TITLE: THE PERSISTING AMBIGUITY OF EMPIRE: STATE- AND EMPIRE-BUILDING IN POST-SOVIET POLITICS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Accusations of the persistence of Russian empires have remained in spite of the extinction of empires elsewhere in the world, the repeated collapse of these projects in the past, and the echoing vows and claims of Russia's twentieth-century rulers that they have expurgated their imperial legacy. This essay rejects standard political culture explanations of the persistence of empire and focuses instead on "empire" and "state" as constructs which animate behavior and express one's relationship to the polity, rather than being reified objects, as most discussions of empire-building and state-building treat them. Empire and state are shown to be inherently ambiguous notions, the most important dimension of any imperial situation being perception: whether politics and policies are accepted as "ours," or rejected as "theirs." The essay grounds the ambiguity between states and empires in the origins of the modern state system, the contradictions inherent in the notion of national self-determination, and the porousness and incompleteness of state boundaries—all of which have helped to foster perceptions of empire, a longing for empire, and a discourse of empire well beyond the dissolution of the "great empires."

The essay then attempts to trace historically how and why notions of "state" and "empire" have proven so difficult to disentangle within the Russian context, profoundly conditioning the collapse of the Russian empire, the demise of the USSR, and the context in which post-Soviet politics are now being played out. It finds these grounded in the conditions of Tsarist and Soviet state-building, the embedded expectations that these experiences generated, the failure of non-Russian state-building, and the dialectic of interaction between Russian and non-Russian in the wake of the polity's collapse.

The essay then moves on to examine the ambiguities of state- and empire-building in the post-Soviet context. In the course of three years Russia's official policy towards its neighbors evolved from isolation to engagement to reintegration, at the same time that Russia discovered a new language of self-determination in reference to its compatriot communities in the "near-abroad." Self-determination for those viewed in their localities as former colonials, and state-building over the expanse of a former empire, exemplify the ambiguities of state- and empire-building on post-Soviet politics. These ambiguities extend to the very definition of "homeland," and of Russia's referent diaspora in the "near-abroad." It is shown that there is a range of myths by which Russian-oriented communities in the "near-abroad" construe their relationship with Moscow, as well as markedly different patterns of political behavior exhibited by various diaspora communities. The politics of diaspora communities is shown to be shaped by a
combination of local political circumstances and the characteristics of specific communities. The double meanings that lurk beneath the surface of our modern notions of self-determination are illustrated through Russia’s policy of attempting to foster “dual citizenship” in the “near-abroad.” Finally, the dialectical interaction between non-Russian nationalisms and Russian nationalism is shown, with each side interpreting the actions of the others through the prism of its own habitus. It is also shown how the failure of non-Russian state-building creates conditions for the extension of Russian influence, casting yet another layer of ambiguity over the distinction between state and empire in the post-Soviet era.
Until recently, it was widely accepted that empires were an extinct political breed. They were supposed to have suffered a fatal blow with the collapse of the European order at the end of the First World War, and to have finally vanished in the wake of the decolonizations following the Second. As Rupert Emerson observed, "the Second World War made self-determination a living principle for the non-European world;" empires, Emerson concluded in the 1960s, had "fallen on evil days and nations have risen to take their place."

Yet, in the region of the world once encompassed by the Tsarist empire, the ghost of empire has proven much more difficult to exorcise. The Tsars' successors, the Bolsheviks, came to power in 1917 with the avowed purpose of extinguishing all empires, including the Russian Empire. Ironically, the state which they built, the Soviet Union, collapsed in 1991 in a litany of empire-imagery. Indeed, the generally accepted image of the Soviet Union is now that propounded by Walter Kolarz in the 1950s--i.e, that communism was nothing more than a tool for "enabling Russia to resist successfully that liquidation of colonialism carried out elsewhere in the world."

Even more ironic is the widespread perception throughout the region that, in spite of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the empire lives on. In an address to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies after the failure of the August 1991 coup, Russian President Boris Yeltsin asserted that "the Russian state, having chosen democracy and freedom, will never be an empire, nor an older or younger brother; it will be an equal among equals." Yet, today it is far from clear that a new Russian empire is not reemerging. In April 1994 the Russian government newspaper Rossiiskie vesti was forced to admit that "talk of Russia's 'neoimperial ambitions' is becoming increasingly widespread." Only two months earlier the Estonian parliament unanimously passed a resolution condemning what it called "the deepening imperialistic tendencies in Russian foreign policy." There are, of course, the open empire-builders in Russian politics who explicitly proclaim their desire for Russian soldiers to wash their feet in the Indian Ocean. But most accusations of imperial revival have been aimed instead at the Yeltsin government itself, not its opposition. Even the pro-Yeltsin Clinton administration, reeling from criticisms of its "Russia-first" and "Yeltsin-only" policies, sought fit to distance itself from its once unassailable ally. In short, one of the key facts about empires in this part of the world seems to be the need to keep killing them.

In the minds of
many Western observers and non-Russians in the region, the so-called “last empire” was not the last.

By contrast, neither the Bolsheviks nor their post-Soviet successors have viewed their own actions as imperial, but rather as part of larger state-building and nation-building projects. In responding to charges of imperial revival, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev has remarked: “Millions of our brethren, neighbors if you please, do not view and have never viewed Russia as an imperial center.” Russians in the “near-abroad” do not see themselves as occupiers, but as displaced persons, as the flotsam left behind by the wreckage of their former homeland, the USSR.

How does one explain this phoenix-like quality of Russian empires, in spite of the extinction of empires elsewhere in the world, the repeated collapse of these projects in the past, and the echoing vows and claims of Russia’s twentieth-century rulers that they have expurgated the imperial legacy? And how does one explain the gulf between the self-perceptions of Russians and the perceptions of Russian actions by others? History has indeed played a cruel joke on the Russians, fating them twice in one century to witness imperial collapse, and yet to be still subject to the same accusations of empire-building. Still crueler have been the fates of the non-Russians, who twice in one century came to be ruled by Russians, and are forever haunted by the specter of yet another empire rising from the ashes.

Schumpeterian or neo-Marxist explanations for these puzzles would seek an answer in a set of social interests or social structures that reproduce Russian imperial policies and practices over time. Realist explanations, by contrast, would focus on the continued weakness of states on the periphery of Russia, arguing that opportunity breeds motivation. Both would explain Russian self-representations as ideologies in the Marxist/Mannheimian sense—i.e., ideas meant to deceive and to obscure the interests which underlie them or to glue together broader coalitions of interests for the purpose of domination. In addition, many observers have been quick to assert a third, more metaphysical, answer to explain the persistence of Russian empires: Russian political culture. According to such arguments, imperial expansion is essential to the Russian character as it has developed over the course of modern history. This is certainly the explanation that enjoys the most currency throughout the region. In May 1994, after Latvia’s compromise with Russia over the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country, the Baltic press referred to Russia as “a country with an innate imperialist character.” This is a widely shared image of Russians, both among experts and citizens alike, the implication being that Russians are forever doomed by their very temperament to expansionist strivings, and the only rational solution is a policy of containment, a cordon sanitaire from the Baltic to the Black Sea (an implication, indeed, of all of these explanations).
Explanations based on culture, opportunity, or interests, even if they contain elements of truth, seem lacking in several critical respects. First, explanations based on culture or interests, aside from difficult problems of substantiation, provide no understanding of how and why these might have been reproduced over time. Before the “age of empires” came to a close, nearly all of Europe had been engulfed by imperial fever, and Russians can hardly be said to have loved their empire more than the British, Turks, or Germans. Even if one could show that a specific Russian mass mentality or enduring constellation of interest were responsible for the persistence of a Russian urge to dominate, this still begs the question of what has sustained them so long, through two imperial collapses, whereas in most other instances imperial thinking gradually diminished in scope, eventually becoming marginal to the political process. Second, opportunity has not necessarily bred motivation elsewhere in the world; the inexorable trend worldwide has been in the opposite direction—towards the dismantlement of empires and the growing recognition of norms of state sovereignty. These approaches to the problem also ignore the fact that empires are no longer what they used to be. Unlike a century ago, no politics in the late twentieth century would openly proclaim themselves as imperial. By the mid-twentieth century, nearly all nineteenth-century imperial projects had been formally dismantled or sought to transform themselves into state-building or transnational communities. Third, unlike what a Mannheimian understandings of ideology would predict, Russian self-representations as being engaged in state-building rather than empire-building appear to be widely shared across the political spectrum and throughout Russian society.

