

# Three forms of Russian imperialism: Empire in Russian History

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**Sergey Nikolsky, a Russian philosopher of culture, says that perhaps the most important idea for Russians “from the fall of Byzantium until today is the idea of empire and the fact that they are an imperial nation. We have always known that we live in a country whose history is an unbroken chain of territorial expansion, conquest, annexation, of their defence, of temporary losses and new conquests. The idea of empire was one of the most precious in our ideological baggage and it is this that we proclaim to other nations. It is through it that we surprise, delight or drive mad the rest of the world.”**

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The first and most important characteristic of the Russian empire, says Nikolski, has always been “the maximization of territorial expansion for the realization of economic and political interests, as one of the most important principles of state policy” [1]. This expansion was the result of the permanent and overwhelming predominance of the extensive development of Russia over its intensive development: the predominance of the absolute exploitation of the direct producers over their relative exploitation, that is to say over one based on the increase in labour productivity.

“The Russian Empire was called “the prison of peoples”. We know today that it was not only the state of the Romanovs which deserved this description”, wrote Mikhail Pokrovsky, the greatest Bolshevik historian. He demonstrated that the Grand Duchy of Moscow (1263-1547) and the Tsardom of Russia (1547-1721) were already “prisons of peoples” and that these states were built on the corpses of the *inorodtsy*, the non-Russian indigenous peoples. “It is doubtful whether the fact that in the veins of the Great Russians there runs 80 per cent of their blood is a consolation for those who survived. Only the complete destruction of Great Russian oppression by this force which fought and is still fighting against all oppression, could be a form of compensation for all their sufferings” [2]. These words of Pokrovsky were published in 1933, just after his death and shortly before, at the request of Stalin, in the historic Bolshevik formula “Russia - prison of peoples”, the first word was replaced by another one: Tsarism. Subsequently the Stalinist regime stigmatized the scientific work of Pokrovsky as “an anti-Marxist conception” of the history of Russia [3].

## **Military-feudal imperialism**

Over the centuries, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the peoples who were conquered and annexed by Russia suffered three successive forms of Russian imperialist domination. "Military-feudal imperialism", thus named by Lenin, was the first. It is not uninteresting to discuss what mode of exploitation predominated in it: feudal or tributary, or again, as Yuri Semenov prefers, "politary" [4]. This debate is brought up to the present by the most recent research of Alexander Etkind. It flows from this that it was colonial modes of exploitation that were then dominant: "the Russian Empire was a great colonial system both at its distant frontiers and its dark heartlands", "a colonial empire alongside those of Britain or Austria, *and* a colonized territory like Congo or the West Indies". The key point is that "expanding into huge spaces, Russia colonized its own people. This was the process of internal colonization, the secondary colonization of one's own territory."

It is for this reason, says Etkind, that we need "an understanding of Russian imperialism as an internal, and not only external, affair" [5]. Serfdom - generalized by law in 1649 - had there a character that was just as colonial as black slavery in North America, but it concerned Great-Russian peasants as well as others, considered by Tsarism as "Russian": the "Little Russian" (Ukrainian) and Belarussian peasants. Etkind draws attention to the fact that even in Great Russia, peasant insurrections had an anti-colonial character, and that the wars by which the empire crushed these revolts were colonial. Paradoxically, the imperial centre of Russia was at the same time an internal colonial periphery, within which the exploitation and oppression of the popular masses were more severe than in many conquered and annexed peripheries.

When "capitalist imperialism of the latest type" appeared, Lenin wrote that in the Tsarist empire it was "enmeshed, so to speak, in a particularly close network of pre-capitalist relations" - so close that "in general, military-feudal imperialism is predominant in Russia". Therefore, he wrote, "in Russia the monopoly of military power, immense territory, or special facilities for pillaging non-Russian indigenous peoples, China, etc., partly complements, partly substitutes the monopoly of modern, up-to-date finance capital" [6]. At the same time, as the least developed imperialism among the six major powers, it was only a sub-imperialism. As Trotsky noted, "Russia paid in this way for her right to be an ally of advanced countries, to import capital and pay interest on it - that is, essentially, for her right to be a privileged colony of her allies - but at the same time for her right to oppress and rob Turkey, Persia, Galicia, and in general the countries weaker and more backward than herself. The twofold imperialism of the Russian bourgeoisie had basically the character of an agency for other mightier world powers" [7].

## **No decolonization without separation**

It was precisely the powerful extra-economic monopolies mentioned by Lenin that guaranteed the continuity of Russian imperialism after the overthrow of capitalism in Russia by the October Revolution. Contrary to previous statements by Lenin, that the norm of the socialist revolution would be the independence of the colonies, only the colonies that the expansion of the Russian Revolution had not reached, or which rejected it, separated from Russia. In many peripheral regions, its expansion had the character of a "colonial revolution" led by Russian settlers and soldiers without the participation of the oppressed peoples, indeed even with the maintenance of the existing colonial relationships. Georgi Safarov described such an unfolding of the revolution in Turkestan [8]. Elsewhere, it had the character of military conquest, and some Bolsheviks (Mikhail Tukhachevsky) quickly concocted a militarist theory of the "revolution from without" [9].

