The Tsar, The Empire, and The Nation

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Introduction

Among the several monuments that the tsarist government chose to erect in Vil‘na, the capital of its Northwest region at the turn of the century, two were especially prominent. The first, unveiled in 1898, was dedicated to the Vil‘na governor-general in 1863–65, Mikhail Murav’ev; the second, unveiled in 1904, honored Catherine the Great, Russia’s empress between 1762 and 1796. The two edifices in fact symbolized two different visions of the Romanov Empire. In government circles, Murav’ev earned praise for his role in quashing the uprising of 1863 and as a statesman who played a key role in efforts to reestablish the region’s Russianness. The monument’s construction and unveiling unfolded principally as a Russian affair in Russian discourse, and indeed, government representatives’ anti-Polish sentiments were evident without ever having to be stated explicitly. Thus, the monument’s appearance illustrates how the Romanov Empire acquired elements of a national (Russian) monarchy in its later decades. Yet by 1904,
the city’s governor-general Petr Sviatopolk-Mirskii contended that the unveiling needed to involve not only Russians but also people of other nationalities, above all the Polish-speaking social elite. His position on the matter reflected his approach to nationality issues in the region more generally. He moreover proposed easing elements of discrimination against non-Russians, believing that their commitments to non-Russian national identification did not necessarily undermine their loyalty to the emperor. In short, the two visions of the Romanov Empire embedded in the monuments were these: one perceived the empire as primarily an ethnic Russian (rußkii) state, where the interests of Russians were promoted at the expense of non-Russians; the other embraced the idea of imperial heterogeneity, whereby political elites sought to ensure the loyalty of non-Russians by tolerating rather than suppressing their diverse cultures.

Historians now broadly agree that non-Russian nationalisms were not the primary cause of the fall of the Russian Empire in the World War I. Indeed, scholars have recently made significant efforts to show that the Romanov Empire and similar multiethnic states actually proved quite effective in coping with the challenges of nationalism. In their path-breaking book Nationalizing Empires, Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller turn attention to the processes of national consolidation unfolding at the core of empires—processes that they regard as having been quite successful. Those processes, they contend, were aimed at “the preservation and extension of empires rather than at the dissolution of empires or the transformations of entire empires into nation-states.” Writing specifically about Russia, Miller assesses the monarchy’s deployment of nationalism as a source of legitimation and evidence of its quest for common cause with popular Russian

4 Rasa Antanavičiūtė, Menas ir politika Vilniaus viešosiose erdvei. XX a. pirmoji pusė (unpublished manuscript).
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nationalism. Other researchers, such as Theodore R. Weeks, likewise contend that “after 1905 official nationalism and popular nationalism became closer than ever,” despite “constant tension” between them.

There is undoubtedly truth to the claims that national consolidation process at the core of the Romanov Empire was successful to some extent, yet we are still left to contemplate the effects of imperial nationality policy on the integration of non-Russians, i.e., the ways in which that policy sought to create institutional spaces and a language of inclusion that could generate sentiments of unity and belonging among those who did not happen to be Russian. Here, the consensus appears broadly pessimistic. A collective monograph edited by the aforementioned Miller and Mikhail Dolbilov notes that, for all intents and purposes, the imperial government in 1907 rejected the integration of non-Russians into the imperial political system with an alteration to the parliament’s electoral law that was specifically designed to reduce their representation. The authors of a volume released by the journal Ab Imperio concur that the empire’s nationalizing policy was essentially anti-imperial in that it envisioned no space for non-Russians in the country’s political body. In a study of identities and nationalism in Right-bank Ukraine, Faith Hillis offers a rather categorical conclusion along the same lines: “Russian tsars, bureaucrats, and intellectuals thus proved unable to reach a consensus about how the empire should respond to the national challenges that it faced. They could neither grant ethnonational considerations a leading role in imperial governance nor guide the empire toward civic nationhood without undermining the foundations of the entire autocratic system.” For Hillis, this failure “weakened the empire’s internal stability.” Other historians,

10 Mikhail Dolbilov and Alexei Miller, Zapadnye okrany Rossiiskoi imperii (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), 167.
too, have noted the lack of a coherent nationality policy, ascribing this fact to both the diversity of worldviews among different political elites and inadequate coordination among government authorities. Thus, historians arrive at different conclusions with regard to the question of how successful the Romanov Empire was in adapting to challenges of nationalism depending on whether they concentrate on interaction between imperial government and popular Russian nationalism or on the effects of tsarist nationality policy on non-Russians.

