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THE VALUE AND THE LIMITS
OF A COMPARATIVE APPROACH
TO THE HISTORY OF CONTIGUOUS EMPIRES
ON THE EUROPEAN PERIPHERY

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COMPARING CONTIGUOUS EMPIRES

The idea that the contiguous empires of the Romanovs, Habsburgs and Ottomans should be compared to each other as traditional polities that became more and more outdated over the last two centuries of their existence has been common wisdom for a long time. It fitted perfectly the grand narrative of the decline and fall of empires, rooted in the writing of Gibbon. It is, however, surprising, how little historians have done in the previous decades to make such a comparison. If comparisons were indeed made, in most cases, they embraced only the Romanov and Habsburg Empires.¹ Only recently did the Ottoman Empire become more involved in such comparative analysis. Almost totally (and undeservingly) missing from the comparative perspective on contiguous empires has been the German Reich or the Hohenzollern Empire.²

In recent years, we observe a growing interest in a comparative approach to the history of empires in general and to contiguous empires

¹ What comes to mind are articles by John-Paul Himka, Paul Robert Magocsi, Sergei Romanenko, Istvan Deak and Miroslav Hroch in Richard L. Rudolph and David F. Good, eds., *Nationalism and Empire. The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union* (New York, 1994) and articles by Orest Subtelny and György Köver in Teruyuki Hara and Kimitaka Matsuzato, eds., *Empire and Society*, ed. Teruyuki Hara and Kimitaka Matsuzato (Sapporo, 1997). See also Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, eds., *After Empire. Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder, Co., 1997).

² See Philipp Ther, "Imperial instead of National History: Positioning Modern German History on the Map of European Empires," in *Imperial Rule*, ed. A. Miller and Alfred J. Rieber (Budapest, New York, 2004), pp. 47-69.

in particular. The main methodological innovation of the new research is that the focus of comparison has moved from the traditional elements and characteristics of the empires to the patterns of their responses and adaptations to the challenges of modernity. The Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov Empires faced similar challenges of modernity and survival in the highly competitive environment of the more developed empires. All of them became gradually involved in the economic world system, in which they were assigned peripheral or semi-peripheral roles. All of them tried to survive by adopting new techniques of imperial management and the mobilization of resources, while maintaining some elements of the traditional regime and its social order. These empires are now increasingly seen as empires in transformation. Some prefer to speak about different (multiple) modernities, represented by these and other peripheral polities.³ Whether historians continue to call these empires (as regards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) traditional or not, all agree that it would be a mistake to see even the Ottoman Empire of the nineteenth century, let alone the Habsburg and Romanov Empires, as a strictly traditional polity, totally deprived of the features of a modern state.⁴ The eighteenth century in all contiguous empires also witnessed some serious changes and even organized reforms, which aimed at building a modern state and bureaucracy, and included the first steps for the promotion of an elite by education in addition to an elite by birth.

On the other hand, although the modernizing agendas of these contiguous empires had some common features, we should keep in mind how different their reactions were, both in strategy and in results. The tendency to “normalize” the history of these polities, particularly that of the Romanov and Ottoman Empires, and to overestimate their success in adapting to modernity is a new extreme in historiography. Only a decade ago, there was almost total negation of their ability to adapt and change, now we are witnessing the opposite extreme.⁵

³ See Samuel Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities in the Era of Globalization,” *Daedalus* 129: 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 1-29.

⁴ See, e.g., Selim Deringil, “‘They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery’: the Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (2003), pp. 311-342

⁵ See Boris Mironov, *Sotsial'naiia istoriia Rossii perioda imperii (XVIII – nachalo XXv)* (St. Petersburg, 1999), for some striking examples of this trend of “normalizing” Russian history.

When comparing the modernizing economic efforts undertaken by these empires, we should also keep in mind difficulties in measuring their effectiveness. For example, it is obvious that the level of dependency of the Sublime Porte on her foreign creditors was higher than that of Russia. However, it is hard to estimate to what extent Russia's qualitatively higher level of economic independence was due to her more effective financial policy, and to what extent it was a result of her success on the battlefield. Military strength and a better strategic position allowed Russia to borrow new money on better conditions than was possible for the Ottomans. It was not only that money influenced military potential, but also that higher military potential helped some empires to obtain a better position in the economic world system.

