

Before Russia was the Great Big Bear: Reflections on the Russian Empire in the Early Modern World Prof. Erika Monahan, UNM.

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Summarized by Timothy Doran

Abstract:

This talk proposes to schematize Russian imperialism in the early modern period, employing a chronological and regional approach. In an attempt to deepen and balance prevalent modern perspectives in which the Russian/Soviet empire is often characterized by inveterate aggression and bellicosity, this talk emphasizes the complex contexts in which Russia operated, its vulnerability, and various methods and tools of imperial rule in the early modern period (16 – 18th cc). Further, it emphasizes that during the early modern period Russia is most usefully considered in its Eurasian context, rather than in terms of an East-West axis.

In 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte turned himself upon Europe. He met his match only in Russia where he was ultimately defeated. Of his 410,000 soldiers who went into Russia, only 40,000 returned. The Battle of Waterloo is not what did Napoleon in, but the invasion of Russia. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815 Russia was permitted to keep Finland and most of the Duchy of Warsaw, but Alexander I was still disappointed since it was his Russia that had saved Europe from Napoleon. Europe was afraid of Russia. Many powers were at the table including a delegation from the Iroquois Nation. Russia's 700,000 soldiers and potential ambitions scared everyone else. In the nineteenth century we see many portrayals of Russia as the "great big bear."

In the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825 – 1855), identity, subjecthood (not citizenship yet) and religion became significant intellectual currents. Although democracy was a dirty word in his vocabulary, some of the soldiers who had gone West and marched to Paris during the Napoleonic Wars had become entranced with democracy. Nicholas quelled democratic ideas. Sergei Uvarov coined "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality" as an official catchphrase. To be loyal to the Czar and defer to him; to be Orthodox; these were what it was to be a subject. The last part, Nationality, was a bit more problematic, because it turned out, despite the state mantra, much of the empire was not actually Russian.

"The Great Game" is one example of Russian grandiose ambitions. Granted, these characterizations were often generated by Russia's rival in the "great game," the British. The Great Game is the name used to describe the push for territory in central Asia in the nineteenth century up to almost the First World War. It is also the name of a bad history book by Peter Hopkirk full of swaggering courageous Brits disguising themselves as Afghans and fooling the Afghans. The "great game" was a very imperialist episode. Although Russia was regarded as a great aggressive bear, England was no less aggressive. There is a steady stream of evidence that Russia was feared. The *New York Daily Times* of 1852 describes Alexander I thusly: "his prodigious qualities are fixed on evil objects." There is also a Muscovite Vulture, not only a bear. When in 1983 Sting published his song asking "Do the Russians Love Their Children Too," this was a sea-change, as the Russians had been portrayed during the Cold War as a fearful, bellicose folk.

In the post-Soviet moment, a bumbling image has overlaid the bellicose one. This is particularly well-illustrated in the recent spy scandal. In the 1960s the Russians were considered a great threat; but now, if we look up “Russian Army” we see that they are underfunded, must pick mushrooms to feed themselves, and are contracting cholera.

Nonetheless, that image of an inveterately aggressive Russia—as a power that always has been and always will be craving or plotting expansion --- persists. The duration of today’s talk focuses on the centuries before the Napoleonic wars, the early modern period, 16-18 cc. In these centuries Russia did not yet have and in many ways did not merit, the reputation of bellicose, inveterate aggressor.

Russia was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional entity essentially from its origins, and lasted a long time. If we condense the insights of post-soviet scholarship this is what it comes to. In the early modern period, one can find many aggressive instances, e.g. 1718 Peter the Great sending someone to the Khanate of Kiev, and in the 1730s there was an ill-conceived war against Ottoman Empire. Peter I ruling from 1689 was the first Czar to call himself *Imperator*, a Latin word in a Western language, a conscious move toward the West. He wanted to be part of it. He would have been baffled by the torment that C19 thinkers had about whether Russia was Western or not.

The duration of this talk sets out to schematize the evolution of the Russian empire from the 16-18th cc. The point of this simplified schematization is to try to develop a sense of the historical context and the challenges that Russia faced. The hope is that listeners take from this talk a sense that that image of Russia as inveterate aggressor hardly applies to the early modern period. Instead, the duration of the talk will emphasize through three centuries three things: *the complexities of Russia’s situation; Russia’s vulnerability; and even cases of Russia backpedaling* (in the 17th c. they gave back the port city of Azov, they ceded territory to China in the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 because it was a higher priority to have commercial relations, and in the 18th c. Russia ceded territory in the Caspian region; then, of course, was the sale of Alaska in the 19th c.)

