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# Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences

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**ABSTRACT** Self-determination is widely understood as an anti-imperial norm responsible in significant part for the global break-up of empires. But self-determination norms have been utilized as well to justify Great Power territorial expansion. This essay examines the ways in which self-determination norms have been wielded by the Soviet Union and Russia to justify overriding sovereignty norms, challenge the territorial integrity of weaker states, and rationalize an expansion of power and influence—despite opposition by a majority of inhabitants of the affected areas, the conflicting self-determination claims of indigenous populations, massive Russian settler colonization, and the opinions of the international community.

## Introduction

The principle of national self-determination has generally been thought to have been the great solvent of empire and a weapon of the weak against the strong. But in at least one region of the world (Eurasia) over the last century, self-determination norms have been as easily invoked to legitimate the break-up of empires as to justify and provide a template for Great Power imperialism and territorial expansion. Specifically, I have in mind the numerous ways in which national self-determination has been wielded by the Soviet Union and by post-Soviet Russia to legitimate overriding sovereignty norms, challenge the territorial integrity of weaker states, institutionalize imperial control over minorities, and expand Russian power and influence—despite opposition by a majority of inhabitants of the affected areas, the conflicting self-determination claims of indigenous populations, accompanying Russian settler colonization on a massive scale, or the opinions of the international community.

There are numerous ways in which the principle of national self-determination has been subjected to critique. A great deal of attention has been paid to the ways in which the principle challenges the norms of state sovereignty that lie at the basis of the international system, fostering political instability. Questions have been raised about the ambiguous

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nature of the ‘self’ within the principle and who has the right to invoke it. There is also a line of critique that focuses on how national self-determination of one group often involves the violation of national rights of other groups inhabiting a particular territory (See, for instance, Cassese, 1995; Hannum, 2011; Horowitz, 2003; Moore, 1998). Less attention among the critics, however, has been paid to the ways in which the principle has been easily subject to perversion by the powerful for purposes of institutionalizing control over territories or peoples.

The invocation of principles of self-determination to assert dominance over the less powerful is part of a larger evolution of imperialism in response to the emergence of international norms of sovereignty and self-determination, which in essence have been aimed at containing imperialism. But just as the consolidation of norms of national self-determination creates strong incentives for nationalist oppositions seeking secession to frame state control as imperial and provides a script for how to challenge multinational states, so too does self-determination create incentives for states engaging in acts of imperialism to frame them as acts of self-determination and provides a script for the powerful concerning how to minimize opposition when dominating others. Imperial performances of national self-determination are often not broadly convincing, as they lack authenticity, are often poorly performed, and constitute a perversion of the principle. But their purposes may be less to convince others than to achieve two goals: first, to provide legitimation for acts of imperialism within one’s own population, thereby generating domestic support and isolating domestic political opposition to expansion; and second, to sow confusion among one’s opponents, demoralize them, and provoke doubts about their common identity and understanding of reality, thereby paralyzing opposing action.

### **Historical Continuities**

Within successive Russian-dominated states, there has been a century-long tradition of turning self-determination norms inside out and utilizing the principle as a script and legitimation for acts of imperialism. It is a tradition that continues to this day—most graphically illustrated in the ways in which post-Soviet Russia has gone about expanding its control in Transcaucasia, Crimea, Transnistria, and Eastern Ukraine. Neither the Soviet Union nor post-Soviet Russia was the first state to utilize self-determination to justify acts of imperialism. Not long after self-determination emerged as a political force on the European continent, Napoleon widely invoked it to legitimate French imperial expansion across Europe, and European powers throughout the nineteenth century utilized various claims of self-determination among peoples controlled by rival empires as ways of gaining advantage against them. As Ronald Robinson noted, the notion of empire as trusteeship that was widely deployed in Britain in the nineteenth century legitimated empire largely as a way of civilizing the conquered and preparing them self-government (1979, p. 88). Nor was the USA immune from these practices. President McKinley presented the annexation of the Philippines as a benevolent enterprise: an ‘empire of love’ aimed at ‘preparation for republican self-government at some suitable future date’ (as cited in Stephenson, 1995, p. 90). And in 1903, the USA manufactured the secession of Panama from Colombia to gain control over the Panamanian isthmus, claiming that the ‘ancient land of Panama’ had exercised its ‘right of self-control’ in accordance with the will of its people (Bunau-Varilla, 1914, pp. 365–366).

