8 Russia from Empire to Revolution

The Illusion of the Emerging Nation State in the South Caucasus and Beyond

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Tsarist Russia entered World War I in a somewhat indirect manner following Austria's declaration of war July 28, 1914 on Serbia in retaliation for the assassination of Austrian Archduke Ferdinand by a Bosnian terrorist with links to Belgrade. On July 31, 1914, it ordered the mobilization of its army and the next day Germany declared war. Russia joined the side of the Entente because allying with Britain, its traditional protagonist in efforts to increase its holdings against the Ottoman Empire and Persia, offered Russia the best opportunity to achieve its long-standing strategic goal of gaining control of the Turkish Straits and Constantinople, a city with special religious significance to Russia's Romanov dynasty, which continued to project itself as the protector of Orthodox Christians since the fall of Byzantium.

The possible consequences of Russia entering into a war on the side of Britain and France against Germany had been sharply outlined in February 1914 in a memorandum to Tsar Nicholas II by P. N. Durnovo, a former Minister of the Interior and State Council member. He accurately predicted the coming war's alignment of Britain, France, and Russia against the empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman Turkey with the United States a late entrant on the side of Entente allies, Britain and France. He presented the motive for such a war as principally a contest for projecting sea power abroad between Britain and Germany, but questioned whether it was in the economic interest

of Russia to be allied with Britain as "the vital interests of Germany and Russia do not conflict".[1] He further argued that "the main burden of the war will undoubtedly fall upon us" and that Russia would take on "the part of a battering ram, making a breach in the very thick of the German defense" while the French would be in a defensive mode throughout the war.[2] In terms of Russia being possibly involved with a Caucasus border war with Ottoman Turkey and Persia he warned that the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 — which created the Triple Entente where Russia agreed to the partition of Persia into a British, a Russian, and a neutral zone — had worked against Russia as it eliminated long-standing trust and had only achieved "an outburst of hatred for us in Persia, and a probable unrest among the Moslems of the Caucasus and Turkestan" that could be expected if Russia entered the war as Britain's ally.[3] Thereby Britain — "the obvious aim of our diplomacy [is] the rapprochement with England" — was a double-edged sword because the only advantage would be "to close the Black Sea to others" although that "would not give us an outlet to the open sea" because of Britain's control of the Mediterranean Sea.[4]

The Ottoman Empire was a reluctant and late entrant into World War I. Basically tired from recent defeats in Balkan wars, it nevertheless was lured into alliance with Germany and Austria because it bordered an Entente power, Russia, which was now seen as a greater threat than Britain. The Ottomans launched a disastrous offensive in December 1914 against Russia's mountainous southern flank, the South Caucasus, which the Russians called the Trans-Caucasus. In the opinion of Pavel Miliukov — a historian and later Foreign Minister in Russia's provisional government: "This catastrophe to the best of Turkey's troops saved the Caucasus from the threat of a new invasion for the rest of the war."[5] In 1916 a renewed Russian offensive brought Russian troops to occupy Erzurum in February, Bitlis and Tercan (Mamahatun) in March, and Trabzon in April. Flanking actions by the Russian army under the pretext of protecting them from armed roving bandits brought Russian forces far into Iran as well, reaching Kirmanshah in February, Bijar and even distant Isfahan in March.[6]

A February 1917 offensive increased their holdings as Erzerum fell. Kirmanshah and Qasr-i Shirin were taken in early April as well as Hamadan in Persia, which allowed a link with the British army forces at

Kizil-Rabate. Van fell in early summer.[7] This marked the greatest line of success the Russian army would know on what it termed the "Caucasus Front." By May, however, the Turkish army had begun to go on the offensive and now began to concentrate its forces on single points of attack rather than across large fronts. The Russian army of over a half million continued to hold most of the mountainous terrain of the eastern Ottoman Empire, that is, the predominantly Kurdish areas, with the help of Armenian troops until late 1917 when the Bolsheviks rose to power and desertions became widespread. These gains had been thought to be sustainable and in fact represented much of the gains promised Russia by Britain and France in a series of secret agreements whose contents the Bolsheviks were quick to publish in December 1917.

Throughout 1917 the Bolsheviks' campaign to undermine the Russian Empire's war effort had been built around the tantalizing slogan of "Bread and Peace." Germany's campaign on its "Eastern Front" had turned into a rout as the Russian Army simply disintegrated and walked away from the war. By the time of the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917, only one of Russia's fronts had not yet turned into chaos and actually still held most of its gains as it stretched beyond the Russian Empire's southern borders through the Caucasus mountains and neighboring ranges of the Ottoman Empire and Persia. At their deepest penetration Russian forces were just north of Mosul in the spring of 1916, where the British Army in Mesopotamia had hoped to link up with it and by a separate campaign through the Turkish Straits to decisively knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war. But now the Caucasus front was becoming a region with several nations attempting to build independent states, and this struggle would be played out against a background of civil war in Russia, German and British intervention in the Caucasus, as well as the emergence of a Turkish republic and the promise of mandates from Paris in 1919.

