearheaded its extension to the entire world.⁵

Empires, by contrast, proved to be too large, unwieldy and above all too diverse to generate an equivalent sense of community. That proved to be true of the Hapsburg and Ottoman as well as the Russian Empires.

There is, however, such a thing as compound national identity. Britain in the eighteenth-twentieth century is a good example, resting as it does on four ethnic components: the English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish. The Irish, being the least well integrated of the four, have provoked easily the most serious internal crises of the British political system during that time. The great question for Russian leaders during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might be formulated as whether they could inculcate an analogous compound national identity in their empire's more diverse ethnic elements. The attempt was made, both by the Tsars and more systematically by the Soviet leaders, and at one time it looked close to success, but at present it seems ultimately to have failed.

There has been much debate among historians, sociologists and anthropologists over the origins of modern nationhood. Today many theorists would assert that nations are not very old, that they emerged only from the late eighteenth century onwards. In this view what distinguishes them from earlier forms of human community are that:

1. Nations are larger, more socially and economically diverse, offering a framework for the capitalist market, with its complex division of labour and its need for more extensive units than were afforded by regional and kinship boundaries.
2. They embody the Enlightenment vision of the rational and self-governing human being: the nation-state is a community of such people.
3. They are bound together by the printed language, which is needed so that the skills of a high culture can be widely disseminated. The bearers and purveyors of this language, writers, journalists, teachers and the professional strata in general, are those who are likely to identify most closely with the nation-state.
4. They are based on the principle that ethnic and political boundaries coincide. Lower-level entities, duchies, principalities, city-states, and so on, have been amalgamated, while higher-level ones, multi-ethnic empires, have been broken up. This has proved the most contentious and destructive of the characteristics of nations, yet also the hardest to dispense with in practice.⁶

In this view, nations evolved only with the growth of widespread education, mass media, a diversified economy and social structure, a penetrative urban culture and a civil society. This is when, in the terminology of Karl Deutsch, 'assimilation' (to a dominant urban language and culture) and 'mobilization' (into a multiplicity of contacts with others) became possible for the mass of the people. The extreme version of this position has been expounded by Ernest Gellner who denies that

nationalism is simply the political manifestation of age-old national communities, and asserts roundly, 'It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round.' He adds, 'Nationalism is *not* the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is indeed how it presents itself. It is in reality the consequence of a new form of social organisation, based on deeply internalised, education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state.'⁷

It is possible to accept that nations as we know them are products of the modern era, and yet to assert that, in a simpler and cruder form, an ethnic or proto-national awareness straddling different social strata existed much earlier in history. Such awareness can crystallize around a tribe, a royal court, an aristocracy, an armed fraternity or a religious sect. It can be stimulated by various factors, of which probably the most potent is prolonged warfare against powerful neighbours. One theorist, John Armstrong, has specifically taken as an example the national identity of *Rus'* during and after the Tatar overlordship.⁸

If nations do indeed have a pre-history, then the crucial question is why and when they emerge from the chrysalis. Benedict Anderson has hypothesized that the stage is set with the 'convergence of capitalism and print technology' and the emergence of monarchical bureaucracies: these 'create unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars' and 'give a new fixity to language', helping to 'build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation'.⁹

In this reading, the central issue is language and the culture and information carried by language, which enable courtiers, intellectuals and bureaucrats to synthesize and project their concept of what binds the nation together. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger called this process, or a later version of it, the 'invention of tradition', the tactic by which elites, faced with the crises of social change, overcome them by invoking values and rituals associated with the past, adapting them to suit contemporary means of communication. Thus British royal pageantry was recreated to suit the needs first of newspapers, then of radio, then of television. These values and rituals need not of course be national ones, but experience has taught modern politicians that appeals to nationhood have the broadest and strongest allure.¹⁰ They perform the function of binding elites and masses in a common identity.

Actually, traditions cannot be simply invented: they must have existed in some form in which they can be authenticated. They then have to be rediscovered and synthesized in a form suitable for the contemporary world. The process by which this is done has been examined by Miroslav Hroch. He posits three stages through which all nations pass, though they are chronologically different for each nation. The first, which he calls phase A, is the period of scholarly interest, when linguists, ethnographers and historians investigate the lore and traditions of the people and assemble from them a cultural package suitable for wider distribution. Phase B is the stage when politicians take from this package what they find useful and deploy it for patriotic agitation among the people, and it leads on to Phase C, which is the rise of mass national movements. In each case Hroch finds a particular social group – again different from nation to nation – which plays a central role in the mobilization of national sentiment.¹¹ Strictly speaking, his theory applies only to nations mobilizing *against* the state in which they find themselves, but I shall maintain that it is relevant to Russia, since there too nationhood had to be generated partly in opposition to the empire bearing its name.

This 'nation-building' is quite distinct from 'state-building', though the two processes are easier to accomplish when they accompany each other. State-building is concerned with defending, controlling and administering a given territory and the population living on it, and entails devising and operating a system for recruiting troops and raising taxes to pay for them, as well as matters like conflict regulation, the imposition and adjudication of law, the establishment of a reliable coinage, and so on. Nation-building is more intangible, but has to do with eliciting the loyalty and commitment

of the population, which is usually achieved by fostering the sense of belonging, often by manipulation of culture, history and symbolism.¹²

The thesis of this book is that in Russia state-building obstructed nation-building. The effort required to mobilize revenues and raise armies for the needs of the empire entailed the subjection of virtually the whole population, but especially the Russians, to the demands of state service, and thus enfeebled the creation of the community associations which commonly provide the basis for the civic sense of nationhood. As the nineteenth-century Russian historian Vasily Kliuchevskii once remarked, 'The state swelled up, the people languished.'¹³

State-building also necessitated the borrowing of a foreign culture and ethos, which displaced the native inheritance. A potential national identity had already been created for Russia by the 'invention of tradition' in the sixteenth century, and it served as impetus and justification for the first stages of empire-building; but it was suddenly repudiated by the imperial state itself in the mid-seventeenth century in circumstances which I examine in Part 2, Chapter 1. This repudiation generated a rift within Russia's ethnic community whose consequences have not been entirely eradicated even today.

In his recent study of national identity, Anthony Smith distinguishes between two types of nation-building. The first is accomplished by what he calls 'aristocratic' ethnies ('ethnie' is his term for a proto-nation). They command the mechanism of the state, and so are able to carry out nation-building by using its resources, as well as by economic and cultural patronage. In this way, they assimilate lower social classes and outlying ethnic groups to their heritage. This was the historical path to the nation-state taken by England, France, Spain, Sweden and, up to the eighteenth century, Poland.

The second type of nation-building, which Smith terms 'demotic', proceeds from non-aristocratic, localized, often subject communities. Lacking their own state, they have to build the elements of one from below, in opposition to some existing state: to accomplish this they need strongly held views of law, religion, culture and community. Examples of this kind are the Irish, Czechs, Finns, Jews, Armenians and the Poles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁴

In the case of Russia, we may hypothesize that both types of nation-building were at work concurrently, with the conflict between them reaching special intensity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. There were two poles round which Russian national feeling could crystallize. One was the imperial court, army and bureaucracy, with its attendant nobility and increasingly Europeanized culture. The other was the peasant community. Peasants cannot lead a nationalist movement, but they can provide a model for it and, given leadership from outside, they can become its numerical strength. The values of village communities have inspired many politicians in the assertion of their nation's identity against alien domination: one has only to think of Gandhi, Mao Zedong and many East European politicians after the first world war. In Russia it was the intelligentsia, drawing on imperial culture but trying to break away from it, which provided this leadership.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notions of authority, culture and community held by the imperial nobility and by the peasantry were diametrically opposed on cardinal points. We may lay out the dichotomy roughly as follows:

NOBILITY	PEASANTRY
Hierarchical	Egalitarian
Held together by subordination	Held together by mutual responsibility
Cosmopolitan	Parochial
Oriented to state service	Oriented to survival
Land seen as private property	Land seen as communal resource

The contrast between these views of community was not absolute. Both sides, for example, shared the feeling of reverence for the Tsar and, on the whole, for the Orthodox Church. At times of supreme crisis, like the Napoleonic invasion, the two sides could work together. Nevertheless, the gap between them was very wide and, what was more important, getting wider during the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century, as the crisis of nation-building approached its apogee.

The result was that the two Russias weakened each other. The political, economic and cultural institutions of what might have become the Russian nation were destroyed or emasculated for the needs of the empire, while the state was enfeebled by the hollowness of its ethnic substance, its inability at most times to attract the deep loyalty of even its Russian, let alone its non-Russian subjects. The intelligentsia, trying to mediate between them, to create an ‘imagined community’ as a synthesis of imperial culture and ethnic community, was crushed between them. The culmination of this process was the revolution and civil war of 1917–21.

This book has been written in the belief that we need a new interpretive approach to the history of Russia. Most western accounts of Russia’s evolution revolve around the concepts of ‘autocracy’ and ‘backwardness’. In my view, neither of them is a fundamental or ineluctable factor. Autocracy, I shall argue, was generated by the needs of empire, and had to be reinforced as that empire came increasingly into conflict with nation-building.

The same is true of backwardness. What is striking is not that Russia was economically backward in either the sixteenth, eighteenth or early twentieth century, but rather that every attempt at reform and modernization tended in the long run to reproduce that backwardness. As the history of Germany, Japan and modern south-east Asia shows, backwardness can be not only escaped from but triumphantly overcome and turned to competitive advantage. Russia did not do this: the economic policies deemed necessary to sustain the empire systematically held back the entrepreneurial and productive potentialities of the mass of the people.

In my view, then, autocracy and backwardness were symptoms and not causes: both were generated by the way in which the building and maintaining of empire obstructed the formation of a nation. I deploy the evidence for this assertion in what follows.

If I am right, the implications for contemporary Russia are profound. If she can find a new identity for herself, as a nation-state among other nation-states, autocracy and backwardness will fade out. It may perhaps be objected that the nation-state is not the be-all and end-all of history, and that we are moving into a post-national era.¹⁵ In particular, in the case of Russia, it may be argued that the relatively low level of virulent nationalism has spared the collapsing Soviet empire the spasms of violence which accompanied, for example, the departure of the French *pieds noirs* from Algeria. (There has been considerable violence, but most of it has been directed by non-Russians against other non-Russians.)

There is something to be said for these arguments, but I believe the nation-state is likely to be with us for a long time yet as the foundation of the international order, and that in Russia the sense of solidarity associated with nationhood would do much to diminish the criminality and the bitter political conflicts which still disfigure its internal order. I do not pretend, of course, that the process of strengthening national identity in Russia can be wholly reassuring either for her neighbours or for the international community at large. But I believe it is preferable to any attempt at rebuilding empire, which I take to be the only serious alternative.