Finally, these approaches neglect what Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone long ago identified as the “dialectical process of challenge and response” between Russian and non-Russian nationalisms. Nationalism does not exist in a political vacuum, but is defined to a large extent in interaction with others. We know from the experience of collapsed European empires that charges of imperial revival tend to persist for a considerable time after independence. The mistrust upon which the dissolution of empires is based does not end with collapse. For peoples engaged in a struggle for nation-building and state-building in the aftermath of colonial domination, former colonial powers can be viewed as the most serious threat to state sovereignty, as well as a major source of national identification and national mobilization. In many cases, heightened mass mobilization over the issue of decolonization precedes independence, shaping the entire character of the party system and social movement sector long into the post-colonial period. In this context, the Mannheimian understanding of the intersection of ideology and interest cuts both ways: even if the imperial practices of the past were to cease entirely, nationalizing elites within former colonies would probably find it in their interests to construe the actions of the former metropole as threatening, if only to justify group solidarity.
and policies aimed at consolidating state sovereignty. The problems of post-colonial societies
are intimately connected with the social engineering conducted during the occupation years, and
their resolution is therefore seen as closely associated with the former occupation power, even
if the connection in the post-imperial period may actually be remote. In some parts of the
former Soviet Union, for instance, the Russian language is routinely referred to as “the
language of the occupier,” and a recent article in the Ukrainian press called on the Ukrainian
government to “rid itself of colonial metal,” a phenomenon brought on by the fact that “the
volume of production of ferrous metals [in Ukraine] is fixed according to the needs of the
former Union.”

The collapse of empires leaves in place many structural legacies of interdependence that
compel the colonized and the colonizer to interact long after colonial demise. But while
structure may dictate that the paths of the formerly colonized and the former colonizer continue
to intersect, it is above all the many layers of historical interaction and the embedded
expectations that this history leaves that provide the context and frame of discourse within
which actors relate to one another. After all, this is not a game that is being played for the first
time. The players have all entered the fray with images in their minds about previous
outcomes, and at least one side has a heightened sensitivity lest the outcome be the same as in
the past. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted, “social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and
in minds;” habitus—a system of embedded dispositions, anticipations, and expectations which
are themselves the product of social practice—structures the ways in which actors construct the
social reality which they confront. Bourdieu describes habitus as a kind of “feel for the
game” produced as a result of experience. In his words, “the ‘feel for the game’ is what gives
the game a subjective sense—a meaning and a raison d’être, but also a direction, an orientation,
an impending outcome, for those who take part and therefore acknowledge what is at
stake.” This essay argues that the persistence of Russian empires must be understood as the
interplay between, on the one hand, practices and policies (most of which are characterized by
a profound ambiguity), and, on the other hand, this kind of “feel for the game,” itself the
product of history, by which actors “read” and anticipate the actions of others in conditions of
uncertainty. It focuses in particular on the interaction between behavior and social constructs
which animate behavior, believing that the ways in which actors represent themselves and
others need to be taken seriously. After all, nationalism is essentially about the assertion of
claims for defining or redefining the physical or human boundaries of the polity, and it is the
inherent ambiguity and indeterminacy of those boundaries that is the central issue at stake in
nationalist politics. The truth or falsity of such claims are difficult to establish. However, the
claims themselves and the discourse that they engender have a remarkable capacity for creating
reality. Certainly, if one is to delve to the core of the issue of the persistence of empire, it is necessary to take self-representations as reflective at least of a subjective reality whose origins and persistence beg explanation.\textsuperscript{15} The persistence of empire is not due to an essentialist assertion of an intrinsic political culture, motivation bred by opportunity, or continuity in social structure and interests. It is politics played out with all its colors and ambiguities. This essay explores the nature of these colors and ambiguities, focusing in particular on the interaction between the imperial legacy inherited by the new Russian state and the politics of nation-building and state-building in post-Soviet polities. At the center of this relationship is an enduring discourse of empire- and state-building that acts as a prism through which actors view themselves and others. To understand the centrality and meaning of this discourse to the post-Soviet case, a brief theoretical and historical digression into the longstanding intercourse between empires and states is required.

The Ambiguous Quality of Empires and States

I have argued elsewhere that empires and states are inherently subjective constructs rather than simply objective entities, and that a key difference between the two lies in the eye of the beholder.\textsuperscript{16} Certainly, the ambiguity between the states and empires is much greater than our self-assured political science admits. Many self-avowed empires eventually evolved into states, while in other cases states that appeared at one time to be relatively successful at national integration have dissolved in the face of anti-imperial mobilizations. Nor are empires and states set apart primarily by exploitation or by the use of force, as the literature on state-building reminds us. The Soviet case demonstrates quite clearly that "empire-consciousness," if we may call it that, is not necessarily a function of the degree to which a group has experienced exploitative or violent policies against it. The most important dimension of any imperial situation is perception: whether politics and policies are accepted as "ours" or rejected as "theirs." This implies both a well-developed sense of separate group identity, as well as a recognition of the illegitimacy of the existing polity's authority. And like all attitudes and behaviors, these can and do vary sociologically, culturally, and temporally. Perceptions of illegitimacy and "foreign" occupation are fostered by specific political practices. But the fit between practice and perception is imperfect, influenced by a whole series of variables that affect the strengths and weaknesses of political and cultural identities. In this sense, particularly in the contemporary world, empire must be understood not as a thing, but as a set of practices that give rise to perceptions and claims that the polity represents a fundamentally alien rule, an "other." Such polities therefore come to evoke the appellation of "empire," even though what
we label as empires in the contemporary context are radically different from polities that bore this designation a century ago.

This is a fundamental error made by many observers of the Soviet scene, who prefer to view empire as an "objective" structure and forget that the use of the term is itself a claim and a stance. With the demise of the Soviet Union, we have witnessed a sudden profusion of empire-imagery. What once was routinely referred to as a state suddenly came to be universally condemned as an empire. The general consensus now appears to be that the Soviet Union was an empire and therefore it broke up. However, it is now routinely referred to as an empire precisely because it did break up.

Before the modern era, the terms "empire" and "state" presented few dilemmas, as the modern state as such did not exist. Traditional empires ruled over relatively demobilized subjects, recognized no clearly demarcated territorial limits to their authority, and attempted to accomplish little else but the collection of tribute to further the wealth and ambitions of rulers. By contrast, the modern state lay claim to citizens, recognized relatively fixed territorial boundaries to its authority, and professed to be infused with the goal of furthering the aims and aspirations of that which we have come to call "the nation."

With the rise of the modern state system, however, empire as a political concept has grown increasingly fuzzy. It is frequently forgotten, for instance, that European empires first gave birth to the modern state, and that the two coexisted in an odd fusion for several hundred years before the empire-states of Europe finally fell prey to their inherent inconsistencies in the twentieth century. Chief among these inconsistencies was the timebomb of nationalism. The notion of popular sovereignty was first systematically expressed in the sixteenth century, as empires became more ambitious and demanded more of their subjects—in terms of taxes, military service, and obedience to authority. The gradual transformation of subjects into citizens called into being the modern nation-state. The notion of citizenship assumed the existence of some collectivity deserving of a state's legitimation—in short, a nation. It was through the exercise of the right of self-determination of peoples that empires have been transcended. Indeed, the very term "empire," which in the nineteenth century constituted an affective tie for those who attended to imperial power, was transformed in the twentieth century into a term of opprobrium and reproof by those who sought the status of nations. By the twentieth century, empire came to represent the antithesis of the norms of the modern state system.

And yet, empires lived on even after the "age of empires" in a world of states, inhabiting the interstices between self-determination and the state system and embodying their inherent contradictions. For one thing, decolonization remained one of the few legitimate means by which the boundaries of states could be changed within the norms of the new state system.
As Crawford Young has written, "The right of self-determination, in current versions of international law, has become restricted to collectivities under colonial, alien, or racial subjugation." In some instances, we have witnessed a "reinvention of empire" (in the sense of a revival of imperial discourse) in significant part as a means for legitimating claims to independent statehood. Ian Lustick has noted the powerful effects that images of state and empire have upon those to whom they are addressed; in his words, "in the modern world, empires are expected to break apart," and secession and decolonization have been turned into categories used by politicians "to label what they do to prevent or achieve changes in the shape of a state."21

Other factors besides international norms have been at work as well. The notion of self-determination always assumed that people knew rather definitely who they were, and that there was no uncertainty about the matter. We know now that cultural identities are inherently contested, embedded, and overlapping, with various elements of identification undergoing politicization and depoliticization over time and identities subject to constant change and evolution. Moreover, self-determination has been predicated not simply upon state power, but upon legitimate state power, perceptions of which vary enormously over time and place. Essentially, if empires have peoples and subjects, states have nations and citizens. These are inherently perceptual and behavioral relationships, not simply legal or census categories. What appears at one moment as "ours" might, in another moment or context, easily be construed as "theirs." And in some contexts, one person's self-determination may be interpreted as another's subjugation. Cultural entrepreneurs play a significant role in defining the contours of "we" and "they."

