

"If the states of Asia and Africa after the withdrawal of the European colonial empires are any guide, then ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Union is likely to be bitter, violent, and protracted."

Nationalism and the Legacy of Empire

BY MARK N. KATZ

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the disintegration of the last great European colonial empire. Just as when the European powers withdrew from their colonies, the 15 former Soviet republics, now all independent countries, are experiencing a host of problems: economic dislocation, weak political structures, ethnic tension, and even warfare.

Although not the sole source of these woes, a significant contributing factor is the emergence of nationalism. Nationalism, of course, is not necessarily destructive; indeed, it is something that occurs in virtually all nations and can be a unifying force within them. But just as happened in many third world countries when they gained independence, an often vengeful form of nationalism has developed in the former republics. Some brands are expansionist—especially in Russia. And while the nationalisms of most non-Russian republics are not expansionist, they tend at a minimum to be centered around a specific ethnic group and to exclude those outside it.

Some observers are convinced that especially virulent forms of nationalism are inherently temporary. While home to a highly defensive nationalism at first, it is argued, new nations gradually acquire the experience and self-confidence that allow them to put aside nationalist policies recognized as counterproductive.¹ The many third world states that used to ban or severely restrict Western investment in the domestic economy but now actively seek it provide examples of this.

Many observers see democratization as a leading means by which extreme nationalism is ameliorated. The theory is that democracies do not go to war with

each other or engage in civil wars because they resolve their conflicts through peaceful methods. That most of the former Soviet republics have either embarked on the path toward democratization or at least stated their intention to do so, appears to offer the hope that extreme varieties of nationalism might be tempered by democratic institutions offering alternative channels for conflict resolution.

Perhaps ethnically exclusive nationalisms in the post-Soviet states will recede as a result of democratization, economic development, or other positive factors, but it is highly doubtful this will occur anytime soon. For there exists in the former Soviet Union, as in many parts of the third world, a problem that serves to heighten insecurity, and thus to enhance extreme nationalism: that the existing borders were drawn by the imperial power not to reflect actual ethnic and national differences, but for its own convenience.

It is not clear whether or to what extent the newly opened Soviet archives will demonstrate that Moscow deliberately drew and redrew contentious borders among neighboring nationalities so they would look to Moscow for protection against one another. But whatever the intentions behind them, the artificial boundaries exacerbated relations among ethnic groups. The union republics often contained two or more nationalities that had historically had poor relations. Nor were borders drawn to include a single ethnic group entirely within them; large segments of a nationality were often divided among two or more republics.

Nationalism in what was once the Soviet Union is not, of course, a homogenous phenomenon, and its character and intensity vary not only across ethnic groups but also within them. But ethnic-based nationalist movements have sprung up throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union. They seek territory, political independence or autonomy, advancement for their group, or other ends—often at the expense of other peoples. In many of the new countries, nationalism in general and territorial disputes in particular are seized on by Communist-turned-nationalist regimes to justify their authoritarian rule. And the passing of

MARK N. KATZ is an associate professor of government and politics at George Mason University. He acknowledges the assistance of the Earhart Foundation for its support in writing this paper.

¹This argument was forcefully made in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

empire means there is no longer a central authority to regulate relations among the various nations.

A TALE OF TWO TERRITORIES

The former Soviet Union offers several major examples of nationalists in neighboring states claiming the same territory. A land dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan kindled a war between the two republics that began almost four years before they became independent. The conflict centers on the question of whether Nagorno-Karabakh, a region the Soviet authorities had assigned to Azerbaijan despite its predominantly Armenian population and its proximity to Armenia, should belong to Azerbaijan or Armenia. It cannot be said with any degree of certainty that if Moscow had, in the 1920s, assigned Nagorno-Karabakh and the tiny sliver of territory between it and Armenia to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic that the current conflict could have been avoided. But it is clear that the Soviet-engineered borders stirred up both Armenian and Azeri nationalists such that each side believes absolutely vital interests are at stake. Neither government has been willing to compromise, though the war has devastated their economies, aggravated Armenia's relations with neighboring Turkey, and led to political turmoil in Azerbaijan. Compromise would be political suicide, since public opinion in both nations has adopted an extremist nationalist position. It is highly doubtful that greater democratization in either country would alter the situation, at least at present.