A word about the structure of this book. I decided at an early stage that a purely chronological exposition would obscure permanent or long-lasting features of Russian society – what one might call its ‘deep structures’ – to such an extent as to undermine the presentation of my overall thesis. I have therefore made Parts 1 and 3 structural, and Parts 2 and 4 chronological. Part 1 examines why a Russian Empire arose at all and what were its abiding features, Part 3 its effects on the major social strata and institutions of Russian society. Parts 2 and 4 adopt a more familiar kind of historical

narrative. I hope that the accompanying Chronology (pp. 487–492), Index and occasional cross-references will make it easier to understand the way the sections relate to each other.

For the present, I have ended my study in 1917. After that year the problem of the relationship between Russians and their empire certainly remained crucial, but its terms changed radically, as is symbolized by the bare fact that the empire was no longer named after them. If life and energy persist, perhaps I shall one day try to trace that story too. For the moment, I have confined myself to a few preliminary thoughts on the way my story has affected the Soviet and post-Soviet experience.

GEOFFREY HOSKING,

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PART ONE The Russian Empire: How and Why?

The Russian Empire: How and Why?

A. The Theory of Empire

‘With the aid of our Almighty Lord Jesus Christ and the prayers of the Mother of God ... our pious Tsar and Grand Prince Ivan Vasilievich, crowned by God, Autocrat of all *Rus*’, fought against the infidels, defeated them finally and captured the Tsar of Kazan’ Edigei-Mahmet. And the pious Tsar and Grand Prince ordered his regiment to sing an anthem under his banner, to give thanks to God for the victory; and at the same time ordered a life-giving cross to be placed and a church to be built, with the uncreated image of our Lord Jesus Christ, where the Tsar’s colours had stood during the battle.’¹

Thus the official chronicle recorded the moment in October 1552 when Muscovy set out on its career of empire by conquering and annexing for the first time a non-Russian sovereign state, the Khanate of Kazan’. Muscovite Rus’ was already a multi-national state, since it included within its borders some Tatars, as well as Finno-Ugrian tribes, but the conquest of Kazan’ signified a new approach to relations with its’ neighbours. Rus’ had embarked on a course of conquest and expansion which was to last for more than three centuries and create the largest and most diverse territorial empire the world has ever seen.²

The chronicle emphasizes the religious motives for the Kazan’ campaign. But there were many others. One of them was quite simply the longing for security, a terrible problem for an agricultural realm whose eastern and southern frontiers lay open and exposed to the steppes which stretched thousands of miles without major barrier all the way into Central Asia. The Golden Horde, which had dominated those steppes since the thirteenth century, had broken up into a patchwork of successor khanates which fought among themselves for the territories north of the Black and Caspian Seas: the Nogai Horde, the Khanates of Crimea, Astrakhan’, Kazan’ and [West] Siberia.

The openness and extent of this terrain generated a shifting pattern of temporary alliances and enmities, a constant and restless jostling for power, for the domination over or elimination of one’s neighbour. Security was sought but never attained, since, however far hegemony might be extended, there was always a farther border beyond, and with it a further neighbour and a further potential enemy. On this hazardous terrain Muscovy learned its diplomatic and military skills. Like a cumbersome and nervous amoeba, it expanded to fill the space it was able to dominate, and was impelled into a perpetual dynamic of conquest, reversing the thrust of the Mongols of three centuries earlier.

It is not enough, however, to say that Moscow was one of the contestants in the struggle for the steppes, for in many ways it was the odd man out amongst them. It was an agricultural realm, and its population was sedentary, whereas the other protagonists were all nomadic principalities, at least in their origins and in many of their abiding characteristics. The rulers of Muscovy regarded their dominions as a patrimony, to be ruled over in undivided sovereignty, whereas its adversaries lived by nomadic rules: homage to an ultimate ruling dynasty (the Chingisids) underpinned a pattern of shifting clan allegiances, which changed according to circumstance and need. Tatar nobles might swear homage to the Grand Prince of Muscovy, but they regarded their obligation as a treaty relationship which could be revoked without dishonour to either side. The Muscovite ruler, by contrast, deemed that they had permanently entered his service and acknowledged his sovereignty, so that a subsequent break was nothing less than an act of treason. The chronicle records that Ivan IV, having occupied Kazan’, ‘had all the armed people put to death as traitors’.³

In some ways, then, what Moscow had undertaken in invading the Khanate of Kazan’ was an act of retribution for oathbreaking, of vengeance for violated sovereignty. But also underlying it was a combined sense of religious and national mission which had assumed greater prominence

as Muscovy became the strongest among the principalities of *Rus'* after the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, in which the Grand Prince of Moscow, Dmitrii Donskoi, defeated the Mongols. In the earliest chronicles, *Rus'* was identified with the 'Russian land', with the Orthodox Church, and with the patrimony of the princes of the Riurik dynasty. During the fourteenth century these concepts had begun to coalesce around Moscow. In 1328 what had been the Metropolitanate of Kiev, the principal Orthodox jurisdiction in *Rus'*, moved its seat there.

Under Ivan III in the late fifteenth century the first steps had been taken towards harnessing to Moscow's growing dominance a new and more grandiose concept of statehood than that associated with a dynastic patrimony. Not long before Moscow finally repudiated the sovereignty of Mongols in 1480, Ivan married Sofia Paleologue, niece of the last Byzantine Emperor. He established a sumptuous court, attended with magnificent ceremonial, on the Byzantine pattern. Ivan put about the story that Constantine Monomakh (Byzantine Emperor 1042–1055) had conferred the insignia and imperial crown on Vladimir Monomakh of Kiev, so that Kiev was retrospectively promoted to imperial status, and through Kiev Moscow claimed itself the heir to an imperial succession which went right back to Augustus. This post-factum creation of a glorious genealogy reached its culmination in the coronation of the young Ivan IV as Tsar (Caesar) in 1547. The 'invention of tradition' implied that Muscovy had a natural right to reclaim all the territories which had at any time been ruled over by any of the princes of *Rus'*.

The fall of Byzantium to the Ottomans in 1453 lent these imperial pretensions a religious colouring – again in retrospect. Not long before, in 1439, at the Council of Florence, the Greek Orthodox Church had consented to reunion with Rome, a move which had been rejected as heretical in Muscovy. The infidel conquest of Byzantium could thereafter be construed as God's punishment for its church's apostasy. This interpretation was not put forward immediately in Muscovy, but, once it was, it implied an awesome role for the church of *Rus'*, as the one Orthodox Church free from the thrall of Islam, a distinction which could plausibly be seen as a reward for faithfulness, and as a pledge of God's special favour.

These secular and religious heritages amalgamated to generate the legend of 'Moscow the Third Rome', expounded with the greatest fervour in the epistles of the monk Filofei of Pskov. He wrote to Ivan II? in 1500 or 1501: 'This present church of the third, new Rome, of Thy sovereign Empire: the Holy Catholic [*sobornaia*] Apostolic Church ... shines in the whole universe more resplendent than the sun. And let it be known to thy Lordship, o pious Tsar, that all the empires of the Orthodox Christian faith have converged into Thine one Empire. Thou art the sole Emperor of all the Christians in the whole universe ... For two Romes have fallen, the Third stands, and there shall be no fourth.'⁴

In the early years of Ivan IV's reign these various myths of origin were collated and systematized by his leading prelate, Metropolitan Makarii, in such a way as to combine the themes of church, dynasty and land, and to tie them to an imperial heritage. He compiled two great books of readings, in some ways like the collections of legitimizing documents put together by Chinese Emperors: they were the Great Almanach (*Velikie Chet'i-Minei*), and the Book of Degrees of the Imperial Genealogy (*Stepennaia kniga tsarskogo rodosloviia*). The first one included lives of the saints, resolutions of church councils, sermons, epistles (among them those of Filofei) and historical documents, laid out so that they could be read each day of the year. They were selected and arranged to demonstrate how God's purpose, from the Creation onwards, had been to found a truly Christian empire on earth, and how the land of *Rus'* was now called upon to fulfil this purpose. Its ruler was 'everywhere under the vault of heaven the one Christian Tsar, mounted on the holy throne of God of the holy apostolic church, in place of the Roman and Constantinopolitan [thrones] in the God-saved city of Moscow.' In two church councils, of 1547 and 1549, these texts were confirmed and a large number of local saints were canonized, to attest both to the unity of the Muscovite church and to its divinely ordained sanctity. One historian has called Makarii the 'gatherer of the Russian church'.⁵

The Book of Degrees evoked a secular tradition to reinforce the religious one: it was an account of the ‘enlightened God-ordained sceptre-holders who ruled in piety the Russian land’. It was a highly selective list: it ignored the claims of rival successors to Kiev, like Lithuania and Novgorod, as well as the junior lines of the Riurik dynasty, and also the Golden Horde, but it emphasized the heritage of Byzantium, as befitted an imperial mission which rested on Orthodox Christianity.⁶

By the time that he embarked on his Kazan’ campaign, then, and on that against the Khanate of Astrakhan’ (1556), Ivan IV was fortified by an exalted vision of his earthly mission, which he employed to complement the humbler claims of steppe diplomacy. Though he never explicitly endorsed the ‘Third Rome’ theory to justify his aggression, Ivan deployed an eclectic bundle of arguments: that Kazan’ had acknowledged the sovereignty of Moscow and in effect Moscow’s right to claim the succession of the Golden Horde, that Kazan’ was a long-standing patrimony of the Riurik dynasty and part of the land of *Rus*’ ‘since antiquity’, that there was a need to maintain peace and end disorder, and that it was his duty as a Christian monarch to extirpate the rule of the infidel.⁷

The trouble was that the various aspects of this imperial ideology were scarcely compatible with one another. It is difficult to see what a Christian Emperor was doing claiming the heritage of an infidel ruler. As Michael Cherniavsky has commented, the two images, the *basileus* and the *khan*, were never really synthesized, but ‘existed separately ... in a state of tension’. ‘If the image of the *basileus* stood for the Orthodox and pious ruler, leading his Christian people towards salvation, then the image of the *khan* was perhaps preserved in the idea of the Russian ruler as the conqueror of Russia and of its people, responsible to no one. If the *basileus* signified the holy tsar, the “most gentle” (*tishaishii*) tsar in spiritual union with his flock, then the *khan*, perhaps, stood for the absolutist secularised state, arbitrary through its separation from its subjects.’⁸ This ambivalence was vividly exemplified in the personality of Ivan the Terrible, and was to persist for centuries thereafter.

