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The Russian Empire and Its Typological Analogies

(Idle thoughts looking at the World Map)

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Among all fundamental watersheds of the World's history we hardly will find a more important threshold than a short period of time immediately before and after AD 1500. The discovery of America in 1492, the discovery of the sea route to India in 1498, and a number of similar and simultaneous events laid the foundations of the Era of Great Geographic Discoveries, which at the same time became the era of the formation of large colonial empires. Most of these empires lived for four centuries more and disintegrated only in the 20th century. Spain and Portugal were first to have emerged in this row, to be followed by England, France, Holland, and very soon also by Russia. Russia was lagging behind the leading countries of the Western Europe in this aspect only by a few decades. The conquering adventures of Yermak Timofeevich took place in the second half of the 16th century, and by the end of the first half of the 17th century the Russian explorers and sailors came to the shores of the North-Western Pacific, and sailed through the Bering Strait. The report of the latter discovery only due to the inefficiency of the Muscovite bureaucracy remained unnoticed and the Bering strait had to be rediscovered almost a whole century later.

However, the Russian colonial empire differed considerably from the rest of colonial empires in several aspect, and the most striking difference was its geographical continuity. We do not speak here at all about the Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) and the Ottoman Empires. They were not colonial in a strict sense, they formed gradually and in a different way, and they did not come into existence as a result of geographic discoveries. But if we compare the Russian empire with the Spanish, Portuguese, British, French, Dutch colonial empires, the main difference is that the metropolis is divided from its newly acquired possessions and colonies not by seas and oceans, but only by mountains and rivers. Between the metropolis and its possessions there was no clearly defined political or geographical border, and for this reason there was no psychological border either, which would enable both the population and the administration to say, where the metropolis ends and a colony begins.

This was probably one of the reasons, why the fate of the historically formed Greater Russia had been so far considerably different from the fate of all other colonial empires, who all by the second half of this century or earlier inevitably went down the path towards their final disintegration. And nevertheless, to come to a better understanding of perspective that may expect Russia in the future, it would be useful to attempt an analysis of analogies between the structures of the Russian Empire and some of the Western European colonial empires. In my opinion, such analogies first of all must be sought for not among the highly advanced powers, like France or Britain, but among

earlier empires with a higher share of archaic, pre-capitalist, medieval features. The Spanish Empire, for example, seems to demonstrate a great amount of similar features with the Russian Empire along many parameters.

We may begin with a statement, that in the preceding history of both countries, before the start of the formation of their colonial empires, there already was a considerable number of shared features. Both countries have experienced a long period of being dominated by Muslim superior conqueror rulers, and both have formed as centralized united monarchies out from a big number of rival small kingdoms or princedoms in the course of a long struggle of Reconquista, which was waged under a strictly religious Christian banner and was parallel with a gradual gathering of separate small units into a unified state. The year of the discovery of America was the year of the fall of Granada Emirate - 1492, and the conquest of Siberia began shortly after the taking of Kazan.

The importance of Catholicism in Spain was as great and played as crucial a role as a background for a formation of a common identity, as was the importance of Orthodoxy in Russia. Consequently the degree of intolerance to Islam, Judaism, and "heresies" of all kinds was extremely high. On the other hand, a conversion, at least at its earlier stage, would remove an alienation of representatives of conquered peoples, especially when their nobility was concerned. In Spain, true, there was much more mistrust towards converted ex-Muslims, while in Russia there was practically none. But the converted "Pagans" were regarded as bona fide subjects in both empires, and, in case of a "noble" origin, could be easily accepted into the ruling elite of the conquerors. Such an openness to converts was less noticeable even in Portugal, let alone France, England, Holland, where the considerations of race, of racial origins were much more an obstacle for an acceptance into the metropolitan elite. In Russia it seems to have been not an obstacle at all.

The colonies of both Spanish and Russian Empires can be grouped into four basic types:

- a. Territories with a dense old Christian European population;
- b. Territories with the traditionally Muslim population;
- c. Territories with a religiously mixed, economically heterogeneous population, unified only by a deeply rooted cultural tradition;
- d. Territories with a rare, economically underdeveloped, religiously initially mostly animistic, but rather easily convertible population.

In the Spanish Empire these categories are represented by a. Netherlands, b. Morocco, c. Philippines, d. Americas. In the Russian empire they are respectively: a. Baltic Lands, b. Central Volga Basin and Central Asia, c. Highland Northern Caucasus and Transcaucasia, d. Ural and Siberia.