The Crimean peninsula is another hotly disputed territory. An independent Muslim khanate, the Crimea was conquered by Russia in the eighteenth century. After the Bolshevik Revolution it was part of the Russian republic until 1954, when Khrushchev transferred it to Ukraine as a gift. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, Russian nationalists insisted the peninsula should be returned to Russia. Shortly before it was abolished late last year, the Communist-dominated Russian parliament formally laid claim to Crimea. Although Russian President Boris Yeltsin has repudiated this claim, the conviction that Crimea should belong to Russia has strong support among the Russian public. Similarly, Ukrainians of every political hue are determined to retain Crimea, afraid that giving it up would be the first step in the dissolution of Ukraine.

There are other territorial disputes between former republics—such as the one over the Fergana Valley in Central Asia with its complicated Soviet-era borders—that have not as yet fully engaged nationalist passions but have the potential to flare up into similarly intransigent conflicts.

A LAND OF THEIR OWN

When the Soviet Union broke up it was only the 15 so-called union republics that became independent. But living in the territory of the former empire were a host of ethnic groups besides those that had a union republic named for them. Many areas in which such usually smaller groups predominated (or had once predominated) Moscow had demarcated as "autonomous republics" or "autonomous regions" within the union republic, or had allowed other special political arrangements. Many of these ethnic groups have also asserted their desire for independence. The distinction between a union republic and an autonomous republic may have seemed clear to the Soviet inventors of the concepts, but it was never clear to the inhabitants of the latter, some of which have larger populations than the now independent union republics.

Inside Russia, one autonomous republic—Chechnya—has declared itself independent. Although Yeltsin has refused to recognize its independence, he has been unable to prevent the governments of the autonomous republics and other political divisions from increasing their authority at Moscow's expense.

And Russia is not alone: several of the other newly independent states also have one or more regions where smaller ethnic groups are demanding independence. Georgia is facing secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Gagauz people and the "Transnistrian Republic" have demanded independence from Moldova. In Central Asia, there are secessionist movements in northern Kazakhstan, and eastern Tajikistan, among other places. In the Crimea there is a strong movement that favors secession from Ukraine.

It is ironic that the union republics asserted their right to secede from the Soviet Union but, once independent, have refused to recognize any region's right to secede from them. They often forbid referendums on independence in regions where secessionist movements are active, or if they do permit polling, balk at accepting the results as legitimate when the majority chooses secession. In new countries with undemocratic regimes, governments are unwilling to allow one or more regions to determine their own future democratically, since this would raise demands for democracy throughout the republic.

Nor is this a problem that can readily be resolved through land reallocation. Under the Soviet Union, Moscow's power was not diminished by transferring territory from one republic to another. For the governments of the newly independent countries, on the other hand, relinquishing any territory voluntarily is almost unthinkable, since it might precipitate a nationalist backlash and ousting at the next election—or possibly sooner, by undemocratic means. This political reality hardens government attitudes toward actual, and even potential, secessionist movements. This stance

does not encourage minority groups to integrate into the larger nation, but instead may inflame their desire to secede.

AUTHORITARIAN DREAM, DEMOCRATIC NIGHTMARE?

Authoritarian governments can exploit nationalist sentiment with regard to territorial disputes and secessionist demands to justify authoritarian measures against perceived insurgencies. But once fanned by leaders, nationalism among the populace can also trap a regime into pursuing uncompromising policies toward such challenges for fear of being overthrown if it backs down. A hard line can lead to war, or to an escalation in ongoing fighting. And if the government loses on the battlefield, it may be ousted for that.

In most of the post-Soviet states the government has remained partly or completely under the control of the former Communists, whose primary goal—unsurprisingly—is to remain in power. Communism no longer being a particularly popular ideology, most Communists who retain power have changed their name and claim to be adherents of democracy. Many of course are not democratic, and even those who have democratic tendencies do not wish to be voted out of office. But nationalism is a popular ideology the former can usually capitalize on, especially where there is a territorial dispute with a neighbor or an attempt at secession to raise the nationalist passions.