There were other contradictions too. Did the ecumenical leadership Moscow proclaimed embrace the entire world of Orthodox Christianity, including the Balkans and Constantinople itself, or was it confined to the lands of *Rus*? As we shall see, when in the seventeenth century an energetic prelate championed the former view against the latter, he unleashed a destructive schism. And if Moscow pretended to be a universal empire, then how could it be so closely identified with one people, the Russians, however broadly one might define their nationhood? That ambiguity too was never to be fully resolved. Finally, in an empire both spiritual and secular, could a perfect partnership between church and state be achieved, or, if not, which was to be the dominant partner? The Tsars, perhaps nervous of conceding too much to the church, never deployed the ‘Third Rome’ argument as part of their diplomatic armoury: it remained a powerful cultural and religious motif latent in their claims to imperial domination.

B. The Practice of Empire

Whatever was the theory of the Russian empire, many of its practical difficulties were to result from its huge size and diversity, and from its hybrid position as Asiatic empire and European great power. The appearance of such a realm was far from being unprecedented historically. Some of the world's greatest empires have been created by a peripheral power on the edge of an ecumene: one thinks of Macedonia and later Rome at the edge of the Hellenic world, of the Mongols in Eastern Asia, or of the Ottomans in the Middle East. Such states borrow techniques and customs from their more advanced neighbours, and then employ their own relatively primitive and warlike social structure to achieve dominance. This is how Russia proceeded too. However, despite its considerable successes from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, it never quite achieved dominance, even over Central and Eastern Europe. And it found itself facing a European civilization which was continuing to make swift progress, partly in response to the Russian challenge.

Asiatic empires were used to exercising suzerainty over myriad ethnic groups, dominating them through a multi-ethnic imperial aristocracy, taxing them by exploiting the 'mutual responsibility' of local communities, offering them an imperial high culture and language to integrate their elites, but otherwise leaving them largely to their own devices on condition of obedience. John Kautsky has called such empires 'collections of agrarian societies which, remaining independent of one another, are linked to another society, the aristocracy, through being exploited by it ... Aristocrats and peasants are generally separated from each other by far-reaching cultural distinctions involving difference of language and religion and sometimes of race. They are, far more than the nineteenth-century British upper and lower classes to whom Disraeli applied the term, "two nations", though the word "nation" with its modern connotations is not really applicable to them.'⁹ In most respects, Russia remained an empire of this type right up to the early twentieth century.

The Asiatic imperial style implied a huge gap between the elites and the masses. In Europe, by contrast, states were moving between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries towards the integration of the masses into nationhood, often crystallized around royal courts, as their armies became larger and better equipped, their economies developed, and their vernacular languages took shape out of myriads of local dialects.

Russia was straddled awkwardly between these two different political milieux, its bureaucratic sinews still largely Asiatic, while its culture became European. If it wished to remain an empire, it had no choice but to become a European great power, for there were no natural barriers to protect it from its western neighbours. But becoming a European great power carried a high cost: from the seventeenth century onwards, the high culture it offered its various peoples was not, like that of, for example, China, generated internally but was borrowed from outside, from a culture and way of life which Russia had to imitate in order to compete with the European powers. That meant that its imperial traditions were at odds with the people after whom the empire was named, and with its own previous state traditions. The tensions thus generated became especially acute in the late nineteenth century, when Russia's Europeanization was becoming most advanced, and other European states were becoming nations.

THE STEPPES In the Asian part of the empire, the assimilation of new territories was fairly simple. Expansion began with the fomenting of disunity in the target society and the seduction of discontented elites, not too difficult a task when, like Kazan' and Astrakhan', they were confederacies of clans with a nomadic history. Shifting allegiances were part of the texture of steppe diplomacy and warfare. Once the conquest had been completed there would be a phase of the ruthless suppression of indigenous resistance, in order to leave no doubt about who was now master. Thus, within the former Khanate of Kazan', revolts of the Cheremisy in 1570–2 and of the Tatars in 1581–4 were put down with exemplary firmness. Kazan' was transformed into a Russian city, with an Orthodox

cathedral dominating its skyline, while Russian servitors were awarded land in the area and Russian peasants (often former soldiers) were encouraged to resettle there. Russian merchants came in to take advantage of the new opportunities for trade opened by possession of the whole length of the River Volga. The indigenous peoples were forbidden to bear weapons. A system of fortresses was erected to prevent them allying with nomads further afield, and to provide protection against further raids by the Crimean and Nogai Tatars from south and east. The whole newly assimilated region was placed under the rule of military governors (*voevody*).

Once the immediate danger of rebellion and renewal of war had passed, Muscovite rulers took care to exercise their authority so as not to disturb unduly the customs, laws and religion of the conquered peoples. The ultimate aim was always the secure integration of the new territories and populations inside the empire, but the means employed to achieve this goal were varied and pragmatic.

Elites were co-opted where this was practical: thus the Muslim Tatar landowners were assimilated into the Russian nobility, but the tribal leaders of the animist Cheremis, Chuvash, Votiak and Mordvin peoples were not, since their status, beliefs and way of life were too alien. The Tatar nobles were encouraged to convert to Orthodoxy, which some did, but at least initially they were not required to. Since some of them in time acquired Russian peasants on their land, this tolerance led to the paradoxical result that in a supposedly Christian empire Orthodox Russians were being enserfed to Muslim non-Russians. At the same time the indigenous peoples were protected against serfdom: they were guaranteed the status of '*iasak* folk', that is tribute-payers, whose property and way of life were left unmolested provided they discharged their dues. There can be no clearer indication of the way in which the needs of empire (in this case for taxes and peaceful assimilation) overrode both religious and national allegiance, even though Muscovy rested its extravagant imperial claims on both religion and nationhood. By the seventeenth century, the Volga basin had what might be called an 'onion-shaped' demography, with relatively few Russians in the highest and lowest social layers, and large numbers of indigenous peoples in the middle.

Thereafter the authorities gradually assimilated the territory and the peoples into the structure of the empire, drawing back whenever integratory measures provoked disproportionate resistance. In the early eighteenth century Tatar nobles were required to convert to Orthodoxy or lose their status, while the *iasak* peoples became subject to military recruitment and had to pay the poll-tax, like their Russian neighbours. After the Pugachev rebellion (which showed that Russians and non-Russians resisted the empire in the same way and for more or less the same reasons) the whole region was assimilated into the newly-created imperial structure of *gubernii* (an administrative unit of some 200,000–300,000 population) and *uezdy* (a similar unit of 20,000–30,000 population), each with its own nobles' association as the nucleus of the local ruling class. From time to time, campaigns were launched to convert the indigenous peoples to Orthodoxy, but they were dropped whenever they seemed likely to cause widespread trouble. The Volga region offered a prototype: the methods first tried out here – administrative and economic followed by cultural and religious integration – were later to be applied elsewhere in the empire too.¹⁰

The conquest of the Volga-Kama basin, of great importance in itself, proved also to be the starting-point for the most spectacular feat of expansion of all: the penetration and settlement of Siberia and the Far East, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. This process, though it had the support of the government, was accomplished without its direct intervention. The impulse came from hunters, trappers and traders, interested in expanding the fur trade, and from that semi-nomadic breed of Russians, the Cossacks.

Cossacks were hunters and brigands, horsemen and stock-raisers who roamed the no man's land – the so-called 'wild country' – between Muscovy, Poland-Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire and the successor khanates of the Golden Horde. They had learned to cope with the harsh and risky life of the steppe by forming themselves into military fraternities and mastering the skills which had reaped the Tatars such success in earlier centuries, including those of raiding and pillaging. Their very name

was Tatar, and signified 'free men'. Settled agriculture they disdained as beneath their dignity, and in any case futile in such vulnerable terrain. But they were prepared to hire themselves out to any overlord ready to offer them favourable terms to act as patrols and frontier defence troops.

Cossacks practised the mixture of ruthless authoritarianism and primitive democracy of those who inhabit a hazardous environment and are utterly dependent on each other for survival. Each unit of a hundred or so men held periodic meetings of its *krug* or warriors' assembly, where they allocated hunting and fishing rights, and decided about campaigning, the distribution of booty and service to sovereign powers. When necessary an *ataman* or 'headman' (*hetman* among the Zaporozhian Cossacks of the Dnieper) would be elected to lead them: once he was chosen, his word was law during combat.

Both for imperial expansion and frontier defence the Cossacks were indispensable, but they were double-edged allies, liable to turn against paymasters who dissatisfied them and to raid and plunder peaceful populations, while their way of life, their prized *vol'nost'* (freedom) offered an alluring alternative model for the serfs and tributaries of the Tsar. In a sense they were an alternative Russian ethnos, the embryo of a potential Russian nation with a quite different social structure. Significantly, criminal bands often adopted Cossack customs, organizing themselves in *arteli*, who would take decisions in common, share out their booty and observe a strict code of conduct – which, however, in their case excluded any collaboration with the state. This has made the criminal world in Russia remarkably tenacious and durable, through numerous changes of regime, right into the late twentieth century.¹¹

During its great period of expansion, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Muscovite/Russian Empire had much in common with the Spanish one. In both cases a militant Christian country had conquered Muslims on what it considered to be its primordial territory, and continued the impetus of conquest to take over a huge and distant empire. The prime agents of expansion, the Cossacks and the conquistadores, were not unlike one another in spirit. The mixture of autocracy with intrepid, self-willed freebooting troops, and an intolerant, crusading faith characterized both countries. But of course there were also crucial differences: Russia's empire, being an overland one, was closer at hand and easier to reach, but also more vulnerable to invasion by hostile neighbours. Even more important, perhaps, the Russians had no Pyrenees at their back to protect them from the ambitions of other European powers. These circumstances imparted to Russian imperialism a degree of caution and pragmatism which the Spanish did not practise.

SIBERIA AS in Spain, the government gave its general approval for the expansion of empire, but the pioneers on the frontier provided the impetus and took the crucial decisions, often turning defensive dispositions into campaigns of conquest. In the case of Siberia, a single entrepreneurial family took the initiative which brought together traders, administrators and warriors for a concerted effort of territorial and economic expansion. The Stroganovs, who for decades had enjoyed an official monopoly in the highly lucrative businesses of furs and salt-mining, engaged a Don Cossack army, under Ataman Ermak, to protect its operations against raids by the Khan of [Western] Siberia. Turning defence into attack, in 1581–2 Ermak succeeding in conquering the Khan's capital on the lower River Irtysh.

