3 Imperial Collapse

Although empires do appear to slide down Taagepera's parabolas in the right way and for the right reasons, it is, alas, also true that attrition does not always follow on the heels of decay. However discomfiting theoretically, this fact should not surprise us too much: decay is internal to the workings of empire and as such is more or less indifferent to exogenous goings-on. In contrast, attrition—as a function of war and externally abetted liberation struggles—depends at least in part on an empire's overall geopolitical position and should as a result be susceptible to a variety of intervening variables. Even so, nonattrition is, if not a puzzle, then certainly an anomaly. We shall have to account for it in a manner that pays tribute to the priority of decay *and* that treats exceptions to the rule in a way that either minimizes, if not fully eliminates, the unpredictability of exogenous factors or incorporates them meaningfully into the explanatory narrative.

The three exceptions I consider are the USSR, Austria-Hungary, and Romanov Russia. All decayed, and all experienced various forms of the pathologies identified in chapter 2. But none experienced attrition or as much attrition as we might—counterfactually—have expected. A perfectly plausible reason is that all three empires had actually decayed very little. Taagepera's parabolas show that the Soviet and Russian realms had reached their maximum territorial extent just before they collapsed. One could argue that attrition would have taken place had these empires not encountered cataclysms that destroyed them prematurely, before they began *really* to decay. That Austria had lost much territory in the nineteenth century weakens these

claims. So too one could note that the USSR collapsed as the result not of some outside cataclysm such as war but of an internal stress surge, perestroika.[1] If so, decay must have been highly advanced for a reform program to have destroyed a superpower. These counterarguments can, of course, in turn be countered and, in the final analysis, all one can do is suggest why one's account is both plausible and, perhaps, more plausible. And that entails making the case historically for advanced decay in the Soviet, Habsburg, and Romanov contexts.

The Soviet Empire

The appropriation of lands, at first of the non-Russian territories and later of the east-central European states, took place in the first three decades of the Soviet imperial experiment, between 1917 and 1948. By the early 1950s it appeared that the Soviet empire had achieved near-monolithic unity. The non-Russian republics were bludgeoned into submission during the 1930s, while the satellites, with the exception of Yugoslavia, were Stalinized after the war. Soviet imperial history after Stalin's death, however, is largely a record of steady, and occasionally very convulsive, decay. Three trends stand out.

First, in contrast to the Habsburg and Romanov realms, which underwent rapid and dynamic economic growth in the last decades of their existence, the Soviet empire experienced steep economic decline.[2] Central planning proved quite incapable of promoting technological modernization. It also engendered a variety of pathologies—statistical padding, the hoarding of resources by factory managers and peripheral elites, the fetishization of production and of quantitative indicators—that severely disrupted periphery-to-core resource flows.[3] These dysfunctional consequences of totalitarianism also encouraged core intervention in local affairs and promoted the growth of the central bureaucracy.

Second, all the peripheries acquired a life of their own in the decades following Stalin's death. Although the Russian core elite retained control, the non-Russian entities in east-central Europe and the USSR developed corporate bureaucracies with regional interests and native intelligentsias with nationalist aspirations. The upshot was that most peripheries witnessed the emergence of local Communist Party machines that ruthlessly pursued their own interests, very often to the detriment of the interests of the core elite or

the empire as a whole.[4] Because we expect decay to be most advanced in informally ruled outlying regions—which succumbed, in Timothy Garton Ash's terminology, to "Ottomanization"—it is not surprising that east-central European peripheral elites engaged in a variety of liberation struggles.[5] Official elites led the way in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968; they attained autonomy for Romania in the 1960s; and they followed the lead of unofficial elites in Poland in 1980 and, finally, in most of east-central Europe in 1989.[6]

Third, the Soviet empire even experienced decline. Although "over 5 million uniformed personnel, some 27,000 nuclear weapons, 55,000 tanks, over 200 army divisions, 6,000 fighter/attack aircraft, 9,000 surface to air missile air defense launchers, almost 300 naval surface warships, and an equal number of attack submarines" were, according to Stephen Meyer, "arrayed against the Western democracies" in the late 1980s, the Soviet military had become increasingly ineffective.[7] Soviet military technology could not keep pace with America's, war planning remained mired in the outdated strategic thinking engendered by World War II, training was inadequate, and morale was low. The occupation of Afghanistan after 1978 amply confirmed that the Soviet armed forces were not as invincible as Western policy makers often assumed them to be. The USSR did possess an enormous nuclear arsenal, but that was of little use in preventing or defeating peripheral challenges to Soviet rule. In sum, advanced economic rot, the insubordination of peripheral elites, and state decline should have produced some attrition, but the Soviet empire experienced no loss of territory in the decades after the break with Yugoslavia. Indeed, the combination of external expansion and internal decline was, as Seweryn Bialer put it, the essence of the "Soviet paradox."[8]

