

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green gradient. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs that appear to be floating or falling from the top left towards the bottom right. These motifs are scattered across the cover, with some near the top and others near the bottom.

RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM

Development and Crisis

Ariel Cohen

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Ariel Cohen

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To Rena

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the most dramatic events of this century. It was also one of the most important ones, not only for our time, but for the century to come. Yet despite the work of a battery of Sovietologists, Kremlin-watchers, and area experts, it was also one of the least expected analyzed developments of modern history.

When this work was first conceived in the spring of 1990, the question that seemed relevant was, "Is the Soviet Union going to collapse?" It was with this query in mind that the next one arose: "What kind of state is the Soviet Union?" Was it an empire, as its multinational character and the domination of non-Russians by the Russians suggested? How had its Bolshevik founders dealt with the fact that after 1917 they had come to rule the old Romanov empire, known as the "prison of peoples?" What could one learn by looking at other multiethnic empires and their development and decline? Finally, what historic linkages between the Soviet state and its Russian imperial predecessor were relevant to predicting the future of the Soviet Union?

While this book was in its early stages, it became clear that the Soviet Union was indeed collapsing. It was now a question of time frame and the extent of collateral damage, not whether the event would take place. However, many in the Sovietological profession "kept the faith" in the ability of the Communist party, the Central Committee, and Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev personally to remain in power, even though their political capital in Moscow and elsewhere in the USSR had been wasted.

Most area specialists spent little time examining available comparative history or political science theories, hardly looked at the historical experience of the Romanov empire, and disregarded the surge toward independence in the union republics of the USSR, including Russia. Instead, the profession continued to debate the question of whether the Soviet Union would disintegrate right up until the failed coup of August 1991. This despite the fact that a close comparison with Ottoman Turkey, Austria-Hungary, and Romanov Russia would have disclosed that the USSR was at the end of its imperial life cycle.

The imperial nature of the former Soviet Union also has great implications today. Conflicts in the former USSR are the result of the collapse of a great empire, of the vanishing of state authority, and of an immense power vacuum in which old and new elites compete for control. Similar to the wars following the disappearance of the British and French colonial empires, the Ottoman Porte, and others, some conflicts in the former Soviet Union are "defrosted" ethnic animosities that were stringently suppressed by the Soviet regime. Others are struggles to control vital resources, such as oil, or strategic ports or coastlines.

Parts of the former Soviet Union, such as the North Caucasus, Transcaucasus, and Central Asia, can be seen as historically gravitating toward the Middle East and South Asia. They are located at the "great rift" between Islam and Christianity, in a friction zone between Europe and Asia. To see them as only parts of Russia, to expect a harmonious succession from the USSR to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), or to anticipate that Moscow will install order in areas of local conflicts is naive at best.

Between 1985 and 1991, the USSR's leadership under Gorbachev embarked upon a broadening social and political reform and rethinking of its foreign and domestic policies. This attempt followed the Brezhnev years, characterized by malaise, corruption, increasingly costly involvement abroad, and ever-growing military spending. However, cutting the bonds of the Stalinist "command-administrative system" generated a failure of political power rarely seen in Russian history.

For an observer of empires, these phenomena indicated not just another case of Soviet reforms going awry, but rather a change of a different nature and proportions—a dissolution of the multiethnic Russian/Soviet empire which had been evolving since the fifteenth century. Only twice before, in the Time of Troubles (*smutnoe vremia*) of the early seventeenth century and in the period from 1917 to 1920, did Russia experience similar political turbulence. Both of these past upheavals were followed by a reconsolidation of central authority after a period of foreign intervention, internal strife, and civil war.

This book will demonstrate that a phenomenon of similar magnitude has occurred. The Russian/Soviet empire has collapsed. It is still too early to predict the geopolitical results of such a planetary political earthquake.

Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union, in less than one year (1989), lost its informal imperial domination of Eastern Europe, as the communist regimes of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Rumania were swept out of power. In addition, for the first time since the creation of the USSR, the republics had an opportunity to secede from the union, and they duly proceeded to avail themselves of it.

This was an extremely rapid disengagement. The Soviet retreat was reminiscent of the collapse of the Ottoman, Romanov, and Habsburg empires in the aftermath of World War I, although the USSR did not suffer a comparable military disaster. Was this a revival of the liberation process that began in 1917 with the collapse of the House of Romanov, only to be forcibly reversed by Lenin and Stalin?

Was the quest for independence of these nations, and especially on the part of their elites, suppressed for awhile, but not eliminated from their national consciousness? Ukraine attempted independence in 1917–1918 and again during World War II. The Balts treasured the memory of their brief independence in the 1920s and 1930s. Even the short period of sovereignty of the Transcaucasian states in 1918–1921 appears to have contributed to the popular will to leave the Soviet Union.

Pre-1991 Sovietology often treated the USSR as a state characterized by unusual ethnic harmony. A number of questions needed to be asked. Did the structure of the regime after the Bolshevik revolution answer to the definitions of empire used in current political science literature? This structure was indeed created by a force emanating from an imperial center. It was built by a bureaucratic and military imperial elite. The system utilized the internal rifts and deprivations of the peripheral nationalities to enhance its own control mechanisms. As was the case with other empire builders, the Soviet leadership worked to further the geopolitical interests of the nascent Soviet state within the limitations of the international system of the time.