The history of Soviet Russia has negated the opinion of the Bolsheviks, according to which with the

overthrow of capitalism the relations of colonial domination of some peoples over others would disappear and that consequently these peoples could, or even should, remain within the framework of a single state. The “imperialist economism”, denying the right of peoples to self-determination, which (criticized by Lenin) was spreading among the Russian Bolsheviks, was in an extreme manifestation of this. In reality, it is exactly the opposite: the state separation of an oppressed people is the precondition for the destruction of colonial relations, although it does not guarantee it. Vasyl Shakhrai, Bolshevik activist of the Ukrainian revolution, had already understood this in 1918 and he publicly polemicised with Lenin on this question [10]. Many other non-Russian Communists understood it then, especially the leader of the Tatar revolution, Mirsaid Sultan Galiev. He was the first communist to be removed from public political life at the demand of Stalin, in 1923.

In reality, the imperialism based on extra-economic monopolies mentioned by Lenin reproduced itself in many ways, spontaneously and unnoticed, even when it lost its specifically capitalist base. It was for this reason, as Trotsky demonstrated, that in the 1920s Stalin “became the vector of the Great-Russian bureaucratic oppression” and quickly “secured advantages for Great-Russian bureaucratic imperialism” [11]. With the establishment of the Stalinist regime, there was the restoration of the imperialist domination of Russia over all these peoples, previously conquered and colonized, who remained within the borders of the Soviet Union, where they made up half the population, as well as over the new protectorates: Mongolia and Tuva.

### **Rise of bureaucratic imperialism**

This restoration was accompanied by murderous police violence and even genocide - the extermination by famine known in Ukraine as the *Holodomor* and in Kazakhstan as the *Zhasandy Asharshylyk* (1932-1933). The national Bolshevik cadres and the national intelligentsia were exterminated and intensive Russification was begun. Entire small peoples and national minorities were deported (the first big deportation in 1937 concerned Koreans living in the Soviet Far East). Internal colonialism spread once more and “the most terrible of these practices was the exploitation of prisoners of the Gulag, which can be described as an extreme form of internal colonization” [12]. In the same way as under Tsarism, the immigration of the Russian and Russian-speaking population towards the peripheries calmed the tensions and socio-economic crises in Russia, while ensuring Russification of the peripheral republics. Overpopulated, impoverished and starving after the forced collectivization, the Russian countryside massively exported the labour force to the new industrial centres on the periphery of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the authorities hindered the migration towards the towns of the local - non-Russian - population of the countryside.

The colonial division of labour distorted, indeed slowed down development, and sometimes even transformed the republics and peripheral regions into sources of raw materials and zones of monoculture. This was accompanied by a colonial division between the city and the countryside, manual and intellectual, skilled and unskilled, well or badly paid labour, as well as an equally colonial stratification of the state bureaucracy, the working class and entire societies. These divisions and stratifications guaranteed to the ethnically Russian and Russified elements privileged social positions regarding access to income, skills, prestige and power in the peripheral republics. The recognition of ethnic or linguistic “Russianness” in the form of the “public and psychological wage” - a concept that David Roediger has taken from W.E.B. Du Bois and applied in his studies of the white American working class [13] - became an important means of Russian imperialist domination, and of the construction of an imperialist “Russianness” also inside the Soviet working class.

During World War II, the participation of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the struggle for a new division

of the world was an extension of domestic imperialist policy. During the war and after its end, the Soviet Union recovered much of what Russia had lost after the revolution, and also conquered new territories. Its surface grew to over 1.2 million km<sup>2</sup>, reaching 22.4 million km<sup>2</sup>. After the war, the area of the USSR exceeded by 700,000 km<sup>2</sup> that of the Tsarist empire at the end of its existence, and was smaller by 1.3 million km<sup>2</sup> compared to the surface of this empire at the height of its expansion - in 1866, just after the conquest of Turkestan and shortly before the sale of Alaska.

### **Fighting for a new division of the world**

In Europe, the Soviet Union incorporated the western regions of Belarus and Ukraine, Carpatho-Ukraine, Bessarabia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, parts of East Prussia and Finland, and in Asia Tuva and the southern Kuril islands. Its control was extended over the whole of Eastern Europe. The USSR postulated that Libya be placed under its tutelage. It tried to impose a protectorate over the big Chinese border provinces - Xinjiang and Manchuria. In addition, it wanted to annex northern Iran and eastern Turkey, exploiting for that the desire for liberation and unification of many local peoples. According to the Azerbaijani historian Jamil Hasanli, it was in Asia and not in Europe that the "Cold War" began, yet in 1945 [14].