The Habsburg Empire

The Habsburgs experienced substantial attrition in the first seven decades of the nineteenth century. Successive defeats at the hands of Napoleon detached some territories; a series of liberation struggles and wars deprived Vienna of its Italian holdings.[9] Despite rampant decay and extensive decline, however, Austria lost no more territories after 1866, while actually annexing Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1908. This arrested form of attrition is all the more puzzling because, as Robert Kann suggests, the Habsburg empire may have

been subject to a process of steady decay from the time it incorporated Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungary in the early part of the sixteenth century.[10] Core control over the crown lands was always tenuous; local diets tended to persist, as did local laws, customs, elites, and their prerogatives. Maria Theresa and Joseph II adopted centralizing reforms with the goal of transforming the empire into some approximation of a Western-style state.[11] Although an efficient bureaucracy was eventually put in place, the core's tug of war with truculent elites in the crown lands continued even after the repressive regime of Francis I. Indeed, according to Kann, "the whole history of the Habsburg monarchy shows a distinct conflict between what may be called the territorial aristocracy in the historico-political entities; namely, those Habsburg lands of independent cultural-political tradition, on the one hand, and the high court nobility at the administrative center of the empire in Vienna on the other."[12]

In 1848, with Vienna besieged by revolutionaries, the provinces in general and Hungary in particular emerged to assert their rights or to make new demands. Franz Joseph's subsequent experiment with neoabsolutism ended with his defeat by Napoleon III at Solferino, while the Kaiser's unwillingness to countenance a looser arrangement for the crown lands came to an end with the *Ausgleich* of 1867, which in essence institutionalized informal rule in Hungary.[13] The terms of the compromise encouraged Hungarian elites to up the autonomist ante every time they renegotiated their relations with Vienna.[14] Moreover, the resulting physical structure of the empire—its division into a moon-shaped Cisleithania and a compact Transleithania dominated by Hungary—effectively demoted Vienna to one link in a long chain of roads, railroads, and telegraph wires and promoted Budapest to the center of its own bailiwick. Indeed, Vienna's disadvantaged location resembled Cuzco's in the Inca realm. "Gradually," writes Istvan Deak, "the administrative machinery was becoming 'national,' with the provincial bureaucracies adapting themselves to the local ethnic-political forces, often quite independently of the national origin of the functionaries themselves."[15] All these changes encouraged interperiphery relations, and especially trade, to grow and the centrifugal tendencies exerted by Magyars, Czechs, Poles, Italians, Serbs, and others to accelerate.[16] Incipient disassemblage and advanced decay reinforced each other, posing a permanent threat to the integrity of the imperial polity until its collapse in 1918.

Austria-Hungary also experienced decline. Napoleon's armies smashed the Kaiser's military at Marengo, Hohenlinden, Austerlitz, and Wagram.

Count Metternich did little to improve Austria's armed forces in the decades that followed, concentrating instead on internal control. The year 1848 exposed the weakness of the state. The military and police proved powerless in the face of revolutionary uprisings, and—much to Friedrich Engels's regret—only the intervention of Russia saved the day.[17] The empire's subsequent military engagements were no less lackluster.[18] The French defeated the Habsburg armies at Solferino in 1859, and the Prussians crushed the Austrians at Sadowa in 1866. Thereafter, the Habsburg armed forces, while resplendent in their uniforms, played mostly an internal policing function and served as a vehicle for integrating the empire's many nationalities.[19] Although the officer corps was competent, the army was generally recognized as being inferior, a point that tiny Serbia was to demonstrate in August 1914.[20]

The Russian Empire

Although the Russian Empire continued to expand almost until its end, it too experienced extensive decay by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. One reason for decay was that the centralizing reforms initiated by Peter the Great and continued assiduously by Catherine—which were so alike in spirit to those implemented by the centralizing reformers of the House of Habsburg, Maria Theresa and Joseph II—only partially succeeded in integrating the borderlands, especially those acquired from Poland.[21] Although Peter and Catherine achieved much in the way of transforming Russia into what Marc Raeff calls a "well-ordered police state"—they created an administrative system, assigned regional governors, and rationalized laws throughout the empire—the transformation remained far from complete.[22] Khans ruled Khiva, emirs ruled Bukhara, clans ran the North Caucasus, and traditional elites remained in power in Georgia; the Baltic lands were in the hands of the German nobility; Polish nobles were unrepentant even after two failed insurrections in 1830 and 1860; Finland remained a grand duchy with its own diet and laws.[23] Indeed, Martin Spechler has shown how Finland's relationship with the core had begun to dissolve, as "opportunities to sell sawn timber products at favorable prices to Britain and to buy high-quality manufactured goods from the West favored a decoupling from the Russian Empire."[24]

The Napoleonic wars did not produce collapse, but they did accelerate decay, enabling peripheral elites—Swedes, Baltic Germans, Poles, and oth-

ers—to lay claim to traditional rights, customs, and prerogatives and expose the "Russian paradox" of simultaneous expansion and state decline. The army epitomized this paradoxical condition. As Walter M. Pinter points out, the overall percentage devoted by the state budget to military expenditures declined by about half "in the age of Catherine the Great, even though the size of the army increased, probably reflect[ing] the very rapid growth in the area and population of the Empire, and the attention and expenditure that Catherine lavished on internal administration." Worse, the size of the army was not matched with appropriate technology. Thus about two-thirds to three-fourths of the total army budget between 1863 and 1913 continued to go toward subsistence items and not weapons and ships. "The reason for Russia's large army," according to Pinter, "was undoubtedly in part inertia, the tradition of simply having a large army, partly the unchanging geographical reality, the great distances and the extensive frontiers that had to be guarded." In addition, Russia needed a large army because its technological backwardness, and especially its lack of a well-developed railroad network, meant that it could not, like more advanced West European states, retain a trained reserve force that could be called up and quickly mobilized in case of war.[25]