The subject of the present volume is precisely the response of the empire’s ruling elite to the challenges of nationalism in the tsarist regime’s last decades. While there are reasons to acknowledge the compatibility of empire and nationalism, there were clearly substantial challenges in combining the two in a coherent, long-term policy. Whereas earlier explorations of these issues have tended to encompass either the empire as a whole or smaller administrative units, the present volume adopts an intermediate geographic scope by focusing on Russia’s western peripheries collectively. We understand this region as including the twelve provinces extending from Ukrainian lands in the south to the Baltic provinces in the north, as well as the Kingdom of Poland. It was precisely in these western peripheries, as Hillis writes, that “Russia first encountered the challenge of modern nationalism.” This was also one of the Romanov empire’s geopolitically sensitive regions and the one where the challenge of nationalism was both the greatest and the most complicated. Control over Poland meant that Russia could exert greater influence over European affairs, but that territory simultaneously created a host of problems. As Dominic Lieven succinctly remarked, “Poland was too big to absorb easily, and its elites were too numerous, too self-confident and too wedded to heroic memories of the old independent Polish Commonwealth.”

14 These twelve provinces were Kiev, Volhynia, Podolia, Vil’na, Kovna, Grodna, Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Kurland, Livland, and Estland.
15 Hillis, *Children of Rus’*, 3.
ideas about abandoning the Kingdom of Poland circulated among the imperial intellectuals and ruling elites, such a solution was never seriously considered by the tsarist government. Not only was it unthinkable for a great power to dispense with such an important territory; it was also crystal clear that Polish claims to the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Right-bank Ukraine would not disappear if the Kingdom of Poland became independent. Western borderlands were also the site of the largest concentration of Jews, and in the late imperial period, many tsarist officials regarded Jews as a serious threat if not an outright enemy. From their incorporation into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century, the Baltic provinces were also highly sensitive in a geopolitical sense. Following the German unification in 1870–71 they became a target of “Russification” policy, although that policy was not that harsh as in the Western region. Strife there peaked in 1905, when the region saw the eruption of one of its fiercest social conflicts, which also overlapped with the national crises (Estonian and Latvian peasants against the Baltic German nobility).

Separate parts of the empire’s western peripheries had different statuses on the Russian mental map. The Grand Duchy of Finland and most of the Kingdom of Poland (then officially called the Vistula Region) were understood as territory under Romanov rule but not Russian “national territory.” Nor were the Baltic provinces of Estland, Livland, and Kurland typically construed as part of that “national territory,” since there were comparatively few ethnic Russians residing there, with Estonian and Latvian peasants constituting the absolute majority under a social elite of Baltic Germans.

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17 On such ideas see, for example, Henryk Głębucki, Fatalna sprawa: Kwestia polska w rosyjskiej myśli politycznej (1856–1866) (Cracow: Arcana, 2000), 304.
19 On the distinction between Russian Empire and Russian “national territory,” see Alexei Miller, The Romanov Empire and Nationalism: Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2008), 32, 161–67; Alexei Miller, “The Romanov Empire and the Russian Nation,” in Nationalizing Empires, edited by Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2015), 338–47. Two parts of the Kingdom of Poland—Chelm and Suwalki—represent an exception because they were regarded in certain circles as Russian and Lithuanian territory respectively.
But as Karsten Brüggemann shows in his chapter, the second half of the nineteenth century nonetheless saw a partial symbolic appropriation of the region in Russian national discourse on the basis of historic and confession-al criteria—something revealed even in geographic nomenclature: initially labeled Ostzeiskii krai (from Ostsee, the German for “Baltic”), the provinces later became Pribaltiiskii krai (“Baltic region” in Russian). The provinces further south—at the center of attention in this book—were in most cases very much conceptualized as a Russian “national territory”; indeed, they were often identified quite purposefully as Western Rus’, with reference to the medieval polity that Russian discourse interpreted as homogenous eastern Slavic territory and the foundation of Russia in its more modern form.

The one principal exception in the region was Kovna and a portion of Vil’na province, which featured a compact Lithuanian population and, in certain contexts, was identified as “belonging” to Lithuanians.