The notion of self-determination also underestimated the porousness and incompleteness of state boundaries. Not only are the boundaries of states usually not coterminous with the boundaries of identities, but states are inherently incomplete entities, replete with overlapping sovereignties. These transnational linkages are interpreted through particular cultural, historical, and ideological lenses. The structural characteristics of transnationality may condition politics, but they do not in themselves define politics. Rather, transnationality must be deciphered through constructs (e.g., concepts such as imperialism, dependency, interdependence, neo-imperialism, spheres of influence, the interests of "great powers," state-building, etc.) that bring meaning to and animate what are otherwise conditions rather than stances.

Finally, there has always existed a segment of the world's population that has rejected entirely the modern state system and the principle of self-determination and openly embraces empire as a means for achieving dignity in a world of "false" self-determinations. Such movements repudiate self-determination as the basis for claims to state sovereignty and look...
back to an earlier world in which loyalty to an imperial cause predominated over the strivings of nations for self-government.\textsuperscript{22}

All of these situations, rooted in the contradictions of the state system itself, have helped to foster perceptions of empire, a longing for empire, and a discourse of empire well beyond the dissolution of the "great empires." The recognition that states and empires take on life only as practices and constructs rather than as things is significant for heuristic reasons, for it points us away from the metaphysics of the politics of state- and empire-building and toward its epistemology. Indeed, since the emergence of modern state-building within the Tsarist empire, these notions have proven extremely difficult to separate, profoundly conditioning the collapse of the Russian empire, the demise of the USSR, and the context in which post-Soviet politics is now being played out.

The Inherent Ambiguity of Russian Polities and the Formation of Habitus

Bourdieu's notion of habitus provides a neat conceptual tool for linking subjective and objective understandings of state- and empire-building. According to Bourdieu, habitus consists of "a system of dispositions, ... of virtualities, potentialities, eventualities," that is the product of history. As Bourdieu explains, "the slightest 'reaction' of an individual to another is pregnant with the whole history of these persons of their relationship." People tend to "read" their future through a set of expectations and inclinations built up through the past. Habitus, writes Bourdieu, is a "strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations." It "is in cahoots with the fuzzy and the vague,"\textsuperscript{23} in the sense that it fills the gap created by ambiguity and uncertainty.

The characteristic feature of state-building in the Eurasian region over the last two centuries has been precisely its ambiguity and uncertainty. Much like its sister empire-states, the Tsarist Empire from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries represented a confused mix of empire- and state-building. Formed out of the collapse of contiguous empires, the Russian empire doubled its size between 1700 and 1885, acquiring new lands in the Baltic, Poland, Finland, Ukraine, the Transcaucasus, and Central Asia. Indeed, it was during that time that Russia became a self-avowed empire. Like other empires of the time, Tsarist Russia attempted to instill a sense of service to an imperial cause and a loyalty to a dominant culture among those who attended to imperial power, primarily through religious and cultural identification. At the same time, like its European counterparts, Russia increasingly began to take on the institutional characteristics of stateness, building bureaucracies and standing armies, rationalizing revenue-seeking, and, by the nineteenth century, in response to persistent demands from its subjects, initiating the transformation of subjects into citizens.
In this context, nation-building and empire-building were not easily segregated activities. Russia’s policy towards its non-Russian minorities attempted to accomplish both tasks: to retain control over these peoples as subjects of the empire and to gradually create the basis for a Russian (Rossiiskii rather than russkii—i.e., political rather than ethnic) nation. This latter goal was most clearly exhibited in the persistent and forceful efforts by the Tsarist regime from the early nineteenth century on to assimilate non-Russians into Russian cultural and social life and was pursued most ardently in the second half of the nineteenth century through the policy of Russification. Reflecting a curious mix of older notions about imperial loyalty based on religious identity and more modern notions of nations as language communities, the Tsars focused their attention on the religion and language of their subjects rather than on their subjective self-identifications. What the Tsarist regime attempted to do in this regard was not that much different from the process by which French rulers created the French nation or what the English did in Scotland and Ireland—that is, to rationalize imperial control by creating loyal subjects through the transformation of cultural identities. The differences in the case of Russia boiled down to four contextual factors. First, this process in Russia was occurring at a later time than in Western Europe, at a time when stateless peoples throughout Europe were becoming more conscious of themselves as nations and mobilizing on that basis. The late nineteenth century was a radically different international context than the eighteenth. This was a time when nationalism spread rapidly throughout Western Europe, and this international context complicated Tsarist efforts at nation-building. Second, as an overland (rather than overseas) empire, Russia had an extraordinary variety of peoples to assimilate in order to engage successfully in nation-building, and it could not so easily segment its nation-building and colonial policies geographically as could the transoceanic empires. England could extend suffrage internally while conquering vast foreign territories. Because of geography, Russia, by contrast, had a difficult time defining who was a citizen and who was a subject, faced extraordinary difficulties in any effort to segregate the two, and could not delineate what the physical borders of Russia were and what were occupied territories. Third, in Western Europe state-building took place within the international context of the Westphalian system, in which a thick web of norms concerning state sovereignty developed. By contrast, the Russian state developed largely in interaction with a series of decaying overland empires, from whence a patrimonial mentality towards territorial possessions derived. Finally, unlike Western Europe, where a tradition of the limited authority of rulers had developed, Russia was handicapped in its efforts to engage in state-building by its autocratic political system. The principle of the unlimited authority of the ruler made it difficult to craft institutions that could defuse conflict or to divide authority territorially—essential elements of successful state-building.
strategies within other contexts. In short, the conditions for successful nation-building in Russia were much less propitious than was the case in seventeenth- or eighteenth century France or England.

The national self-assertion of Russia’s minorities did not bring down the Tsarist regime. Rather, the Tsarist system collapsed on its own, and nationalist elites, at times with considerable support within their populations and at times with relatively little, cautiously went about declaring national states in the chaos and confusion that ensued. In this situation, the Bolsheviks’ entry onto the stage of politics at first seemed to represent a radical break with the state-building and empire-building projects that motivated their rivals and predecessors. At the level of ideological discourse, Lenin sought neither to restore an empire nor to build a state, but rather to carry out an internationalist revolution that denied both the legitimacy of empires and the utility of states. Within this vision, the Russian Empire was simply a convenient vessel for achieving revolution, but was never meant to confine it. Yet, both the logic of the state system and the legacies of empire exercised profound impacts upon Bolshevik behavior. State forms crept into Marxism-Leninism in the face of the persistent state-seeking behavior of the peoples of the Tsarist empire, as a means for furthering the spread of revolution and preventing non-Russian nationalities from constructing separate states. Throughout the entire reconquest of the non-Russian territories, a myth of self-determination was maintained, even to the point that Lenin could talk in 1920 about ordering the Red Army “to self-determine” Georgia, as if self-determination was something done to rather than by nations. The Leninist view of the party as the embodiment of the will of history was conducive to a continued conflation of state and empire.

Equally critical for understanding the current period was the fact that Russians and non-Russians equally filtered each other’s actions through longstanding behaviors, expectations, and ways of thinking. While military force played a decisive role in settling contests over power, the Bolsheviks gathered critical support in the non-Russian regions from Russian colonists, highly Russified non-Russians participating in the Bolshevik movement, and dissident nationalists who sought a broad-ranging autonomy within a Russian-dominated state rather than full-scale independence. Russians in non-Russian regions played an important role in the process. In the non-Russian west, the strength of the Bolshevik movement was concentrated almost exclusively in cities—among the Russian and Jewish urban populations. The Bolsheviks at various times garnered significant local support from Russian and Armenian workers in the Transcaucasus; from Cossack settlers in the Northern Caucasus; from Russian colonists in the Kazakh and Bashkir steppes, in Crimea, and in Tashkent; and from Russian and Ukrainian settlers in the Pridniestr. These “colonists” feared the consequences that the disintegration of
control by Moscow would hold for them. Many were willing to support any authority that
might prevent a diasporic outcome—even the Bolsheviks. Lenin himself was not immune from a
Russian habitus in interpreting non-Russian claims for independence, as his desire to punish the
ruling classes of the Baltic for seceding from Russia demonstrates.29

By contrast, nationalist movements viewed the events of 1917-1920 through an entirely
different set of lenses. As Ron Suny has recently written about the period, most Russian
political movements:

viewed events as a single, gigantic revolutionary process engulfing the whole of the now-
defunct empire. Nationalists, in contrast, interpreted the struggle as a national war of
Russians against minorities, the center against the peripheries. They viewed the
experiences of the borderlands as unique events that fulfilled and justified the natural
historical evolution to national independence.30

But the conditions for success among non-Russian nationalist movements were poor. Most
relied for support on peasaintries with strong local, religious, clan, and class identities.31 Many
were caught in the crossfire between Russians and invading Germans and Turks, as well as
between Russian Whites and Reds, none of whom displayed great sympathy for aspirations of
national independence. As is the case today, they inherited few pre-existing state institutions or
militaries; the tasks of state-building they faced were daunting. Some were indeed seduced by
Bolshevik state-building rhetoric.