But what has been unusual about Soviet and Russian imperialism over the last century has been how these states systematically utilized the principle of self-determination as an instrument for domination and control. The underlying motivation for this was the normative sea change concerning empire that occurred in the twentieth century—part of what Philpott (2001) has labelled the ‘revolution in sovereignty’ that occurred in the modern era. Specifically, over the course of the twentieth century, the world experienced a normative transformation surrounding empire, as international law came to ban such practices as conquest and colonization, national self-determination gained legitimacy as a global principle, and empire itself came to be widely construed as a pejorative. This transformation began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the global proliferation of nationalist and anti-colonial resistance rendered establishing and maintaining imperial control considerably more costly, and with these growing costs, opposition to empire emerged as well within imperial metropolises. Thus, imperialism came to require more elaborate justification, both to lessen the costs of control and to undermine potential opposition at home.

It was in this shifting normative environment surrounding empire that the Soviet Union was born. In the context of rising nationalism within the Tsarist Empire, Lenin embraced federalism and anti-colonialism as principles that could be used to advance Bolshevik power. Martin (2001) has shown how the failed examples of the Habsburg, Tsarist, and Ottoman empires in managing the challenges of nationalism strongly affected the way in which the Bolsheviks went about fashioning their own nationality policies. As he wrote, ‘Lenin and Stalin understood very well the danger of being labelled an empire in the age of nationalism’ (Martin, 2001, p. 19). To counter such perceptions while gaining and maintaining control over politics and society in non-Russian regions, the Soviets pioneered the systematic use of granting the appearance of sovereignty without the substance of sovereignty as an underlying organizational principle of the state. While speaking the language of self-determination, the Soviet Union had been stitched together largely by the Red army, and the republics remained thickly controlled from Moscow through the vehicle of the communist party apparatus. At the same time, the republics were granted national territories, a degree of cultural autonomy, and indigenous leaderships, and were legally sovereign entities that mimicked nation state form. Indeed, according to the Soviet constitution, they formally retained the right to secede—a legal fiction that, under very different circumstances in the late 1980s, eventually came back to haunt Soviet leaders when republics evoked their rights to sovereignty. The Bolsheviks thus created a state that was federal in form, but unitary in substance. In this respect, the Soviet Union’s internal organization cloaked control in the language of self-determination and utilized norms of self-determination and sovereignty to blur the line between domination and consent.

The international dimension of Soviet empire similarly sought to utilize the forms and outer attributes of sovereignty as a way of masking control and structural imperial rule. Support for anti-colonialism was also instrumentalized by the Soviet state for attacking rival capitalist states rather than a genuine adoption of the principle—its uses being fully subordinated to the purposes of expanding Soviet power abroad as early as the first decade of the revolution. Acts of conquest by the Soviet state—such as the incorporation of the Baltic states, Western Ukraine, and Moldova by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1939—were always portrayed as acts of self-determination, often with elaborately ritualized performances of coerced participation (such as party-mobilized mass demonstrations