The chapters below are divided into four sections based on their primary analytical focus. The first section explores transformations in nationality policy and the impact of nationalist ideology on bureaucratic thinking. The second focuses more closely on the specific matters of religion, the third on education, while the fourth analyzes interrelationships between the tsarist government and popular Russian nationalism.

### Transformations of Imperial Nationality Policy

Competing policy strategies and the influence of regime liberalization on possibilities of effective rule are the focus of the studies written by Anton

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20 The Western region consisted of the Southwest region (the provinces of Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia) and the Northwest region (the provinces of Vil’na, Kovna, Grodna, Minsk, Vitebsk, and Mogilev), even though sometimes in the early twentieth century, the term “Northwest region” was applied only to the so-called Lithuanian provinces (Vil’na, Kovna, and Grodna), but not to the remaining three “Belorussian” ones. This region does not even appear among the borderlands analyzed in Alfred J. Rieber’s book, _The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Kotenko, Darius Staliūnas, and Malte Rolf. These chapters probe the diversity of imperial visions promoted by tsarist officials, focusing in particular on the tension between visions that, on the one hand, promoted privileges for the East Slavic population and the discrimination or segregation for non-Russians and, on the other, stood ready to tolerate non-Russian demands in the sphere of culture and education in order to ensure their loyalty to the Romanov Empire. Those investigations reveal that while one or the other vision might emerge predominant at a particular moment or in a specific context, neither was able to conquer the other entirely, which left policy inconsistent even at the conceptual level. Kotenko analyzes the imperial government’s actions in the Southwest region in relation to both Russian and Ukrainian nationalism. If the region represented Russian “national territory,” then its Little Russian, or Ukrainian, inhabitants were construed as part of the tripartite Russian nation, along with Belorussians and Great Russians.22 Although some government officials—for example, in censoring agencies—promoted a strict assimilationist policy towards Little Russians, Kotenko shows how the Revolution of 1905 legalized publications in the Ukrainian language, which made it impossible to ban such works solely on the basis of language. Other local officials were more interested in securing social stability than in any policies of cultural homogenization. Kotenko proposes that a combination of different visions of empire and nationality policy, along with important changes to the political regime after 1905, blocked proponents of a strict assimilation policy from fully realizing their plans. In a fruitful formulation, Anton Kotenko calls the tsarist state an inconsistently nationalizing empire. Indeed, collectively we argue that inconsistency represents the main characteristic of nationality policy in the late imperial period.

Darius Staliūnas continues this theme of inconsistency by focusing on two competing strategies of nationality policy in the Northwest region: an imperial nationality policy, which proposed that the satisfaction of non-

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22 As the focus of this book is the imperial government and popular Russian nationalism, we use the term used at the time in Russian discourse: “Belorussians,” rather than the modern “Belarusians.” This choice has no ideological connotations.
Russians’ cultural demands would guarantee their loyalty to the empire; and a nationalist policy, which prioritized the tasks associated with assimilation for the East Slavic population and segregation with regard to Jews and Poles, and sometimes even all Catholics. Proponents of the second strategy often recommended the continuation of policies in the post-1863 period, even though the more liberal political regime and stronger non-Russian national movements after 1905 made such policies substantially more difficult to pursue. Staliūnas also shows that even tsarist officials themselves conceded that neither of these strategies could guarantee the loyalty of non-Russians in the longer term.

Rolf deals with the dilemmas of imperial nationality policies in the Kingdom of Poland. He shows how local Russian nationalists promoted policies of strengthening Russian influence in the kingdom, and how they were supported by some among the empire’s political elite who were infiltrated with a degree of ethnic Russo-centrism. But, as Rolf argues, Warsaw’s governor-general Georgii Skalon, the principal tsarist statesman in the region, pursued this policy only to a limited degree. Of Baltic German origin, Skalon embraced estate-orientated concepts of social order that would have been undermined by the proposals that radical Russian nationalists sought to implement in the empire’s borderlands. Thus, Rolf argues, tsarist officials in the Kingdom found themselves in double isolation: they were perceived as foreign by the largest of the local nationalities, Poles and Jews; and they were simultaneously alienated from Russian nationalists. Exploring this complicated situation, Rolf concludes that tsarist government had no long-term vision of how to manage the empire’s multiethnic borderlands.

