
AUTONOMY AND DECENTRALIZATION IN THE GLOBAL IMPERIAL CRISIS: THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE AND THE SOVIET UNION IN 1905–1924[†]

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This article brings the case of imperial transformation of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union into global discussions about empire, nationalism, and postimperial governance, and highlights the political and legal imaginaries that shaped this transformation, including their global and entangled character. This article argues that the legal and political discourses of decentralization, autonomism, and federalism that circulated at the time of the imperial crisis between the Revolution of 1905 and the adoption of the Soviet Constitution in 1924 contributed to the formation of an ethno-national federation in place of the Russian Empire, despite both the efforts of the Bolsheviks to create a unitary state, and the expectations of a different future among contemporary observers. At the same time, the postimperial institutional framework became a product of political conjunctures rather than the legal discourse. Its weakness before the consolidating party dictatorship made the Soviet Union a showcase of sham federalism and autonomism.

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Russian Empire in the context of World War I and the Revolution of 1917 were part of the third and the most important wave of imperial transformations in modern history, which started with the Napoleonic Wars and continued with the restructuring of the Central European political order in the middle of the nineteenth century and the rise of the Japanese Empire in East

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Asia in the late nineteenth century. In 1914, Petr Struve, one of the leading liberal intellectuals and politicians of late imperial Russia, announced that the start of the “German war” was, in fact, the opening of the “Third World War.” By this he meant the radical confrontation of imperial universalisms in redrawing the world political map, and the struggle between democracy, nationalism, and imperialism as principles of legitimacy of the new political order.¹

Drawing insight from Struve’s views on the global crisis in the time of World War I, this article aims to salvage from isolation the case of imperial transformation of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union and highlight the legal and political imaginaries that shaped this imperial transformation as part of the global circulation and entanglement of discourses about the postimperial political order. Currently, the story of World War I, with respect to the Russian Empire, is narrated from the perspective of the breakup of a continental empire. The notion of a continental empire ushers historical thinking into a *Sonderweg* (special-path) paradigm that makes such an empire incompatible with other synchronous forms of imperialism and colonialism.² The narrative of the first socialist revolution helps to bring about the *Sonderweg* paradigm to aid in the interpretation of the Soviet nationality policy. Thus historical accounts of the transformation of empire and colonialism in the Western world at the time of the Great War could ignore imperial transformations in Eurasia.

Mark Mazower argues for the continuity of imperial politics in the various forms of internationalism that remained at the end of World War I and during the Versailles system, and into the League of Nations.³ While perceptively tracing the continuities of imperial discourse and dispositions at the time of the global crisis, this account ignores the rival internationalism (the Third International) and universalism arising from the revolutionary transformation of the Russian Empire. In his much-acclaimed book on the rise of the concept of national self-determination, and expectations on the part of anticolonial activists associated with it, Erez Manela brings in Vladimir Lenin alongside Woodrow

¹ Petr Struve, “Sud istorii” (The Trial of History), *Russkaia Mysl’* (Russian Thought) 8/9 (1914), 168–79; Struve, *Razmyshleniia o russkoi revoliutsii* (Reflections on the Russian Revolution) (Sofia, 1921).

² Using the paradigm of a continental empire for Russian history creates a comparative plane with the history of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and, at the same time, cuts off broader comparative and global entanglements. This is evident in the interpretation of the triumph of ethnic nationalism associated with the breakup of the continental empires, which downplays the history of imperial hybridity and universalism. See Aviel Roschwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914–1923* (London, 2001).

³ Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Place: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, 2009).

Wilson in an analysis of the articulation of the principle of national self-determination, but misses the entangled nature of dynamically changing stances and perspectives on that principle in 1919.⁴ The Communist International (Comintern) view on Versailles was best captured in the lead article in the official organ of the former, which called the Versailles peace the second Brest Litovsk and called the principle of self-determination “a fig leaf for the politics of annexation.”⁵ The communist stance on the principle of self-determination changed in 1918 when the Bolshevik leadership found that that principle was used by the Central Powers in the Brest Litovsk negotiations with the Soviet government in a successful attempt to push the border of the peace settlement to the east.⁶ Already in 1919, the principle of national self-determination not only was open to diffusion, reception, and interpretation by national and anticolonial movements, but also was a synchronously contested idea subject to political dynamics and positionality in the context of the imperial transformations.

The examples mentioned above demonstrate the need for historians to cross the boundary between the Western experience of imperial transformations in the wake of World War I and the revolutionary transformation of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Of the various ways such boundary crossings may be part of the global and entangled intellectual history of key legal and political concepts in the postwar and postimperial order, the way these concepts adapted to local historical contexts was crucial. Similarly, if one can reciprocally describe Versailles as the second Brest Litovsk, it is also possible to look at historical dynamics of the so-called continental empires and symmetrically apply the framework of imperial transformations instead of the idiom of the breakup of empires and the triumph of the principle of the nation-state.

Broadening the scope of analysis suggested by Mazower for Western colonial empires, one needs to explain the paradox of drastically diverging outcomes of the collapse of empires in Eastern Europe. The outcomes in question comprise (1) the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire into nationalizing states and the failure of the idea of the federalist transformation of the Central European landscape, (2) the Armenian genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the nationalizing Turkish state, and (3) the real puzzle embodied in the Russian Empire—its historical trajectory being conceived of as the opposite of that of the Habsburg Empire before World War I. Writing in the 1880s, John Robert

⁴ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007).