That Russia's armed forces succeeded in overwhelming Central Asia and the Caucasus, which joined the empire largely on an informal basis in the nineteenth century, testified to Russia's comparative military strength vis-à-vis its "near abroad." On the other hand, it was clear that Russia was no match for the more advanced Western powers. The tsar's armies beat back Napoleon only with the help of winter, and they proved strong enough to save Vienna from ragtag revolutionary bands in 1848. But the Crimean War and, especially, the 1905 war with Japan showed that the armed forces, while still superior to Kazak nomads, radical students, and Bukharan foot soldiers, were no match for modernized states.[26] Like Austria-Hungary, however, Romanov Russia experienced no attrition despite advanced decay and decline. Instead, it actually expanded.

Imperial Props

As these three cases illustrate, empires need not proceed automatically along the trajectory depicted by Taagepera's parabolas. That trajectory depends on two links—between imperial decay and state decline, and between

state decline and attrition—that cannot be taken for granted. Four variables can intervene to arrest decay, decline, and/or attrition.

- A hypercentralized core state can, as in the case of the USSR, prevent peripheral elites from drifting away—not by eliminating the reasons for, or capacity to engage in, drift but by maintaining strict organizational and coercive control over the periphery.
- A favorable geopolitical environment can sustain a declining empire and forestall attrition. In particular, alliances can shield empires, as Wilhelmine Germany shielded Austria-Hungary.
- A favorable geographic location can, as was the case with Romanov Russia, have the same effect as a favorable geopolitical environment.
- Internally generated easy money, like the external support of generous allies, can sustain empire; it permits core elites to sidestep the problem of declining resources and unproductive economies and sustain requisite levels of imperial expenditure.[27] Spain's discovery of silver and gold in the New World was just such a boon, as was the USSR's windfall from the oil embargo of 1973.

As I argue next, these four props are, first, consistent—or, at least, not inconsistent—with the theoretical framework I propose in this book. Second, they address the forms of attrition—wars and liberation struggles—discussed in chapter 2. Third, although these factors may be explained historically, they cannot be predicted. Fourth, because these factors are necessarily impermanent, their longer-term effect may be to make buttressed empires even more prone to shocks and thus to collapse.

1. With respect to theoretical consistency, nothing about a structural theory of imperial decay excludes the importance or relevance of such factors as geography, natural resources, and the broader setting of international relations. The only variable that appears to contravene the model is the notion that an exceedingly top-heavy, hypercentralized state can arrest decay. After all, I had specifically argued that a bloated state *promotes* decay. We can escape this seeming contradiction by, as already noted in chapter 2, splitting hairs—namely, by arguing that a *very* top-heavy state will both advance decay *and*, by virtue of its size, strength, and capacity, temporarily keep peripheral elites from drifting and/or breaking away. Resting on a contradiction, such an outcome is, of course, necessarily unstable and unlikely to be long lasting.

But such an outcome is theoretically conceivable and, as I argue with respect to the USSR, empirically possible.

2. All four intervening variables reduce the chances of attrition. By keeping peripheral elites on a short leash—by means of tight organizational control of their training, appointment, and promotion—a hypercentralized state will prevent them from embarking on interperiphery linkages or alliances with outside polities. A favorable geopolitical environment in general and alliances in particular will effectively reduce the possibility of war and especially of devastating war. Favorable geography—or physical distance from arenas of war or of great-power competition—can also minimize the possibility and/or effect of war. A. H. M. Jones, for instance, attributes the survival of the eastern half of the Roman Empire to the fact that

> strategically the Eastern Empire was, during the fourth and fifth centuries, far better placed than the Western. . . . The barbarian invaders who crossed the Danube therefore always tended, when they had exhausted the resources of the Balkans, to move westward and add to the embarrassments of the West. . . . The greater part of the Eastern Empire—Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt—was more or less immune from invasion, and provided the resources to maintain the imperial armies in the Balkans, which, though frequently invaded, were regularly recovered from the impregnable bridgehead of Constantinople.[28]

Last, easy money permits core elites to fight wars, resist liberation struggles, and finance bloated core states.

3. Predicting which, if any, of these factors will intervene to prevent decline or retard attrition and when is impossible. The logic of decay militates against the persistence or creation of exceptionally strong, hypercentralized core states. Because empires are by definition great powers with, presumably, a host of adversaries, we do not as a rule expect them to be courted or coddled by their neighbors, especially in periods of decline. As to geography, although empires can be situated in any corner of the globe, we expect them to emerge in the very thick of political and military struggles and not in remote areas. Easy money, finally, is like an asteroid: it either cannot be predicted at all, or if it can—because an empire just happens to be sitting on a vast pool of oil—it cannot be predicted by any theory of empire.

We *can* account for the emergence of these factors historically. We can trace the emergence of Soviet totalitarianism to, say, Communist ideology,

Stalin's personality, the imperatives of late modernization, capitalist encirclement, and so on.[29] Ottoman Turkey's relative geostrategic importance makes perfect sense in terms of nineteenth-century great-power competition in general and the "Great Game" in Central Asia in particular.[30] Austria-Hungary better served Germany's strategic purposes alive than dead.[31] Favorable geographic location is overwhelmingly a function of natural barriers to invasion, such as mountains, rivers, deserts, and oceans. Vast natural wealth is the result of geological or other natural developments on the one hand and economic demand on the other.