"The parasitic character of the bureaucracy manifests itself, as soon as political conditions permit it, through imperialist plundering", wrote at that time Jean van Heijenoort, former secretary of Trotsky and future historian of mathematical logic. "Does the appearance of elements of imperialism imply the revision of the theory that the USSR is a degenerated workers' state? Not necessarily. The Soviet bureaucracy feeds in general on an appropriation of the work of others, and we have already, long ago, recognized this fact as part and parcel of the degeneration of the workers' state. Bureaucratic imperialism is only a special form of this appropriation" [15].

The Yugoslav Communists became rather quickly convinced that Moscow "wanted to completely subordinate the economy of Yugoslavia and make of it a simple complement providing raw materials to the economy of the Soviet Union, which would hamper industrialization and disrupt the socialist development of the country" [16]. The Soviet-Yugoslav "joint-stock companies" were to monopolize the exploitation of the natural resources of Yugoslavia that Soviet industry needed. Unequal trade between the two countries would guarantee the Soviet economy super-profits at the expense of the Yugoslav economy.

After the break of Yugoslavia with Stalin, Josip Broz Tito said that from the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) and especially after the conference of the "Big Three" in Tehran (1943), the USSR took part in the imperialist division of the world and "is consciously pursuing the old Tsarist road of imperialist expansionism". He also said that the "theory of the leading people within a multinational state" proclaimed by Stalin "is nothing but the expression of the fact of the subjugation, the national oppression and the economic plunder of the other peoples and countries by the leading people" [17]. In 1958, Mao Zedong ironically remarked in a discussion with Khrushchev: "There was a man by the name of Stalin, who took Port Arthur and turned Xinjiang and Manchuria into semi-colonies, and he also created four joint companies. These were all his good deeds" [18].

### **The Soviet Union on the brink of collapse**

Russian bureaucratic imperialism was underpinned by powerful extra-economic monopolies, further strengthened by totalitarian power. But their character was only extra-economic. Because of this it proved too weak or completely incapable of carrying through the Stalinist plans of exploitation of the

satellite countries in Eastern Europe and the border regions of People's China. In the face of the increasing resistance in these countries, the Kremlin bureaucracy had to abandon the "joint-stock companies", unequal trade and the colonial division of labour that it wanted to impose. After the loss of Yugoslavia, from 1948 on, it gradually lost political control over China and some other countries, and had also to weaken its control over others.

Even within the USSR the extra-economic monopolies proved incapable of securing the long-term imperialist domination of Russia over the principal peripheral republics. Industrialization, urbanization, the development of education and more generally the modernization of the peripheries of the Soviet Union, as well as the growing "nationalization" of their working class, of the intelligentsia and of the bureaucracy itself began to change gradually the balance of power between Russia and the peripheral republics in favour of the latter. Moscow's domination over them weakened. The growing crisis of the system accelerated this process, which began to tear the Soviet Union apart. The counter-measures of the central power - such as the overthrow of the regime of Petro Shelest in Ukraine (1972), considered as "nationalist" by the Kremlin - could not reverse this process, nor effectively stop it.

During the second half of the 1970s, the young Soviet sociologist Frants Sheregi tried to observe Soviet reality based on "Marx's theory of classes, combined with the theory of colonial systems". He concluded that "the gradual extension of the national intelligentsia and the bureaucracy (civil servants) of the non-Russian republics, the growth of the working class - in a word, the formation of a more progressive social structure - will lead the national republics to secede from the USSR". A few years later, at the request of the highest authorities of the Soviet Communist Party, he studied the social situation of the teams of young people mobilized by the Komsomol throughout the country to build the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway. This was the famous "construction of the century".

"I became interested", says Sheregi, "in the contradiction that I discovered between the information about the international composition of the builders of the railway, forcefully diffused by official propaganda, and the high level of national uniformity of the construction brigades that arrived." They were almost entirely composed of ethnically and linguistically Russian elements. "I then came to the unexpected conclusion that the Russians (and the "Russophones") were being driven out of the national republics" - driven out by the so-called titular nationalities, for example by the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan.

This was confirmed by research that he conducted into two other major projects in Russia. "The central government knew it and participated in the resettlement of Russians by funding the "shock engineering projects". From this I concluded that since the social funds of the national republics had been depleted, there was a shortage of jobs, including for the representatives of the titular nationalities where social guarantees (crèches, holiday homes, sanatoriums, opportunities for housing) existed; such a situation can cause inter-ethnic antagonisms, so the authorities gradually "repatriated" Russian youth from the national republics. Then I realized that the Soviet Union was on the verge of breaking up" [19].