⁵ *Kommunisticheskii internatsional* 1 (1919), 111–12.

⁶ On the Brest Litovsk treaty see Borislav Chernev, “Ukrainization and Its Contradictions in the Context of the Brest-Litovsk System,” in Eric Lohr, Vera Tolz, and Alexander Semyonov, eds., *The Empire and Nationalism at War* (Bloomington, 2014), 163–88.

Seeley, one of the founding figures of the “Greater Britain” imperial project, compared Russia with the USA and suggested that these countries were examples of continental expansion of unitary national states.⁷ Many Russian ideologues and politicians rejected the comparison of the future of the Russian Empire with the Habsburg Empire. Yet the historical trajectory of the Russian Empire resembled the path not taken by the Habsburg Empire. It included the collapse of the imperial structures in the mass violence of the Civil War and the emergence of the federal political formation with cooptation of elements of regional and national territorial and extraterritorial autonomy. Neighboring the League of Nations system and partially reflecting its regime of national minorities, the Russian imperial transformation also contained the combination of a mixed federal state with the world communist revolution and supranational organization of the communist movements (the Comintern).

This article argues that legal and political imaginaries circulating at the time of the imperial crisis played an important role in shaping these divergent outcomes and might explain the paradoxical switch of the path of the Russian Empire onto the path that had been prescribed for the Habsburg Empire. While the comprehensive and symmetrical comparative analysis of the above-mentioned paradox is a task for the future, the present article takes the first step in seeking to unpack the range of political visions pertaining to the rearrangement of political space of the Russian Empire from the first imperial crisis in the twentieth century in the Revolution of 1905 and through the early Soviet period. While pursuing the circuits of circulation and borrowing ideas in the manner of international intellectual history,⁸ the authors argue that the travelling ideas about political order and negotiation of diversity were refracted in a particular light in the local context. In this way, the authors subscribe to the vision of global history of Chris Bayly, who argued in favor of locating the degree and nature of global impacts in local contexts.⁹

Following the First Russian Revolution of 1905, the profound differences between legal theoreticians (such as Vladimir Gessen and Boris Nol'de of the liberal Constitutional Democratic (KD) Party) and political practitioners (mainly of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Party), as well as the dynamics of

⁷ John Robert Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (London, 1883), 86–7. On the Russian reception of Seeley's political vision see Alexander Semyonov, “‘Greater Britain’ into ‘Greater Russia’: A Case of Imagining Empire and Nation in the Early Twentieth Century Russian Empire,” in John W. Boyer and Berthold Molden, eds., *EUtROPEs: The Paradox of European Empire* (Paris, 2014), 25–48.

⁸ David Armitage, “The International Turn in Intellectual History,” in Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern Intellectual History* (New York, 2014), 232–52.

⁹ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA, 2004).

the imperial crisis, contributed to ruptures between theoretical debates and political practice. Despite the close attention of scholars-turned-politicians to the differences between a unitary state featuring autonomies and a federation, the revolutionary politics of 1917–22 and the appropriation of the SR decentralization program by the Bolsheviks resulted in a fusion of the two forms of postimperial diversity management. This led to the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as a *de jure* federation, which included the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR), itself a unitary state with autonomies within it, from a legal perspective. At the same time, this institutionally weak system, which was confirmed by the first USSR Constitution of 1924, did not prevent the consolidation of the Bolshevik party autocracy from becoming an example of sham federalism and sham autonomism.

AUTONOMY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

The modern notion of sovereignty and its particular version of popular sovereignty had been decisive for the modern career of the legal–political concept of autonomy. At the same time, the political language of autonomy was employed in the “international” politics that was still shaped by imperial great powers and overlapped with traditional imperial (supranational) politics that rested on regimes of indirect rule and retention of cultural particularisms and local laws of ruled territories and populations.¹⁰ The concept of autonomy thus could be seen both as a revolutionary refutation of the *ancien régime* and as a way to redescribe the relations between heterogeneous parts of the political space of empire with the help of a modern political language.

The establishment of the Batavian, Helvetic, Cisalpine, Roman, and other client republics during the French Revolutionary Wars heralded the emergence of dependencies between nations or nations-in-the-making—the idea of a self-governing autonomous nation in a larger sovereign polity. The establishment of the Grand Duchy of Finland and the Tsardom of Poland was influenced by both the French Revolutionary Wars and the earlier tsarist experience (in particular the special regime in the Baltic provinces). Finland and Poland (until the uprisings of the 1830s and 1860s) enjoyed considerable linguistic, financial, and educational autonomy. The word itself was not officially used but was implied through the references to the “own laws” these territories retained or, supposedly, could pass. Poland had a written constitution in 1815–32, while Finland had its own codified legislation. This meant that national state-like autonomy, a product of the European Enlightenment, implied not just a self-governing or self-ruling

¹⁰ See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010).

polity but a self-legislating one in line with the literal translation of the term from Greek (“self-law”).¹¹