Seventy years later, in many of these same respects, the fundamental political processes
at work had not altered drastically. What did change was the outcome. Images of state and
empire once again became the central element in political discourse, primarily because
throughout Soviet history there remained a fundamental uncertainty over the roles of citizen and
subject. To a large extent this was fostered by totalitarian rule, which cast everyone
simultaneously in the roles of subjects and citizens. But there also remained a widespread
ambiguity over the extent to which the Soviet state was essentially a Russian state. At the
height of their power, Russians were portrayed merely as elder brothers, not as conquerors,
and Russian nationalism was an instrument of rule, not the regime’s guiding principle.32

Soviet authorities engaged in a massive effort to create a social base among non-Russians; they
never viewed their own actions as imperial, but rather saw themselves as engaged in a state-
building project—i.e., creating that sense of shared identity and legitimacy necessary for
underpinning a legitimate state. Indeed, it was the dream of creating a state from an empire that
separated Soviet-type imperialism from that practiced by traditional empires. The Soviet regime
did more than simply occupy territories; it was driven to engage in policies aimed at creating a
social base for itself and, when one did not exist, to demonstrate the supposed existence of such
support through a form of “coerced legitimacy.” Moreover, the attempt to coopt non-Russian
state-seeking behavior became institutionalized and universalized in the form of the Soviet federal system—the quintessential institution of the Soviet empire-state, reflecting its inherent dual persona.

The Soviet regime never extinguished nationalist strivings and was at best able to marginalize them. But the Leninist model allowed the population to avoid the choice between Soviet and national identities, and Soviet rule exercised a very deep cultural and political impact upon identities, as we are only beginning to realize now that the Soviet Union is no more. Indeed, it was the curious situation of embedded identities in the Soviet case that proved so highly plastic and unstable and constituted the critical element in explaining the speed, manner, and circumstance with which the Soviet Union fell apart. In the absence of effective social control, it was not difficult for ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize non-Russian populations on the basis of their opposition to empire, for the Soviet state had always sustained two realities throughout its existence.

The dual reality of the Soviet polity easily flowed over into the politics of the post-Soviet period. By declaring itself the sole legal successor state to the Soviet state, in the minds of new national elites in the post-Soviet republics the Russian state also took on the role of successor empire. This perception was further fostered by the actions of the Russians themselves. Only days after proclaiming that the USSR no longer existed, the government of Boris Yeltsin moved to establish the state emblem of the new Russian state: the two-headed eagle, the symbol of the Tsarist empire, with the proviso, in Gennadii Burbulis’ words, that “the eagle not look very evil.”

I have been arguing that “state” and “empire” are more than mere institutions, but also are mental constructs that order our world and express our relationship to a polity; they represent sets of images, expectations, roles, and behaviors towards structures and not only structures themselves. If, as Benedict Anderson asserts, all communities larger than the village are construed, then so too are non-communities and illegitimate relationships. Once the notion of empire came to symbolize the illegitimacy of the existing state system, it was understandable why imperial discourse might persist beyond the demise of the “great empires.” The very fact that perceptions of empire, a longing for empire, and a discourse of empire remain characteristic features of post-Soviet politics is a sign that the legitimacy of the post-Soviet state system is weak.

We have already explored some of the roots of why it remains weak. Within the Eurasian context, timing, geography, international context, and hypercentralization conspired to accentuate the ambiguity surrounding the proper location of territorial and ethnic boundaries, an ambiguity which was further accentuated by the Leninist model of state-building and the dual
reality that it sustained. If nationalism is essentially about the definition of the physical and human boundaries of the polity, historical experience in this part of the world has led to wholesale confusion and contestation over the definition of those boundaries.

Moreover, competing visions of state-building (Tsarist, Soviet, nationalist) have produced habituses of markedly different orientation. Paul Goble has contended that the central cause of the persistence of empire is the continued disorientation among Russians as to exactly what their relationship should be with the former Soviet republics, a confusion grounded in the history of empire- and state-building in the Tsarist period and exacerbated by the policies of the Soviet period. As Goble has put it, Russia today faces "two existential questions—what is Russian, and who are Russians," due primarily to the fact that "the Russians have never before been forced to define precisely who is a Russian and what the proper limits of Russian territory should be." While Goble’s observations are certainly true, what is missing in them is the obverse side of the issue: the same problems of identity and definition are faced by all of the post-Soviet states and peoples. Like Russians, non-Russians must now define for the first time the proper limits of their territory and who they are. Even the Balts, who, unlike the other new nations of the former Soviet Union, experienced two decades of independent statehood in the twentieth century, have faced great difficulties in defining the boundaries of their political communities and of their states. Nearly all of the post-Soviet states entertain some kind of territorial claim on another state. In addition, the questions of who is and who is not a citizen and in some cases whether particular groups or regions should belong to these communities plague these states no less than the question of who is a Russian, and the issue of their proper relationship with Russia, Russians, and "Russian-speaking" minorities is mired in uncertainty. State-building and empire-building in the post-Soviet context remain highly ambiguous. What perhaps was remarkable was not that this confusion reemerged in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, but rather just was how quickly it set in. As will be evident in some of the examples given below, this was only in part the result of strategic decision-making by elites; the persistence of perceptions of empire, a longing for empire, and a discourse of empire have also been rooted in a dialectic of responses between Russian and non-Russians in a situation of high ambiguity and in broadly shared understandings (or misunderstandings) of the actions of others.

Post-Soviet Russia: The Opacity of Self-Determination and State-building

One of the problems with cultural explanations of the persistence of Russia’s empires is that they ignore the significant variations over time that have occurred in Russian policy and behavior towards non-Russian peoples. In both the Soviet and post-Soviet cases, the views of
Russian policy-makers concerning their relations with their neighbors in the aftermath of imperial collapse have not been a constant. As we saw in the case of the Bolsheviks, these views evolved in the face of a great deal of "learning" and ad hoc response to a radically new environment for Russians. In addition, embedded expectations on the part of Russian and non-Russians and international norms exercised profound effects on the outcome. A similar type of evolution has occurred in the case of post-Soviet Russia as well.

As we now know, over the course of 1992 a significant shift of opinion occurred within Russian government circles concerning Russia's relationship to its new neighbors. As Andranik Migranian, a member of Yeltsin's Presidential Council and one of his chief advisors on foreign policy, has described this critical evolution in thinking:

As a result of miscalculations in assessing the role and place of Russia and the deep-seated nature of relations between Russia and the countries of the near abroad, officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry and other political leaders in the country drew the strategically erroneous conclusion that Russia should turn inward, within the borders of the Russian Federation, get out of all the former USSR republics, [and] not interfere in interethnic and regional conflicts in the former Union . . . , thereby openly and publicly renouncing any special rights and interests in the post-Soviet space outside the Russian Federation . . . However, the events that occurred in Russia and in the republics during 1992 made some serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia's role and place in the post-Soviet space . . . A significant portion of the political establishment . . . began to realize more and more clearly that a special role in the post-Soviet space belonged to Russia. 37

According to Migranian, it was in particular the events in Moldova in 1992, "when ethnic Russians for the first time were pulled into military action," that pushed Russians out of their inward-looking torpor. 38 Fearing territorial dismemberment, the new nationalizing government of Mircea Snegur was unwilling to countenance any limitation of its sovereignty over its territorial patrimony by recognizing the political autonomy (federal, confederal, or otherwise) of the Pridniestr region. It instead attempted to assert its military control over the region by sending a ragtag army against an even more ragtag set of mutineers. After considerable violence and desperate appeals from the "Russian-speaking" community, Yeltsin engaged the overarmed Fourteenth Army into the fray, sending the Moldavians into quick retreat. 39 This coincided as well with the imposition of new citizenship laws in the Baltic which limited the ability of Russians to participate on an equal footing with Estonians and Latvians.

More than any other set of events of the time, the Moldovan conflict and Baltic citizenship restrictions caught the imagination of Russians. Tired of being castigated as "occupiers" and "colonizers," Russians across the political spectrum were quick to point to these issues as cases of persecution of Russian minorities. These issues became a cause célébre
among nationalist politicians; throughout 1992 nationalist demonstrations could hardly conclude without a ritual march on Moldovan and Baltic consulates in Moscow. Accusations of softness on the part of the Yel’tsin administration from the nationalist opposition within the Supreme Soviet prodded Yel’tsin into taking a more decisive stance. The list of tyrannies soon widened. largely in response to the nationalizing policies of the post-Soviet states themselves: the conflict with Ukraine over its efforts to nationalize former Soviet armed forces and to control the Black Sea Fleet and its predominantly Russian officer corps; persistent demands by nationalist forces to “Ukrainianize” Ukraine, home to 11.4 million Russians and an additional 5.6 million non-Russians who claim Russian as their native language (i.e., close to a third of Ukraine’s population); a massive out-migration of Russians from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, particularly from zones of interethnic conflict, leading to major refugee problems inside Russia itself; and a widespread perception that Russia’s current borders were no less artificial than those of the USSR, a view with which it is difficult to take issue.