or near-unanimous referenda and elections) to back up the claim (see for instance, Gross, 2002). Nominally independent nation state units were penetrated and monitored by Moscow, at the same time as they were transformed domestically into governments and societies mimicking the false voluntarism of Soviet institutions. The practice of performing sovereignty first emerged at the time of the Russian Civil War, when it was unclear whether to incorporate territories of the former Tsarist Empire directly into the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic or simply to bind them to Moscow through party controls. Ukraine, Belorussia, and Transcaucasia, for example, were treated at first as formally independent states bound by international treaty to Soviet Russia, though eventually these republics formed the basis for creating the USSR in December 1922. As an alternative to integration in a single state, the concept of ‘people’s republics’ was invented in the early 1920s to deal with territories that had previously had a suzerainty relationship with the Tsarist empire (Bukhara and Khiva) or when it was believed that formal independence might help ward off interventions by foreign powers where Bolshevik power was weak (such as in the Far Eastern People’s Republic vis-à-vis the Japanese and the Tuvan and Mongolian people’s republics vis-à-vis the Chinese). ‘People’s republics’ were again used after the Second World War in East Europe when Soviet power had been weakened. The form has been mimicked as well by post-Soviet Russia more recently in Eastern Ukraine, where, for reasons of potential resistance and international reaction, post-Soviet Russia has so far eschewed annexation.

Similarly, Soviet domination in Eastern Europe differed in quite significant ways from forms of imperial control used by European colonial powers. It was not a formal relationship of suzerainty or a colonial status, but a system of masked control—a system of states (and eventually, a formal alliance of states), each of which was recognized by the international community of states as a sovereign entity, but whose politics were substantively controlled from abroad through multiple covert channels. Thus, sovereignty and self-determination came to be utilized by the Soviets as a script and technology for imposing control through hollowing out its substance and embracing its form.

### **Russia Resurgent?**

The Soviet practice of using self-determination as a mode of control eventually came back to haunt the Soviet Union, as much of the Soviet collapse was precisely the story of groups that sought to imbue a faux self-determination with substance. But Soviet state—destroyed by waves of separatist nationalism during the perestroika era—bestowed the practice of using self-determination as a script and technology for imperialism to its post-Soviet Russian successor. Perhaps this is little surprise, given that many of those running the Russian state under Putin worked in the KGB and were foot soldiers in implementing these techniques during the late Soviet period. This resuscitation of Russian imperialism followed the chaos and disintegration of the 1990s, when Russian power receded both internationally and across Eurasia, and within Russia power drifted into the hands of local elites. Within contemporary Russia, there is a deep nostalgia for Soviet power that is rooted in a desire within certain sectors of society to reassert Russian status internally and externally and that has been promoted by the Putin regime. Indeed, in 2011, a Pew Research Centre poll found that 48% of Russians agreed with the statement that it is natural for Russia to have an empire (with only 33% disagreeing with the statement) (2011, p. 36).<sup>1</sup> Such neo-imperial sentiments have grown particularly strong in recent

years. Thus, according to the Pew surveys, in fall 1992, shortly after the Soviet collapse, only 36% of Russians agreed with the statement ‘There are parts of neighbouring countries that really belong to us.’ By 2009, that proportion stood at 58%, and by spring 2014 (after the Crimean invasion)—at 61% (Pew, 2011, 2014).

All this has provided a strong temptation for Russian leaders to build legitimacy through Russian expansionism abroad. In a normatively post-imperial international environment, in which open acts of conquest and naked forms of imperial control are no longer considered legitimate,<sup>2</sup> the use of self-determination as script and technology for masking expansion was highly appealing to Russian leaders. Moreover, it was a script with which they were thoroughly familiar. Self-determination as a cover and legitimation for military action played a prominent role in Russia’s invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Until 2014 in Crimea, for example, separatism had largely grown dormant. Indeed, a survey conducted by Gallup in May 2013 in Crimea found that 53% of Crimeans were satisfied with the status of the peninsula within Ukraine, and only 23% were interested in Crimea becoming part of Russia (IRI, 2013). Nor is there a great deal of evidence that the interests of Russians or Russian speakers in Crimea were under significant threat as a result of the Euromaidan Revolution in February 2014. In 2014, on the Crimean peninsula, there were 600 schools—575 (96%) of which were Russian-language schools in a population in which Russians constituted only 58% of the population (Telekanal novostei ‘24’, 2014). Public opinion polls conducted by Gallup in March 2014 showed that most inhabitants in eastern and southern Ukraine (even the vast majority of Russian speakers) did not feel threatened by the Euromaidan Revolution, and strong majorities in all parts of Ukraine opposed Russian intervention (International Republican Institute, 2014).