Although props, like shocks, are anything but mysterious phenomena, we cannot say, at time t, that some factor will intervene at $t + n$ to save a decrepit empire. Geographic location is the only candidate for such status—after all, rivers, ranges, and oceans do not come and go at the whim of constructivist scholars—but, even here, we have no way of knowing that technological means or geopolitical alignments will not render such obstacles irrelevant. Constantinople's location may have saved it from the barbarians in the fifth century; that very same location did not save it from the Ottomans one thousand years later.

4. All is not lost. Because no intervening variable is permanent by nature, it can at best only delay attrition. More important, by delaying attrition, these variables may actually make decaying empires more susceptible to collapse. I have already suggested how this dynamic could work in the case of hypercentralized states. They keep peripheral elites under control by intensifying the periphery-to-core resource flow and thereby accelerating decay. But such a balancing act cannot be sustained for too long. At some future time the contradictory pressures acting on the core state, and of course on the imperial economy, may prove too strong for it to sustain both enormous state control and so high a degree of resource extraction. As a result, hypercentralized states should make empires especially susceptible to disintegration, if and when even relatively minor crises strike.

Alliances—or, more generally, a favorable geopolitical environment—are no less of a mixed blessing. The decaying empire finds safety in the embrace of a big brother, but, by the same token, it becomes hostage to his policies and behavior. Those may be pacific but in all likelihood will be belligerent: after all, ascendant expansionist powers looking to flex their muscles and claim a place in the sun should be most inclined to shelter decaying empires. During World War I, in Kann's words, "the strait jacket of the German alliance was, of course, one of the most important factors which prevented

the arrangement not only of a separate peace between the [Habsburg] monarchy and the Western Allies but of the arrangement of a general negotiated peace between all the warring parties as well."[32] Worse, the alliance may embolden the big brother to be even more aggressive toward other states. It can also incline the core elite of the decaying empire to be less cautious, on the ground that its oversized sibling can always save it from policy mistakes.[33] Just such a calculation appears to have figured in the decision of Habsburg elites to go to war against Serbia in July 1914, when a "set of leaders experienced in statecraft, power and crisis management consciously risked a general war to fight a local war."[34]

Easy money is also a two-edged sword. By saving the empire from decline and encouraging the state to intensify its control of the periphery precisely as the forces of decay are eating away at the empire's foundations, easy money makes the empire especially vulnerable to capricious future disruptions in the flow of resources or fluctuations in prices.[35] The 1978 revolution in Iran, for instance, was at least partly the result of the drop in oil revenues that occurred just before.[36] Silver and gold from the New World sustained Spain, but once prices dropped because of overproduction, so too did the empire's fortunes.[37] Siberian oil and gas propped up the Soviet regime in the 1980s, but with world overproduction and concomitant price reductions, natural resources could not sustain imperial rule past the short term.[38] More important, because easy money is the product of the sudden acquisition of seemingly limitless wealth, it necessarily loses value over time, as the more there is of it—whether oil, silver, gold, or timber—the less it is worth, as prices fall and revenues decline.

A favorable geographic location may most resemble an unconditional asset. Geographic isolation of the kind enjoyed by, say, the United States is a fact of nature, whereas mere distance from great-power contests, of the kind enjoyed by Romanov Russia, is a relative asset that, like the Maginot Line, cannot keep war and conflict permanently away. But even a favorable location can redound to an empire's disadvantage. The strategic value of marginality or isolation may be obvious, but the economic costs can more than offset it. Economic isolation may reduce an empire's access to capital, technology, and trade and in the long run retard its development and diminish its capacity to compete internationally. Bernard Lewis, for instance, attributes the long-term decline of the Ottoman Empire to the discovery of the New World and the resultant shift of economic activity from the eastern Mediterranean to the Atlantic.[39] Similarly, Henri Pirenne famously argued

that the Muslim conquest of the Mediterranean transposed the cultural and political center of Europe from the south to the north.[40]

Shocks

Whereas attrition is premised on informality of rule, sustained resource diversions, and state decline, collapse is not. Because the peripheries of decayed empires are, ipso facto, more autonomous than they were before decay set in, they have, at least in principle, the capacity to act as more or less full-fledged states. Not so the peripheries of collapsed empires. Some may have been the beneficiaries of decay; others may have been the objects of formal rule and core-state intrusiveness. As the rapid and comprehensive dismantling of the hublike structure of empire, collapse therefore produces "free-floating" peripheries and a core. The spokes of the rimless wheel, *P-C-P*, disappear, but the *P-C-P* relationship need not be replaced by *P-P-P*, *Z-P-Z*, or *P-Z-P* relationships.