In short, Russians saw themselves being transformed from citizens into the uncomfortable role of subjects. Indeed, citizenship and voting restrictions in the Baltic came to be likened by Russian officials to “ethnic cleansing,” “apartheid,” and “genocide.” In the words of one Russian diplomat:

our fellow countrymen . . . are discriminated against in exercising their right to labor [and] career promotion. They are in fact prevented from speaking their native language and preserving their culture. Sometimes they are simply pushed out of the country where they live . . . This approach is legalized . . . and passed off for a course of strengthening national statehood.

The extent to which this characterization is true is not the issue; certainly, elements of truth are contained in it. At the same time, given the widespread perception of Russians in many of the post-Soviet republics as “conquerors” rather than as either “citizens” or “subjects,” this new martyrology, while in many cases reflecting reality, in other cases provided Russians with a certain psychological relief from feelings of historical shame or guilt. The important point, however, is not the objectivity of these perceptions per se, nor even their origins, but rather their vitality. In 1992 and 1993 Russians rediscovered the language of nation-building and self-determination, this time in defense of those viewed in the non-Russian post-Soviet republics as “colonials.”

But what added yet another layer of ambiguity to this situation and evoked deep alarm among Russia’s neighbors was how Russia simultaneously began to define its “geopolitical” interests in the region. Already in spring 1992 a debate was raging within government circles over the issue. Significantly enough, this redefinition was accomplished by Russia’s liberal elite
itself and was not due primarily to pressure from nationalist or neo-communist politicians. As Migranian describes what occurred:

There was great significance in the fact that it was not only neo-communists and nationalist-patriots who championed this understanding of Russia's role and place [in the "near-abroad"] . . . , but also people with reputations as responsible and sober analysts and politicians; this, in the final analysis, exercised the decisive influence on the formation of the new foreign policy paradigm towards the near-abroad.44

By 1993, a new consensus had emerged within Russia over its role in the "near-abroad." Russia had moved to define its own "Monroe Doctrine" towards the post-Soviet republics and began to interfere more actively in their domestic affairs, particularly in the Transcaucasus. In May 1993 a contingent of Russian troops at a base in Azerbaidzhan withdrew from the republic and left behind large stores of weapons. These were subsequently taken over by the troops of Suret Huseinov, an Azeri businessman who had established his own private army. As armies usually do not forget their weapons when they withdraw, many analysts believe that the Russian government had ordered the surreptitious arming of Huseinov's troops. Shortly afterwards, Huseinov marched on Baku, overthrowing the pro-Turkish government of Abulfaz Elchibey and installing Geidar Aliev, a former member of the CPSU Politburo, in power. Aliev subsequently pursued a new foreign policy tack that brought Azerbaidzhan into the Commonwealth and aimed at gaining support in Moscow. In Georgia in the summer of 1993, Russian peacekeepers actively aided the advance of Abkhaz troops until the Georgian government agreed to join the Commonwealth. Russia then not only brokered a ceasefire, but helped the Georgian government defeat Gamsakhurdia's insurrection.45

The basic contours of Russia's policy towards the "near-abroad" were already in place well before the December 1993 elections. But the strong showing of nationalists and neo-communists gave rise to a more strident assertion of Russian geopolitical interests throughout the region. In January 1994, in his opening speech to the new Federation Council, Yeltsin stressed Russia's destiny as "a great power" and as "first among equals" among the former Soviet republics.46 By February 1994, Russia announced plans for a ring of thirty military bases in the "near-abroad."47 In June Yeltsin told graduates of Russia's military academies that "nobody and nothing can free Russia from the political and moral responsibility for the fate of countries and peoples which, for centuries, have moved forward together with the Russian state."48

Russian officials steadfastly draw a distinction between a "great power" and an "imperial power," the former constituting the legitimate pursuit of state interests towards its neighbors, the latter constituting a policy of domination. Within the post-Soviet context, however, the distinction between the legitimate pursuit of state interests and empire-building is

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entirely nebulous and is likely forever to remain so. No one would deny that Russia, like all states, has the right to pursue its own interests beyond its borders. Yet once again geography and history conspire to muddle that which in other settings would be prosaic. The pursuit of Russia’s “geopolitical” interests in the “near-abroad” is a goal that is widely shared among Russians that it is treated as self-evident, requiring no justification.

By 1994 Moscow’s stance had shifted still further from active engagement in the “near-abroad” to agitating for full reintegration of the republics of the former Soviet Union—a goal that again appears to be axiomatic and widely shared across the Russian political spectrum. In June 1994 the Speaker of the Federation Council Vladimir Shumeiko expressed confidence that “a single confederative state will appear with time on the territory of the former Soviet Union.” Yeltsin’s national security advisor Yuri Baturin has given much the same prediction in interviews with foreign correspondents. Former Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi, only days after his release from prison, noted that the peoples of the former Soviet Union “are destined by the Lord God himself to live as one family, one nation, one state—a great power.” He added that “today people have fully understood the price of the irresponsible and ill-thought-out decision to liquidate the USSR.” An article in September 1994 in the reformist newspaper Nezavisimaia gazeta noted that “the creation of a new state on the territory of the former Soviet Union” is “an historically ordained necessity” and is, according to the author, “quietly understood as that” among former republics. At the United Nations in September 1994, Yeltsin described Russia’s ties with the former Soviet republics as “exceeding those of mere neighborliness” and “a blood relationship.” At the CIS summit in Moscow in October, a joint program to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Naziism was approved; it was described by Yeltsin as “a unifying factor for the CIS” that evoked “the sacred things that united us in the past” under a single “fatherland” and as a single “people.”

Advocates of reintegration do not see integration as an act of empire-building, but as an act of state (or supra-state) creation. Indeed, most do not call for the formal recreation of the USSR, which they believe is no longer practical (although an attempt to cancel the Belovezhskoe agreement establishing the CIS failed in the Russian Duma in March 1994). As Krasnaia zvezda, the newspaper of the Russian army, has noted, “the entire post-Soviet area has greatly changed . . . A return to the old ways is simply impossible. We must build our common home anew and seek new paths to unification.” Unlike Zhirinovskii’s openly imperial ambitions, reintegration is to be a voluntary and legal process carried out by the non-Russians themselves. But given the way in which Russia has asserted itself as “a great power”
and defined its geopolitical interests throughout the region, where one draws the line between state-building and empire-building again remains obscure.

It has been evident, for instance, that some circles within the Russian government have viewed issues of citizenship and human rights as proxies for other goals of expanding Russian influence. At a Russian Foreign Ministry seminar in March 1994, Gennadii Mozhaev, a representative of the Association for Ties With Foreign Compatriots, argued that the strategic task of Russia is “to keep all Eurasian territory of the former Soviet Union if not under control, then under strong influence... From this point of view,” he said, “it’s an advantage for us to have a big number of Russians in the near abroad.” 56 That same month, the Russian special mediator in the Moldova conflict let slip at the end of the first round of negotiations that “Russia has geostrategic interests in Moldova, and also means to defend the Russian-speaking population,” clearly linking geopolitical and human rights concerns. 57 Indeed, for some time Moscow insisted on basing rights for the Fourteenth Army as a precondition for any solution of the conflict, and the agreement reached with Moldova in August contains considerably ambiguity on whether a withdrawal will indeed take place. 59 As Bourdieu notes, “The harder it is to exercise direct domination, and the more it is disapproved of, the more likely it is that gentle, disguised forms of domination will be seen as the only possible way of exercising domination and exploitation.” 59 In the aftermath of the collapse of empires, with populations mobilized around nationalist aims and with strong international norms in support of self-determination and state sovereignty in place, no state is likely to declare power-projection openly as its goal. Empires in the late twentieth century are no longer what they used to be. Almost invariably, activities that arouse charges of empire-building are couched in the language of state-building. Even Aleksandr Rutskoi, who has created a “Great Power” political movement aimed at restoring “the great power of Russia” within the borders of the former USSR calls for doing so “by means of the freely expressed will of its peoples.” 60

In the course of three short years Russia’s official policy towards its neighbors had evolved from isolation to active engagement to reintegration at the same time that Russia had discovered a new language of self-determination in reference to its compatriot communities in the “near-abroad.” But self-determination for those viewed in their localities as former colonials and state-building over the expanse of a former empire exemplify the ambiguities of state- and empire-building in post-Soviet politics. Self-determination and state-building bear formal semblance to these processes in other contexts; but a pall of uncertainty hangs over them as to whether they do not in actuality represent covert imperial projects. In short, Russian state-building and Russian empire-building in the post-Soviet era remain opaque and elusive, difficult to define and thoroughly entangled.
DUAL CITIZENS OR FIFTH COLUMN?