Another problem when estimating the backwardness and traditional character of these polities is that in speaking about traditional contiguous empires, historians used to imply total opposition to their modern maritime rivals. In reality, these "modern" sea-based empires had plenty of elements of traditional social order or patterns of rule, not only in colonies overseas, but also in their core-areas. That is particularly true of Spain, but to some extent also of France and Britain. Generally, this means that the concepts of "traditional" and "modern" have become more problematic and that they should not be simplistically attributed exclusively to contiguous or maritime empires.

The area to which comparative methods have been applied most intensively and productively is probably the history of elites in contiguous empires. Some very interesting, although not necessarily unquestionable, comparative observations about the mobilized diasporas in the Ottoman and Romanov Empires were made by John Armstrong.⁶ An important contribution to the topic was the volume edited by Andreas Kappeler and Fikret Adanir.⁷ A set of comparative-oriented case studies on the elites of all three empires has appeared recently in Russian.⁸ The

⁶ John A. Armstrong, "Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas," *The American Political Science Review* 70 (1976), pp. 393-408.

⁷ Andreas Kappeler (ed.) in collaboration with Fikret Adanir and Alan O'Day, *The Formation of National Elites* (New York, 1992; Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850-1940, Vol. 6).

⁸ Khans Peter Khee (Hans Peter Hye), "Elity i imperskie elity v Gabsburgskoi imperii, 1815-1914" (pp. 150-176); Selchuk Akshin Somel' (Selcuk Aksin Somel), "Osmanskaia Imperiia:

most important summarizing contribution to the field is a comparative synthetic paper on the elites of contiguous empires by Andreas Kappeler.⁹ The interest in elites is part of a more general trend, which calls attention to the patterns of imperial rule, to the fluctuations from indirect to direct rule and back to indirect rule on a new basis, which were so characteristic of all contiguous empires.¹⁰ Another promising trend, which could soon bring interesting results, is the comparative research of the religious policies of these empires, including conversion and apostasy.¹¹

An important methodological aspect of the new research is attention to the processes of interaction among multiple actors, both central and local: in other words, the use (also in comparative perspective) of a situational approach.¹² That is also characteristic of some new research into the history of national movements in empires. Previously, many of these studies tended to concentrate almost exclusively on a particular national movement, marginalizing the role of the imperial center. Bringing empire back is an important change in the new approach to the history of nationalism. This means that national movements are now seen in interaction with local and central authorities, and with other (sometimes rival) national movements. It is exactly this focus on the interactions of multiple actors concerning loyalties, identity formation and nationalist

Mestnye elity i mekhanizmy ikh integratsii" (pp. 177-205); Aleksandr Kamenskii, "Elity Rossiiskoi Imperii i mekhanizmy administrativnogo upravleniia" (pp. 115-139), in *Rossiiskaia Imperiia v sravnitel'noi perspektive. Sbornik statei*, ed. Aleksei Miller (Moscow, 2004).

⁹ Andreas Kappeler, "Imperiales Zentrum und Eliten der Peripherie," contribution to a project, conducted by the Historical Commission of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, "Rulers and Ruled in Continental European Empires in Comparison, 1700-1920."

¹⁰ See Alexey Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, "Introduction," in *Imperial Rule*, ed. Miller and Rieber, pp. 1-6. The Austrian Academy of Sciences will soon publish the materials of the project "Rulers and Ruled in Continental European Empires in Comparison, 1700-1920," which also focused on this topic.

¹¹ See Paul W. Werth, "Schism Once Removed: Sects, State Authority and Meanings of Religious Toleration in Imperial Russia," (pp. 85-108) and Selim Deringil, "Redefining Identities in the Late Ottoman Empire: Policies of Conversion and Apostasy," (pp. 109-134) in *Imperial Rule*, ed. Miller and Rieber.