Thereafter the way lay open, through taiga and tundra, right across Siberia. The peoples who populated this immense territory were primitive and loosely ordered, without state structures: they sometimes offered bitter resistance to the invaders from the west, but were overcome with comparative ease even when superior in numbers, since their military equipment and organization were rudimentary.

Leaving fortresses (*astrogi*) behind them at major river crossings to consolidate their advance, the Cossack pioneers reached the Pacific Ocean by 1639 and founded there the harbour of Okhotsk in 1648. Thereby the advancing Russians gave substance to their claim on the heritage of the Golden Horde, adding it to their existing ethnic and imperial claims in Europe. Their actual domination of

the territory was, however, fragmentary. Freebooters, hunters and traders came first, drawn by the fabled wealth of the region, while the government subsequently improvised a thin web of colonization, sending soldiers, clergy, officials and a few resettled peasants. Spontaneous peasant settlement played a minor role, since the distances and dangers were sufficient to deter all but the boldest.¹²

The occupation of Siberia offers the first example of a characteristic feature of Russian imperialism: its tendency to forestall possible danger by expanding to fill the space it is able to dominate. This has meant that for Russians the sense of border is vague and protean, shaped by the constellation of power on its frontiers at any given moment. Expansion comes to an end only when Russia fetches up against another power capable of offering effective resistance and of affording a stable and predictable frontier, so that future relations can be conducted on a diplomatic rather than a military footing. Such frontiers Russia has normally respected, challenging them only when it appears that the power on the other side can no longer guarantee them. These tendencies have lent Russian imperialism a paradoxical air of aggression combined with caution.

In the Far East, China was both an obstacle to further advance and a stabilizing influence. After a period of indecisive conflict, the Russians signed with them the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), which settled the mutual border for nearly two centuries. Further north, where no such power existed to restrain and mould the forward impetus, even the Pacific did not pose an insurmountable barrier: Russian expansion continued across Alaska and down the west coast of North America. It was followed, however, by only the sparsest of settlement, and never put down firm roots.

Mindful of the vast distances and the perilous situation of the thinly scattered Russian settlers in Siberia, the Muscovite government pursued towards the natives a pragmatic policy similar to the one tried out on the Volga. Having first established undisputed control, where necessary by harsh and violent methods, it left the local peoples as far as possible to continue their traditional way of life, on condition of paying a regular tribute in furs (*iasak*). *Voevody* were exhorted to treat them 'with leniency and benevolence, and not to levy the *iasak* by brute force'.¹³ Siberian clan and tribal leaders were confirmed in their powers, though, unlike the Tatars, none of them was assimilated into the Russian nobility, since their way of life was felt to be too alien.

In practice, such intended forbearance was difficult to sustain. Disputes often broke out between Russians and natives. Sometimes Russian officials took hostages to ensure payment of the *iasak*; sometimes, knowingly or not, they infringed native hunting rights, or new peasant settlements blocked traditional pastoral routes. On any of these grounds, conflict might flare up, whereupon the Russians would exploit their superior weaponry to restore order as they conceived it.¹⁴

Siberia gave Russians a reassuring sense of space. Its immense expanses formed a kind of geopolitical confirmation of the notion of universal empire. At the same time its huge material resources were never properly exploited. Siberia is a prime example of the way in which the empire was run for considerations of great power status, not for economic ones. Its first and most obvious source of wealth, furs, was mercilessly exploited in the interests of traders and the exchequer, with no thought for restocking, so that by the early eighteenth century it was starting to decline from sheer misuse. The agricultural potential of the south and west lay almost completely fallow until the late nineteenth century. The mineral wealth, despite numerous geological expeditions, was grossly underexploited right into the twentieth century.

Admittedly there were major difficulties with transport, but that did not prevent the regime using Siberia as a dumping ground for the empire's undesirables, its criminals and its persecuted, who were conveyed in their thousands over its wastes to their confinement in convict camp or administrative exile. Some of them worked in saltworks and silver mines, but ironically the more educated sometimes found employment in official posts: at that distance it was considered safe for them to serve the Tsar they were allegedly trying to undermine! Siberia thus became a means of bolstering internal security rather than a great resource for economic growth.

STEPPES OF EAST AND SOUTH The straddling of northern Eurasia left the Russians with an immensely long, indeterminate and exposed flank to the south, where the steppes were flat and vulnerable to invasion. They applied to it the techniques they had first tried out in the Volga region, building a loose line of fortifications from the southern Urals to the Altai, manned by Cossack patrols or armed peasants to protect their communications from raiders.¹⁵ In practice peasants and soldiers were hard to distinguish, since perforce they acquired each other's characteristics in this harsh environment where the arts of war and agriculture were needed in equal measure for survival.

Given the immensely greater scale of the problem than on the Volga, security was not to be attained in this way, and eventually the Russians sought it by the only available alternative: to envelop and stifle conflict by expanding south and east across the desert to the khanates of the Central Asian oases, building loose chains of fortresses and redoubts as they went. In the course of this progress, they encountered by turn the semi-sedentary, semi-nomadic Bashkirs, then the nomadic Nogais and Kalmyks, then the Kazakhs. At each stage the Russians would begin by applying the technique which had served them well against Kazan', exploiting feuds within tribal confederations and drawing some tribes into a vassalage which was then interpreted as long-term subjection. There would follow a campaign of retribution against violated sovereignty, after which the indigenous peoples would be drawn into the permanent service of the Tsar, sometimes as special regiments within the Russian army, just as the British did with the Gurkhas. Russia would alternately threaten them and offer them trade privileges to fix them in service.¹⁶

Russia's most persistent and redoubtable opponents in this steppe confrontation were the Crimean Tatars in the south. They were so formidable because they had the mobility and ferocity of any nomadic host, but also a relatively high level of civilization, and the backing of a great power, the Ottoman Empire. Since the slave trade was a mainstay of their economy, they mounted frequent raids northwards towards Moscow: in 1571 they even sacked the city itself.¹⁷ The Russians, confined to the forests, marshes and poor soils of the north, had to stand by and see the fertile expanses of the Pontic steppes, to the north of the Black Sea, remain under-inhabited and scarcely cultivated because of the blight the Tatars cast over them from their fastness in the Crimea.

Until the late seventeenth century, no Russian government felt strong enough to challenge the Crimean Tatars militarily. When at length they did so, they found the obstacles formidable. The hundreds of miles of open steppe which afforded such ideal hunting ground for Nogai and Tatar cavalry were a nightmare for infantry and artillery to traverse. Unable to rely on foraging in the sun-baked plains, the Russian army had to take with it a huge supply train, whose burdens were further swollen by the fodder needed for the draught animals pulling it. A whole series of Russian campaigns failed because of these difficulties, sometimes after initial encouraging success. In 1689 Prince Vasili Golitsyn's troops reached the isthmus fortress of Perekop, but had to abandon the siege because they had already consumed most of their supplies. In 1696 Peter I captured the fort of Azov, but had to relinquish it some years later for similar reasons. In 1736 General Münnich actually breached the walls of Perekop but had to retire without capturing it because he had run out of food and water: the Tatars had providently burnt their granaries and poisoned their wells.¹⁸

Right up to the late eighteenth century, Russia continued to rely for its security on extended chains of forts in the steppe, connected by an elaborate system of signalling linked to reserves situated near Kiev. About a quarter of the army was stationed on or behind these fortifications to prevent cavalry raids, which it could barely manage to do even with such profligate use of manpower. The power of the service nobility over their serfs was justified mainly by the need to staff these defences.¹⁹

Eventually the Russians were able to overcome the Crimean Tatars by employing their time-honoured steppe strategy, using diplomacy and military pressure to weaken their ties with the Ottoman Empire and to entice some of their vassals, the Nogai clans. With their help the Russian army was able to break into the Crimea in 1771. It declared the khanate a Russian protectorate, and

then abolished it twelve years later, incorporating the territory directly into the empire and replacing the Khan with a Russian Governor. The Tatar *murzy* (nobles) were absorbed into the imperial nobility, if they could furnish proof of legitimate title, while the peasants were confirmed in their landholdings and their free status. The Muslim religious authorities were permitted to retain their endowments (*waqf*) and their traditional status.²⁰

From the Russians' viewpoint this policy was wholly successful: there was no major Tatar rising against their rule. But there was a heavy price to be paid – by the Tatars: many of them emigrated to the Ottoman Empire, leaving behind land which was occupied by incoming Russian peasants and other colonists. Gradually the Tatars became a minority in what had been their own realm. It transpired, then, that large numbers of Muslims would emigrate if they had the chance to do so rather than endure an alien Christian domination. This was to happen again later in the Caucasus, leaving a legacy of hatred and bitterness which was to render Russia's frontier in that region a permanent source of potential weakness.

Victory in the Crimea cleared the way for the Russian armies to consolidate their growing superiority over the Ottoman Empire on the whole northern coast of the Black Sea, which they gradually asserted in a series of wars fought between the 1760s and 1790s. These conquests were of cardinal strategic and economic significance. Russia was at last able to break out of her meagre woodland and exploit in security the rich steppe lands which had so long tantalized her people. Agriculturalists were able to make incomparably more productive use of them than slave-traders, and during the nineteenth century the grain grown there became the commercial mainstay of the empire. [See Part 2, Chapter 3]

CAUCASUS Domination of the Volga basin and of the Pontic steppes inevitably involved Russia in the politics of the Trans-Caucasus, for reasons which General Rostislav Fadeev outlined in the 1850s.

Domination on the Black and Caspian Seas, or in extremity the neutrality of those seas, is a vital interest for the whole southern half of Russia, from the Oka to the Crimea, the area where the principal strength of the empire, material and personal, is more and more concentrated ... If Russia's horizons ended on the snowy summits of the Caucasus range, then the whole western half of the Asian continent would be outside our sphere of influence and, given the present impotence of Turkey and Persia, would not long wait for another master.²¹

The Caucasus mountain range and its hinterland constituted very different terrain from the steppes but posed analogous problems of turbulence and power vacuum on Russia's borders, aggravated in this case by the presence of Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and behind them Britain, hovering in the background, always ready to intervene. The region was a bewildering patchwork of tiny ethnic groups, often confined to single valleys or clusters of valleys, divided from each other by high mountain walls. The indigenous peoples were staunch in the Islamic faith, jealous of their tribal independence and their pastoral way of life.

