Dealing with Nationalities in Imperial Formations: How Russian and Chinese Agencies Managed Ethnic Diversity in the 17th to 20th Centuries

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1 Imperial Formations and Colonial Transcontinuities

At first glance, government actions of Great Powers today have apparently little in common with those principles and factors that governed their policies in the past. This supposed discrepancy is particularly striking when we compare the Postsocialist positions of Russia and China with the situation in the age of new imperialism (1860–1914): in both empires, we seem to witness an almost diametric reversal. This perspective has, however, been challenged for quite some time by a vivid debate on the imperial dimensions of Russia and the Soviet Union, insisting on the significance of cross-epochal legacies for imperial formations.

Condensed to what has become known as the imperial turn, this controversy gained substantial momentum due to recent investigations focusing on Russia as a multinational state that have considerably widened our understanding of the complex relationships between the state and nationalities (ethnic groups).1 In their comments on the course taken by this debate and

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in their review of its different directions, the editors of *Kritika* not long ago stressed the need to concentrate more on “the forces holding the tsarist empire together for so long and, by the same token, of the long-term challenges and continuities affecting the multinational Soviet Union.” They thus addressed those cohesive forces on which multinational empires rely—especially in times of social upheaval—to strengthen their coherence, the effects of which become visible particularly during historical caesuras (e.g. 1917, 1991). It seems obvious that the assumption that structures of long duration are at work in these contexts is of theoretical relevance for the analysis of contemporary nation-building processes as well.

Even if one takes a sceptical stance towards the ‘continuity-of-empire’ hypothesis because it allegedly “essentializes Soviet Empire,” the search for “resources of the empire's longevity” and its “ability to stabilize society, despite its ethnic, religious and sociocultural heterogeneity” is still an open-ended question. On the other hand, perceiving the Soviet Union “as a radically new imperial project,” as Aleksei Miller has proposed following Terry Martin, also seems to be a misconception and also somewhat misleading. The phenomenon of the Soviet-borne multinational state cannot be explained just out of itself. Giving thought to the consistency of the ancient regimes' methods to rule, “which include modern methods of census-taking and map-making,” thus continues to be a constructive and convincing approach to both Russia's

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