¹² On the situational approach, see Alexey Miller, "Between Local and Interimperial. Russian Imperial History in Search for Scope and Paradigm," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5:1 (2004), pp. 1-26, esp. 8-18.

agendas with their possible alternative outcomes that allows us to grasp the fabric of imperial history.¹³

BEYOND TRADITIONAL COMPARISON

An important achievement of recent years is the understanding that we should go beyond a traditional comparison of contiguous empires, and also compare land-based empires to maritime empires. Such a comparison can be particularly fruitful when we address the issue of nation-building in the core areas of empires. Ronald Suny argues convincingly that many of the oldest nation-states of our time, including France, began their historic evolution as heterogeneous dynastic conglomerates with the characteristics of an imperial relationship between the metropolis and the periphery. Only after the hard work of nationalizing homogenization were hierarchical empires transformed in their core areas into relatively egalitarian nation-states based on a horizontal notion of equal citizenship.¹⁴

“‘The nation-state’ has become too centered in conceptions of European history since the late eighteenth century, and ‘empire’ not centered enough.” This very important methodological observation was formulated by Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper in connection with maritime empires.¹⁵ “We are accustomed to the idea that Spain created its empire, but it is more useful to work with the idea that the empire created Spain,” wrote Henry Kamen recently.¹⁶ This theoretical

¹³ See more in Alexei Miller, *The Ukrainian Question. The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2003), pp. 2-38; idem, “Shaping Russian and Ukrainian Identities in the Russian Empire During the Nineteenth Century: Some Methodological Remarks,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 49: 4 (2001), pp. 257-263.

¹⁴ Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, ‘National’ Identity, and Theories of Empire” in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald G. Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford, 2001), p. 27.

¹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony. Rethinking a Research Agenda” in Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, eds., *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1997), p. 22.

¹⁶ Henry Kamen, *Spain’s Road to Empire: The Making of a World Power* (London, 2002). Quotation comes from Ronald Wright, “For a wild surmise,” *TLS*, December 20, 2002, p. 3.

premise is also valid for Russia and Hungary as Habsburgian subempire after 1867, and is also helpful in an interpretation of the policies of the Young Turks.

I would argue that it was exactly this lack of a comparative perspective that caused the inability of many historians of the Romanov Empire to recognize the very important fact that the Russian nation-building project did distinguish between the Empire and Russian national territory.¹⁷

There are many more areas where comparison of land-based and maritime empires can be productive. Steven Velychenko has demonstrated how instructive a quantitative comparison of imperial bureaucracy and army can be.¹⁸

Wayne Dowler and other students of Russian imperial politics regarding the schooling of Muslim populations compare them to the politics of the French and Britons regarding the schooling of their Muslim subjects in Africa and India.¹⁹ These studies remind us of the very

For a similar argument on Britain, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707-1837* (London, 1992).

¹⁷ For examples of how the works of Eugen Weber (*Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*. Stanford: Cal., 1976), Linda Colley (*Britons. Forging a Nation*), Michael Hechter (*Internal Colonialism. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development. 1556-1966*. Berkeley, 1975) and other students of nation-building in the core areas of maritime empires can help the analysis of Russian nationalism, see Miller, *The Ukrainian Question...* and A. Miller. "The Empire and the Nation in the Imagination of Russian Nationalism," in *Imperial Rule*, ed. Miller and Rieber, pp. 9-27. See also in the same volume Sebastian Balfour, "The Spanish Empire and its End: a Comparative View in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe," pp. 153-162; and Steven Velychenko, "Empire Loyalism and Minority Nationalism in Great Britain and Imperial Russia, 1707 to 1914: Institutions, Laws, and Nationality in Scotland and Ukraine," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39: 3 (July 1997), pp. 413-441. At the same time, one should keep in mind that such comparisons can be very misleading, if they are not based on a proper knowledge of the Russian material. See, for example, the misinterpretation of the Russian case in Krishan Kumar, "Nation and Empire: English and British National Identity in Comparative Perspective," *Theory and Society* 29:5 (2000), pp. 579-608, esp. pp. 584-588.

¹⁸ Stephen Velychenko, "The Bureaucracy, Police and Army in Twentieth-Century Ukraine. A Comparative Quantitative Study," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 23:3-4 (1999), pp. 63-103; idem, "The Size of the Imperial Russian Bureaucracy and Army in Comparative Perspective," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 49:3 (2001), pp. 346-62.