Beyond the Caucasus range, in the basins of the Rion and Kura/Araxes rivers and the hills around them, lived two of the oldest Christian peoples in the world, the Georgians and the Armenians. The Georgians were largely a people of peasants and landed nobles, Orthodox by religion, organized till the late eighteenth century in a kingdom which was a loose confederation of principalities, wedged between the Persian and Ottoman Empires. The Armenians, by contrast, were traders, artisans and professional people of the Gregorian monophysite faith; they had had their own kingdom in the middle ages, but by the eighteenth century most lived in the Ottoman Empire, where they enjoyed a tolerably secure, if subordinate status as a recognized *millet* (a self-governing ethnic or religious community). Some were subjects of the various khans of the Persian Empire. Intermingled among them in the lower Kura basin and along the Caspian Sea were also Azeris, Shia Muslims whose religion inclined them towards Persia while their language was close to Turkish.

With their territories the object of contention between two Muslim empires, it was natural that the Georgians and Armenians should both look to Orthodox Russia as a potential protector. As early as 1556, when Muscovy was first established on the borders of the Caspian Sea, the east Georgian kingdom of Kakhetia sent envoys to consult about the possibility of becoming a protectorate.²²

However, it was not for more than two centuries that Russia, at last controlling the north coast of the Black Sea and the Kuban' steppes, was able to intervene decisively in Transcaucasian affairs. It was motivated to do so by the fear, later articulated by Fadeev, that otherwise the region, already unstable, would become the base of operation for another power, Asiatic or conceivably even European, to threaten the newly acquired steppes. Every time there was war with the Ottoman Empire, the Caucasus became an additional front, and even in peacetime the raids of the hill tribesmen constantly endangered the productive agricultural settlements establishing themselves on the Kuban' plains to the north. Well before the end of the eighteenth century Russia constructed a line of forts along the Terek river, which annoyed the neighbouring Kabardinian chiefs.

This was the motive which impelled Russia in 1783 to offer protection of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity in return for acknowledgement of overlordship. Georgia got a bad bargain, for within two decades its separate kingdom had been abolished, and its royal family banished, yet effective Russian protection had not been forthcoming when its capital city, Tbilisi, was sacked by the Persians in 1795.

All the same, the Georgian people survived, and were able during the nineteenth century to develop a sense of nationhood in reasonably stable circumstances – something which might not have been possible had Russia never intervened. For the Russian masters themselves, the experience of dealing with Siberian and steppe peoples was largely misleading when handling a long-established and cultured people like the Georgians. Proud of their distinctive traditions, they were not content gradually to lose their identity in an Asian-style empire.

Administrative assimilation actually proceeded much faster than it had done in the steppes. Georgian principalities were amalgamated to form the Russian gubernii of Tiflis and Kutaisi. The elaborate, multi-layered hierarchy of the Georgian nobility was reduced to the simpler model of the Russian *dvorianstvo*, while the Georgian custom of entail was replaced by the Russian one of dividing estates among all heirs. The city of Tiflis was rebuilt on European lines, and the palace of the viceroy became the centre of a brilliant social and cultural life.²³

Under the Russians, the Georgian kingdom, though subordinate, was more united than it had been for centuries. This factor, together with the provision of stability, the construction of communications, the offering of commercial opportunity and the inculcation of a European-style culture furnished the conditions in which it proved possible during the nineteenth century for Georgian nobles to find a sense of common identity with their own people, and to take the first steps towards nationhood in the modern sense.²⁴ This is a paradox we shall see several times: the Russian empire providing the pre-conditions for the creation of a nation, which cannot flower fully within the empire and turns against it.

As for the Armenians, their hopes were roused by the Russian incursion into their territories, and especially by the victories over the Persians in 1828 and the Ottomans in 1829. For a time Russia held the strategically vital areas of Kars and Erzerum, but returned them to Turkey by the Treaty of Adrianople (1829). However, Armenians living there were allowed to emigrate to Russia, and did so in large numbers: this contingent included many peasants, who mostly settled in the hill country of Nagorny Karabakh. Armenian traders, artisans and professional people became a significant element in all the Transcaucasian cities, in Tiflis and Baku as much as in Erivan. By a Statute of 1836 the Armenian Gregorian Church was recognized as self-governing.²⁵

These population movements certainly provided new hope for thousands of Armenians. Yet they also had the effect of arousing the suspicion and enmity of the Muslims who were accustomed to

political domination over the territories where they settled. The new Armenians were thus potentially insecure: basically, they remained, as before, a people divided among different empires, with no land they could securely call their own.

Paradoxically the Russians established themselves in Transcaucasia without having gained mastery of the Caucasus itself. The new Russian dominions depended on a tenuous line of communication, the Georgian Military Highway, running through the heart of the mountains. While the chieftains of the Ossetian people, who lived along it, were favourable to Russia, it was tolerably secure, nor did Russians need to fear permanent disruption so long as the diverse peoples of the mountains, the Chechens, Kabardinians, Circassians, Kumyks and so on, were held back from mutual cooperation by ethnic and princely feuds.

However, even before the end of the eighteenth century, there were signs that this disunity might not last for ever. In 1785, after an earthquake, a Sufi leader, Sheikh Mansur, called on his fellow Chechens to join with other tribes in resisting further encroachments by the infidel. The Sufi brotherhoods provided an ideal focus for the emergence of a new democratic Islamic resistance, often repudiating the chieftains and their compromises with imperial authority. In this case, therefore, by endeavouring as usual to co-opt local elites, Russia did not gain the docility of the mass of the population, but on the contrary provoked them to rebellion.

Sufism might seem an odd focus for such rebellion: originally it was a mystical movement of contemplation, self-denial and withdrawal from the world. But the intense relationship which existed between mentor (*murshid* or *sheikh*) and his disciples could, in circumstances of danger and instability, readily generate a collective commitment to militant action. By the early nineteenth century, the call for *jihad*, or ‘exertion in defence of the faith’ was becoming popular among ordinary people, overriding local feuds and cementing armed resistance under Sufi leadership. Egalitarianism, self-sacrifice and devotion to the prophet supplanted hierarchy and obedience to the tribal *beg*.²⁶

In the 1820s Ghazi Muhammad taught that ‘He who is a Muslim must be a free man, and there must be equality among all Muslims’. To promote this freedom and equality it was the duty of all the faithful to cast out the infidel though *qazawat* or ‘holy war’. ‘He who holds to the Shariat must arm no matter what the cost, must abandon his family, his house, his land and not spare his very life.’²⁷

Ghazi’s successor, the Imam Shamil, led the resistance movement for quarter of a century (1834–59), exploiting all the advantages the terrain afforded him. Small bands of lightly armed men could descend at any moment on a Russian outpost or convoy, exploiting surprise and mobility to inflict the maximum damage and loss of life, before vanishing into the mountains and forests. This was a kind of warfare to which the Russians, with their long experience of the steppes, were not at all accustomed, and it was very difficult for them, despite their considerable superiority in numbers and technology, to overcome their nimble foe. Deploying more troops simply generated more casualties. The Russians’ attempts to divide their opponents and gain allies would call forth swift and ferocious retaliation from Shamil.²⁸

The Crimean War (1853–6) revealed what a threat this endless Caucasian fighting could be to the empire: two hundred thousand troops had to be stationed there throughout the war to keep an eye on both Shamil and the Turks and were thus unable to intervene in the decisive theatre of war. In the end only a systematic campaign of forest-felling, crop-burning, road-building and destruction of villages enabled the Russians to gain a permanent grip on the Caucasus range.²⁹

In a word, they were able to attain their ends only by genocide. Following the pacification, the Russian authorities resettled many mountaineers on the plains. Many more chose instead to leave, seeking a new home in the Ottoman Empire. At least 300,000 Circassians departed, nearly their entire population; so too did many Abkhaz, Chechens, Kabardinians and Nogai Tatars.³⁰ This outcome, very different from what had been experienced on the steppes and anticipating the massive deportations of the twentieth century, displayed dramatically the costs of empire: in this case a lasting legacy

of hatred, bitterness and desire for vengeance which has made the Caucasian frontier a permanent source of weakness for Russia.

UKRAINE The flat, open region to the south and south-west of Muscovy was geographically part of the steppes, and presented Russia with the problems characteristic of steppe terrain. Here, however, there was a vital additional element: national identity was directly at stake, since the area had been for centuries part of the patrimony of the princes of *Rus'*, and its principal city, Kiev, had been the seat of the first East Slav state from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. At that time a thriving trading centre and agricultural region, it had suffered grievously from the Mongol invasion, and later from the collapse of Byzantium and the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. It became an insecure hinterland, defenceless before the Crimean Tatars' slave raids, traversed by Cossacks, nomads and by the marauding robber bands which flourished where there was no fixed civil authority.³¹

During the fourteenth century Lithuania became the dominant power in the region, and it repulsed the Mongols a century before Muscovy was able to do so. Lithuania in turn fell under the influence of Poland, with which the Grand Prince of Lithuania concluded a dynastic union in 1385, later converted into a joint Commonwealth. The Catholic and Latinate culture of Poland took hold among the elites of the region, though profession of the Orthodox faith continued to be tolerated. The stage was set for a centuries-long national and religious struggle between Poland and Russia, Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the greater physical security afforded by the Polish-Lithuanian state, Ukraine became its grain belt. The landed nobility gained in both privilege and material wealth, while imposing an ever more debilitating serfdom on the peasants. The Lithuanian Statute of 1529, together with the Magdeburg Law in the cities, provided some guarantees of citizenship for all non-serfs and, although often in practice ignored, it inculcated a stronger legal awareness in Ukraine than was prevalent in Muscovy.

Polish culture proved highly attractive to many Ukrainian landowners, especially since those who converted to Catholicism received the full rights of the *szlachta* (Polish nobility) to enserf the peasants and to participate as citizens in the political life of the Commonwealth. With the coming of the counter-reformation, the Polish king encouraged the expansion of a network of Jesuit colleges, which brought with them the latest in European culture and thinking, while a new Greek Catholic (or Uniate) Church was created, Orthodox in ritual, but administratively in union with Rome, which took over most Orthodox parishes. Originally conceived as an attempt to begin the reunification of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the Uniate Church became in effect an instrument of Polonization.³²

Where the ill-defined borders of the joint Commonwealth faded into the steppe, however, Catholicism and high culture made but few and feeble inroads. There the Cossack community of the lower Dnieper continued its steppe way of life, hunting, fishing, raiding across the sea into the Ottoman Empire, and striking up temporary alliances with Muscovy or Poland for the defence of its frontiers. The Cossacks' headquarters, the Sech', on an island below the Dnieper rapids, was almost impregnable and guaranteed their dogged self-rule as well as their privileges, notably their exemption from taxation, which were registered by the Polish crown.