But when the revolution in Kyiv threatened to place Ukraine outside of Russia’s geopolitical sphere of influence, Russia decided to stoke Crimean separatism as pretence for invasion. The ground had been laid over the previous decade when Russia handed out 200 thousand Russian passports in Crimea—a practice that was illegal within Ukraine, since Ukraine did not recognize dual citizenship. A similar strategy was used by Russia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia prior to the 2008 Russian invention there: transform local inhabitants into Russian citizens by illegally distributing Russian passports to minority populations abroad, and then find a pretext to claim that the rights of minorities (many of whom were now also Russian citizens) were being violated and their lives threatened, justifying military intervention and ultimately territorial dismemberment.

In Crimea, Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms (to render the appearance that they were recruited from the local population) surrounded the regional parliament and invaded it, forcing the selection of Sergei Aksyonov as prime minister. Aksyonov was a shadowy figure with ties to organized crime; his Russian Unity Party, which was created in 2009 after ‘consultations’ with Moscow, had received only 4% of the votes in Crimea in elections for the Ukrainian parliament (Volchek, 2014). A subsequent invasion by 10,000 ‘little green men’ in unmarked uniforms (Russian troops masquerading as Crimean ‘self-defence forces’) then secured control over the peninsula. Crimea’s entrance into Russia was then blessed by a referendum in Crimea conducted at gunpoint, in which supposedly 82% of the Crimean population participated, with 95% of those participating voting in favour of Russian annexation. Independent polls estimated that only about 34% of the population of Crimea actually participated in the referendum (Donaldson, 2014).

While most of the world had little difficulty recognizing the Russian invasion as a gross violation of international law, throughout this charade Russia maintained the pretence that the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea were simply, in UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin's words, a shining example of the right to national self-determination being put into practice. 'We do not dispute the principle of the territorial integrity of states,' he said. 'It is, of course, very important. It is also understandable that enjoyment of the right of self-determination as to separation from an existing state is an extraordinary measure, applied when future coexistence within a single state becomes impossible' (as cited in Lederer, 2014). Russian diplomat and former deputy secretary general of the United Nations Sergei Ordzhonikidze similarly portrayed Russia's invasion and annexation as justified by the self-determination norm:

It is hard not to greet the decision of the people. The most important thing is the right of a nation to self-determination. This is a concept that is established throughout the world. The people themselves should decide how they want to live. And it's our job to support the decision of the people. (as cited in Razberemsia, 2014)

In his speech celebrating the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Putin specifically argued that it was justified by 'the right of nations to self-determination' in the United Nations Charter, noting that the secession of Crimea was nothing different from the secession of Ukraine from the USSR or Kosovo from Serbia (Putin, 2014a). Of course, Russia has never supported such expressions of popular will within its own territory, as two wars in Chechnya and Russia's use of its extensive laws against extremism to block expressions for autonomy testify.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the indigenous population of Crimea—the Crimean Tatars—rejected Russian annexation; in the wake of Russian annexation, they find themselves subject to harassment, threatened with being fired from their jobs, and subject to restrictions on owning property on the peninsula, while their leadership has been forced into exile. Displays of the Ukrainian flag in Crimea have become criminalized.