In the process of showing all this, another major point should emerge. That is, that show that the very prevalent tendency to think of Russia in terms of East or West, to ask the question of whether Russia was part of the East or West, doesn’t appropriately capture the early modern dynamic in which Russia operated. In the early modern period Russia was a power very much embedded in a Eurasian context.

To put this discussion of early modern Russian imperialism in a chronological framework, albeit a simplified one, goes as such:

- In the 16th c. Russia was a cagey, vulnerable, HR (human-resources)-oriented empire. Manpower shortages informed most decisions and moves by the government.
- In the 17th c. Muscovy was ascendant, yet cautiously realistic
- In the 18th c., Russia had an identity crisis: it self-consciously embraced “Western” ideologies of empire. It became more territorial and racialized, or, to be fair and put it in terms that Russians used, to embrace a “civilizing mission.”

In addition to thinking about Russian imperialism by slicing it into chronological segments, it can also be helpful to think of the various regions into which Russia expanded. Each of these places varied geographically, demographically, culturally, and historically. Thus presenting different circumstances and challenges with which Russia contended. The five regions considered here are: Siberia, the Western borderlands, the Southern Steppe, the Caucasus, and Alaska. Siberia and the southern steppe are given more attention than the other regions, but these other places are useful to have on one's radar screen when thinking generally about the Russian empire.

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In the sixteenth century **Ivan IV (“the terrible”) 1533 – 1584** took the Khanate of Kazan in 1552 and then Astrakhan. At this point it is perhaps fair to call Russia an empire as they now ruled over a Muslim “other.” (In the 15th century Russia was using imperial strategies with its Slavic neighbor princedoms, also, but since they were ethnically similar and shared dynastic routes, this is generally not considered the imperial period.)

So, one metric by which it is said that Muscovy was now an empire is that it now claimed sovereign over a completely “other” population, the Muslim Kazan khanate. However, at this point, Muslims were not simply a subordinate, lesser “other.” In fact, some were incorporated into the highest ranks of the Muscovite elite. Ivan IV's second wife was the princess of a Muslim prince from the Caucasus Mountains. Ivan was trying to make contacts there. The Georgians had appealed to Muscovy against Ottoman incursions. Maria Chernikova, Ivan IV's second wife, was hardly the only Islamic figure co-opted into the Russian elite. We've all heard the story of Rasputin. One of his murderers was Felix Yusupov, descended from a long line of Mongol khans who had become part of the Muscovite elite, the Russian nobility.

Yet, Russia, or Muscovy, as it was then called in the 16th c., was still exceedingly vulnerable. In the sixteenth century Russia made advances, but it had to be pretty cagey while flexing its muscles.

At the same time as Ivan IV began expanding territories and conquering Muslim populations, it faced many military threats on other borders. It faced enemies from Sweden in the North, the Polish-Lithuanians to the West, and the various steppe nomad tribes from the steppe along its southern borders. In 1571 Moscow itself was devastated by Tatar raiding from the south.

Second, the British pushed to corner Muscovy into a subordinate position in the development of commercial relations. In the 1550s the English set up the Muscovy Company, a trading company which became a major model of imperialism for the British. Monahan summarizes its credo as, “we will offer these terms of trading, and if the Muscovites don't like that, we'll just wipe them out.” Finally, by the end of the 16th c., Muscovy essentially fell apart in the face of all its challenges. 1598-1613 is known as the Russian “Time of Troubles” characterized by famines, uprisings, and dislocations of populations.

In the 17th c. Muscovy was ascendant, yet cautiously realistic. HR issues continued to be a major concern.

In the seventeenth century, Russia took Siberia, and by 1649 it hit the Pacific. In the mid-nineteenth century Russia hit the pinnacle of its territorial magnitude, but this march across Eurasia is the most dramatic single territorial gain. As in the 16th c., manpower at this point was more important than territory.

Its method of empire building in Siberia was largely militaristic; it deployed military detachments. Of course, those military detachments may have spent more of their time building forts, roads, etc. and even feeding themselves than actually engaged in combat. More than caring about gaining territory, Russia was most concerned with gaining people who would pay it fur tribute. And it, via military, administrative officials, and private traders, accomplished this through various means: outright coercion, such as the practice of taking native hostages as collateral; and through the guise of trade or gift-giving.