The *P-C-P* relationship can break down completely and collapse only if the core is destroyed or temporarily debilitated. Either way, some sort of shock appears to be necessary. A sudden change in climate may have destroyed the Akkadian empire; world war brought down the Habsburg, Romanov, Ottoman, and Wilhelmine empires; the Aztecs proved powerless against the intrusion of diseases brought to their shores by hopelessly outnumbered conquistadores.[41] Indeed, the arrival of Cortés in 1519 was quintessentially exogenous to developments in Mesoamerica. Although Moctezuma II ruled at the high point of Aztec expansion, he was easily defeated by a few hundred men who produced what Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest call a "Spanish holocaust."[42]

Brian Fagan's systematic investigation of the effect of natural catastrophes on polities reinforces the theoretical importance of shocks: "There are only a limited number of ways societies can respond to accumulated climatic stress: movement or social collaboration; muddling their way from crisis to crisis; decisive, centralized leadership on the part of a few individuals; or developing innovations that increase the carrying capacity of the land. The alternative to all these options is collapse."[43] Although collapse may therefore not be inevitable in principle, it may be inevitable in reality if for some reason societies are incapable of responding in one of Fagan's prescribed ways.

Although natural scientists know much about the causes and consequences of disease, climate shifts, and other destabilizing natural phenomena, and although social scientists also have some authoritative statements to make about comparable social phenomena, their collective wisdom is of little relevance to a theory of imperial decline. Such a theory perforce has little to say about plagues, hurricanes, asteroids, and man-made cataclysms, except to acknowledge that they can affect political systems and that, because they occur for reasons extrinsic to the theory, they are necessarily unpredictable. Why system-shattering shocks emerge and where they come from are questions that theories of revolution may be able to answer but that theories of empire—and especially a structural theory of empire—cannot. All such a theory can do is invoke the ultimately unpredictable nature of much of reality and point to chaos theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Gödel's theorem, and the like for moral support.[44] (Somewhat more encouragingly, Ehrhard Behrens suggests that some mathematical problems can be solved only through chance![45]) Negative evidence for the validity of this proposition is found in James Rosenau's study of "turbulence," which attempts to explain "high complexity and dynamism" in terms of an analytical framework that combines macro with micro perspectives and a whole host of actors, ranging from states to individuals, and amounts to a theory of everything.[46]

This is not to say that shocks are convenient dei ex machinis and that there is absolutely nothing to be said about the probability of their occurrence. Although it may be impossible to predict earthquakes with accuracy, geologists do know that they are far more likely to occur in certain places than in others. "El Niño," writes Fagan, "is a chaotic pendulum, with protean mood swings that can last months, decades, even centuries or millennia. The pendulum never follows exactly the same path, for even minor variations in wind patterns can cause dramatic changes down the line. But there is an underlying rhythm to the swings, like a set of musical variations endlessly circling a central theme."[47] In similar fashion Joseph Tainter notes:

> As the marginal return on complexity declines, complexity as a strategy yields comparatively lower benefits at higher and higher costs. A society that cannot counter this trend, such as through acquisition of an energy subsidy, becomes vulnerable to stress surges that it is too weak or impoverished to meet, and to waning support in its population. With continuation of this trend collapse becomes a matter of mathe-

matical probability, as over time an insurmountable stress surge becomes increasingly likely. Until such a challenge occurs, there may be a period of economic stagnation, political decline, and territorial shrinkage.[48]

Humanly contrived shocks may be equally unpredictable in this sense without, as a result, being utterly random and inexplicable events. Several generalizations are thus possible and useful:

1. Shocks can be grouped into the following broad categories: natural phenomena, such as droughts, plagues, asteroids, earthquakes, and the like; wars, invasions, and other kinds of military conflicts; socioeconomic developments, such as mass migrations and economic depressions; and political changes, such as the death of a charismatic leader, misguided reform efforts, revolutions, and so on.

Natural phenomena are, as noted, completely beyond the grasp of any theory of empire. Military conflicts may be considered a constant, part of the international background against which all imperial trajectories are played out. Socioeconomic developments are no less a permanent part of the internal development of all states. Political change is also a constant, although one that is likely to occur most often in decaying and malfunctioning empires ripe for revolution, rebellion, transformation, and the like. In a word, only the first category, natural phenomena, is truly exogenous, while the latter three can fit into the interstices of a theory of imperial decline, and political change arguably can be made a function of imperial decay. Theda Skocpol's theory of revolution could, when seen in this light, be easily translated into imperial terms. She attributes the inability of agrarian autocracies to modernize to their class structure. We can agree, while adding that this structure was both resilient and obstructive precisely because peripheral class elites enjoyed the administrative autonomy inherent in every severely decayed imperial structure.[49]

2. Ceteris paribus, we expect different types of shocks to affect empires differently along various points of the parabola. Natural phenomena are likely to be most devastating during periods of ascendance or decline and not at times of systemic stability. Wars will be most destructive the further along the parabola an empire is located. We expect ascendant empires to win most wars and decaying empires to lose most.[50] Socioeconomic shocks should devastate decaying empires most, ascendant empires less, and stable empires least. The death of a leader, misguided reforms, and other internal

developments will affect decaying and ascendant empires most and stable, well-functioning, institutionalized empires least. Alexander the Great's untimely demise, which, according to A. B. Bosworth, "led inevitably to the dismemberment of his empire," is a case in point.[51]

3. What qualifies as a shock with respect to one system may not with respect to another. Sick systems, like sick patients, can die from colds; healthy systems, like healthy patients, generally do not. The more vigorous the empire, the more cataclysmic the shocks must be to push it into oblivion. The more decrepit the empire, the more run-of-the-mill the shock, the more it can approximate a mere problem. Clearly, problems are legion, perhaps even infinite in number. Real cataclysms, however we define the modifier, are far smaller in kind and in number.