By the mid-seventeenth century the Polish king and *szlachta*, tiring of the anarchy on their borders and jealous of the Cossacks' privileges, attempted forcefully to subjugate the Dnieper community and incorporate it fully into the Commonwealth. The attempt provoked a rebellion in defence of Cossack self-rule: its leader, Hetman Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi, sought the protection of the Muscovite Tsar.

The resultant Treaty of Pereiaslavl' (1654) was a *locus classicus* of the discrepancy between steppe diplomacy and that of Muscovy. Khmel'nyts'kyi expected the Tsar's envoy, Vasillii Buturlin, to join him in taking an oath to observe the terms of the treaty. When Buturlin refused, declaring that it was unthinkable for the Tsar to bind himself by oath to a subject, Khmel'nyts'kyi walked out of the negotiations. So pressing was his military need, however, that he subsequently changed his

mind and consented to accept Buturlin's assurances of the Tsar's good faith instead of an explicit oath. The Cossacks pledged the Tsar 'eternal loyalty', while he in turn confirmed the Cossack Host in its privileges, including its own law and administration, the right to elect its own Hetman and to receive foreign envoys not hostile to the Tsar. He also guaranteed the Ukrainian nobility, church and cities their traditional rights. Under these arrangements the alliance was concluded and Poland was driven out of left-bank Ukraine and Kiev.³³

Left-bank Ukraine became the site of a new state, the Ukrainian Hetmanate, which preserved a degree of autonomy, as well as its own culture, well into the eighteenth century. The representatives of nobles, clergymen and burghers were given their place alongside Cossacks in the General Council which elected the Hetman. An institutional foundation was thus laid for the Cossacks to create the framework of a Ukrainian nation-state in alliance with Russia.

Moscow, however, regarded the Treaty of Pereiaslavl' as the first step in the permanent incorporation – or reincorporation – of the territories of what it called 'Little Russia' into the empire, as part of the 'gathering of the Russian lands'. It began a process of creeping integration, sowing and exploiting dissensions within Ukrainian society. Muscovite voevodas listened to the grievances of peasants and rank-and-file Cossacks against their elites, and sometimes passed them on to Moscow to settle. In 1686, after long negotiations with the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Kievan metropolitanate, symbol of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, was subordinated to Moscow.³⁴

The turning-point in relations came during Peter I's war against Sweden. The Hetman, Ivan Mazepa, discovered that the Russian army was so preoccupied with defending the road to Moscow against Charles XII that it had no troops to spare to come to the aid of the Ukrainians. This unwelcome discovery raised the question whether the Treaty of Pereiaslavl' was still valid: both in feudal and in steppe diplomacy, an overlord who was no longer willing or able to provide protection for a vassal forfeited any claim on his continuing loyalty.

Mazepa decided to throw in his lot with the Swedes and the Poles, in the expectation that Ukraine would eventually become a partner in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Peter reacted swiftly and ruthlessly to his defection. He accused him of treason, and sent an army under Prince Menshikov to his headquarters town of Baturyn, which was taken with the slaughter of all its inhabitants. Elsewhere too Russian commanders sought out Mazepa's supporters, interrogated them and sent them to execution or exile. They turned out to be fewer than expected, perhaps because of Peter's demonstrative ruthlessness, or perhaps because many Cossacks did not want to resubmit themselves to a Catholic realm.³⁵

Thereafter the way was open for the complete integration of Ukraine into the Russian Empire. Ukrainian affairs were transferred from the College for Foreign Affairs to the Senate, implying that Ukraine was an integral part of Russia. The Hetmanate was first suspended and then abolished in 1763. Its institutions were in decline anyway, since Cossacks had to bear full military duties without serfs to cultivate their lands. Growing polarization among the Cossacks also weakened their sense of a common political destiny: poorer Cossacks and townsfolk looked to the Russian administration and law courts to protect them against exploitation by their superiors.

Besides, there were benefits for Ukrainian nobles in being fully assimilated into the imperial *dvorianstvo*. For one thing, it converted their peasants into serfs, over whom they had full rights. Besides, thanks to their relatively high level of culture and education, they were often at an advantage when competing with their Muscovite counterparts for official positions, especially since they were ethnically close and able to speak good Russian. Incorporation offered them scope for their talents, rather as the Union of England and Scotland offered attractive career opportunities to Scots far outside their ancestral homeland.

By the 1780s the Hetmanate had been abolished and divided up into gubernii identical with those elsewhere in the empire. Cossack regiments were absorbed into the Russian army, though with their own distinctive names, uniforms and ranks as a relic of their separate status. The Sech' was not only closed down but razed, now that it was no longer needed for defence against the Turks.³⁶

Ukraine's loss of its distinct identity was more complete than that of any other region of the empire. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ukrainian rural elites became to all intents and purposes Russian, while the larger towns were cosmopolitan, with Russians, Jews, Poles, Germans, Greeks and others living side by side. The peasants spoke a variety of Ukrainian dialects, but were far from any sense of identity with their landowners or of belonging to a Ukrainian nation. In so far as a separate Ukrainian identity lingered, it was among scholars and professional people interested in literature, folklore and antiquities.

BESSARABIA Bessarabia was really an extension of the southern part of Ukraine, and had a similarly mixed urban population; only here the peasantry was Romanian. It was a thin sliver of land between the rivers Dniester and the Prut, conquered by Russia in 1812. It formed the north-eastern half of the province of Moldavia, itself one of the two Romanian principalities which had been in dispute between the Russian and Ottoman empires since the early eighteenth century. Traditionally ruled over by Romanian boyars under Greek Phanariot *hospodars*, it had been subjected to an especially rapacious system of tax-farming which had left its peasants, despite a fertile soil, among the most poverty-stricken in Europe. After the Crimean War and the declaration of Romanian independence in 1861, it became for a time part of Romania, and even after its return at the Congress of Berlin it remained the only part of Russia's European territory directly threatened by potential national irredentism, that is, claimed by a nation-state across the border.

After its initial annexation in 1812, Bessarabia enjoyed a period of autonomy on the Finnish model, but this was ended in 1828. Thereafter both the poverty of the region and its exposed situation led the imperial authorities to do everything possible to weaken the indigenous elites and to import Russian officials and landowners. By the late nineteenth century Bessarabia had thus become home to a peculiarly raw and brash immigrant Russian ruling class; it was a soil in which monarchist and anti-Semitic movements found abundant nourishment.³⁷

POLAND In the second half of the eighteenth century Russia embarked on perhaps its most fateful episode of imperial expansion when it destroyed the Polish state and annexed a large part of its territory. To understand why this happened, and why Russia displayed such cynicism and brutality, we have to remember that Poland had itself once been a rival great power, contesting the same territories and claiming the same right to absorb all East Slavs into its realm, for a time with considerable success. It is as if, during the British Civil War of the seventeenth century, an Irish Catholic king had invaded England, captured London, and for a time occupied the throne.

This was not just great power rivalry, but also a bitter family quarrel. The territories which formed the eastern half of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania had belonged in pre-Mongol days to the patrimony of the princes of *Rus'*: they were thus part of the agenda of the 'gathering of the lands of *Rus'*'. The Poles, being Slavs, and having inherited part of the legacy of Kievan *Rus'*, could put forward perfectly plausible rival claims to the loyalty of the Ukrainians and Belorussians. The fact that they were also Catholics made their pretensions doubly repugnant in the eyes of Orthodox Russians. Their culture, conspicuously aristocratic and westernized, completed the picture of family perfidy.

Poland was moreover strategically vital to Russia. It commanded the flat, open approaches from the west, across which European powers over the centuries repeatedly invaded Russia. Applying the logic of steppe diplomacy by which Russia was accustomed to regulate its dealings with its neighbours, Poland must either be strong enough to offer both resistance and a stable frontier, like China, or else, if weak, it must be under Russia's thumb.

As it became obvious during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that Poland was in fact growing dangerously weak, Russia began to deploy the techniques which had served it well

in overcoming adversaries of the steppe: promoting internal splits in order to achieve domination and if necessary destruction. It was Poland's misfortune that these devices were singularly effective when applied to her. Her monarchy was elective, not hereditary, allowing ample scope for the free play of faction. Her libertarian constitution permitted a single member of the Diet to thwart a resolution – a right reputedly not exercised lightly, but nevertheless one which enfeebled the state's capacity to act – and also envisaged the right of 'confederation', which entitled groups of citizens to uphold what they believed to be the law by means of joint armed action.³⁸

Peter I and his successors exploited these defects to keep Poland weak and to maintain a Russian hegemony over it, backing aristocratic factions, impeding attempts to reform the constitution and interfering in royal elections. When necessary, Russian troops were sent in, on one occasion breaking into the Diet when it was in session and arresting deputies unfavourable to the Russian cause.

Unlike the steppe khanates, however, Poland was a power among other European powers, who therefore had a legitimate interest in what happened to her. Without provoking a general European war, which was clearly not in her interests, Russia could not carry out the destruction of Poland without considering the susceptibilities of at least Austria and Prussia. Hence the eventual dismemberment of the Polish state could take place only by agreement among all three powers. It happened in three stages, in 1772, 1793 and 1795. In conception, however, this was an act of traditional Russian empire-building: in announcing the second partition, Catherine II claimed that Russia was resuming sovereignty over 'lands and citizens which once belonged to the Russian Empire, which are inhabited by their fellow-countrymen and are illuminated by the Orthodox faith'.³⁹

The population Russia absorbed during the partitions was very diverse: it included some 40% Ruthenians (Ukrainians or Belorussians), 26% Poles, 20% Lithuanians, 10% Jews and 4% Russians; 38% were Catholics, 40% Uniate, 10% of the Jewish faith and 6.5% Orthodox.⁴⁰ But it was not the diversity which caused Russia difficulties: after all, she had coped with plenty of that already. More fateful was the fact that in the Poles and the Jews she had taken in the two nations who were to prove the most irreconcilable to Russian imperial rule, a permanent source of bitterness and conflict.

The Poles were Roman Catholic, and most of them identified with the Latin West of the Counter-Reformation. Culturally and economically they were more advanced than the Russians. Their concept of citizenship ran counter to the whole theory and practice of political authority in Russia. In Poland, as in England, political rights proceeded from a broadening of feudal aristocratic privilege – the 'golden liberty', as it was known – to embrace the whole population. This process had begun belatedly but unmistakably in the last years of the Commonwealth, in the constitution of 3 May 1791. Both in its traditional aristocratic and in its new democratic forms, the Polish ideal was incompatible with Russian autocracy. Unfortunately for the Poles, and probably for the Russians too, the continuing split in their society, between the nobility (*szlachta*) and the rest, made it impossible for them to mount a united movement of national resistance after incorporation into Russia. Unable either to throw off Russian domination or to submit meekly to it, Poland became a permanent festering sore on the body politic of Russia. It demonstrated vividly the problem of an Asiatic empire trying to dominate a European nation.