Imperial policy makers such as Mikhail Speranskii, who undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of self-legislating Poland and Finland, helped introduce other forms of decentralization. In 1822, while holding office as governor-general of Siberia, he designed a system of limited indigenous self-government in the region. Together with other reformists, he inspired the creation of local *zemstvo* self-government in parts of European Russia in 1864,¹² although this reform was also a means of retaining the control of the nobility over the peasants after the emancipation of serfs in 1861.¹³ The right to self-government did not eradicate the idea of full independence. In Poland and Finland such an idea was undoubtedly stimulated by the sharp contrast between the proclaimed liberal administration and the strong presence of the central government in all spheres. Some imperial officials and intellectuals, including the prominent scholar of constitutional and international law Nol'de, saw the autonomous status of Poland and Finland as an interim phase on their way to full Russification in legal and linguistic terms.¹⁴ This was not unique to the Russian Empire. The Qing, for instance, carried out a policy of systematic sinicization of non-Han groups in their quest for a unitary empire in de facto autonomous Mongolia and Tibet.¹⁵ In both cases nationalism triggered attempts to nationalize dynastic polities, turning the Romanov and Qing Empires into Russian and Chinese respectively. These attempts stimulated the spread of “defensive” nationalism in the nondominant groups.¹⁶

¹¹ L. A. Berezhaia, O. V. Budnitskii, and M. D. Dolbilov, *Zapadnye okrainy Rossiiskoi imperii* (Western Peripheries of the Russian Empire) (Moscow, 2007).

¹² *Zemstvo* can be translated as “local” or “rural” self-government, and refers to the system and bodies introduced in 1864 in some parts of European Russia.

¹³ “Vysochaishe utverzhdenyi Ustav ob upravlenii inorodtsev, 1822 g.” (The Royally Approved Charter on Governing the Aliens, 1822), in *Polnoe sobraniye zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii s 1649 g.* (Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire since 1649), vol. 38 (Saint Petersburg, 1830), 394–417; Terence Emmons and Wayne S. Vucinich, *The Zemstvo in Russia: An Experiment in Local Self-Government* (Cambridge, 1982).

¹⁴ T. I. Khripachenko, “Poniatiia federatsiia, detsentralizatsiia, avtonomiia v sotsialisticheskoi i liberal'nom diskursakh Rossiiskoi Imperii (konets XIX–nachalo XX veka)” (The Concepts Federation, Decentralization, and Autonomy in Socialist and Liberal Discourses of the Russian Empire), in A. Miller, D. Sdvizhkov, and I. Shirle, eds., *Poniatiia o Rossii: K istoricheskoy semantike imperskogo perioda* (Concepts about Russia: Towards Historical Semantics of the Imperial Period), vol. 2 (Moscow, 2012), 98–142, at 124.

¹⁵ Ping-ti Ho, “In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski’s ‘Reenvisioning the Qing,’” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57/1 (1998), 123–55.

¹⁶ I. I. Serebrennikov, *Buriaty, ikh khoziaistvennyi byt i zemlepolzovanie* (The Buryats, Their Economic Life and Land Use), ed. N. N. Koz'min (Verkhneudinsk, 1925).

Parallel to the spread of minority nationalism, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, and other pioneers of Russian socialism and anarchism discussed the ideas of decentralization and autonomism. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Bakunin put forward the idea of self-organized autonomous communities to form the United States of Europe or the whole world. Herzen and Nikolai Ogarev developed the federalist ideas of the Decembrist Nikita Murav'ev and suggested dividing Russia into autonomous regions (*oblast'*).¹⁷ Afanasii Shchapov also imagined a Russia of regions, which would govern themselves by *zemstvo* councils, with a *zemstvo* assembly becoming the supreme body of a democratic federation. Shchapov's ideas and the exclusion of Siberia from *zemstvo* self-government helped Nikolai Iadrintsev, Grigorii Potanin, and other Siberian intellectuals formulate their concept of Siberia as a colony in need of autonomy. Together with the federalist suggestions of the Ukrainian thinker Mykhailo Drahomanov and the economic and administrative decentralization slogans of *zemstvo* liberals, Siberian regionalism (*oblastnichestvo*) stimulated broader discussions of decentralization across the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸

These discussions appealed to the rising popularity of socialism, with the Populists (*Narodniki*) and later the SRs becoming the main allies of both minority nationalists and regionalists. Yet socialist understandings of autonomy were by no means coherent. In the early twentieth century, Russian Marxists opposed the idea of extraterritorial or personal autonomy, which was developed by the Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner and favored by the Jewish Labor Bund. The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (SD) was also critical of the SRs' attempts to combine Bakunin's ideas and national self-determination—to grant autonomy to regions and communities within a democratic republic and to rely on federal principles when regulating relations between different nations.¹⁹ At the same time, the SDs had included the rights to regional self-government and to self-determination for all nations into their program already in 1903. Becoming the cornerstone of the Bolshevik international program, the latter was later clarified by Lenin as the legal right of nations to secede and form independent states.²⁰ Joseph Stalin agreed with Lenin that, unlike self-determination, cultural national

¹⁷ Decembrists were members of the officers' uprising against Nicholas I in 1825.

¹⁸ Mark von Hagen, "Federalisms and Pan-movements: Re-imagining Empire," in Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatoly Remnev, eds., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington, 2007), 494–510.

¹⁹ Khripachenko, "Poniatiia," 105–6, 110–12, 114.