4. It follows that the number of events qualifying as potential shocks increases with the degree of imperial decay. We know by analogy that feeble people are more likely to suffer illnesses, accidents, and the like, both because their immune systems are weakened and because the remedies they take are more likely to have adverse effects.[52] As a result, although the rapid and comprehensive dismantling of an empire can occur anywhere along the parabola, we expect it to strike most often along the downward slope.

5. It also follows that, because empires experience decay unevenly, shocks should affect different parts of an empire differently. Major shocks, or cataclysms, should destroy any weakened system, especially if the advanced decay is spread evenly. When shocks are minor, however, we expect them to affect differentially decayed empires differently. Evenly decayed empires should be more prone to disintegrate rapidly and comprehensively than unevenly decayed empires, which, we surmise, should be more inclined to lose only those chunks of territory that are most autonomous. As we shall see in chapter 4, the evenness of decay can significantly affect the likelihood that empire will be revived in the aftermath of collapse.

6. Because the pool of potential shocks expands with the degree of decay, the probability that cataclysms will bring about collapse becomes correspondingly smaller than the probability that mere problems will do the trick. Asteroids can still strike, of course, but we expect decaying empires to be more likely to collapse for noncataclysmic reasons. The barbarian invasions that contributed to the downfalls of Han China and Rome, for instance, were little different from similar such incursions in both empires' past. What mattered was their internal weakness, their inability to withstand and cope with shocks that they once easily survived.

7. Although we cannot account for the functional equivalent of asteroids, earthquakes, plagues, or climactic shifts, it may be possible to do so for some portion of the vast number of potential shocks that could affect a particular class of decaying systems—those whose attrition has been arrested. When decaying empires should undergo attrition but do not, collapse is likely to be the result of shocks that directly affect the factors that arrest the downward trajectory.

Collapsing Empires

A look at the causes of the collapse of Romanov Russia, Wilhelmine Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey, and the USSR will help us refine some of these points. The Russian Empire was drawn into and devastated by World War I; the Reich lost a two-front war. In contrast, the Ottoman realm collapsed after substantially less destructive warfare, Habsburg territories were never invaded, and the Soviet Union was not even implicated in a major war at the time of collapse (its foray into Afghanistan, however bloody and demoralizing, does not qualify). And yet, all five empires collapsed, disappearing in the course of several years, as in the Soviet and Ottoman cases, or of one year, as with Romanov Russia and Wilhelmine Germany, or, even, of a few weeks, as was the case with the Habsburg realm. Because the Romanovs and Hohenzollerns suffered defeat or devastation or both, their collapse makes sense. As the Habsburgs, Ottomans, and Soviets suffered neither of these misfortunes, their collapse is puzzling. As we shall see, the shocks that brought down these three empires undermined the props that kept them in a state of suspended attrition.

World War I directly undermined the tsarist imperial state in two ways. First, and most obviously, world war destroyed Russia. Its army was no match for Germany's, and the Russian economy began to unravel under the pressures of mass mobilization and near-total war.[53] In February 1917 a new regime replaced tsarism in Petrograd, but the empire itself began dissolving soon after the authority of the provisional government declined precipitously under conditions of chaos in Russian cities and villages. The Bolshevik coup d'état was also the coup de grace for the empire. Borderland elites who had heretofore strived only for autonomy interpreted the Bolshevik seizure of power as an illegitimate usurpation and the de facto end of empire. The German advance, the initial inability of the Bolsheviks to extend their power

far beyond the Petrograd-Moscow axis, and the subsequent civil war between Reds and Whites provided additional opportunities for the borderlands to strike out on their own.[54] By the middle of 1918 most non-Russian elites had declared independence, a condition they were to enjoy until 1920–1921, when, with the exception of Finland, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, they fell to the onslaughts of the Red Army.[55]

Second, and no less catastrophic for Russia's imperial system, World War I directly undermined the protected status the empire had enjoyed on the geographic margins of the European state system. Unlike other states embroiled in incessant conflicts on all fronts since the Middle Ages, Muscovy remained relatively sheltered from such rivalries.[56] On the one hand, thanks to geography it was far removed from the center of great-power conflicts—a fact that contributed to the undoing of Charles XII of Sweden and of Napoleon; on the other hand, declining Poland served as a buffer between Russia and ascendant Prussia. Poland's disappearance in the late eighteenth century and Germany's emergence as a great power in the late nineteenth exposed Russia to attrition from the West, but it was World War I that drew Russia into an all-European conflict, exposed it to superior military forces, resulted in foreign occupation of provinces that had experienced the greatest decay, and destroyed the imperial state's capacity to retain control of its rebellious peripheries.