The Secret Agreements

The question of Russia's interests and compensation had not yet been determined when it entered the war in alliance with the Entente. "On

November 13, 1914, the day following Turkey's entrance into the war, Count Benckendorf, the Russian Ambassador to Great Britain, discussed the matter of the Straits with King George V of England, who said to him: 'Constantinople must be yours.' "[8] As British war aims approached the Turkish Straits with the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in early 1915, a more formal understanding of what Russia's compensation from the Entente powers would entail led to the Constantinople Agreement, which not only awarded Russia "the city of Constantinople, the western bank of the Bosphorus, of the sea of Marmara and of the Dardenelles," but parts of Thrace as well.[9] The Straits were to be open to free passage for merchant ships, however. While Russia was promised Constantinople and the Straits, France and Great Britain essentially partitioned the rest of Ottoman territories with later allowances for Italy that became formalized following the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. In that agreement, following the reports of genocide perpetrated by the Turks against Armenians on a wide scale in 1915, regions where Armenians had been concentrated were now awarded to Russia: "the region of Erzerum, Trebizond, Van and Bitlis," as well as substantial adjoining Kurdish mountainous areas of eastern Anatolia, including part of the province of Mosul. At the time most of these areas either were under Russian occupation or Russian forces were nearby. Russia had lobbied Britain and France for far more. It had requested the creation of an "autonomous" Armenia that would represent not only traditionally Armenian areas held by Russian forces, but would also include parts of Cilicia in southern Turkey with an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea, the port of Mersin.[10] This bold request represented an attempt by Russia to assert a role beyond the protection of Armenians to include Nestorian Christians living near Bitlis as well as Assyrians and Greeks living in Cilicia. In short, it represented Russia's continuing attempts to serve as the protector of Christians living in Ottoman Turkey.

Mark Sykes' solution (March 12, 1916) was to let Russia receive Erzerum, Bitlis and Van with a minimum Armenian population and Nestorian Christians and Kurds as one designated zone, while the French would receive more historical Armenian areas south, including Cilicia.[11] The Russians had also already come very close to Mosul and remained just north of it in the mountainous Kurdish areas. The failure

of Russia to occupy Mosul was political not military. Indeed, according to one Russian diplomatic historian, as the Russian army moved closer and closer to Mosul in the spring of 1916, and "therefore, to its significant oil resources." "French and English politicians were apprehensive that the Caucasus Army would follow the Turks fleeing to Mosul, and then Russia would be most unlikely to free the territory once occupied, which was close to Baghdad and the area of the Persian Gulf."[12]

1917

On the broader European front, however, Russian losses of personnel and terrain were vast. Russian soldiers began to be described as going into battle with one rifle for three or four men. Some units lacked boots. A visit to Warsaw by the president of the Duma, Russia's legislative assembly, described conditions: "On the floor, without even a bedding of straw, in mud and slush, lay innumerable wounded, whose pitiful groans and cries filled the air."[13] Social disintegration was increasing at home as labor and political strikes combined with high inflation. The Duma began to question the competence of the leadership, first of the ministers, and then, gradually, by extension of the monarchy itself. When a government order to dissolve it was given on March 10, members of the Duma refused and two days later began to set up a provisional government. On the streets Councils or "Soviets" of workers, soldiers, and several socialist parties had already been formed; that same day they met in the Duma to form a Soviet of Workers' Deputies. On March 15 an agreement that formed the Provisional Government was obtained between the two groups mainly by pledging not to form a final government until a national constituent assembly of all of Russia could be called. The Tsar abdicated his throne that night.

The Russian army, so battered on the Western Front, still had a force of 600,000 entrenched deep in Ottoman territory. Now, despite Minister of Foreign Affairs Miliukov's assertion that Russia would remain loyal to its allies, the Soviet of Workers' Deputies announced a policy of seeking "peace without annexation and indemnities on the basis of national self-determination." This phrase, which the Bolsheviks also would

attempt to use in negotiations with the Germans later, in many ways prefigured President Wilson's Fourteen Points. Britain, France, and the United States now feared that Russia, despite official assurances, might leave the war. Throughout the summer the Russian Army continued to melt along Germany's eastern front, while the British and French lines continued to reflect the battleground stalemate. The possibility of German divisions being shifted westward made a German victory suddenly less tenuous.