Despite the impressive territorial gains looking at the map, the hold was tenuous. Some historians liken Russia's hold in Siberia to Swiss cheese. Beyond the forts and roads they held, they didn't have much power. One way this is illustrated that many Siberian natives actually paid tribute in fur to both Russia and the Dzhungars or another nomadic group. Russia recognized that its hold was tenuous: it did not push conversion to Orthodoxy. In fact, on one diplomatic mission, Moscow officials even forbade a Lamaist interpreter who wanted to convert to Orthodoxy from doing so for fear it would derail the diplomatic waves. Keep in mind what a contrast this was to the 19th c. mantra of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality."

The greatest illustration of Russia's "cautiously realistic" stance can be seen along its southern borders in the region now known as Ukraine. During the 17th c. Russia avoids war with the Ottoman Empire, which wasn't always easy. Russia does fight extensively, however, with the Crimean Tatars, which moves more in the direction of becoming a client state of the Ottomans during this century.

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While in the seventeenth century Russia was now an ascendant power, in the eighteenth Russia had an identity crisis. Peter the Great is known as Russia's first and greatest Westernizer. He forced Westernization on Russia. It entirely assimilated, in its official ideology, Western ideas about what it was to be an empire. Its ideology became more racialized as well, although its contemporaries would have called this something like "embracing a civilizing mission about helping its 'others' in its empire."

The strategies in enhancing Russia's western borderlands consisted of wars, accommodation, and the cooptation of elites. For Poland, the partitions of Poland in three stages on the watch of Catherine the Great required diplomatic means of accomplishing empire. Incorporating elite Baltic Germans and such folk was always given under the name of privileges, not rights: for people had privileges in the Russian Empire, not rights.

The Siberian example is more straightforward. Russia did not meet the same degree of resistance there that it did in the rest of its empire. Siberia is quite empty and this made it an easier place to ‘color the map’ but violence was necessary, particularly in Kamchatka.

Religious orthodoxy was not stipulated for the ethnic groups or nations that Russia conquered. In seventeenth century Siberia, being an orthodox Russian was by no means a part of being part of the Empire. Muslims had worked for five generations within the Empire and were not required to convert. Several diaspora communities living in Siberia. The Volga River, considered part of heartland Russia, was Islamicized before it converted to Christianity.

Military challenges to Russia came more from nomads of the South such as descendants of the former khan Kuchum and the Oriats, a splinter group of Mongol stock, more than from northern stationary folks. To the south, Muscovites had faced challenges from nomadic groups for centuries. It was only in the 18th c. that Russia was able to truly emerge as the victor in that long contested territory. It became successful by settling people there. Catherine the Great settled her people there, and this strategy was successful. Settling people proved a very effective imperial strategy. Of course, this doesn’t happen without military. People needed to be protected by soldiers in order to move into the territory. The method was successful. It is beyond the 18th c. that the Volga river basin began to be thought of as part of the Russian heartland. It had been Islamicized in the 9/10th cc. and had for so long been known as the Wild Field.

In contrast, Russia ended up not being able to keep Alaska, in a century when territory was very important to it, because it could not effectively get people there. This example, too, shows the persistence of human resource shortages, in Russian history. Alaska was part of Russia’s empire acquired in the 18th c. In Alaska Russia used very different imperial strategies. First, beginning in 1799 Russia administered Alaska through Russia’s only trading company, the Russian Alaska Company. Russia had no other trading companies. Second, in Alaska we do not see the cooptation of elites that we see elsewhere in the Russian Empire.

Though not covered in detail here, Ukraine and the Caucasus Mountains regions are tremendously diverse and complex borderlands regions whose historical contexts continue to be important in their contested contemporary relationships with Russia.

Conclusion

Empires acquire and maintain territory through various means, including the propagation of through war, coercion, the cooptation of elites, assimilation of cultural norms, the propagation of ideology, and through dynastic politics. Russia used all of these methods in the early modern period. When and how Russia acquired and administered various of its regions is a story of complex geopolitical contexts, and Russia’s imperial aspirations changed over the centuries. Russia’s complex geopolitical situations—for much of its history “East-West” was not the major orientation; for much of its history it was quite vulnerable, and not nearly as interventionist with its own populations or as bellicose with foreign polities, as it aspired to be in the late imperial period.