Russia’s relations with its referent diaspora in the “near-abroad” is illustrative of the double meanings that lurk beneath the surface of our modern notions of self-determination within the Eurasian context. A profound ambiguity extends not only to the definition of who is a member of the diaspora, but even to the very definition of what is the “homeland” to which they are supposed to refer. Both of the terms that are used to describe this group (russkoizychnye and sootechestvenniki) in Russian political discourse reflect the indeterminacy over the issues of to whom and what homeland politics pertains. The term russkoizychnye, or Russian-speakers, reflects the fact that a significant number of those who look towards Moscow as a source of support are not ethnic Russians at all, but rather members of the Russian language community. This is many cases includes large numbers of Ukrainians, Belorussians, Jews, Armenians, and others who find themselves on foreign soil, largely as a result of successive waves of migration during the Tsarist and Soviet periods. Not all of them are actually “Russian-speakers” in the sense that their native language is Russian. As Nursultan Nazarbaev has said, “I do not accept the concept of ‘Russian-speaking population.’ Which of us is not a Russian speaker? After all, the whole of Kazakhstan speaks Russian, including 99 percent of Kazakhs.” In some contexts, “Russian-speakers” are united more by their marginalization within their new polities than by their linguistic characteristics. What is the “homeland” of such a group, and in what sense does Russia have the right to represent its interests? Certainly for many, the homeland being referred to here is not an ethnic one. The term sootechestvenniki (countrymen or compatriots, from the root otechestvo, or fatherland) presents no less ambiguity; it again begs the question of which fatherland is being referred to here: the new Russia, the old Russia, or the former Soviet Union? In fact, many do not view the new Russia per se as their homeland, but rather the former Soviet Union. As Valentina Maslennikova, an elderly Russian woman who lives in Crimea, told an American journalist: “What we want is to live again in the union as it was. I live in Yalta. My sister lives in southern Ukraine. Her son lives in Leningrad. We don’t want all these borders.” Still others in the diaspora envisage a “greater Russia” in the spirit of the Tsarist empire as their homeland. The enormous revival of Cossack movements in Russia’s borderlands and their active role in politics in the Pridniestr and northern Kazakhstan harks back to an older “homeland” and tradition as a frame of reference. In short, the definition of homeland is itself contested. In some respects, Russia’s referent minority in the “near-abroad” is a diaspora in search of a homeland.

Much as the diaspora itself has had difficulty defining itself, both Russia and the post-Soviet states have had difficulty coming to grips with the ambiguity that surrounds the diaspora.
Does Russia’s referent diaspora consist of ethnic Russians, “Russian-speakers,” or all citizens of the former Soviet Union? Official Russian policy has reflected all three. “Russia bears responsibility for every citizen of the former Soviet Union,” Abdullakh Mikitaev, head of the department of citizenship of Yel’tsin’s presidential administration and himself a Kabardinian, has said. “It is the duty of Russia not to allow discrimination against compatriots, to uphold their well-being and dignity, and ensure their protection and support, no matter where they live.”

Dual citizenship has emerged as the centerpiece of Russia’s approach for dealing with the diaspora in the near-abroad. The idea has several variants: the introduction of a common CIS citizenship; a series of bilateral treaties recognizing dual citizenship between Russia and the non-Russian republics; or, in the absence of intergovernmental agreement, simply granting Russian citizenship to individuals as they apply for Russian citizenship, without informing the home state. According to Mikitaev, “sooner or later there is clearly going to be a single citizenship again in the Commonwealth countries, on the model of the European states.” CIS citizenship, however, looks too much like the recreation of the USSR in new clothes to be of great appeal to most republics. Although a draft proposal for instituting a CIS citizenship was circulated to the member republics in July 1994, so far the latter two approaches have prevailed.

Russia has already concluded bilateral agreements with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on dual citizenship; Kyrgyzstan and Tadzhikistan have also expressed their interest in concluding such agreements: the former in order to stem the flow of Russian migrants from the republic, the latter in order to solidify military protection from Russia against insurgents. Russia has requested similar agreements from Moldova, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Kazakhstan. It has at times suggested that the recognition of dual citizenship be a precondition for any resolution of the Dniestr problem or for normalization of relations with Latvia and Estonia. As for the ad hoc approach, the Russian law on citizenship, passed in 1993, provides for the possibility of obtaining citizenship through a process of registration with a Russian foreign embassy or consulate. As of January 1994, 42 thousand residents of Estonia had registered with the Russian embassy there as Russian citizens. There are also reports that by early 1993 over 400 thousand Russians in Ukraine had requested dual citizenship with Russia. In July 1994 the Crimean parliament adopted a law allowing dual citizenship on its territory.

“Hundreds of thousands of people in the West have dual citizenship and this does not become an obstacle in relations among states,” Mikitaev has noted. Yet, with the exception of the Central Asian republics, who in general face no direct threat of dismemberment by
Russia, few actions on the part of the Russian government have engendered greater fear among republican leaders. Nursultan Nazarbaev has described dual citizenship as an idea “imposed from outside the country.” He has strongly opposed it as threatening the very existence of his state. “Just imagine if the Russians, who are 32 percent of the population, had two passports in their pockets. They would have one foot in Russia and the other here. That would destabilize the situation in Kazakhstan.” The Kazakh government has in fact refused permission for Russia to open consulates in northern Kazakhstan in fear that this would lead to a rush of registration for dual citizenship on the part of the diaspora community. The Moldovan, Ukrainian, Estonian, and Latvian reactions have been no different. Estonian authorities have expressed considerable concern over Russia’s practices of granting citizenship without interstate agreement to Estonian residents. As the Minister of Citizenship and Migration of Estonia has noted, the Estonian government is not able to know “whether a person is a Russian citizen, holds dual citizenship, or is a stateless person,” since the Russian embassy refuses to release a list of those granted Russian citizenship—a practice the minister called “an administrative and security issue for Estonia.” Dual citizenship, the Moldovan Foreign Minister told Andrei Kozyrev in January 1994, “may have a stabilizing effect in Turkmenistan, but may boomerang elsewhere.” Certainly, if pursued as a general principle of interstate relations in the region, dual citizenship threatens to unleash a wider instability that would prove difficult to contain. As Askar Akaev explains:

I have always favored dual citizenship... We do not have a border with Russia and there can be no territorial problems here. Thus, dual citizenship can only be a benefit for the Russian-speaking population in our country. The Uzbeks are a different matter, however. They live in the border region in our country and Kirghiz live in the border region in Uzbekistan, so in this case dual citizenship could play a negative role.

Akaev’s acceptance of dual citizenship with reference to Russians only, however, has provoked considerable opposition within his own republic. Opposition forces have labelled the idea capitulation “under pressure from Russian imperial forces.”

Of course, from the point of view of the non-Russians, the diaspora presents no less ambiguity. Nationalizing post-colonial states are imbued with the purpose of overcoming the legacies of empire, establishing state sovereignty in the name of the nation, and preventing a return descent from citizen to subject. One of the key issues that defines the political spectrum in these states is whether they are nationalizing enough: have they been providing sufficiently for their sovereignty vis-a-vis their previous “occupiers,” or are they vulnerable to being picked off again, to an “imperialism by stealth,” or to becoming a “neo-imperial” appendage of their former masters? The post-colonial state is by definition a state under threat, a state whose sovereignty is insecure and subject to question. And the fact that these are at best states-
in-becoming (i.e., their elites aspire to imbue these polities with those characteristics that we associate with the modern state) means that they are all the less secure in their stateness. At worst, they are failed states, making potential prey for external meddling and intervention. In short, these are states that are haunted by the nightmares of their imperial pasts. That past is not only omnipresent in the reality of everyday life, which bears deep scars from previous occupation policies, but also constitutes the central element in the national myths that provide the foundation and coherence of the state itself. “Whatever it may claim,” Zenon Pozniak, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, has said, “Russia . . . has been, is, and will remain an enemy of Belarusian independence and freedom.”

In this context, the presence of a diaspora resulting from successive waves of migration under imperial rule and the geographic proximity of the former occupying power only aggravate existing hypersensitivities. There is the continual temptation to view these migrants as an extension of the previous occupying power and as remnants of its controlling apparatus; their very presence challenges the integrity of the state and is a constant reminder of the past. The basic question boils down to one of trust: can the diaspora community be trusted to act as loyal citizens of the new state, or are they a “fifth column” preparing the way for reoccupation? And it is here that the signals that each actor sends to the other through their actions, reactions, and counter-actions can lead to spirals of mistrust or to an atmosphere of growing confidence.