If the USSR *was* an empire, as posited here, how can analysis of the "life cycle" of empires (i.e., their development and decline, as these appear in modern political science literature) be applied to the Soviet experience? There were enough characteristics of a decaying empire, such as stagnating elites, falling living standards, and foreign policy fiascos, to suggest that this body politic was in agony. By 1990 there was no longer a consensus among the political elites of the USSR (as there was in 1917) to the effect that Russia must "keep the empire." If the termination of empire was only *one* of the political options being explored by Soviet politicians, scholars, and the informed public, what were the other options? Could the Soviet regime maintain the empire indefinitely? An analysis of previously secret Central Committee and Politburo materials (offered here in Chapter Four) indicates that while such an outcome seemed most desirable in the eyes of the Communist party leaders, it could not be accomplished in reality. An alternative scenario, confederation of some of the Soviet republics, was rendered infeasible by the August 1991 coup and the internal political developments that led to it.

The purpose of this book, therefore, will be to analyze the development of the Russian/Soviet empire and its decline during Gorbachev's regime, from both political science and comparative history perspectives. Eastern Europe will be outside the scope of this work.

In Chapter One an outline of the major theoretical frameworks for understanding imperial development and decline will be presented.

Chapters Two and Three will examine how Russia and the USSR developed as a classic, contiguous, multiethnic empire which underwent several stages (Muscovy, the Westernized empire of Peter the Great and his heirs, and Stalinist/post-Stalinist) before entering its systemic crisis under Gorbachev.

Chapter Four will concentrate on Gorbachev's Soviet Union as an empire

in decay and will address the inability of the *nomenklatura* to deal effectively with the collapse of the state system. It will also examine the attitudes toward the question of empire among various segments of the Russian and non-Russian elites and the general population.

The conclusion will synthesize the approaches elaborated in Chapter One and will discuss their application to the Russian and Soviet cases. It will also focus on the centrifugal processes that led to the disintegration of the USSR as a multinational empire.

This book is intended for both area specialists and the interested general reader. Chapters Two and Three provide an overview of Russian and Soviet history that analysts of Russia and of the Newly Independent States (NIS) are no doubt largely familiar with, but which will be of greatest benefit to the student or lay reader. For area experts, Chapters One, Four, and Five will be most interesting.

The end of 1991 was a time of great hope. It seemed that the only rational alternative open to the USSR's leaders was the creation of several nation-states in its stead. Such a solution would have meant, for the first time in Russian history since the fifteenth century, the abandonment of attempts to become a "universal empire" or a "dominant state"—one that, in various ideological guises, incessantly strives for imperial control of a known political universe. Independence had been proclaimed by all members of the union. Thus, a new page in East-Central European, Central Asian, and world history appeared to have been opening, a page that would include the participation of Russia in a multipolar, more democratic, and hopefully more cooperative international political system. Unfortunately, post-1991 developments in Russia and the NIS have raised the specters of reemerging Russian imperialism and aggressive nationalism, which would bring with them immeasurable suffering for the peoples of Russia and the former empire.

It is hoped that an increased understanding of the historical and political processes addressed in this book on the part of Eurasian and Western policy makers will contribute to peace, stability, and prosperity in Russia, Ukraine and the former Soviet empire.

RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM

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Definitions, Theories, and Methodology

DEFINITIONS

The word "empire" stems from the Latin *imperium* which means "command." This was the meaning of the word before it came to define the realm commanded.¹ Empire can be understood to be an age-old form of government between the subjects and the objects of political power, involving two or more national entities and territorial units in an unequal political relationship.

John Starchey defined empire as "any successful attempt to conquer and subjugate a people with the intention of ruling them for an indefinite period" with the accompanying purpose of exploitation.² Michael W. Doyle maintains that empires are "relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies."³ According to Maxime Rodinson, empires are "state units within which one ethnic group dominates others."⁴

B.J. Cohen writes that the word "imperialism," a highly emotionally charged term, first appeared in nineteenth century France to denote the ideas of partisans of the one-time Napoleonic empire, and later became a pejorative for the grandiose pretensions of Napoleon III. In the 1870s the word "imperialistic" was used in Britain by supporters and opponents of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli to denote the policy of British imperial expansion.⁵

It is ironic that in most cases neither the Soviet effort to sustain the Romanov realm nor the American expansion westward during the nineteenth century were labeled "imperialistic" but were rather seen as "nation-building."⁶ Imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century denoted mostly the colonialism of maritime powers, from the Spanish and the Portuguese, to the British, the French and other Europeans, to the Japanese and Americans.⁷

While the definition of imperialism was hotly contested, there appears to be a consensus in most current political science, political economy, and comparative history literature that empires include more than formally annexed lands but do not necessarily encompass all forms of international inequality, despite the contrary views of surviving Marxist-Leninists and neo-Marxists.