²⁰ V. I. Lenin, "O prave natsii na samoopredelenie" (The Right of Nations to Self-Determination) (1914), in Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Collected Works), 5th edn, vol. 25 (Moscow, 1969), 255–320.

autonomy did not give nations full rights but supported a regionalist approach to autonomy. He argued that majorities would not oppress ethnic minorities within autonomous regions since democratization, the right to use native languages, the right to have national schools, and freedom of religion would solve the national question in Russia.²¹

The debates were further complicated by the separation between theoreticians—like the constitutional scholar Gessen, who would later join the broad liberal movement uniting into the KD Party—and political practitioners. Gessen, who together with Nol'de published a collection of foreign constitutions,²² defined autonomy from a theoretical perspective of natural law. He connected personal freedom with local and national freedom, making regionalism and nationalism extensions of natural rights. Nevertheless, he stressed that national autonomy could only be implemented through parliamentarism and constitutionalism. Besides, it was to be limited to cultural and religious matters. For Gessen, the main goal of decentralization was local democratization and increased participation of the society in governance, as well as the latter's improvement.²³

Lenin, Stalin, and most other socialists, by contrast, belonged to the practitioners, for whom the issue of decentralization was a tactical instrument in pursuing their socioeconomic agenda of transition to socialism. The SRs and other socialist nationalist parties used their own decentralization projects—which included the right to national self-determination, territorial or non-territorial autonomy, and reorganization of the Russian Empire into a federation—for boosting their support among minority nationalists. The SDs devoted little attention to decentralization before 1917 despite its inclusion in the party program.

Autonomy was also prominent in international politics. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the British Empire had increasingly used it as an instrument for reconfiguring the formal empire by establishing postimperial economic and cultural dependencies. The various forms of self-government of Quebec, the Cape Colony, Transvaal, and the Orange River Colony, and the dominion status of Canada (1867), Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907), Newfoundland (1907), South Africa (1910), and Ireland (1922), were stages in

²¹ I. V. Stalin, "Marksizm i natsionalnyi vopros" (Marxism and the National Question) (1913), in Stalin, *Sochineniia* (Collected Works), vol. 2 (Moscow, 1946), 290–367.

²² V. M. Gessen and B. E. Nol'de, eds., *Sovremennye konstitutsii: sbornik deistvuiushchikh konstitutsionnykh aktov* (Contemporary Constitutions: A Collection of Enacted Constitutional Acts), 2 vols. (Saint Petersburg, 1905).

²³ V. M. Gessen, ed., *Avtonomiia, federatsiia i natsional'nyi vopros* (Autonomy, Federation, and the National Question) (Saint Petersburg, 1906), 1–12, 21–8.

their transition to sovereignty based on British constitutional ideas, which kept economic and cultural ties in place.²⁴ Indeed, the agenda of anglicization of these territories had by then been largely realized. In a similar way, the Philippine Autonomy Act of 1916 proclaimed the establishment of a “more autonomous government” in the US-controlled Philippines on their way to eventual full independence. The “progressive” Great Britain and USA, which provided dependent nations with self-government, “civilizing” them and “preparing” them for independence, became symbolically connected in the late nineteenth century. The use of American approaches to governance and constitutionalism in US foreign policy allowed for framing the establishment of American dependencies across the globe as the new imperialism or imperialism of free nations, in which the formally independent nation-states became part of the US-dominated legal, economic, and political structure legitimized through liberal democratic discourse.²⁵

The British Empire also used autonomy as an instrument for disintegrating rival empires. The Russian Empire also stimulated secessionism abroad. In the nineteenth century, the two governments applied this instrument in the Balkans. In 1876, William Gladstone, then leader of the opposition in the British Parliament, called for the autonomy of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Bulgaria.²⁶ The military success of the Russian Empire in the Russo–Ottoman War of 1877–8 ensured their autonomous status. Despite some changes to the initial plan, which were introduced at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the autonomy of Bulgaria was widely perceived as a major step towards its eventual independence from the Ottoman Empire.²⁷ In 1912–15, the Russian and British governments applied a secessionist notion of autonomy to the former Qing dependencies, with the former backing Mongolia (1912–15) and the latter supporting Tibet (1914) in their self-rule claims during the Xinhai Revolution (1911–12). Despite the international circulation of the term, the debates in international law (which at the time primarily developed along humanitarian lines) did not foreground autonomy and national self-determination before World War I, while constitutional scholars like Nol'de, who participated in framing international-law debates, left the two legal spheres separated from one another.

²⁴ Ivor Jennings, *The Approach to Self-Government* (Cambridge, 1956).

²⁵ Prasenjit Duara, “The Imperialism of ‘Free Nations’: Japan, Manchukuo, and the History of the Present,” in Ann Laura Stoler Carole McGranahan, and Peter Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, 2007), 211–39.

²⁶ W. E. Gladstone, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (London, 1876).

²⁷ A. Gul Tokay, “Ottoman–Bulgarian Relations, 1878–1908,” *Balkanistica* 14 (2001), 117–35.

THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY IMPERIAL CRISIS

Despite the persisting image of the Russian Empire as a centralized political space, it was a heterogeneous political architecture and sociocultural space, or what is historiographically described as a series of imperial situations.²⁸ To his great surprise, Nol'de discovered that the modern definition of the political space of the Russian Empire was given only at the time of the 1905 Revolution, when it replaced the long title of the emperor that had served this definition before.²⁹ Recognizing the novelty of this definition at the time of the revolutionary upheaval and constitutional reform, Nol'de and other legal scholars pondered the nature of imperial sovereignty and concluded that the Russian political space was constituted on the logic of inclusive and differentiated treatment of different regions, historical–legal entities, and groups of population.