¹⁹ Wayne Dowler, *Classroom and Empire: The Politics of Schooling Russia's Eastern Nationalities, 1860-1917* (Toronto, 2001); Robert P. Geraci, *Window to the East. National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, 2001).

important fact that what we are comparing are not isolated entities. The Russian government sent several experts on official and non-official missions to French and British colonies to study their experiences. Closely related to these studies is another interesting comparison, that of the western and Russian versions of orientalism.²⁰

There are many other examples of the transfer of imperial expertise and colonial institutions. One such study has been recently conducted by Ilya Vinkovetsky, who wrote a history of the Russian-American Company, which was run on the principles of British colonial trade companies. A comparative perspective allows Vinkovetsky to analyze the mutations of an institution in a different institutional and cultural environment.²¹

Last but by no means least, I should mention the work of Dominic Lieven, who brilliantly compares the geopolitical strategies of land-based and maritime empires.²² Lieven also contributed some important comparative observations on the internal politics of maritime and land-base empires. He argues that common to all empires was the “key dilemma ... how, on the one hand, to hold together polities of great territory, population and therefore power, and, on the other, to square this priority with satisfying the demands of nationalism, democracy and economic dynamism.”²³

²⁰ Nathaniel Knight, “Grigor’ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?” *Slavic Review* 59:1 (2000), pp. 74-100; idem, “On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 1:4 (2000), pp. 701-715; Adeeb Khalid, “Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:4 (2000), pp. 691-699; Maria Todorova, “Does Russian Orientalism Have a Russian Soul? A Contribution to the Debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:4 (2000), pp. 717-727.

²¹ Ilya Vinkovetsky, “The Russian-American Company as a Colonial Contractor for the Russian Empire,” in *Imperial Rule*, ed. Miller and Rieber, pp. 163-178.

²² See his opus magnum: Dominic Lieven, *Empire. The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London, 2000); idem, “Empire on Europe’s Periphery: Russian and Western Comparisons,” in *Imperial Rule*, ed. Miller and Rieber, pp. 135-152.

²³ Dominic Lieven, “Dilemmas of Empire 1850-1918. Power, Territory, Identity,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34: 2 (1999), p. 165.

In sum, such research was instrumental in the destruction of a “Berlin wall” between maritime and land-based empires, which seemed so solid in the historical writings of the previous decades.

Another important extension of the comparative approach is the inclusion into the comparative perspective of some more distant (from the European perspective) empires. A recent article of Alfred Rieber demonstrates how one can compare not only the complex frontiers of the Ottoman, Romanov, and Habsburg Empires, but also of the Chinese and Persian Empires.²⁴

BEYOND COMPARISON: TOWARDS ENTANGLED HISTORIES

When studying the nationality politics and processes of nation-building, at least in the nineteenth century, it is important to speak of the *macrosystem* of the continental empires of the Romanovs, Habsburgs, Hohenzollerns, and Ottomans. The first two had extensive and rather mobile (both in reality and potentially) borders with all the other empires of this macrosystem, and the latter two, with the Romanovs and the Habsburgs.

Several factors had significance with regard to this interaction. The first was a religious factor. The Romanov Empire put herself forward as the protector of all Orthodox believers, both inside and outside its borders. The Sublime Porte played the same role in relation to Muslims. The Habsburgs protected Catholics, and Vienna often worked hand in hand with the Vatican, including its politics concerning the Greek Catholics.²⁵ Repressive policies directed against Catholics in Germany (*Kulturkampf*, which particularly targeted Poles), and anti-Polish politics towards

²⁴ Alfred J. Rieber, “Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers,” in *Imperial Rule*, ed. Miller and Rieber, pp. 179-210. See also an interesting recent attempt to compare property (rights and institutions) in the Ottoman and Chinese Empires in Huri Islamoglu, ed., *Constituting Modernity: Private Property in the East and West* (New York, 2004).

²⁵ For a demonstration of how the triangular relationship of Vienna – Vatican – Petrograd operated during the First World War, see Aleksandra Iu. Bakhturina, *Politika Rossiiskoi imperii v Vostochnoi Galitsii v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow, 2000).