Putin's act of 'self-determining' Crimea<sup>4</sup> was greeted by calls by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine and Transnistria for further acts of Russian expansion aimed at creating an entity known in Tsarist times as 'Novorossia' (New Russia)—the lands conquered by Catherine Great from the Crimean Khanate and subject to extensive Russian colonization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Putin himself embraced the Novorossia concept, questioning why these territories had been placed in Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet regime and calling it a violation of the right to self-determination (Putin, 2014b). Of course, the vast majority of people who inhabit these lands are not Russians at all, but rather Ukrainians and Moldovans—the overwhelming majority of whom, irrespective of language use, have no intention of joining Russia.<sup>5</sup> Still, Russia relied on a small minority of Russian nationalists and communists to stoke separatism in the region, and even dispatched significant numbers of Russians from Russia proper to these areas as tourists in order to participate in separatist activities (Roth, 2014).

In April 2014, pro-Moscow activists barricaded themselves inside government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and proclaimed their regions independent 'people's republics'. Similar to Soviet practice, the 'people's republic' status was meant as a way of utilizing sovereignty and self-determination norms to undermine the claims of others to control the area. The new 'authorities' then held hastily organized referenda in May to bless these declarations, with supposedly 89% in Donetsk region (with a 70% turnout) voting for independence (The



pro-independence vote in Luhansk was supposedly 96%). Preparations for the referendums took less than a month and cost less than \$1,700, and nearly all major polling stations were guarded by men wearing balaclavas and carrying automatic weapons. Ballot stuffing was rampant, and independent polls showed that a majority of Russian-speaking Easterners (58%) actually supported the unity of the country (Sindelar, 2014). Almost all of the leadership of these new 'sovereign' entities came from Russia itself. Russia dispatched significant numbers of 'volunteers' (Cossacks, Chechens, Ossetians, Serbs, and others) and Russian troops without insignias on their uniforms (some claimed to be 'volunteers' on leave from the Russian army) to these regions, arming them with sophisticated military equipment supplied by Russia, to defend these units against the attempts of the Ukrainian government to gain back control over its territory. And when the Ukrainian army was on the verge of defeating the rebels, thousands of Russian troops invaded Donetsk province, turning the tide of the conflict and forcing Ukraine into a humiliating retreat.

## Conclusion

In sum, what the century-long Russian experience with self-determination demonstrates us is that national self-determination can as easily function as a script for building empires as for dissolving them by utilizing the discourses and forms of self-determination as a technology of control, emptying it of its substance. But as the collapse of the Soviet Union also suggests, there are significant risks of such imperial strategies over the long term. Contemporary Russia may deploy self-determination as a script for territorial expansion. But that same script provides alternative templates for challenging Russian control by imbuing hollowed out forms of self-determination with genuine substance, potentially coming to be deployed in ways that Russian rulers may not have fully anticipated.

## Notes

1. For similar results in 2014, see Poushte (2014).
2. For some of the many studies demonstrating the near-extinction of acts of territorial conquest after the Second World War, see Fazal (2007), Pinker (2012), Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer (2003), and Zacher (2001). On the United Nations resolutions banning formal empire, see United Nations General Assembly Resolutions #1514, #2625, and #3281.
3. For example, in August 2014, Russian prosecutors banned a planned peaceful 'March for Siberian Federalization' in Novosibirsk under Russia's extremism laws. As Artyom Loskutov, an organizer of the march, noted, 'They decided to tell us how great it is when some republic moves for self-determination. Okay, well let's apply this to other regions. Can Siberia allow itself this same rhetoric? It turns out it can't' (as cited in Luhn, 2014).
4. I use the term here in the same way that Lenin used it in 1920, when he similarly ordered the Red Army 'to self-determine' Georgia, as if self-determination was something done to others (as cited in Pipes, 1974, p. 227).
5. Thus, of the 15 million people inhabiting the seven Ukrainian provinces claimed by Putin as supposedly being part of Novorossia (Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Luhansk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odessa provinces), 65% identified as Ukrainians in the 2001 Ukrainian census, and only 29% identified as Russians (calculated from State Statistical Service of Ukraine, 2001).

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