Consequently—and despite the influence of the French revolutionary formula of “one and indivisible” Russia—the first Russian parliament, the State Duma, elected in 1906, reflected this logic until the counterreform instituted in 1907. The right of political representation was extended to the territories of the former kingdom of Poland as well as to the Caucasus, Siberia, and Turkestan, and the first Russian parliament reflected the logic of contiguous empire and the inclusive conception of imperial sovereignty. This main peculiarity of the first Russian parliament may better be seen in the comparative light of colonial maritime empires, where the right of political representation was clearly separated from the inclusion of a colony into the overarching system of imperial rule.

Founded on the logic of imperial sovereignty, the State Duma became a forum for discussions of postimperial political order, where different and contested political visions of community, legality, and political space based on the legacy of state-supported confessional, estate, and linguistic differences clashed with each other and with the nationizing politics of the imperial government and Russian monarchy. Lacking in clear separation of colonies from the metropole, the representatives of the imperial political space discussed visions of a postimperial order that were based on ideas in circulation since the nineteenth century and encompassed a wide range from loosely defined decentralization and self-government through federalist projects and national autonomy. While the Polish case stood out in terms of revolutionary ideas of the integral nationalism of the National Democracy and demands for national autonomy based on historical

²⁸ Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber and Alexander Semyonov, “New Imperial History and the Challenges of Empire,” in Gerasimov, Glebov, Kusber, Mogilner, and Semyonov, eds., *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire* (Leiden, 2009), 3–32.

²⁹ Boris E. Nol'de, *Ocherki russkogo gosudarstvennogo prava* (Essays on the Russian Public Law) (Saint Petersburg, 1911), 225–44.

constitutional precedent, other visions reflected the stress on particularism of population group or locality. The Duma not only became a major forum for discussions of the postimperial political and legal order, given the articulate presence of non-Russian representatives and its multiethnic composition, but also fostered the spread of autonomist ideas among those politicians who were still looking for the forms that could protect the economic and cultural rights of their communities.

The ethnic lines of Russia's first representatives did not translate automatically into the lines of political and ideological affinity in the caucuses of parliament and alliances. Alongside the national caucuses in the first Duma, such as the Polish *Koło*, there were confessional, estate, and regional groupings (Muslim caucus, Cossack representatives), the most famous of which was the hybrid caucus of the Autonomists. Attempts by leaders of the national caucuses to translate ethnic lines into political affinities were often subverted by the regionalist and social identities, as in the case of the refusal of the group of Polish Duma members from Western provinces to enter the Polish *Koło*, and by class identification, as in the case of those Muslim Duma members who preferred the Labor caucus to the Muslim one.³⁰

The use of the category of nationality in electoral politics and on the Duma floor should be seen as a claim that cultural and political boundaries ought to coincide and as a rival to other forms of prevalent self-identification rather than as a faithful description of social realities. In other words, the claim of nationality in the course of late imperial public politics was directed vertically, down to the masses that ought to be mobilized into a national project (self-determination of masses under the guidance of national activists) and not horizontally (with the exception of the Polish case) as a claim of distinction and political separation (self-determination as secession). This vertical social orientation of the language of nationality would persist in the Soviet policy of national autonomy until the late Soviet period, when the forgotten social dimension of that policy had made absurd the union of completely formed nations.

As the last Russian emperor, Nicholas II, was abandoning the supranational language of sovereignty, the vacuum was filled with political visions that were formed in the space of imperial public politics. Even though federalism could be seen as a natural political heir to empire, the political debates of the Duma period did not form a consensus on this question. At times, federalism was envisioned by

³⁰ Alexander Semyonov, "'The Real and Live Ethnographic Map of Russia': The Russian Empire in the Mirror of the State Duma," in Gerasimov, Kusber, and Semyonov, *Empire Speaks Out*, 191–228; Diliara Usmanova, *Musul' manskie predstaviteli v Rossiiskom parlamente, 1906–1916* (Muslim Representatives in the Russian Parliament, 1906–1916) (Kazan, 2005).

Russian liberal politicians as the future international political order in Europe (in reference to the debates on Slavdom and the Habsburg Empire and in anticipation of the major rupture in the political evolution of Europe),³¹ but more often it was suspected of belonging to aristocratic and undemocratic political programs, as was in part seen in the most developed federalist thought at the time, in Poland.

Conceptually, there were three arguments against federalism. One objection was made from the viewpoint of the essential hybridity of the social and cultural imperial space, whereby the clear-cut division of the space along national lines either would be impossible or would create “internal centralisms.” The second argument was made from the viewpoint of the effectiveness of the modern state, which often presupposed the unitary structure of the state, or at least the undesirability and danger of decentralization based on the principle of nationality. The third argument was made from the perspective of hierarchies of the imperial space, whereby equal distribution of autonomy was impossible due either to “varying levels of cultural development” of population groups in the empire or to the uneven size of constituent population groups (i.e. the presence of small nationalities).³²

Thus the political consensus across a wide range of Duma oppositional forces centered on the broad concept of autonomy, both territorial and non-territorial, and on satisfying the varying identity projects based on ethnicity, language, territory, religion, and social status. In practice this meant that the KDs supported autonomy in regional legislation and cultural rights for selected parts of the empire (Finland and Poland in the first place) but did not imply Russia’s transformation into a federation. The SRs did not focus on the peculiarities of the future institutional framework, but also tended to support national and regional autonomy in a unitary state.³³ However, pragmatically and quite apart from the conceptual debates, the promise of federalism as an equalizing stance against

³¹ Fedor Rodichev (*Russkie vedomosti*, 18 Sept. 1905) advocated Polish autonomy in the liberal debates of the Revolution of 1905, linking it to the future possibility of completing the goals of the 1848 revolution.