## **Military-colonial empire**

The crisis of the Soviet bureaucratic regime and of Russian imperialism was so great that to everyone's surprise the USSR collapsed in 1991, not only without a world war, but even without a civil war. Russia lost its outer peripheries, because fourteen non-Russian republics of the Union left it and proclaimed independence - all those who, according to the Soviet Constitution, had this right. This meant a loss of territory, unprecedented in the history of Russia, of an area of 5.3 million km<sup>2</sup>.



But, as noted by Boris Rodoman, an eminent scientist who created the Russian school of theoretical geography, today too "Russia is a military-colonial empire, living at the price of an unbridled waste of biological and human resources, a country of extensive development, in which the extremely wasteful and costly use of land and nature is a common phenomenon". In this domain, as well as in regard to "the migration of populations, the mutual relations between ethnic groups, between the local population and migrants in various regions, between state authorities and the public, the "classic" characteristics of colonialism remain vivid, as in the past".

Russia has remained a plurinational state. It includes twenty one republics of non-Russian peoples, covering almost 30 per cent of its territory. Rodoman writes: "In our country we have an ethnic group bearing its name and providing the official language, as well as many other ethnic groups; some of them have national-territorial autonomy, but do not have the right to leave this pseudo-federation, in other words, they are forced to stay there. More and more often the necessity of the existence of distinct administrative units according to ethnic criteria is put in question; the process of their liquidation has already begun with the autonomous districts. Yet almost no non-Russian people has begun living in Russia as a result of migration; they were not resettled in an existing Russian state - on the contrary, they are peoples conquered by this state, pushed back, partly exterminated, assimilated or deprived of their state. In such a historical context national autonomies, even regardless of to what extent they are real and to what extent only nominal, should be seen as a moral compensation for ethnic groups who have suffered the "trauma of subjugation". In our country the small peoples which do not have national autonomy, or which are deprived of it, disappear quickly (e.g. the Vepsians and the Shors). The indigenous ethnic groups, at the beginning of the Soviet period, constituted a majority in their autonomous units. They are now a minority because of colonization, linked to the appropriation of natural resources, public works, industrialization and militarization. The development of "waste lands", the construction of certain ports and nuclear power plants in the Baltic republics, etc., not only had economic reasons, but also were aimed at the Russification of the border regions of the Soviet Union. After its collapse, the military conflicts in the Caucasus, whose peoples are being held hostage to the imperial policy of "divide and rule", are typical wars to conserve the colonies in an empire that is disintegrating. The extension of its sphere of influence, including the integration of parts of the former Soviet Union, is now a priority of Russian foreign policy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Tsarist Russia, nomadic tribes swore allegiance and their land automatically became Russian; post-Soviet Russia distributes Russian passports to people in countries on its borders..." [20].

### **Restoration of capitalist imperialism**

The restoration of capitalism in Russia has partially complemented and partially substituted the extra-economic monopolies, weakened and truncated after the break-up of the Soviet Union, by a powerful monopoly of finance capital welded to the state apparatus. Russian imperialism, reconstructed on this basis, remains an inextricably internal and external phenomenon, operating on both sides of the borders of Russia, which once more are beginning to be movable. The Russian authorities have built a state mega-corporation which has the monopoly of the internal colonization of Eastern Siberia and the Far East. These regions have oilfields and other great riches. They have privileged access to the new global markets in China and in the Western Hemisphere.

The two regions mentioned may share the fate of Western Siberia. "The federal centre keeps for itself almost all West Siberian oil revenues, not even giving Western Siberia money for the construction of normal roads", wrote the Russian journalist Artem Yefimov a few years ago. "The trouble, as usual, is not colonization, but colonialism", because "it is economic exploitation and not the improvement and development of the territory that is the aim of the corporation mentioned."

“Basically it comes down to admitting that in the country, at the highest level of the state, colonialism reigns. The resemblance of this corporation to the East India Company and other European colonial companies of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries is so obvious that it could be funny” [21].

A year ago, the massive uprising of Ukrainians on the Maidan in Kiev, crowned by the overthrow of the Yanukovich regime, was an attempt by Ukraine to finally break the colonial relationship historically binding it to Russia. We cannot understand the present crisis in Ukraine - the annexation of the Crimea, the separatist rebellion in the Donbass and the Russian aggression against Ukraine - if we do not understand that Russia is still and always an imperialist power.

**Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski**

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## **P.S.**

\* “Russian imperialism”. First published in Polish November 15, 2014 in *Le Monde Diplomatique* - Edycja polska [Polish Edition], N° 11 (105), November 2014.

\* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

\* Kowalewski is author of several works on the history of the Ukrainian national question, published among others by the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. We [IVP] recommend his article “For the independence of Soviet Ukraine”, *International Marxist Review*, Vol. 4, N° 2, Autumn 1989.

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## **Footnotes**

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