The Baltic provides excellent examples in which each of these actors has interpreted the actions of others through its own constructs of state- and empire-building, thereby triggering further actions and reactions. Exclusive citizenship laws in Estonia and Latvia, for instance, incited outrage within the Russian diaspora and induced Russia to take measures to prop up its referent diaspora in the region; these reactions in turn engendered greater mistrust of the diaspora community within those states and of Russia’s intentions in the region. In February 1994 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs unfurled a plan aimed at reinforcing the position of the Russian diaspora in the Baltic, including import benefits and banking assistance for businesses outside Russia run by ethnic Russians. In the Baltic this was interpreted as a strategy by Russia to sustain the domination of its compatriots over Baltic industry and commerce, posing a potential threat to the security of these states. In the case of Estonia, Russian officials have suggested that if Estonia does not take steps to integrate its Russian community, Moscow might be provoked to support regional autonomy for northern Estonia and to offer blanket citizenship to Estonia’s Russians, raising the specter of Estonia’s territorial dismemberment. As Rasma Karklins has written regarding the Russian insistence on granting citizenship rights and social security benefits to retired officers of the Soviet military in the
Baltic: “By linking troop withdrawal to demands about the status of demobilized soldiers, Russia reinforces the notion that Soviet-era settlers represent a Russian fifth column, rather than a minority to be integrated into the community of Latvia. It is international practice for states to extend citizenship rights based on loyalty to their constitution, not because a neighboring state demands it.” Yet, the provision of loyalty requires that states treat their inhabitants equally, without regard for ethnicity, origin, profession, or foreign connections. As Andrei Kozyrev has noted, “If people anywhere are called ‘occupiers’ and ‘noncitizens,’ they begin to behave accordingly.”

Because Estonia and Latvia have been pressing territorial claims against Russia based on their interwar borders, the Russian Federation has openly denied that the Baltic states were ever occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. Russian recognition that the Baltic was illegally occupied in 1940 would give Latvia and Estonia legal grounds for regaining lost territories. While the purpose of Russia’s denial of Soviet occupation of the Baltic is primarily defensive, it has been interpreted in the Baltic as a signal of Russian territorial designs on the region. In another case, when Russia began to toughen its negotiating position at talks with the Lithuanians over normalization of economic relations and military transit through Lithuania from Kaliningrad, the Lithuanian chief negotiator noted that this “would hardly help the Russian speaking population” in the country. In short, each side has been interactively engaged with the other, interpreting the actions of others through the prism of its own constructs at the same time as influencing and being influenced by those actions.

**Domination and the Dialectic of Failed State-Building**

The continued vitality of empires in a world of states can be attributed in part to failed state-building. Indeed, it was the failure of the Soviet state-building enterprise which gave rise to its widespread recognition as an empire. In many respects, the post-Soviet states resemble the pseudo-states characteristic of much of post-colonial Africa. They lack competent institutions and are incapable of exercising effective authority over their territories. Their territorial boundaries are often under challenge from both within and without. Indeed, in some cases the only true characteristic of stateness that they exhibit is that they are recognized by the international community of states as members of that community. While undoubtedly much of what constitutes being a state is the recognition of this claim by others, there is more to stateness than mere recognition by others. The modern state is associated as well with the claim to represent the aspirations of the “nation” and with a whole set of institutions and practices—bureaucratic administration, standing armies, the provision of order, control over national currencies, customs and border control, regularized revenue-seeking, etc. It is in this latter area.
in particular that post-Soviet states have so far failed miserably for the most part, in some cases becoming mere shells.

From the point of view of new nationalizing elites in the former Soviet Union, state-building and empire-building are seen as competing ventures (a view that contrasts sharply with the Russian perspective, which seems incapable of differentiating between the two). There are good historical reasons for such perceptions. The failure of national states to establish effective power in the 1917-1920 period was directly related to the reimposition of Russian control over them. In the Soviet period, Moscow's control was challenged whenever national elites attempted to construct national institutions and to engage in genuine legitimacy-building within their communities. In the late 1920s korenizatsiia led to the penetration of local and nationalist perspectives into the Communist Party and to some loss of control by the center. Authority-building by local communist elites in the late 1950s in the Baltic and the late 1960s in Ukraine once again led to challenges to Moscow's dominance. There has always been a very close relationship between the success or failure of state-building in the non-Russian republics and the degree of Russian control over these regions.

In the post-Soviet period as well, the failures of the new nationalizing projects of the 1990s have been closely associated with the projection of Russian power and influence throughout the region and with perceptions of the resuscitation of empire. In a number of new states the downfall of the first cohort of post-Soviet elites—the leaders who brought their new countries to independence (the Landsbergises, Kravchus, Gamsakhurdias, and Shushkeviches)—has led to the rise of new elites less concerned with nationalizing projects than with managing public disaffection over the disruptions associated with economic collapse, the transition to a market economy, ethnic and regional separatism, and factional infighting. This in turn has led to greater reliance on Moscow, the only international force in the region capable of influencing outcomes significantly on these issues. Whereas in 1991 public opinion in these states stood squarely behind leaders seeking to distance themselves as far as possible from Moscow’s control, by 1994 the crises of nationalizing states had in some cases promoted the crystallization of internal constituencies favoring closer relations with Russia. Indeed, many non-Russians in the region are openly calling for greater Russian intervention and control over their lives as an answer to the severe problems of governability that they currently face. Thus, a public opinion poll conducted in Belarus in March 1994 discovered that more than 55 percent of Belarusians were in favor of the restoration of the USSR, and 63 percent favored unification of the republic with Russia. Belarus has even been referred to facetiously in the Russian press as "the 90th member of the Russian Federation." As Vladimir Zhirinovskii once stated in answer to how he would accomplish the geopolitical shock therapy that he advocates:
There is no need even to wage active combat . . . All it takes is not to interfere . . . They will annihilate each other . . . And then they, or rather those who remain alive, will come running to Russia asking to take them back with the status of a volost' or uezd.  

This dynamic between failed state-building and the rise of non-Russian constituencies within the republics favoring extension of Russian power throughout the region further obfuscates the difference between state- and empire-building in the post-Soviet context. The extension of Russian power over the non-Russian states is not simply a matter of Russian expansionism. Failed state-building and the disorder that it engenders produces a kind of demand for external domination from the dominated themselves, giving rise to opportunities for exercising legitimated domination. Russia’s role as peacekeeper in the region, the desire of some new states to rejoin the ruble zone, and even Nazarbaev’s proposals for a Eurasian Union are all examples of how the crisis of governability that has descended upon the post-Soviet states gives rise to an expansion of Russian influence and pulls Russia into the role of “elder brother.” Domination must be understood not merely as involving acts by the dominating, but also by the dominated. By engaging in behavior that places Russia in a position to wield decisive influence over them, non-Russians may in fact be forging the links of their own chains.

Beyond Empire

This essay began with the paradox of the persistence of Russian empires beyond the imperial collapse—in spite of the vows of elites to the contrary. The collapse of Russian empires should hardly surprise us, since in the twentieth century, as soon as a polity is widely recognized in political discourse as an empire, its further existence is likely to be brief. By the twentieth century empire and state had been transformed into constructs by which we express our relationship to the polity and to the existing state system. The universalization of the norms of the state system accounts in part for the inability to distinguish between acts of empire-building and state-building. But we have also seen that, in the Eurasian setting, several contextual and historical variables, as well as the Leninist state-building strategy, operated so as to accentuate the ambiguity between the two. Indeed, there is probably no other region of the world in which empire-building and state-building have been subject to such equivocation. In the context of high uncertainty, historical development has produced habituses with wildly different understandings of state- and empire-building that have shaped behavior interactively. Whereas Russian elites seem incapable of recognizing the essential ambiguity that surrounds state-building and empire-building in the Eurasian context and the dilemmas that this presents, nationalizing elites among the non-Russians are obsessed with this ambiguity, reading imperial
intent into actions which, in other contexts, would be unlikely to be understood in that fashion. These are in actuality mutually reinforcing perspectives, for the behavior they produce on each side reinforces the expectations of the other. A basic feature of post-Soviet politics is a curious mélange of roles that is difficult to unravel. Russian leaders who vowed never again to cast their country into the role of an "elder brother" soon find themselves cast into that role. Nationalizing states whose leaders vowed to do everything "so that there would never again be a center in our lives" soon find themselves courting Moscow. Unsure as to whether the new Russia represents an emerging empire or an emerging state, Western policy-makers create the "half-way house" of Partnership for Peace—meant to assuage the nightmares of East European states should Russia threaten their sovereignty once again, at the same time as admitting Russia as a member. "Empire" and "state" remain major facets of the prisms through which politics is interpreted throughout the region, channeling expectations and behaviors and structuring the process of state-building itself.