Unlike Russia, Wilhelmine Germany was at the height of its power when World War I broke out.[57] Economic growth had been especially impressive, involving a 25 percent increase in gross national product between 1908 and 1913, based in large part on considerable advances in coal, iron, and electricity production and in the chemicals and motor industries.[58] Even so, the Reich quickly lost most of its overseas colonies: Togo, New Guinea, and Tsingtao in late 1914, South-West Africa in 1915, and Cameroon in 1916. Although Germany's wartime efforts were prodigious, victory in Europe may have become impossible after the entry into the war of the United States, which tipped the balance economically against the Reich. As Austria-Hungary proved to be an unreliable ally in the east, Germany had to hold the front in Russia and Ukraine while simultaneously coping with Britain, France, and the United States in the west. The strain on Germany's resources was too great, and in late 1918 it could no longer sustain the war effort.[59] German forces broke rank, while revolutionary disturbances at home replaced imperial rule with a democratic regime. The front collapsed in the chaos that followed, and German forces retreated from the recently occupied

territories in east and west. German troops in East Africa also surrendered. Defeated and weakened, the Reich formally lost its holdings after hostilities had ceased, when the terms of the peace deprived it of territories in Africa, the Pacific, and parts of Europe.[60]

Austria was widely acknowledged to be a declining power by all its neighbors since the middle of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the imperatives of balance-of-power politics demanded that the territory under Vienna's rule remain Habsburg, lest a dangerous power vacuum emerge in the center of Europe. A striking illustration of Austria's position was Bismarck's decision after Sadowa not to march on Vienna and to leave the Habsburg realm more or less intact.[61] Seen in this light, the Austro-German alliance of 1879 merely ratified Austria-Hungary's peculiar geopolitical position in general and its importance to Wilhelmine Germany in particular. With German power as the guarantor of Habsburg integrity, Austria-Hungary received a lease on life. By the same token, Germany's defeat in war precipitated Austria-Hungary's collapse.[62] Enervated by the war and deprived of its protector, a highly decayed imperial system fell apart into regions and elites for the most part already beyond Vienna's control.

Unlike Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire had experienced significant attrition in the course of the nineteenth century; like Austria-Hungary, it collapsed only after World War I. The war overtaxed the empire's backward economy and military, but because the Ottoman realm was spared the brute devastation of Romanov Russia, some other factor must have precipitated collapse. The Ottoman Empire, not unlike Austria-Hungary, lived on as the sick man of Europe because of a geopolitical environment that favored its continued survival. World War I destroyed that environment; more important, it undermined the Central Powers, which directly supported Constantinople. Only after Germany lost and Austria-Hungary fell apart were the Ottomans, under pressure from nationalist forces commanded by Mustafa Kemal, no longer able to continue as an imperial house and as a realm.[63]

The Soviet empire could weather decay precisely because the party-state was totalitarian, maintaining an elaborate system of recruitment and control that sustained its rule even after decay had assumed alarming proportions in the 1970s and 1980s.[64] Totalitarianism kept the peripheries bound to the core, despite the terrible economic price it exacted. Indeed, by the end of Leonid Brezhnev's reign decay had accelerated to the point where totalitarianism could no longer reproduce and sustain itself.[65] Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms were supposed to save the system, but instead perestroika destroyed

the empire. Reneo Lukic and Allen Lynch provide a good account of the cataclysmic effect of Gorbachev's policies:

> In the face of the post-Stalinist legacy of increased real power in the hands of the national communist leaders of the union republics, and by his insistence on making the central Communist Party the primary agency of structural reform, Gorbachev ensured both the demise of the supranational Soviet Communist Party . . . and the establishment of nationally based political movements and institutions as the sole alternative to Soviet communism, reform or otherwise. In seeking to transform a Communist Party whose large majority was uncomprehending if not unsympathetic or even hostile to his reform enterprise, Gorbachev ensured the neutralization of the only political institution in the Soviet Union with a supranational vocation. At the same time, by seeking to contain reformist forces under the umbrella of the putatively reformed central Communist Party, while also tolerating and even encouraging a degree of political latitude unprecedented in Soviet history, Gorbachev lost whatever chances might have existed for establishing a supranational alternative to the Soviet Communist Party.[66]

By targeting the party at a time of advanced decay and national communist mobilization, Gorbachev's reforms subverted its organizational overlordship in east-central Europe and the republics.[67] As a result, according to Valerie Bunce, "the tightly integrated structure of the bloc also meant that changes in the Soviet Union, whether in policy or personnel, tended to spread rapidly to Eastern Europe—whether the Soviets wanted that to happen or not and, quite often, in a form and level of intensity that the Soviets neither expected nor welcomed. The bloc structure, therefore, tended to *magnify* Soviet developments as they traveled westward."[68] Once totalitarianism was dismantled, the imperial rule that was premised on totalitarian control began to dissolve.

My argument demotes Gorbachev from the potential status of a hero in history to a well-meaning, if hapless leader who stumbled into the USSR's collapse. Some scholars would disagree with this characterization—Archie Brown, for instance[69]—but it surely is true that Gorbachev never intended to destroy the Soviet Union, and it is also the case that he had scant appreciation of the explosive nature of the Soviet nationality question.[70] Seen in

this light, Gorbachev closely resembles the erratic Nikita Khrushchev: both leaders attempted to address the inefficiencies identified by Karl Deutsch in a manner that, while laudable perhaps, was profoundly destabilizing. The major difference therefore consists not in the leader but in the condition of the system. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Soviet empire was vigorous and powerful. By the mid-1980s it had just emerged from the "era of stagnation."[71] Under conditions such as these, reform of any kind was probably lethal.

