

Chapter 2

The Northern Caucasus as a Colonial Phenomenon

Russia, like the Soviet Union, is a multi-national empire.¹ Throughout recent history, most empires (except where the original local population was “eliminated”) are inherently unstable. Most of the major empires that survive for long periods of time can attribute their success to their superior governmental organization and engineering capacity, both of which are usually accompanied by military prowess.

The principal European empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth century ruled their overseas possessions—through colonial services, established navies, merchant fleets, and well-trained expeditionary forces. Countries such as Belgium, France, Great Britain, Holland, Portugal, and Spain followed this pattern. In contrast, Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman Empire, and to some extent Germany conquered contiguous territories. The territory, these latter countries acquired either was a result of conquest or sometimes as “compensation” in connection with a peace settlement of a conflict for their actions or inactions. The Russian Empire, like the United States, expanded both by gaining land from established countries as well as from less technologically developed and politically less organized populations.²

¹ Paul Goble, “Russia’s Colonial Rule of Northern Caucasus Approaching its End, Israeli Analyst Says,” Window on Eurasia, March 28, 2011, available at <http://windowoneurasia.blogspot.com.au/2011/03/window-on-eurasia-russias-colonial-rule.html> (Accessed February 22, 2012) (quoting Avraam Shmulyevich who wrote in a Stavropol newspaper that “a colony is a territory which is sharply distinguished from the metropolitan center by the national and/or religious composition... and which is politically administered from the metropolitan center and is economically dependent on it.”).

² See e.g. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons of Global Power* (2004); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1989); Walter Lafeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansionism* (35th ed. 1998); and Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (2002).

Table 2.1 Metropolitan-colonial ties

Metropolitan state	Political subdivision/colony	Bond value/minority power
France	Algeria	5–
France	Indo-China	2+
Great Britain	Malaysia	1+
Great Britain	Rhodesia/Zimbabwe	1
Great Britain/Netherlands	South Africa	4–
Portugal	Angola/Mozambique	3+
Russia	Northern Caucasus	4+

Russian expansion into the Caucasus region dates back to the reign of Peter the Great in the late seventeenth Century.³ He sought to establish a military presence in the region. It took nearly a hundred years for the Russians to consolidate their southern border after defeating the Persians and the Ottomans.⁴ Nonetheless, neither the Russian Empire nor the Soviet Union achieved complete success in gaining control over the region.⁵

If one examines some recent efforts of countries to maintain their empires into the late twentieth century, the success rate is not particularly high. If one analyzes political maps of the world, one is struck that borders are constantly subject to change. This dynamism reflects a combination of both global and local conditions—with the cost of empire and the local populations seeking to achieve self-determination being the primary factors. International borders are not permanently enshrined. They can be unstable because they may have been initially drawn in an arbitrary manner that ignored the preferences of the local inhabitants. Natural geographical phenomenon such as rivers and mountains may have provided a logical basis for outsiders to delineate borders, but history shows that those drawn in that fashion may be unsustainable with the passage of time or are the locales of separatist activity.

2.1 The Relevance of the Colonial Model

Why is it possible for some populations to enter into a *modus vivendi*, with the country that seeks to colonize them, but not others? Many factors are involved such as the relative strength of the metropolitan state to its colony, the economic and political objectives of the metropolitan state, and the metropolitan state's

³ See N.N. Grodnenskii, *Neokonchennaya voina: Istoriia vooruzhenogo konflikta v. Chechnya* [The Endless War: the History of the Armed Conflict in Chechnya] (2004), available at http://vvs2058.ucoz.ru/Chechnya_War.pdf (Accessed March 17, 2012).

⁴ See Robert W. Schaefer, *op. cit.*, at 49–55.

⁵ *Id.*, 56–107.

ability to find allies among the some of the local elites. Table 2.1 below offers a comparative context for understanding certain “post-colonial” separatist conflicts.

With respect to colonial-type relations—where the local population does not have political self-rule, perhaps the key determinant keeping borders fixed is the strength of the bonds (economic, political, and psychological) between significant segments of the local population and the metropolitan (ruling) country or the strength of a dominant minority “group” within the territory seeking to preserve such ties, fearing the consequences of local rule to their privileged positions. We measure this strength by an admittedly subjective qualitative assessment of a number of the factors noted earlier and call it for want of a better term “Bond Value/Minority Power.” Under this scheme, it might be able to conceptualize these relationships according to the following hierarchy:

- 1 = Marginal—a colonial relationship without a critical mass of “expatriates”.
- 2 = Slight—some genuine recent ties to the “metropolitan” country.
- 3 = Moderate—stronger bond than “1” or “2” for economic, political, or strategic reasons.
- 4 = Significant—quality of the bond is greater than the above, but local population diverse in terms of groupings and objectives.
- 5 = Strong—Metropolitan country is unwilling to compromise on the issue of independence or autonomy.

On a case-by-case basis, one might make the following observations with respect to the relationships of certain “metropolitan counties and the territories they control in the post-World War II era”.

Table 2.1 is intended to be illustrative. It captures only a tiny share of what could be regarded as relatively recent “colonial” conflicts and thus reflects an inherent bias where one participant is sending its armed forces to a territory far away. Thus, for example, it does not include the numerous attempts by the Kurds to gain independence from Iran, Iraq, or Turkey at various times.⁶

In the Table 2.1, we assigned Russia’s relationship to the Northern Caucasus a value of “4+” in recognition of the view of the current Russian political leadership that without a stable resolution of the conflict in the region, the very integrity of the state is in jeopardy. The region has both strategic and economic value to Russia (e.g. energy pipelines). Given the Russian government’s efforts to maintain control over the Northern Caucasus, the relationship has taken on a great symbolic importance given the expenditure of considerable financial, human, and material resources. Hence, Russia’s loss of all or part of the Northern Caucasus could be viewed as a step toward the devolution of the state.

In each of the examples provided above, a portion of the local population challenged the control of the metropolitan power. The resulting struggle had both military and political components. Usually, the fighting had both unconventional and conventional aspects, but each conflict had unique characteristics. Generally,

⁶ See e.g. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (1996).

organized armed insurgents having political goals usually were seeking to establish their independence from a distant colonial power or separating from a contiguous territory that may have a disproportionate amount of the country's political power or wealth.

2.2 Colonialism, Resistance, and Terrorism

In some instances, portions of the local population might have been satisfied with obtaining some greater level of autonomy, although the longer the conflict lasted and the bloodier the fighting became, independence usually became the only acceptable objective to a large segment of those opposed to foreign rule. Many individuals/groups that are unable to form an organized military resistance movement may resort to terrorist acts to achieve their goals.

It is a common perception of specialists on terrorism that terrorist groups generally do not achieve their declaratory ultimate goals, although many have been successful in generating "attention and publicity."⁷ This view can be misleading given the absence of a universally-accepted definition of terrorists and the wide variety of groups that are classified as such. Furthermore, terrorist groups are not static. They may evolve into more organized insurgent/resistance groups or if the government which they are opposing is effective, such groups may implode leaving one or more core cells that may be labeled "terrorists." Over time, new groups are formed and the metropolitan power may need to devote a considerable amount of effort to learn about their new "opponents." This is a dynamic process that can exist over decades.

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⁷ Max Abrams, op cit., at 42–78.

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Burger, E.S.; Cheloukhine, S.

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