For more democratically oriented Communists, a nationalist position on territorial/secessionist/ethnic conflicts can serve to bolster domestic support, at least within the majority ethnic group. For leaders less democratically minded, such conflicts can provide a useful excuse for continuing authoritarian rule. In Kazakhstan, for example, where the ethnic Russian and ethnic Kazakh populations are almost equal, many believe that full-fledged democratization would lead to the emergence of Kazakh and Russian nationalist parties, whose fear and suspicion of each other might lead to civil war. Continued rule by the authoritarian but relatively benevolent regime of President Nursultan Nazarbayev is seen as preferable to this by many Russians and Kazakhs.

Exploitation of nationalist sentiment not only helps former Communists remain in power but can also work to restore ousted Communists. Heydar Aliyev, the former Communist Party boss of Azerbaijan whom Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev dismissed in 1987, regained power last year mainly due to the collapse of authority the democratically elected president, Abulfaz Elchibey, suffered as a result of his government's inability to halt Armenian advances in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

But when leaders of any stripe exploit nationalist sentiment they risk creating conditions that impede the progress of compromise settlements. In September

1993, for example, the outline of an agreement between Russia and Ukraine was announced, under which Ukraine would relinquish its claims to the disputed Black Sea Fleet in return for forgiveness of some of its mounting debt to Moscow for Russian oil. Ukrainian nationalists protested that giving up the fleet would weaken Ukraine's claim to the Crimean peninsula, where the fleet is based. Nationalist opposition was so intense that Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk had to repudiate the agreement almost immediately. Finally, the failure of Eduard Shevardnadze, the restored former Communist boss of Georgia, to force breakaway Abkhazia back into the fold in September 1993 caused a rapid upsurge in the rebellion against his rule led by the elected but deposed anti-Communist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

RESTIVE RUSSIANS

The presence—and in some cases the actions—of large Russian communities in several of the non-Russian former republics have also stirred up nationalist tensions. There are approximately 25 million Russians living outside Russia in the territory of the former Soviet Union. During the Soviet era these Russians enjoyed the highest status in the non-Russian republics, holding most of the top positions in industry, government, the military, and education. Official business was conducted in Russian, not the local language. As a result, non-Russians often viewed Russians in their republics as colonial occupiers. At independence, or even before it, the non-Russians sought to end Russian dominance in their republics. Most of the new countries have deposed Russian as the language of official business in favor of the native tongue. Non-Russians have also sought to remove Russians from their leadership positions.

The position of the Russians in the other post-Soviet states resembles that of the European colonists living in the third world when countries there became independent. In many cases the Europeans emigrated en masse back to Europe, either because the new government drove them out, because they feared nationalist policies or sentiment would make life uncomfortable for them, or because, while the new government wanted Europeans to remain, they knew they would no longer have nearly as much decision-making power.

For those returning to Britain, France, Portugal, or elsewhere in Europe, the transition was often very difficult. They had to find places for themselves in societies experiencing economic difficulties. But at least there was a well-established capitalist economy for them to integrate into. Russians emigrating from the non-Russian former republics face a Russian economy in complete disarray, and their prospects for finding jobs or even housing back in Russia are extremely bleak.

Unsurprisingly, most Russians do not want to return. On the other hand, neither do they want to adjust to the reality of the new countries' independence. They do not want to give up their high-status jobs. They do not want to learn the local languages. And in some cases they have shown signs of being unwilling to accept minority status. The predominantly Russian population on the east bank of the Dniester River, for example, has announced its secession from Moldova and the formation of what it calls the Transdnestrian Republic. In both the Donbas mining region of eastern Ukraine and in northern Kazakhstan, where Russians make up a large proportion of the population, there are movements to secede and join the adjacent Russian Federation. A similar movement has sprung up among the predominantly Russian population of northeastern Estonia in reaction to the Estonian law granting citizenship only to ethnic Estonians and those "others" (primarily Russians) who pass a proficiency examination in the Estonian language—something most Russians in Estonia are not capable of doing.

The ethnically exclusivist elements in the nationalisms of the newly independent non-Russian states on the one hand and their Russian communities on the other are mutually reinforcing. The assertion of non-Russian nationalism is highly threatening to the Russians living in the areas bordering Russia—the so-called near abroad—especially since returning to Russia would mean destitution for most of them. But the Russians' response—asserting Russian nationalism, especially in the form of secessionist movements—is threatening to non-Russians, who see the prospect of Russian secessionism as not only weakening their new states by detaching vital territory but as part of a larger Russian plan to reabsorb them altogether. Because each community sees concessions as potentially leading to the loss of independence or to expulsion, neither is willing to cooperate with the other.