Catholics and Greek-Catholics in Russia influenced Habsburg attitudes toward its Protestant, Greek-Catholic and Orthodox populations. In the earlier period, the relative tolerance of the treatment of Protestants by the Habsburgs resulted from the necessity to fight for their loyalty with the Ottomans, who adopted a favorable attitude towards Protestants. It was only after the defeat of the Porte army (with many Hungarian Protestants in its ranks) near Vienna that the Habsburgs could afford to crush the Protestants in their empire.

The second important factor was that of the pan-ethnic ideologies: pan-Slavism, pan-Germanism, and pan-Turkism. These ideologies attempted to utilize religious factors for their own goals, but even in the cases of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism, which were very closely connected, they had their own significant differences.

If Russia undertook a war for the "hearts and souls" of the Slavs of the Ottoman empire, often under the banner of pan-Slavism, then the Porte struggled for the loyalty of the Muslim subjects of the tsar. It is not accidental that Kemal Karpat, author of a wide-ranging monograph, *The Politicization of Islam*, gives his chapter on the "Formation of the contemporary nation" the subtitle "Turkism and pan-Islamism in the Russian and Ottoman Empires."²⁶ The processes that took place among the Muslims of the two empires were indeed intricately connected. Emigrants from Russia were no less involved in the foundation of the pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic movements than the Ottoman subjects. Moreover, because of the large Arab population in the Ottoman Empire, pan-Turkism long remained a more suitable item for export than for internal consumption in the Ottoman domains.

Pan-Slavism was addressed to the Habsburgian Slavs no less than to the Ottomans. Czechs and Slovaks, not to mention Galician Rusyns, were at times quite receptive to this propaganda. In its neo-Slavist version, it even gained the attention of the Prussian Poles in the early twentieth century. Pan-Germanism was another challenge for the Habsburgs since they had lost their quest for the leading role in the German unification in 1848 and, finally, in 1866 after the Battle of Sadova. This was because pan-Germanism was putting a huge question mark over the loyalty of

²⁶ Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam. Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 276 and 286. The importance of this factor has been noted by Geraci in his *Window to the East*, p. 279.

the Austrian Germans to the house of the Habsburgs. In 1867, Austrian Prime Minister Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust argued that if the Slavs were also included in the projected national compromise, German-Austrians would be reduced to a neglected minority and would begin to orient themselves politically towards Prussia. Thus, this dualism was to a large extent a by-product of the Prussian unification of Germany on the one hand and a fear of pan-Slavism on the other.²⁷

However, pan-Germanism was also a challenge to the Romanovs. Prussia's unification of Germany not only prompted Russian nationalists and the authorities of the Russian Empire to understand the need to accelerate their own plans for consolidation of the eastern Slavs into a single imperial nation. Pan-Germanism was supposed to claim, sooner than later, the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire as a part of a greater Germany. Moreover, the loyalties of the numerous German-origin Russian subjects, irrespective of whether they were Baltic nobles, so important in ruling the empire since the beginning of the eighteenth century, or peasant colonists, who populated strategically important regions of the Empire, including her western and southern frontiers began to be questioned. It was precisely since the 1880s, after the unification of Germany and the formation of the anti-Russian bloc of Central powers, that Baltic Germans ceased to be a problem of the *frondeur* Russian nobility (from General Ermolov to the Slavophile Iurii Samarin) and became a major factor in the authorities' geopolitical fears and plans. Armstrong was correct in that it was the rise of the second Reich that triggered the gradual decline of the multimillion German diaspora in all of Eastern Europe, and first of all in the Romanov Empire.²⁸ Moreover, during World

²⁷ Joseph Redlich, *Das österreichische Staats- und Reichsproblem* (Leipzig, 1920), vol. 2, p. 559 ff., as quoted in Kann, *Das Nationalitätenproblem*, vol. 2, p. 143 f. See also the comment by Heinrich Lutz in *Die Donaumonarchie und die südslawische Frage von 1848 bis 1918. Texte des Ersten österreichisch-jugoslawischen Historikertreffens*, Gössin, 1976, ed. Adam Wandruszka et al., (Vienna, 1978), p. 58 f. See also Fikret Adanir, "Religious Communities and Ethnic Groups under Imperial Sway: Ottoman and Habsburg Lands in Comparison," in *The Historical Practice of Diversity: Transcultural Interactions from the Early Modern Mediterranean to the Postcolonial World*, ed. Dirk Hoerder, Christiane Harzig, and Adrian Shubert (New York, 2003), pp. 54-86.