How, then, can the recycling of Russian empires be broken? What is it that would allow us to really talk about the "last empire" in Eurasia? One is tempted here to resort to that troublesome category of "fate." Yet, "fate" is an inadequate answer in that other relationships dogged by imperial legacies have managed eventually to shed them, albeit to various degrees. This is certainly true for most overseas empires. But cases such as Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire demonstrate that even in an overland context it is possible to develop norms of interaction which make the reemergence of empire appear unlikely. The central issue once again revolves around the continuing ambiguity of the physical and human boundaries of polities. The transcendence of empire requires that such boundaries become institutionalized—in Ian Lustick's words, "unquestioned features of... public life" and "part of the natural order of things for the overwhelming majority of the population whose political behavior is relevant." The acceptance and rigorous enforcement of norms of the inviolability of borders, the development of effective state institutions that make sovereignty meaningful, and the incorporation of minority communities into political life and the consolidation of inclusive norms of citizenship are necessary conditions for such a transformation, for only under these circumstances can the uncertainty over the physical and human boundaries of polities be reduced. But even if such conditions were to materialize (as unlikely as they currently seem within the post-Soviet context), the transcendence of empire would still require a considerable period of time to alter existing expectations and premises of behavior. Habitus, Bourdieu emphasizes, is "durable but not eternal" in that it is "an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences... and constantly affected by them." The transcendence of empire means more than changing the context that has produced such
relationships; it ultimately necessitates transforming the mentalities and orientations that sustain these relationships. If the twentieth century is any guide to the twenty-first, empires will remain an elusive but consequential part of the Eurasian political landscape, dressed in the attire of state-building but embodying the contradictions and weaknesses of the state system itself.

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NOTES


7. ITAR-TASS, January 20, 1994 (17:04 EST).


10. Examples that come to mind are the transformation of the British Empire into the Commonwealth, the French attempt to create an enlarged republic, and Portugal’s Estado Novo. I am indebted to Crawford Young for this point.


13. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 127. Bourdieu describes habitus as "embodied history internalized as second nature and forgotten as history," a set of internalized understandings that "at every moment, structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences," which are themselves modified by these new experiences. In this way, Bourdieu distinguishes habitus from essentialist understandings of culture.

14. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 60. Habitus should also not be confused with habit; the latter, according to Bourdieu, is mechanistic relationship of stimulus and response, whereas habitus refers to an inventive and creative set of dispositions which incline a subject towards a particular mode of interpretation.


Actually, very few of those who use the term "empire" ever both to define it—a point recently made by David Laitin in a recent review article on the literature concerning Soviet nationalities. See David D. Laitin, "The National Uprising in the Soviet Union," World Politics (October 1991), p. 142.

As Crawford Young has pointed out to me, the above characterization obscures the variety of political forms that existed in the pre-modern world. Kingships, city-states, and theocracies, for instance, all contained elements associated with the understanding of the modern state that is presented here. For further elaboration, see Chapter 2 of Crawford Young's forthcoming work Bula Matari: The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

Alex Motyl has argued that "the term empire is not a pejorative designation for the Soviet Union, but the source of insight into its dynamics." Alexander Motyl, "Building Bridges and Changing Landmarks: Theory and Concepts in the Soviet Nationalities," in Alexander J. Motyl, ed., Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 264. I would argue that the term as it is now used is inherently pejorative, and that it is precisely the element of illegitimacy that the use of the term measures. For more on this argument, see Beissinger, in Young, The Rising Tide, op. cit.


Such an animus can be detected in a variety of fascist regimes (such as Nazi Germany or Mussolini's Italy) which openly sought to recreate a glorious imperial past.

Bourdieu and Wacquant, An Invitation, pp. 22-23, 124, 132.

This was evident in the 1897 census, conducted at a time when all Europe was aflame with nationalism; yet, the census contained no question on the nationality of members of the empire—only their religion and language. See Brian D. Silver, "The Ethnic and Language Dimensions in Russian and Soviet Censuses," in Ralph S. Clem, ed., Research Guide to the Russian and Soviet Censuses (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 72-73. As Silver notes, the census designers "intended to treat native language as a surrogate for nationality" and to "maximize the estimated number of people who adhered to the Russian Orthodox religion," thereby projecting the appearance of loyalty within the empire's population. Every respondent was placed into one or another religious category, with no room for nonbelievers.

David D. Laitin, Roger Petersen, and John W. Slocum, "Language and the State: Russia and the Soviet Union in Comparative Perspective," in Motyl, Thinking Theoretically, op. cit., p. 130.

On this, see Richard Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 79.

Indeed, only Poland had declared its independence before the Bolshevik coup.


31. ibid., p. 81.
34. Nezavisimaja gazeta, December 19, 1991, p. 3.
38. ibid., p. 4. Migranian also assigns some responsibility to the conflicts in Southern Osetia and Abkhazia for politicking the near-abroad in Russia. The Soviet army was already present in these conflicts as a peacekeeping force when the collapse of the USSR occurred.
39. Yeltsin never openly admitted ordering the army to attack, and much pretense has been made about the supposed independent actions of General Aleksandr Lebed, the army’s commander. However, considerable evidence indicates that Lebed was merely following orders. See RFE/RL Daily Report, no. 24, February 4, 1994.
43. ITAR-TASS, February 7, 1994 (12:45 EST).
44. Nezavisimaja gazeta, January 12, 1994, p. 4.
47. ITAR-TASS, February 28, 1994 (10:56 EST).
49. ITAR-TASS, June 9, 1994 (06:03 EDT).
58. Two aspects of the agreement raise questions about whether the Fourteenth Army will be leaving. For one, the army has recruited a significant number of Pridniestr residents; under the agreement, they will remain in place and may be integrated into the Dniestr republic’s forces. Secondly, the withdrawal is predicated upon a political solution of the Dniestr issue, which may not occur. Even if a political solution is found, it may contain elements favorable to Russian geopolitical control over the area.


63. ITAR-TASS, April 26, 1994 (10:49 EDT).


69. ITAR-TASS, April 26, 1994 (10:49 EDT).


75. Izvestia, April 15, 1994, p. 4.

76. ITAR-TASS, January 17, 1994 (05:16 EST). Dual citizenship had in fact been rejected by the Kirgiz legislature in 1993.

77. ITAR-TASS, June 10, 1994 [05:06 EDT].

78. See RFE/RL Daily Report, no. 27, February 9, 1994, “Regional Cooperation and Security in the Baltic Sea Region,” address by Jueri Luik, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, March 2, 1994, Stockholm. There has been considerable reaction in Riga among Latvians to the domination of business by the Russian diaspora. As one Latvian shopowner has said, “If the Russians are so poorly off . . ., then let me ask you: Why do they control most of the businesses in Riga, and have the biggest apartments?” The New York Times, March 1, 1994, p. A3.


81. CDPSP, vol. 66, no. 6 (March 9, 1994), p. 24. Karklins, for instance, notes that “The nature of citizen status is that it not only grants rights but also involves duties, such as loyalty to the state and the constitution. How can citizenship be granted to people who oppose the existence of the state?” Yet Karklins at the same time recognizes that “a small minority [of Russians] has remained openly hostile, working for the rebirth of the Soviet state.” Rasma Karklins, *Ethnopolitics and Transition to Democracy: The Collapse of the USSR and Latvia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 144. If the latter is true, then why would it be necessary to disenfranchise large numbers of Russians for fear of their disloyalty? To some extent, the degree of disloyalty of the Russians in Latvia has been concocted by Latvian nationalizing elites as a means for asserting Latvian ethnic dominance over the state.

82. ITAR-TASS, March 11, 1994 (06:52 EST); Eesti Ringvaade: A Weekly Review of Estonian News, vol. 4, no. 15-1 (April 7-10, 1994); RFE/RL Daily Report, no. 38, February 24, 1994. While admitting that the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states in 1940 “was, of course, a mistake,” Russian deputy foreign minister Vitalii Churkin asserted that “from the legal aspect, the 1940 events cannot be interpreted as an invasion or occupation” and “today’s international law does not apply to the situation before . . .” RFE/RL Daily Report, no. 20, January 31, 1994.


85. Radio Moscow World Service, March 21, 1994 [01:00 UTC].


89. Accusations of colonialism and empire-building are not the monopoly of Russia, but can be found in many multinational contexts in the late twentieth century. British rule over Northern Ireland, Ethiopian rule over Eritrea, Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza, Chinese rule over Tibet, Indian rule over Assam, Indonesian rule over East Timor, and the United States’ rule over Puerto Rico are but a few of the examples of the survival of discourses of imperialism in the contemporary world of states.

90. Leonid Kravchuk, at the Belovezhskoe meeting, quoted in Nezavisimaiia gazeta, December 10, 1991, p. 3.

91. Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands*, p. 44.