In sum, Russia was struck by a cataclysm that was both enormously destructive and subversive of its geographic isolation. Its collapse was overdetermined. Germany lost a war that left it, relatively speaking, more or less unscathed but completely vulnerable to the punitive policies of the victors, who stripped it of its colonies. Austria-Hungary's alliance with Germany meant that German defeat would result in Habsburg collapse. War weakened the Ottoman Empire, while its alignment with the losers deprived it of the geopolitical solicitude of the defeated Central Powers on the one hand and the triumphant Triple Entente on the other. Finally, perestroika devastated the hypercentralized totalitarian state and thereby undermined the Soviet empire.

Variations

In discussing these factors, I have assumed that they prop up empires uniformly. We know, of course, that some parts of an empire will be more isolated than others, that easy money will not flow evenly, that geopolitical environments can be more or less favorable to different parts of an empire, and, most important perhaps, that hypercentralized rule will not be evenly distributed. As a result, just as uneven decay can contribute to different outcomes, so too the uneven effect of sustaining factors can produce different results.

Consider the dissimilar ways in which Austria-Hungary, Romanov Russia, and the USSR collapsed. The Habsburg realm was more or less evenly decayed, and its alliance with Germany had no differential effect on Habsburg territories. As a result, the dismantling of the imperial relationship occurred virtually over night, in early November 1918. The Germans, Czechs, and Slovaks founded republics, Hungarians became embroiled in a civil war, South Slavs established a state, and Poles and Ukrainians fought over Gali-

cia. The degree of turmoil varied from region to region, and more or less stable states emerged only in 1919–1920, but the rapid and comprehensive disappearance of Habsburg authority over the peripheries was indisputable.[72]

In Romanov Russia, in contrast, those parts of the empire that had enjoyed greatest autonomy as imperial peripheries, had been occupied longest by German or Austrian troops, and had been spared the ravages of the most destructive trench warfare were most likely to separate and to do so successfully. The geography of imperial decay thus combined with the geography of war to produce a process of collapse that affected different parts of the empire differently. Finland had possessed a variety of protostate institutions, including its own parliament and constitution, even in Romanov times; during the war it managed to avoid reoccupation by virtue of its geographic location. The Baltic states, which should not by any measure have been able to stand up to the Red Army, had the good fortune of possessing indigenous protopolitical institutions developed by Baltic German elites, of being occupied by the German army, and of being located far from the central arena of the civil war in the southeast. Poland, finally, retained its political, cultural, and social elites throughout the nineteenth century, and, thanks to German rule, was able to acquire and nurture its independence during the war. In stark contrast, such minimally decayed regions as Ukraine and Belarus also had the misfortune of being devastated by the front, while the informally ruled khanates of Khiva and Bukhara had nowhere to go and thus could fall prey to Bolshevik predations.[73]

The Soviet empire experienced both uneven decay—with east-central Europe the most decayed and the non-Russian republics the least decayed—as well as uneven totalitarian rule, with east-central Europe the least afflicted and the non-Russian republics the most afflicted. As we would expect, the east-central Europeans acquired independence in 1989, in no small measure thanks to their own national revolts, while the non-Russian republics had to wait until the USSR itself collapsed in late 1991. All the east-central Europeans had enjoyed semiautonomous satellite status since at least the 1960s, with Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and to a lesser extent Czechoslovakia actually developing substantial elements of state capacity, civil society, market economies, and rule of law.[74]

The non-Russian republics were also unevenly decayed. The Baltic states had enjoyed substantial autonomy since the 1960s, when they began serving as laboratories for social, economic, and political experiments usually involving devolutions of authority. Moreover, by virtue of having been incor-

porated into the USSR only after World War II, they managed to enjoy twenty years of independence and escape the worst of Stalinist terror.[75] Not surprisingly, the Balts led the drive for national liberation and, after 1991, were in the forefront of political and economic reform. In stark contrast, the Central Asian republics enjoyed the least autonomy within the Soviet Union and proved to be most reluctant to pursue independence and, after independence, to pursue reform. Such middle-of-the-road Soviet republics as Ukraine, Moldova, and the three Caucasus states were in general less independence-minded than the Balts and east-central Europeans and more independence-minded than the Central Asians.[76]

After Collapse

Unlike attrition, which ineluctably deimperializes an empire by reducing it to a shell of its former self, collapse need not result in the end of empire. We know that empirically, but we can also deduce this from a closer look at how collapse affects empire. After all, collapse ensues if and when the core is weakened and cannot play the role of a hub. Shocks can so rattle a system as to produce a breakdown in the interactions between and among its parts. As the imperial spokes "disappear," the peripheries are left on their own as formally independent polities. But formal independence does not necessarily mean the disappearance of empire as a system. "The boundaries of social systems," writes Raimondo Strassoldo, "are not only spatial, but also functional; a social system is said to exist as long as its components display certain behaviours, states, and attributes. At the moment its variations exceed certain critical values or norms, the system is said to be stressed, disintegrated or to have become something else."[77] Because the shocks that produce collapse can be of various types—ranging from cataclysms to mere problems—and because the empires struck by shocks can be positioned at various points of Taagepera's parabolas, we have no reason to think that the "behaviors, states, and attributes" of the core and periphery have necessarily become transformed and that the breakdown of the *P-C-P* relationship is therefore permanent. We know that a shock may result in collapse, or it may not. In turn, collapse may—but need not—result in nonexistence. The imperial system, like a patient in a critical condition, may revive.[78]