METROCENTRIC APPROACHES

The first critics of imperialism came from two camps: the radical-liberals (John A. Hobson) and the Marxists (Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, and primarily Vladimir Ilyich Lenin). Such authors as Christopher R.W. Nevins, Henry N. Brailsford, and later John Starchey, Harold Laski, and Victor G. Kiernan, writing in the Marxist or socialist tradition, managed not only to dominate the debate but to define its basically anti-Western, anticapitalist terms. The main thrust of this critique concentrated on issues of financial penetration, domination of markets and sources of raw materials, and securing investment outlets.

Austrian political economist Joseph Schumpeter attacked imperialism from a different angle, criticizing the expansionist inclinations of military elites. For Hobson and Lenin, as well as for Schumpeter, empire *is* imperialism. It is a product of internal, metropolitan drives to external expansion. It is a *metropolitan disposition* toward satisfying the lust for profit of financiers (Hobson), the necessities of growth of monopoly capital (Lenin), or the objectless drive of militaristic elites (Schumpeter). Approaches that stem from these three schools rely heavily on an observation of metropolis (as opposed to periphery), arguing that imperialism is necessary to sustain industrialization or to solve the problem of domestic instability.⁸

Hobson was the first to treat imperialism as the disposition of metropolitan society to extend its rule. He was also the first to connect imperialism and capitalism, disregarding all available evidence that empires have existed based on slave and feudal social organization, and that presumably there could be empires under societal formations other than capitalism. Hobson portrayed British imperialism as the result of forces emanating from metropolitan Britain. Special interests, led by financiers, encouraged an expansionist foreign policy designed to promote the needs of capitalist investors for investment outlets. These interests succeeded in manipulating the metropolitan politics of parliamentary Britain through their influence over the press and educational institutions.⁹

Lenin, as well as Schumpeter, offered dispositional, metrocentric approaches to imperialism, although both differed from Hobson in a number of respects. Lenin defined modern imperialism as the monopoly stage of capitalism which, he argued, "converted this work of construction into an instrument for oppressing *a thousand million people* [in the colonies and semi-colonies], that is, more than half the population of the globe, which inhabits the subject countries, as well as the wage slaves of capitalism in the lands of civilization."¹⁰

Lenin's "territorial division of the world" broadened Hobson's concept of formal territorial annexation to include the exercise of controlling influence by economic means—one of the modes of so-called informal imperialism. For Lenin, imperialism was not only the product of high finance, it was capitalism in its final, monopolistic stage driven to search for overseas profits, raw materials, and markets. According to Lenin, the connection between capitalism and imperialism was neither marginal nor mistaken. It was vital to capitalism as

a whole, and not amenable, as Hobson thought, to democratic reform. For Lenin, the concept of the export of capital was central to his theoretical construct.

In the international sphere, Lenin assumed that alliance building by the capitalist countries for the purpose of protecting their spheres of interest is motivated by financial considerations. The relative power of states in alliance change; the alliances are nothing but a truce in periods between wars.

Lenin ends with a total condemnation of capitalist imperialism, arguing that it is beyond repair. To the numerous "old" motives of colonial policy, finance capital has added the struggle for the sources of raw materials, for export of capital, for "spheres of influence," i.e., "spheres for profitable deals, concessions, monopolist profits and so on."¹¹

One could argue that Lenin's polemic was directed against Kautsky and the Austrian social democrats rather than against the imperial powers of the time. History has proven the ability of capitalism (and social democracy) to reform itself and to improve the living standards of the working class. It has also proven the skills of Western governments in handling decolonization. Thus, Lenin's critique, especially in view of Western investment failures in the Third World in the 1960s and 1970s (Nigeria, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, etc.) and the reliance of developed countries on trade primarily between themselves, was rendered obsolete by the actual course of events.

Schumpeter, in striking opposition to Lenin, stated that pure capitalism and imperialism not only were unrelated, but were antithetical to each other. He defined imperialism as the objectless disposition of a state to unlimited forcible expansion (formal imperialism or territorial conquest). This phenomenon originated in atavistic, militaristic institutions, such as the "war machine" of ancient Egypt. Modern capitalism's only link to these aggressive forces of imperialism lay in the historical residue of the corruption of true capitalism by the war machines of the absolutist monarchies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. When warped by the tariffs that mercantilistic considerations imposed on free market capitalism, it became "export monopolism"—an economic system such as that of turn-of-the-century Germany, which produced incentives for military conquest to expand closed national markets.¹²

Schumpeterian influence can be discerned in the writings of E.M. Winslow which, unlike those of the Marxists, distinguished between earlier liberal, philosophically radical, laissez-faire capitalism, pacifistic and anti-imperialist in nature, and latter-day militaristic imperialism.¹³ Winslow concludes that war cannot be blamed on the existence of economic power.

The Schumpeterian, Marxist-Leninist, and Hobsonian approaches influenced numerous liberal and socialist writers who analyzed imperialism from the (metrocentric) perspective of national pride and honor, including the "aggressive altruism" of the "white man's burden," and the control of vital strategic areas, markets, and sources of raw materials.

Some contend that even after decolonization the basis of relations between former colonial powers and what became known as the Third World did not