The Bolshevik seizure of the Winter Palace in Petrograd in November 1917 put into power a force not only anathema to the British War Cabinet; but one that was poorly known. The chaos of Russia now fueled an atmosphere of uncertainty. By late December the British and French governments began to discuss "a delimitation of south Russia into British and French spheres of activity."[14] The question now, Lord Robert Cecil argued before the British War Cabinet, was that "we must decide definitely whether we are to support the Bolsheviks in their claim to be the supreme Government throughout Russia, or whether we are to recognize and assist the other *de facto* Governments in Russia. We must either support the Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, or the Bolsheviks."[15]

Nationalities Unbound

The March 1917 revolution greatly affected the situation in the southern Caucasus and eastern Anatolia, as it became an impetus for independence by several nations. The national question had arisen as a key issue "both in social democratic circles and in the general intellectual life of Transcaucasia in the years before World War I."[16] The most important of the Social Democratic parties was the Mensheviks whose Georgian leader, Noia Jordania, in contrast to fellow Georgian, Stalin, and the Bolsheviks, "had long supported an autonomy that would support, protect, and nourish the national culture."[17] His "proposal to create an autonomous local government, which would shield Transcaucasia from anarchy until the Constituent Assembly convened . . . on an all-Russian basis," was the basis of Georgian independence.[18] This was

called the Transcaucasian Commissariat. Its representation included Georgian Mensheviks, Azeri Muslim Musavats, Armenian Dashnaks, and Socialist Revolutionaries.[19]

For Menshevik and newly independent Georgia it was crucial to keep Turkish troops out. The Russian army, so battered on the Western Front had maintained a force of 600,000 entrenched deep in Turkish territory. Now, they too began to melt away. Armenians began now to play an increasingly prominent position in the Russian lines as the Provisional Government directed Armenians "to take charge of the provinces of Van, Erzerum, Bitlis and Trabzon."[20] By January 1918, neither the Armenians nor the remnants of the Russian army could hold the mountains north of Mosul or, as months wore on, even the core areas of Armenian settlement in Ottoman Turkey as the Turkish army began to concentrate its forces on one objective at a time. As Kazemzadeh termed it, "for the Western Powers in the autumn of 1917, Transcaucasia was nothing more than a front in the war against Turkey," while for the Bolsheviks and White forces its surviving army "was the only force that could very well decide the fate of the revolution in Transcaucasia."[21]

Brest-Litovsk

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 15, 1918. The terms for peace, which Germany demanded, resulted in serious territorial losses for Soviet Russia. Turkey, as an ally of Germany, also insisted on strong territorial concessions in the Caucasus.

Brest-Litovsk superseded a truce that the Transcaucasian Commissariat had negotiated at Erzinjan in December 1917 in Turkish eyes. They refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Transcaucasian Commissariat and the states it represented. Now, Turkish forces no longer had to negotiate to regain their 1914 borders; instead, "Russia, in its anxiety to extricate itself from war, agreed to cede Kars, Ardahan and Batum, all of which had been acquired in 1878."[22]

The countries of the Caucasus, which had all briefly tasted independence, and the areas that the Russian Army had conquered under the guise of protector to Christians of the Ottoman Empire soon found

themselves being incorporated into the budding Soviet Union or Turkey. The promises of mandates and the rights of nations so eloquently championed by President Woodrow Wilson were difficult to fit to the new economic situation of postwar Europe or the aspirations of the United States in a region where revolutionary forces had now achieved power. Peoples like the Kurds and other nationalities caught up in the Russian occupation saw little chance of independence either if they were to be under the umbrella of the Bolsheviks or the newly installed Turkish nationalist regime in Ankara. It was no coincidence that Soviet Russia was the first state to formally recognize the new government of Kemal Ataturk. Two pariah countries that didn't quite fit into Europe's plans for them were secure in their borders. Iraq, or at least parts of it, would now be relegated to what might have been part of imperial legacies.

Endnotes

1. P. N. Durnovo, "Durnovo's Memorandum," in Frank A. Golder, ed., *Documents of Russian History, 1914–1917* (New York: The Century Company, 1927), 12.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 13.
5. Paul Miliukov, *History of Russia: Reforms, Reactions, Revolutions* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), 3: 308.
6. Evgenii Adamov, ed., *Razdel Asiatskoi Turtsii po sekretnym dokumentam b. ministerstva inostrannikh del* (Moscow: Litizdata NKID, 1924), 80.
7. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 106.
8. Anatole G. Mazour, *Russia, Past and Present* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1951), 397.
9. Jacob C. Hurewitz, ed., *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 2: 17.
10. Adamov, 135–36.
11. Ibid., 158.
12. Ibid., 81.

13. Mazour, 401.
14. Michael Kettle, *The Road to Intervention, March–November 1918: Russia and the Allies 1917–1920* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1: 164.
15. Ibid., 1: 165.
16. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 176.
17. Ibid.
18. Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 57.
19. Ibid., 58.
20. McDowall, 106.
21. Kazemzadeh, 79, 42.
22. McDowall, 107.