³² F. F. Kokoshkin, “Avtonomiia i federatsiia” (Autonomy and Federation), in *S’ezdy i konferentsii* (Congresses and Conferences), vol. 3, part 1 (Moscow, 2000), 559. This was a report given to the Eighth Congress of the Constitutional–Democratic Party (9–12 May 1917). On the discourse of hybridity, which had been neglected in historiography and was salient to the period in question, see Ilya Gerasimov, Marina Mogilner and Sergey Glebov, “Hybridity: Marrism and the Problems of Language in the Imperial Situation,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2016), 27–68.

³³ F. F. Kokoshkin, *Oblastnaia avtonomiia i edinstvo Rossii* (Regional Autonomy and the Unity of Russia) (Moscow, 1906), 3–5, 14–15; *Programmy russkikh politicheskikh partii* (Programs of Russian Political Parties) (Saint Petersburg, 1905), 44–5.

new hierarchies of the reformed political space and as a blueprint for the time of radical rupture was kept at the back of the mind in late imperial politics.

Despite the significant limitations on political representation in 1907, the debates continued in the Third and Fourth Dumas. World War I consolidated the consensus that decentralization was needed. Both liberals and moderate socialists in the Fourth Duma ascribed the empire's misfortunes at the front to the inadequacy of its centralized political system. The retreat in Western Ukraine (Galicia) in the summer of 1915 became the turning point. Liberals, moderate socialists, and moderate conservatives formed the majority Progressive Bloc in the Fourth Duma, putting forward a program featuring the autonomy of Poland; the reform of legislation pertaining to Finland; the protection of minority rights; the liberalization of self-government; and the introduction of *zemstvo* to Siberia, the Caucasus, and other peripheries.³⁴

POSTIMPERIAL SETTLEMENT

One can hardly explain the historical trajectory of the early Soviet Union without the impact of the political debates that had been ushered in in the Duma period of the Russian Empire and in the context of global circulation of political concepts of postimperial order and their local adaptation. The Bolshevik vision of the revolutionary state relied on the idea of a unitary polity in the form of dictatorship of the proletariat and the principle of national self-determination. The dependence of the Bolsheviks on a wide array of political forces and movements at the time of the 1917 Revolution explains their leap to federalism as the architecture of the revolutionary state:

We have in Russia in the sphere of internal politics the final recognition of the new political order of the Socialist Soviet Republic as a federation of free republics of different nations who live in Russia. And now even, I hope, our enemies realize that the new order, the Soviet power is not a figment of the imagination, not a party trick, but a result of the course of events and the spontaneously unfolding World Revolution.³⁵

Lenin's plan of establishing a union of free nations was later substituted by Stalin's autonomization plan. Instead of creating an alternative to the League of Nations, an international polity guided by the communist party of the world (the Comintern), Stalin opted for adopting the plan of the Bolsheviks' political rivals,

³⁴ B. B. Grave, ed., *Burzhuziia nakanune Fevral'skoi revoliutsii* (Bourgeoisie on the Eve of the February Revolution) (Moscow, 1927), 26–9.

³⁵ This is a quote from the concluding remarks by Lenin at the Third Congress of Soviets (Jan. 1918), in which, for the first time, he embraced the concept of federalism, noting its spontaneous character. See *Pervaiia sovetskaia konstitutsiia* (The First Soviet Constitution) (Moscow, 1938), 104.

which he had sharply criticized in 1913.³⁶ The model of the Soviet Union was implemented with little participation of Lenin, then terminally ill, and closely followed the design of the RSFSR shaped by the minority nationalisms and the Russian Civil War, but highly asymmetric and hierarchical. Instead of a homogeneous proletarian community, the Bolsheviks opted for a heterogeneous federation. Apart from appeasing national minorities, the federative model was supposed to demonstrate the inclusive and empowering character of the Soviet regime and therefore to advertise it to colonial nationalists.³⁷

Nationalist politicians of the non-Russian groups, often affiliated with the SRs, created the first national territorial autonomies already in 1917. The establishment and operation of the Buryat Mongol (1917–20), Kokand (1917–18), Alash (1917–20), Tatar and Bashkir (1917–18) self-government bodies, which used the term “autonomy” in self-description, proved that such a form of governance was not only acceptable by non-Russian populations, but also rather stable in view of the virtual collapse of the Russian state. The Ukrainian People’s Republic (UPR) also began as autonomous in 1917 to turn independent in 1918 after the Bolsheviks disbanded the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, which was supposed to sanction the new decentralized postimperial order, and started the Civil War.