Confessions in the Crossfire

Another core issue involved religious groups and their status in the aftermath of 1905. Several of our authors correspondingly focus on this question. Chiho Fukushima and Vilma Žaltauskaitė show how repressive methods in confessional policy eventually led not only to homogenization (the acculturation of the Orthodox East Slavic population into Russian society)
but also to differentiation (the acculturation of East Slavs into Polish society of those who converted to Catholicism). Fukushima discusses the impact of the 1905 Decree of Tolerance, which allowed people to leave the Orthodox faith, on nation-building processes. The strongest players in the Chełm-Podlasian region were the imperial government and the Orthodox Church, on the one hand, and Polish nationalists in collaboration with the Catholic Church, on the other. After the decree’s issuance, former Uniates—Greek Catholics who had been forcibly converted to Orthodoxy in a large campaign of 1875—converted to Roman Catholicism on a massive scale, and thus became even more strongly acculturated into the Polish society. At the same time, it is likely that those who remained Orthodox acculturated into the Russian nation.

Like the Kingdom of Poland in Fukushima’s chapter, so too in the Northwest region there was a spate of mass conversions from Orthodoxy to Catholicism after the toleration decree, as Žaltauskaitė’s chapter reveals. But here a majority of the so-called recalcitrants who had resisted their inclusion in Orthodoxy in the decades before 1905 were not Uniates but the descendants of Belorussian Roman Catholics who had been forced to covert to Orthodoxy by the government between 1863 and 1868 (though notably some of those converts remained Orthodox even after 1905). Žaltauskaitė shows that the confrontation between the Orthodox and Catholic communities, between Orthodox and Catholic clergy, and between the imperial government and non-Russian nationalisms had a long prehistory and did not begin with the decree of 1905, as some of the earlier historiography has proposed. Žaltauskaitė also notices a rise in discriminatory measures in confessional policy from around 1908. This policy shift did not serve to increase loyalty to the empire among Catholics in the Northwest region.

**Transformations in Education**

The 1905 Revolution also brought significant changes to educational policy. Yoko Aoshima argues that in contrast to earlier decades, the central government after 1905 began to discuss education policy matters on an empire-wide
scale, rather than addressing each region separately. Even so, the position of different regions on the Russian mental map remained quite varied, with the result that the scale and scope of native language use also differed as it had before the revolution. Focusing mostly on the Baltic provinces and the Kingdom of Poland, Aoshima asserts that discussions of the use of non-Russian languages in schooling around 1905 began with only a regional focus, although the government actually permitted a slightly wider range of rights for non-Russian languages within an arrangement that asserted the basic predominance of the Russian language as the state language. However, the discussions taking place in the imperial center provoked demands from non-Russian populations more than earlier in the empire’s history, which in turn caused the government to try to protect Russian interests.

After 1905, the imperial government initiated plans for the creation of a universal primary education system. Kimitaka Matsuzato analyzes the tensions that emerged in this project in the Southwest region, where the Ministry of Education sought to expand the school network as evenly as possible so every child would have the opportunity to receive a basic primary education. However, the lack of resources compelled the government to rely on the financial input of local communities, who often prioritized the higher primary schools. Beyond the goal of increasing access to education, the tsarist bureaucracy had another motive for maximizing the number of schools under the jurisdiction of the ministry or the zemstvos in relation to parish schools: it hoped to counter illegal Polish schools, whose numbers surged after 1905.23

Two further chapters focus principally on the content of educational policy. Olga Mastianica and Jolita Mulevičiūtė analyze how officials sought to promote imperial loyalty in the Northwest region through the education system, paying particular attention to various instructional practices, primarily excursions. Mastianica highlights continuity: after 1905, the Russian education system continued to implement the historical narrative conceived back in the 1830s, which declared the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to be a

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23 The zemstvo was an institution of self-government introduced in most of the Romanov Empire in 1864. For more on the introduction of the zemstvo system, see chapter 2, p. 44 in this book.
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Russian state, and thus construed the Northwest region as being composed of historically Russian lands. Mulevičiūtė notes a concept that began to appear in school reports following excursions, whereby the Russian nation as a supra-ethnic community was portrayed as an alternative to the homogeneous Russian nation. Both authors stress that despite the Northwest region’s ostensible status as Russian “national territory,” uncertainty over its actual Russianness became clearly evident in the various actions of state institutions. Mastianica notes that while teachers and other activists frequently called for more attention to the history and geography of the region in their lessons, the tsarist government did little in this regard. Mulevičiūtė shows how this region was marginalized as an excursion destination. Both authors admit the difficulty of finding sources that can reveal the influence of these lessons and excursions on pupils, though they hypothesize that this indoctrination could have had the “side effect” of fostering non-Russian loyalties.