BIG BROTHER'S RETURN

When the Western European powers withdrew from their colonies in the third world, they retained significant influence in some (notably the French in sub-Saharan Africa) and little or none in others. None of the former powers, however, attempted to rebuild their colonial empires after having given them up. Powerful forces in Russia, though, appear determined to do just this.

A potential alliance of Russia and the Russian communities in the near abroad looms as an additional threat to the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union. Whereas the Russian expatriates may have little hope of seceding and making it stick, their capability is greatly enhanced with Russia's government or military forces behind them. For example, it is Russian army support for the Transdnestrian Republic that has

allowed the Russians living there to avoid being governed by the Moldovan government. Boris Yeltsin himself has threatened Estonia over the issue of Russians living in that republic.

Russia has intervened not just to support Russians abroad, but for other reasons as well. Russian troops, for example, have intervened in Tajikistan to restore an old-line Communist regime that had been ousted by a coalition of democratic and Islamic forces in 1992. Yet despite Russia's purported concern about the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism" in Tajikistan, Russian forces assisted a Muslim minority in driving Orthodox Christian Georgian forces from Abkhazia.

The governments of the non-Russian states have responded differently to Moscow's efforts to extend its influence. Estonia and Ukraine have unsuccessfully sought support from the West. The Georgian government finally joined the Commonwealth of Independent States last year after Russian forces expelled Georgia from Abkhazia, but Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze simultaneously denounced Russian "imperialism." The Lithuanian government adopted an accommodating attitude toward Russians in the country—it could afford to, since there are relatively few there compared to Latvia or Estonia. Armenia and Azerbaijan have both attempted to win Russian backing in their ongoing struggle with each other (though there are few Russians in either). The Central Asian nations have sought to accommodate Russian interests, but except for Kyrgyzstan, they are run by old-line Communists who fear their own people so much that they have turned to Russian forces to maintain them in power.

Whatever their government's response, non-Russian nationalists for the most part regard Russian actions with extreme alarm. Many are convinced that Russia intends to eliminate their countries' independence and reabsorb them, just as occurred with most of the non-Russian states that briefly asserted their independence at the end of World War I and with the Baltic states in 1940. Indeed, non-Russian nationalists see Russia behind all the disputes their nations face, whether or not it actually is. They fear that Moscow is now taking advantage of the contentious Soviet-drawn borders in order to divide and conquer them once more. Those governments that have cooperated with Russia, such as the Shevardnadze regime in Georgia and the Aliyev regime in Azerbaijan, are often regarded as suspect or even traitorous by non-Russian nationalists—which undermines their legitimacy and hence their ability to remain in power.

LIVING WITH THE LEGACY

Although the Soviet Union no longer exists, the successor states have inherited a grim legacy of empire, including the intractable border disputes, a variety of secessionist movements, and the associated problems

discussed earlier that have given rise to ethnically exclusivist forms of nationalism in the non-Russian former republics and Russia itself. Nor is this negative nationalism likely to be gentled by democratization, at least in the near future. This kind of nationalism results in people, whether from the ethnic majority or a member of a minority nationality, identifying primarily with their ethnic group, and only secondarily—if at all—with other citizens of their country in a bond of common interest. Democracy under these circumstances may only serve to ratify the "tyranny of the majority."

It is this prospect that makes minorities in the former Soviet republics unwilling to be part of the new countries they find themselves in, but rather prefer to secede and either join a neighboring state and benefit from the tyranny of the majority there, or form an independent state where they can exercise their own

tyranny of the majority. This means that the former republics are likely to have confrontational relations with minority groups within their borders and with each other, for a long time to come.

If the states of Asia and Africa after the withdrawal of the European colonial empires are any guide, then ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Union is likely to be bitter, violent, and protracted. The experience of other nations, though, does offer some hope. Real progress has been made recently toward resolving seemingly endless conflicts between blacks and whites in South Africa, between Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East, and between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. The good news is that progress is possible. The bad news is that it can take decades before any is made: the recent wave of nationalist conflict in the new states of the former Soviet Union is not likely to be short lived, but may last indefinitely. •