The forms of postimperial assemblage remained disputed throughout 1917, with many socialists and liberals still backing autonomy in a unitary state instead of a federation. The famous SR educator Mark Vishniak, for instance, claimed that Russia was too diverse to become a fully fledged federation, but agreed to federative principles, with some autonomies being broader than others.³⁸ The virtual collapse of the state, however, made many liberals cautious about decentralization. By August 1917, the SRs appeared to remain the only major party to genuinely support national and regional autonomy, which boosted their popularity among Siberian regionalists and minority nationalists. The SRs were a majority at the Siberian Regional Congress (Tomsk, 8–17 October 1917), which reaffirmed the claims to Siberia’s legislative, executive, and judiciary autonomy in the future Russian federative republic and ensured the right to cultural national (extraterritorial) and territorial autonomy for minorities.³⁹

³⁶ “Stalin’s ‘Autonomization’ Plan,” in Moshe Lewin, ed., *Lenin’s Last Struggle* (Ann Arbor, 2005), 145–7; Stalin, “Marksizm i natsionalnyi vopros.”

³⁷ Ivan Sablin, *Governing Post-imperial Siberia and Mongolia, 1911–1924: Buddhism, Socialism and Nationalism in State and Autonomy Building* (London, 2016).

³⁸ E. K. Breshko-Breshkovskaia, *Chto delat’ v Uchreditel’nom sobranii* (What Is to Be Done in the Constituent Assembly) (Moscow, 1917), 6–7; M. V. Vishniak, *Avtonomiia i federatsiia* (Autonomy and Federation) (Petrograd, 1917), 22–6, 31–2.

³⁹ Paul Dotsenko, *The Struggle for a Democracy in Siberia, 1917–1920: Eyewitness Account of a Contemporary* (Stanford, 1983), 6; V. A. Drobchenko and E. I. Cherniak, “S”ezdy,

It was the experience of their rivals and the postimperial armed struggle, involving the formation of one of the largest centers of anti-Bolshevik forces on the basis of the Siberian polity, which made the Bolsheviks review their attitudes toward autonomy and decentralization and establish the Soviet Russian Republic as a “federation of Soviet national republics” based “on the free union of free nations.” The “workers and peasants of each nation” could decide in what form to participate in the federal government and other federal institutions, if at all.⁴⁰

The legal language, however, remained fuzzy, making the established model unintelligible, if not self-contradictory. The 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR stated that the *soviets* of the regions, which were special in terms of economy and national composition, could unite into autonomous regional unions that were part of the RSFSR based on the principle of federation.⁴¹ There was nothing about national autonomous republics in the 1918 Constitution, even though several Soviet republics had already been created, with the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Republic, established on 30 April 1918, being the first one. In late 1918 another form of autonomy, the labor commune, was introduced. Since 1920, the autonomous region became the most widely used form of autonomy. Between 1917 and 1924, the People’s Commissariat for Nationalities under Stalin fostered interactions between the newly established autonomies and the central government. By 30 December 1922, when the USSR was created, there were eight autonomous republics, twelve autonomous regions, and two labor communes in the RSFSR.⁴²

konferentsii i soveshchaniia v Tomskoi gubernii kak pokazatel’ obshchestvenno-politicheskoi aktivnosti mass v marte-oktiabre 1917 g.” (Congresses, Conferences, and Meetings in the Tomsk Province as a Marker of Civic and Political Activism of the Masses in March–October 1917), *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 383 (2014), 99–106; I. A. Iakushev, “Fevral’skaia revoliutsiia i sibirskie oblastnye s’ezdy: k istorii oblastnogo dvizheniia v Sibiri” (The February Revolution and Siberian Regional Congresses: On the History of the Regionalist Movement in Siberia), in I. A. Iakushev, ed., *Volnaia Sibir’*, vol. 2 (Prague, 1927), 13–40, at 23; I. V. Nam and E. I. Cherniak, eds., *Kul’turno-natsional’naia avtonomiia v istorii Rossii: dokumental’naia antologiia* (Cultural National Autonomy in Russian History: A Documentary Anthology), vol. 1, *Sibir’, 1917–1920* (Tomsk, 1998), 276–8.

⁴⁰ G. D. Obichkin, S. N. Valk, L. S. Gaponenko, A. A. Novosel’skii and M. D. Stuchebnikova, eds., *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti* (Decrees of the Soviet Government), vol. 1 (Moscow, 1957), 321–3.

⁴¹ Konstitutsiia (Osnovnoi zakon) Rossiiskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Federativnoi Sovetskoi Respubliki (Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic) (1918), *Moscow State University*, at www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/cnst1918.htm, accessed 8 Nov. 2015.

⁴² A. S. Enukidze, ed., *Atlas Soiuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik* (Atlas of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) (Moscow, 1928).

The RSFSR was not the only space of postimperial experimentation with autonomy between the October Revolution of 1917 and the formation of the USSR in 1922. The Far Eastern Republic (FER), formed in 1920 and controlled by the Bolsheviks until its unification with the RSFSR in 1922, adopted a constitution in 1921 in which there were two types of autonomy, territorial for the Buryats and extraterritorial cultural–national for the Ukrainians, Jews, “Turk-Tatars” (Tatars and Bashkirs), Koreans, and any other national communities that reached the necessary population size (with the exception of the numerous Chinese, who were largely denied citizenship).⁴³