²⁸ Armstrong, "Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas..."

War I, the possessions of Germans, be they alien or Russian subjects, was challenged altogether.²⁹

It is important to recognize that many ethnic and ethno-religious associations inhabited two or three neighboring empires. The outcome of the processes of identity formation and consolidation of the images of national territories in many of these cases depended greatly on the macrosystem-scale interactions taking place amongst the continental empires.³⁰

The loyalty of these ethno-social groups, whose national identity was relatively longstanding and stable (the Germans, the Polish *szlachta*, the Jews) can also be understood only in the context of the macrosystem. The political hesitations of the Polish elite are well known, relying at various times on their connections with Berlin, Vienna and St. Petersburg. It is also well known that the loyalty of the Jews to Austro-Hungary during World War I is to a great extent explained by their understanding of tsarist policies in relation to the Jews and their situation in Russia.

It is also important to realize that it was not only ideas or material assistance for foreign supporters that were transferred across the borders of these neighboring empires. Another aspect of interaction among these empires was the movement of populations, either organized and conducted from above or taking more spontaneous forms from below. The contiguous borders of these empires were military frontiers, drawn and redrawn on the basis of conquest. They did not embody either natural or national principles. In order to secure them, imperial rulers frequently resorted to resettlement, deportation and colonization. Foreign and internal wars displaced peoples or stimulated their emigration to join their confrères, ethnic or religious. Very often, massive migrations took place also in peaceful times. Examples abound: the migration of russophile Rusyns from Galicia to the Russian Empire, of Ukrainian nationalists from Russia to Galicia, of Poles and Jews from the Russian to the German Empire and then their exclusion back again, of Muslims from the Russian to the Ottoman Empire (the so-called *mukhadzir* movement) and of Balkan Slavs (mainly Bulgarians and Serbs) in the opposite direction,³¹

²⁹ See Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge: Mass., 2003).

³⁰ Such examples include Romanians, Azeris, Ukrainians, Tatars, Lithuanians, just to name a few within the borders of the Romanov Empire.

³¹ On some aspects of these migrations, which sometimes looked like an organized exchange

of German and in much fewer, but still significant, numbers, Czech colonists into the Russian Empire. These movements strongly influenced the formation of separate cultural enclaves, and in some cases, also the identification processes in the areas from which people migrated,³² and inevitably the political temper and politics of the imperial centers.

The interaction and mutual dependence of the four neighboring continental empires suggests the importance of treating them not only as distinctive units of comparison but also as a macrosystem. The empires of the modern era are all tied together by military and economic competition and by the transfer of expertise in various spheres. However, the specific characteristics of the entangled histories of neighboring contiguous empires distinguish them from the competitive relationships of other continental and overseas empires. The dense and diverse interaction in the area of national politics between these empires bears a qualitatively different character compared with the geopolitical competition of those empires not coterminous with their rivals. Ronald Suny once remarked that for contiguous empires, pursuing different policies in the core and the periphery was far more difficult than for noncontiguous empires.³³ We can go further, saying that for neighboring contiguous empires, it was more difficult: (A) to pursue their nationality policies within their borders without influencing their neighbors; and (B) to project influence outside their borders without serious consequences for their domestic policies.

A perfect illustration of Point A would be the unification of Germany by Prussia, which had immediate and far-reaching influence on the nationality politics of all its neighbors. Here are a few examples to illustrate Point B. If Great Britain had decided to support the struggle of the mountain tribes of the Caucasus against the Romanov Empire, this

of population, see an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Mark Pincel, "Demographic Warfare – an Aspect of Ottoman and Russian Policy, 1854-1866," Harvard University, 1970.