The old *szlachta* feeling for liberty was never altogether lost: under Russian rule it revived in the guise of romanticism. With the aid of its misty evocations Poles could dream of a nation – a Christ-like nation Mickiewicz called it – without the imperfections which reality perforce imposes, and each Polish patriot could indulge his own vision of a perfect community without sacrificing one jot of his individuality for the sake of it. In this way the Poles somehow elided the centuries which most peoples passed through between medieval chivalry and the modern nation-state. The poet Kazimierz Brodzinski put it simply:

*Hail, O Christ, Thou Lord of Men! Poland in Thy footsteps treading Like Thee suffers, at Thy bidding; Like Thee, too, shall rise again.*⁴¹

The Tsars were not wholly insensitive to the peculiar problem they faced in Poland, and they made some attempt, as they had in other parts of the empire, to find ways of working peacefully with the Polish elite. Alexander I appointed a leading Polish nobleman, Prince Adam Czartoryski, who was also his close friend, as his Foreign Minister, and for a time took seriously his proposal for a ‘Europe of nations’, in which Poland would be independent under Russian protectorate.⁴² Even after the defeat of Napoleon, when he turned his Holy Alliance *against* nations rather than in favour of them, the Tsar still granted Poland a constitution which gave it home rule in personal union with Russia.

From 1815, the Congress Kingdom of Poland, which included Warsaw, the old capital city, had its own government, its own elected legislative assembly (the Sejm), its own army, passports, currency and citizenship. Civil liberties were guaranteed; Polish was the official language, and the Catholic Church was accorded a recognized status as that of the majority of the people. Similar arrangements were being made for Finland at the time [see below, p. 37], and many educated Russians hoped that they might prove to be prototypes of a future Russian constitution. In a speech to the Sejm in 1818, Alexander himself expressed the hope that the Polish constitution would ‘extend a beneficial influence over all the countries which Providence has committed to my care’.⁴³

On the other hand, many other Russians never ceased to be suspicious that granting Poland real nationhood would enable it to filch the old principality of Lithuania, which was largely populated by Ukrainian, Belorussian and Lithuanian peasants, whom they considered natural subjects of Russia. Besides, Alexander was not accustomed to a real parliament and tended to equate serious opposition with sedition. When members of the Sejm spoke out against censorship and claimed the right to impeach ministers, he suspended it for four years and revoked the mandates of some of the deputies. Growing increasingly suspicious of the numerous patriotic and masonic societies which flourished in Poland, he closed them down (as in Russia) and instituted a purge of Wilno University.⁴⁴

After the Decembrist rebellion of 1825, Nicholas I was even more suspicious of the Poles, and was not satisfied that Polish courts dealt firmly enough with those he believed to have been involved in treason. Matters came to a head when in November 1830 one of the patriotic societies tried to assassinate the Viceroy, Grand Duke Konstantin, and to disarm the Russian garrison. They failed in their immediate aim, but did seize control of the city of Warsaw, turning discontent into an armed insurrection and polarizing the situation. Every Pole had to decide for or against participation in the revolt, and Czartoryski reluctantly sponsored it, becoming head of an independent Polish government at war with Russia.

As before, however, Poland remained divided, both between moderates and radicals in the capital, and more generally between the *szlachta* and the peasants. A land reform was urgent if the insurrection was to gain the support of the peasants, and without that support it had no chance of success against the much larger Russian army. But the Polish government temporized until it was too late. In spite of the sterling fighting qualities which the Polish army displayed then, the Russians were able to restore complete control by the autumn of 1831.⁴⁵

The result was the destruction of Poland’s distinctive institutions. Nicholas I warned in 1835: ‘If you persist in nursing your dreams of a distinct nationality, of an independent Poland ... you can only bring the greatest of misfortunes upon yourselves.’ The Sejm and the separate army were abolished, and most of Poland’s affairs brought under Russian ministries. The ruble replaced the zloty. The University of Warsaw was closed, and all schools subjected to direct Russian control. The Russian language became officially acceptable alongside Polish in administration and justice, and the Russian criminal code replaced the Polish one. The Uniate Church in former Lithuania was assimilated into the Orthodox Church.⁴⁶

In short, Poland, a proud and independent European nation, was treated as if it were less than a steppe khanate. Officers who had served in the rebellious army were cashiered and deported to Siberia, and nobles lost their estates. Many forestalled this fate by emigrating, mostly to France,

which became the home of an alternative Poland. At the Hotel Lambert Czartoryski became a kind of king in exile. The Polish Democratic Society in Paris mocked Europe's diplomatic arrangements by talking of a 'Holy Alliance of Peoples'. Naturally the Russians were cast in the role of principal enemy of this 'Alliance', and the Polish emigration, with its brilliant poets, musicians, soldiers and elder statesmen aroused lively anti-Russian sentiment over most of Europe. The 'saviour of Europe' in 1812–15, Russia now became the 'gendarme of Europe', a reputation which was to hamper her diplomatic efforts greatly for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Even worse, when the Russian government resumed the path of reform in Poland, in the 1860s, the result was more or less a repetition of the 1830 rebellion. By making concessions to the church, permitting the re-opening of part of Warsaw University and encouraging serious discussion of reforms, including the abolition of serfdom, Alexander II aroused exaggerated hopes and also provoked bitter disagreements. The result was an armed insurrection in 1863–4, which aimed to restore Polish independence. It proved very tenacious: for a time it succeeded in driving the Russian army almost out of Poland and in establishing an alternative administration, effective at least in the rural areas. But as before the rising was undermined by its own internal divisions and by the failure to attract support from any European power. By the end of 1864 the Russian army regained complete control, and this time Poland lost the last vestiges of its separate status: what had been the 'Congress Kingdom' became merely 'the Vistula region'.⁴⁷ The debacle was not only disastrous for Poland, but led to a decisive souring of the reform efforts of Alexander II [see Part 4, Chapter 1].

THE JEWS The partitions of Poland brought some 400,000 Jews into the empire.⁴⁸ They confronted their new masters with problems analogous to those of the Poles, yet also different. They were yet another 'awkward nationality' as far as Russian administrators were concerned, resistant to assimilation and difficult to fit into the empire's categories of population. They had an ancient religion and culture, a level of literacy and communal cohesion far higher than those of the Russians. They usually excelled at any trade, manufacture or profession they practised, so that they were dangerous competitors for others. They were widely resented among the population, partly for this reason, and partly because of religion: talk of the 'murderers of Christ' found a sympathetic echo among some believers, both Catholic and Orthodox.

Yet, in spite of their remarkable culture and talents, the Jews were nearly all poor, partly owing to discrimination long practised against them, partly because of the economic decline of eighteenth-century Poland. Their poverty, together with the economic functions they usually filled – as shopkeepers, traders, artisans, stewards, innkeepers and moneylenders – made it out of the question that any of them should be assimilated into the Russian nobility. They thus remained condemned to a conjunction of high achievement and low status: an unstable and explosive mixture.

From the outset the Russian government was concerned not only to integrate them, but also to protect other nationalities against them. When Moscow merchants petitioned in 1791 to be shielded from their competition, the government responded with a decree forbidding them to settle in the capital cities: this became the basis for the creation of the Pale of Settlement, which confined them, with few exceptions, to the former territories of Poland, plus the rest of Ukraine and New Russia.

For much of the nineteenth century, however, the Russian authorities did attempt to find some way of integrating Jews into society. The Jewish Statute of 1804 in some respects exemplified European enlightenment thinking about how this might best be accomplished. Jews were, for example, to be admitted without restriction to education at all levels, or, if they wished, to their own schools, where, however, they would be obliged to learn Russian, Polish or German. Their right of self-government in the *kahal* was confirmed in so far as it was separate from the rabbinate. They were allowed to set up and own factories, and to buy or lease land in New Russia and certain other provinces. On the other hand, even here there were restrictions: Jews were forbidden to engage in the liquor trade, which had been a major source of income for them in Poland. They were barred

from military service, and required instead to pay a special tax. Above all, the Pale of Settlement was confirmed.⁴⁹

In practice, the assimilatory aspects of the Statute remained a dead letter, while the restrictive ones were applied in full. Russian schools at all levels were so sparse that the Jews were scarcely able to take advantage of them. Even those who did could find it difficult to obtain appropriate employment afterwards: when one Simon Vul'f graduated in law at Dorpat University in 1816, he was briefly hired by the Ministry of Justice, but soon dismissed on the grounds that he could not handle cases involving ecclesiastical law.⁵⁰ As for the prospect of agricultural settlement in New Russia, the government never backed it up with funds. In local government, it proved impossible to separate the secular functions of the *kahal* from the religious function of the rabbinate: Russians made the distinction without difficulty, but it was quite alien to Jewish tradition. In 1844 the *kahal* was officially abolished, but in practice continued to exist, since the authorities were unable to replace it with anything effective. Henceforth, however, it had no acknowledgement or protection at law.

Overall, the Jews suffered from the Russian government's endemic tendency to promise well-tailored reforms which it was unable to deliver: only for the Jews this tendency was to prove especially damaging. Under Nicholas I assimilation was viewed not as an ultimate goal to be achieved, but as an immediate bureaucratic criterion, to be manipulated in 'carrot and stick' fashion. Conversion to Orthodoxy became a pre-condition for Jews' enjoyment of the normal rights of Russian subjects; for the vast majority who remained loyal to their ancestral faith discrimination intensified. In 1827 the exemption from military service was abolished. This did not merely mean that Jews henceforth bore the same obligations as Russians: many Jewish boys were picked out at the age of twelve for compulsory military training, after which they remained in the army for the customary twenty-five years.

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the Jews suffered from their anomalous position within the empire, from popular prejudice and from the government's inability to match aspirations with practical measures. There was as yet, however, no concerted ethnic or racial doctrine directed against them: that was to be a product of a more nationally conscious era, when publicists wanted to explain away the continuing rift between Russian people and Russian empire.

THE BALTIC At the opposite extremity from the Poles and the Jews were the German landed nobles of the Baltic provinces which Peter I conquered from the Swedes in the early eighteenth century. They entered the Tsar's service with conviction and remained perhaps of all ethnic groups the most loyal to him right up to the end of the empire, even in the period when national identity became the cardinal question in European politics.