Although the FER policy makers claimed to have drafted the first “organic” law of cultural national autonomy in the world, the Constitution of the UPR adopted on 29 April 1918, was the first to institutionalize non-territorial national disentanglement in the form of national personal autonomy and establish national unions for extraterritorial communities.⁴⁴ Apart from the UPR, non-territorial autonomy for the Jewish population was institutionalized in Latvia and Lithuania in 1919. In Lithuania a system of Jewish communities under the leadership of the Jewish National Council and the Ministry of Jewish Affairs was formed; the autonomy also included religious matters. The same year the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which was enacted in 1920, proclaimed the right of minorities in Austria to “to establish, manage and control at their own expense charitable, religious and social institutions, schools and other educational establishments.”⁴⁵

The 1924 Constitution of the USSR provided at least three different models of non-sovereign nationhood within the new polity: union republics, autonomous republics within union republics, and autonomous regions. The constituents of the USSR—the Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Transcaucasian republics (with the first and the last being federations)—retained nominal sovereignty and the right to leave the union, while the autonomies participated in forming

⁴³ *Osnovnoi zakon (Konstitutsiia) Daĭ nevoistochnoi Respubliki, utverzhen Uchreditel'nyĭm sobranieĭ Daĭ nego Vostoka 27 apreliia 1921 g.* (Fundamental Law (Constitution) of the Far Eastern Republic, Adopted by the Constituent Assembly of the Far East on 27 April 1921) (Chita, 1921).

⁴⁴ *Konstytutsiia Ukrain'skoi Narodnoi Respubliki (Statut pro derzhavnyi ustrii, prava i vil'nosti UNR)* (Constitution of the Ukrainian People's Republic (Statute on the State System, Rights, and Freedoms of the UPR)) (1918), in Pavlo Khristiuk, ed., *Zamitki i materialy do istorii ukrainskoi revoliutsii, 1917–1920 rr.* (Essays and Materials on the History of the Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1920) (New York, 1969), 73–9.

⁴⁵ Ephraim Nimni, *National Cultural Autonomy and Its Contemporary Critics* (London, 2005); Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Austria (1919), *Australian Treaty Series*, at www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1920/3.html, accessed 8 Nov. 2015.

the supreme authorities. Together with the goal of making the USSR the World Socialist Soviet Republic, this appealed to Lenin's initial plan to provide an alternative to the capitalist League of Nations.⁴⁶

The second part of the Constitution, the Union Treaty, however, left union republics with limited competence—with the supreme union bodies retaining control over international relations, economic and financial planning, the military, land use, labor regulations, the judiciary, education, health care, statistics, citizenship, and other matters. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks ensured the dominance of the RSFSR in the new republic. Both the Congress of Soviets of the USSR and the Central Executive Committee, which was the supreme government body between the congresses, were formed proportionally to the population, in which the RSFSR was a majority. The Council of Nationalities, part of the Central Executive Committee together with the proportional Union Council, was formed largely by the representatives of the RSFSR. The autonomous republics of the RSFSR had five representatives each—like union republics—while the autonomous republics of Adjara and Abkhazia in Georgia had only one representative each, just like autonomous regions. Having the largest number of autonomies, the RSFSR outnumbered other union republics in the Council of Nationalities.⁴⁷ Paraphrasing Max Weber, we may call the established structure *Scheinautonomismus* or sham autonomism.⁴⁸ Yet the limited decentralization and institutionalization of a couple of dozen postimperial nations was very far from the initial Bolshevik homogenization plan.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the expectations of the international observers and Lenin's own statements in 1917, the transformed Russian Empire took the form of an ethno-national federation. When turning from revolutionaries and social critics into policy makers, the Bolsheviks had to acknowledge the persistence of decentralization in debates and politics that loomed large during the 1905 Revolution, continued in the State Duma, and served as the basis for political action across the collapsing empire in 1917. Consequently, the USSR appeared to be a radical departure from the Russian Empire of the Duma period only

⁴⁶ Osnovnoi zakon (Konstitutsiia) Soiuzu Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik (Fundamental Law (Constitution) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), (1924), *Moscow State University*, at www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/cnst1924.htm, accessed 8 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Max Weber, "Russlands Übergang zum Scheinkonstitutionalismus" (Russia's Transition to Sham Constitutionalism), *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 23/1, Beilage (1906), 165–401.

on paper. The Bolsheviks did not go as far as the SRs in ensuring national self-government: despite the inclusion of the right to secession in the Constitution, the central authorities retained tremendous control over local affairs. The creation of a parallel party structure with its own hierarchies and logic made the Soviet federation more constrained than even the liberal visions of limited local self-government and autonomy. Finally, the political architecture of the Soviet Union was based on the practices of rejecting “bourgeois” representation: sham democracy with unequal representation, the dominance of the RSFSR, and ultimately full subordination of the supposedly legislative congresses of soviets to the executive bodies *de jure* and party agencies *de facto*.

At the same time, the USSR proved to be a durable environment for the retention of particularisms and the development of postimperial nationalisms, as Ronald Suny demonstrated.⁴⁹ The transformed imperial space did not immediately break up into independent nation-states, as in the case of the Habsburg Empire; nor did it turn into a single violently homogenizing nation-state like the Ottoman Empire. The experience of the USSR was used in the protracted transformation of the Qing Empire/Republic of China/People’s Republic of China, but with considerable limitation of the federalist element. China only included several autonomies, remaining at the same time a unitary state. Last, but not least, the Russian Federation was built on the legacies of the debates and politics of 1905–24, which persisted despite the breakup of the Soviet Union.

⁴⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993).