The Problem of the Russian Right

Relations between the imperial government and Russian rightist organizations in different western peripheries of the empire varied significantly even as they also had certain common characteristics. In the Northwest region, as Vytautas Petronis shows, rightist organizations of different orientations—both moderate (nationalist) and extreme (radical and monarchist)—appeared in the early twentieth century. The first were more influential in the so-called Lithuanian provinces, the second in Belorussian lands. However, according to Petronis, none of them had a specific ideology or strategy that “would have encompassed other—the non-Russian—nationalisms within the general framework of the empire.” The imperial government backed all these organizations between 1905 and 1907, though subsequently it sometimes used them only instrumentally, without providing support that was either constant or complete; after 1910, government backing weakened. Petronis indicates that the rightists feared the delegation of more power to society, yet at the same time we should not forget that many members of these organizations were state employees, bureau-
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crats, school teachers—that is, a constituent part of imperial institutions. As many of the studies in this volume show (see Staliūnas, Žaltauskaitė, and Aoshima), from 1908 onward, imperial nationality policy in the western peripheries became increasingly discriminatory towards non-Russians, which is what a majority of these Russian rightists wanted.24 However, this does not mean that this shift happened in all the empire’s peripheries, or did so simultaneously.25 In this volume Rolf argues that on the one hand, Warsaw governor-general Skalon renewed the policy of strengthening Russian influence in the Kingdom of Poland after 1910 but, on the other, he still looked for moderate reconciliation with Polish society.

In the Baltic provinces, Russian rightists’ situation was more complicated than in the Northwest region, as here Russians made up a very small percentage of the population. That is why such right-wing activists recommended more drastic solutions designed to increase the influence of ethnic Russians in the region (for example, government-backed colonization by Russian peasants and the creation of incentives for Estonians and Latvians to depart voluntarily). When discussing the political visions of Russian rightists in the Baltic region, Brüggemann emphasizes their utopian character. Much like Petronis and Kotenko, he argues that the rightists’ plans for the region appeared too radical to tsarist government officials and threatened to destabilize ethno-confessional relations in the region. They, therefore, did not earn the government’s support.

As the chapter by Vladimir Levin shows, there were no serious disagreements between the imperial government and Russian rightists on the “Jewish question.” With a few exceptions, neither side intended to grant Jews equal rights. Yet, there was a kind of dynamism in both bureaucratic attitudes to-

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wards Jews and the visions of Russian rightists. If during the Revolution of 1905 Jews occupied the top position in the empire’s “hierarchy of enemies,” then in subsequent years, their demonization decreased, and by 1914, their place in the enemy rankings had been taken by Germans. Still, Jews acquired equal rights to the other subjects of the empire only after the February Revolution in 1917, and the continuation of their status as second-class subjects before then prevented the formation of rightist Jewish political organizations. Although there were some individual conservative and loyalist Jews who tried to gather into rightist organizations or cooperate with Russian rightists, Levin shows that they were largely unsuccessful in these efforts.

Thus, the inconsistency of imperial policy, emphasized by many contributors to this volume, did not mean inconsequentiality. As shown not only in Levin’s but also in Fukushima, Matsuzato, Mulevičiūtė, and Žaltauskaitė’s papers, the empire’s policy in this arena—despite and even because of its very inconsistency—shaped the loyalties and attitudes of non-Russians.

So, which of the two visions identified at the start of this introduction actually predominated the empire’s last decade? The answer must be “neither.” At any given moment and in any particular context, one or the other might gain the upper hand. But in the end, the regime could commit itself completely to neither of them. As an imperial formation, it could not identify fully with Russian nationalism, even though it sometimes implemented things that Russian nationalists advocated. A focus on loyalty over nationalization, meanwhile, could not address the general tendency of non-Russian claims to escalate. The altered political context—new civil rights, a parliament with real legislative power, a burgeoning press, etc.—rendered the execution of any policy originating before 1905 much more difficult afterward. The result was a dilemma that was never resolved. If tsarist Russia in its last decade represented a nationalizing empire, it was only inconsistently and reluctantly so.