There were good reasons for this. Of all the empire's elites, the Baltic German barons were alone in having nobody with whom they might potentially form a nation. On the lands they owned the peasants were Estonian and Latvian-speaking, fairly labile as regards ethnic identity, but certainly not identifying with Germany.⁵¹ Furthermore, from the time of their incorporation, the Baltic barons possessed privileges which no other social or ethnic group managed to gain under the autocracy. Peter I confirmed the *Ritterschaften* of Estland and Livland in all the corporate rights and privileges which they had enjoyed under the Swedish crown, but had been in danger of losing: these included the right to run local government in the countryside, preservation of the Lutheran church, of German law and the German court system, and use of the German language for all official business. They were not absorbed into the Russian nobility, but kept their distinct identity and institutions.⁵² Succeeding monarchs confirmed these arrangements: indeed, they later provided some of the principles on which Catherine II reformed the imperial nobility in 1785. (It is true that in carrying out this reform, Catherine also abolished the Baltic nobles' self-governing institutions, but they were restored by Paul a couple of decades later, and not interfered with again till the later nineteenth century.)

Peter took this unusual line with the Baltic barons because he recognized in them the ideal servitors he needed to carry through the kind of reforms he had in mind. They had long experience of corporate self-government on western models. They had easy access to German universities, where public administration in the spirit of cameralism was taught better than anywhere else in the world. Their Lutheran faith, with its emphasis on personal probity and loyalty to the state, was also an asset. In effect, Peter offered them a deal: confirmation of their privileges in return for loyal service to the Russian Empire.

This was a deal which had much to commend it from their viewpoint as well, and not merely in order to preserve their privileges. Young Germans imbued with ideals of good government picked up at Jena or Göttingen found that the petty principalities of their motherland could offer scant scope for their talents. Even relatively large and enlightened Prussia yielded to Russia in the opportunities it afforded for the deployment of their skills. Russia was a huge and backward empire, whose ruler was determined to develop its resources and mobilize its people: there, if anywhere, was the chance of achievement and promotion. The Tsars entrusted them with high positions of command, both in the armed forces and the civil service. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of the 2,867 senior officials mentioned by Erik Amburger in his detailed study of the imperial bureaucracy, 498 (17.4%) were of German origin, and 355 of those from the Baltic provinces alone. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when this German influence reached its height, the figures were even higher.⁵³

Like the English aristocracy of the nineteenth century, the Baltic German nobles combined ancient institutions with a modern understanding of statecraft and usually a ruthless exploitation of the rural population working on their estates. Uniquely among the nobilities of the Russian Empire, they practised entail rather than dividing their estates on the death of the owner. They combined a close interest in agriculture on their domains with an urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle: Riga and Reval, both centres of international trade, ensured contact with Germany and with a wider world and gave them regular intercourse with professional and commercial people, who were often German too, or at least spoke the language.

FINLAND Finland was an unusual success story for Russian imperial policy in the nineteenth century, at least until the final decade. That relative success was due partly to the singular circumstances in which Finland was received into the Empire. A province of Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was conquered by the Russians during the war against Sweden in 1808–9.

The defeat of the Swedish army did not automatically entail the willing acquiescence of the Finnish people: guerrilla armies were formed and became troublesome to the new Russian administration. In an attempt to win over the Finns, Alexander I promised to uphold all the liberties they had enjoyed under the Swedish crown, and he summoned a meeting of the Finnish Diet at Porvoo in March 1809. Under the arrangements worked out then, Finland kept its own laws and institutions, and had its own ruling council, or Senate, quite separate from the Russian government, and reporting personally to the Tsar in his capacity as Grand Duke of Finland. The Grand Duchy was even permitted to have its own small army. This kind of concession went further than the normal Russian imperial practice of respecting local traditions and conciliating local elites: it left Finland with unmistakable home rule.

Alexander's policy was almost completely successful in gaining the Finns' allegiance, and in this way a unique situation arose: the Russian Empire became home to a small European state, with its traditional laws and liberties inherited from the past. It is true that the Tsars did not see fit to convene the Diet for more than half a century, but in other respects they honoured the engagements they had entered into. The Finns reciprocated: in 1830 they remained quiescent, and some of their army units actually took part in the repression of the Polish rebellion. Finns did quite well out of the settlement with Russia: their high-flyers could take service in the Russian army and civil service, while the reverse road was closed to Russians.

More than that, the Finnish national movement, once it began to take hold during the mid-nineteenth century, initially received the support of the Russian government, as a counter-weight to the cultural and linguistic influence of the Swedes, which had hitherto been dominant. As late as the 1880s, one might have pointed to Finland as an example of successful Russian imperial integration.⁵⁴

CENTRAL ASIA Turkestan and the oases of Central Asia were not brought into the Russian Empire till the second half of the nineteenth century. They were conquered partly for traditional reasons of security: to protect the open southern border of steppe and desert. As Foreign Minister Gorchakov argued in a classic defence of Russian imperialism sent to other European powers in 1864: 'The situation of Russia in Central Asia is similar to that of all civilised states which come into contact with half-savage nomadic tribes without a firm social organisation. In such cases, the interests of border security and trade relations always require that the more civilised state have a certain authority over its neighbours, whose wild and unruly customs render them very troublesome. It begins first by curbing raids and pillaging. To put an end to these, it is often compelled to reduce the neighbouring tribes to some degree of close subordination.'⁵⁵

There were also economic motives in play: the need for a secure supply of cotton at a time when the American Civil War threatened supplies from across the Atlantic, and in general the opportunities opened up by Central Asian raw materials and markets. Above all, the Russian need to shore up its European great power status by means of military successes after the humiliation of the Crimean War, and the ambition of local generals ensured that military solutions were sought for problems which might otherwise have been settled by diplomatic means.⁵⁶

More than any other Russian imperial territories, Turkestan resembled right up to 1917 a colony of the normal European type, in that it was an area of economic exploitation, distant from the metropolis and recognized as being quite distinct from it. Its native peoples were classified as *inorodtsy* (aliens) and no attempt was made to Russify them or convert them to Christianity. Their elites, unlike those of the Caucasus, were not incorporated into the Russian nobility, though they were allowed to continue exercising most of their pre-existing powers under a Russian military Governor-General. The Islamic law courts were left undisturbed to exercise their prerogatives, at least in local affairs.

Probably with time, this attitude would have changed, and Russia would have begun the long, patient integration of the territory and its peoples into the imperial structure, as it had done over three centuries with the initially no less distinct Muslim peoples of the Volga basin. But their conquest came too late for this process to be seriously launched before the Tsarist empire itself collapsed.

C. Russia as empire – conclusions⁵⁷

In the light of modern European imperial experience, mostly overseas and commercial, Russia looks decidedly odd. But that oddness largely fades if one examines it in the light of Asiatic or indeed pre-modern European experience, say that of Rome. Like an Asiatic empire, the Russian one created a supra-national elite with a strongly military ethos to integrate and rule the various subordinate peoples in their charge. It operated by gradually incorporating all those peoples more closely in the structure of the empire. Local tribute-gathering was integrated into the imperial fiscal system; tribal leaders were subordinated to the army command or to St Petersburg ministries; imperial law was given precedence over indigenous custom; Russian peasants or Cossacks were encouraged to move in and settle. All this took place without any presumption that ordinary Russians were superior to other peoples of the empire. Rather the reverse: Russians bore all the burdens of serfdom, from which some other peoples were exempted. All peoples, Russians included, were the raw material of empire, to be manipulated or dominated as seemed expedient to its unity and strength.

Let us sum up the main distinctive features of this empire.

1 It was an overland military empire, not only at the stage of conquest and defence of a new territory, but usually in its long-term administrative provisions, especially in areas considered vulnerable to insurrection or to outside incursion, like Poland or the Caucasus. This did not mean that trade was non-existent, but it was certainly not paramount, and it was often closely associated with the military. This gave military leaders the chance of power and profit in the localities where they exercised their command. In this respect, the Russian empire resembled the Roman, though it lacked traditions of citizenship, and the dynasty remained strong enough to prevent any military leader making a bid for supreme authority.

2 The authorities' economic and fiscal policies gave priority to maintaining the armed forces and the administration. They tended to work in such a manner as to impede the mobilization of the economic potential of the empire, its population and resources.

3 The church played a relatively minor role. This is at first sight surprising, since at certain crucial phases the expansion of Russia took on the form of an anti-Islamic crusade, as in Spain. But in Asiatic empires there is no place for an independent church: ideology is part of the state's armoury, and the ruler rules with the 'mandate of heaven'.

4 There was usually no distinction between metropolis and colonies. Annexed territories became full components of the empire as soon as practicable. The stability of the empire was maintained over time by co-opting local elites and integrating them into the Russian nobility and bureaucracy. This co-option had the effect both of making the empire multi-national in principle and of widening the gap between elites and masses of all ethnic groups, including the Russians themselves. On the other hand, relations between the diverse peoples were markedly less racist than in, say, the British Empire. On the mass level, the worst relationships were between nomadic and sedentary peoples, with the sedentary ones steadily gaining ground, and between the Islamic and Christian peoples of the Caucasus.

5 The Russian culture and language were tangible integrating factors for most ethnic groups, but did not succeed, as they did in China, in obliterating and replacing other cultures. Whereas in China high culture was endogenous and worked along with the official ideology in maintaining order and social integration, in Russia

high culture was to a large extent borrowed from outside and became subversive of official values. China was the heartland of Asia, while Russia was on the periphery of Europe, with all the advantages and disadvantages which that position entailed.

6 The empire was permanently open to the surrounding world, to both trade and invasion. Isolationism was not an option: Russia could not become ‘the middle kingdom’ in proud detachment, like China. Foreign and military policy were always crucial. Even when stability and security were attained on the Asian frontiers, they were never complete in the direction of Europe, from where the most dangerous and destructive invasions came, since the European states were technically and culturally on the whole more advanced. That is why the major crises came from there too.

7 At all times the survival of the empire and the maintenance of its territorial integrity were the paramount priorities for Russia’s rulers, before which national, religious, economic and other priorities invariably yielded. The Russian imperial sense of identity was powerful: it rested on pride in the size and diversity of the empire, as well as on military victories. As Karamzin put it in his *History of the Russian State*, ‘If we look at the expanse of this unique state, our minds are stunned: Rome in its greatness never equalled it ... One need not be a Russian, only a thinking individual, to read with admiration accounts of the history of a nation which, through its courage and fortitude, won dominion over one-ninth of the world, opened up countries hitherto unknown, brought them into the universal system of geography and history, and enlightened them in the Divine Faith.’⁵⁸ Thus Russian national identity tended to be subsumed in that of the empire, whose values were in principle multi-national. That worked well enough until the other European powers, Russia’s bitter rivals, started to become nation-states.

PART TWO State-building

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