³² See, for example, John-Paul Himka, "The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus': Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions," in *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, ed. Michael Kennedy and Ronald G. Suny (Ann Arbor, 1999), pp. 109-64, and Veronika Wendland, *Die Russophilen in Galizien. Ukrainische Konservative zwischen Osterreich und Russland, 1848-1915* (Vienna, 2001), which highlight the mechanisms and significance of such an exchange between Galicia and "Russian" Ukraine.

³³ Ronald G. Suny, "The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, 'National' Identity, and Theories of Empire," in *A State of Nations*, ed. Suny and Martin, pp. 29-30.

decision would have had no influence on how she dealt with her “own” Muslims. If France at one time or another had supported the Poles, this would have had little impact on her political relations with her own population, be it on the continent or in the colonies. However if the Habsburg Empire had encouraged the Polish or Ukrainian movements in the Russian Empire, it would have been obliged to adjust its policies toward its “own” Poles and Rusyns-Ukrainians.

A telling example of this dilemma is the policy of the Romanov Empire towards the Armenian church after the annexation in 1828 from Persia of the seat of the Supreme Patriarch of all the Armenians in Echmiatsin. Since then, St. Petersburg used its control over the spiritual center of the Armenians to project influence over the Armenian population of the Ottoman and Persian Empires. As Paul Werth in his study of this policy stresses, “upholding and enhancing the prestige of the Catholicos [supreme bishop] abroad required the imperial government to make substantial compromises in the administration of Armenian religious affairs within the Russian empire. In essence, there was a crucial contradiction between St. Petersburg’s ideal standards of confessional administration, on the one hand, and arrangements that would maximize the authority of the Catholicos abroad, on the other.” He reaches the conclusion that St. Petersburg always opted to sacrifice these ideal standards of internal imperial confessional administration for the more effective use of the Patriarchate in foreign policy.³⁴

This macrosystem was internally stable for a rather long time because, no matter how often it came to war between them, all these empires respected certain conventional limitations in their mutual rivalry. Generally speaking, they did not aim to destroy their neighbors, to a large extent because the three of them required cooperation in dealing with the legacies of the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was in the course of preparations for the Great War and during it that the empires started to play the ethnic card against their imperial rivals so actively. This means that much of the strength of the national movements in the region during the war should be attributed to the impact of the empires.

³⁴ Paul Werth, “Imperial Russia and the Armenian Catholicos at Home and Abroad,” in *Reconstruction and Interaction of Slavic Eurasia and its Neighboring Worlds*, ed. Ieda Osamu and Uyama Tomohiko (Sapporo, 2006), pp. 203-235.

The best illustration of this point is the German policy on the occupied western borderlands of the Romanov Empire. The Russian language was outlawed in the whole region, and the Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian languages were promoted in the press and in education. Ukrainian prisoners of war were kept in separate, better supplied, camps, where Ukrainian activists worked with them to propagate Ukrainian national ideology and identity. Later, a separate Ukrainian battalion was formed from among these people. The formation of Belarusian and Lithuanian military units soon followed. At the same time, the Special Political Department was formed in the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Empire with the task of working with the Habsburg prisoners of war of the Slavic, particularly Czech, origin in the hope of preparing them to fight as separate units on the Russian side.³⁵

Thus, the question, to what extent the Nemesis of these empires should be attributed to national movements, and to what extent to the empires themselves, remains open to debate. This also leaves the question of the living potential of these contiguous empires more open than generally thought. In other words, were all these empires on a decline or in crisis on the eve of World War I? Was World War I just the last nail in the coffin of declining polities, or a dramatic clash, which brought all these empires, no matter how "ill," to collapse? In my view, the potential of these empires (with the possible exception of the Sublime Porte) was far from exhausted. They were meeting the challenges of modernity in a way that did not determine their collapse, and it was World War I that made them the prey of history.

³⁵ See more in Alexei Miller, "A Testament of the All-Russian Idea: Foreign Ministry Memoranda to the Imperial, Provisional and Bolshevik Governments," in *Extending the Borders of Russian History. Essays in Honor of Alfred Rieber*, ed. Marsha Seifert (Budapest, 2003), pp. 233-244.