In the category "a" the civilization level and the cultural standard of a colony is higher, than that of the metropolis, which makes a stubborn resistance and a final separation inevitable.

In the category "b" the differences in the type of the civilization and in the cultural tradition also make an organic synthesis impossible, but some significant enclaves of settlers from the metropolis can continue to exist rather peacefully and almost indefinitely long among a culturally alien population, not mixing with it. Sooner or later,

however, the problem of their re-emigration is going to arise.

In the category “c” the level of the local rather heterogeneous cultural tradition is high, consequently the spirit of nationalism is potentially strong, there is no place for considerable number of settlers from the metropolis, but the local population is interested in the metropolitan culture, in the unifying and pacifying function of the metropolis, and relatively positive attitudes towards these functions are maintained for a rather long time.

In the category “d,” at last, a maximum of a mutual linguistic and cultural penetration can be observed. Huge strata of a new population, consisting of “white” settlers and people of a mixed blood are formed. Even when a political separation is accomplished and the unity of the empire has disintegrated, there is remaining a deep interest in the maintaining of cultural ties, and to some extent also of an economic cooperation.

There is no doubt, of course, that any historical parallels and analogies have a very limited value. The history never repeats itself in a precisely similar pattern, and we have no reasons to expect, that the relations between Russia and its former and current possessions are going to repeat in the 21st century the same character that was characterizing for the relations between Spain and its possessions in the 19th century. There are some striking similarities, but the differences are also quite obvious.

One may argue, that the most important difference, which may make the whole comparison invalid, is the epochal difference, the difference in time. The Spanish Empire started to disintegrate in the early 19th century, while the Soviet Union, which is undoubtedly a direct continuation of the Russian Empire, stepped down on the path of a disintegration almost two centuries later, in a totally different international situation, in the era of a quite different technology. But I would not agree with this argument. In fact, the Russian empire had disintegrated in the course of the 20th century twice. The first time it was in 1918, but then the Bolsheviks succeeded to reunite it, with some minor losses, practically in no time. The second time was in 1991, and this time it seems to be final. But the dates are not so important. What matters in the history of mankind is not the calendar time, but the relative time, the level of the social and economic development. In terms of the typology of socio-economic formations the so-called socialism of the Soviet Union was not, as its ideologists tried to claim, the next stage of the social development after the highest phase of capitalism. Compared to capitalism, it was a step backwards, not forwards. The social structure of the Soviet Union could not even be called a state capitalism. It much more resembled the social structure of despotic Asian empires, with an absence of economic freedom, with an economic voluntarism of the state, with a very important role of the exploitation of slave labor in the infamous “gulags,” with the position of the collective farm peasantry more resembling serfdom than an agricultural cooperation. I can quote for this purpose a recently published work by I.M. Diakonov, *Puti Istorii* where he proposes his own version of the typology of socio-economic formations. And according his typology, the territories and subsequent republics of the Latin America, too, must be regarded not as capitalist countries but as historical analogies of ancient empires, like the Roman Empire, and subsequent barbaric kingdoms of the early medieval Europe.

I must confess that I have never been to Guatemala, let alone the Guatemala of the 19th century, and certainly I have not lived in England of the times of John the Lackland. But what I know about the current state of affairs in the newly independent states of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaidjan, much more reminds the Latin America not only of today, but rather of several decades ago, and the medieval Europe, rather than a developed capitalist state. But there are differences between the Russian and Spanish cases, which are perhaps more important, than epochal differences. The Spanish possessions were separated from the metropolis by seas and oceans, while the Russian Empire was a continuous land mass. And although the degree of integration and mutual cultural and biological penetration of colonizers and colonized was much higher in the Latin America than in the British and French North American possessions, still it was probably not so unlimited as in Siberia. And still the analogies are significant enough and should not be neglected.

The decline and the disintegration of the Spanish colonial empire was probably an absolutely inevitable historical necessity. It is not so certain about the collapse of the USSR. Very few people dared to forecast it in 1970s. There are many people today, who say, that the collapse of the USSR might be avoided if... And then many "ifs" follow, and it becomes obvious, that in reality there was no chance for a realization of any of those ifs. For example, if Yeltsin would replace Gorbachev in the office of the President of the USSR and so on. All this is an absolutely futile guesswork. The disintegration of the USSR has happened and in all probability it is completely irreversible.

However, the question is, whether the Russian federation is going to follow the same evolutionary way which the USSR has followed, whether the world has to expect a further disintegration of Russia or not.

So far there are no signs, indicating, that the further disintegration of Russia is inevitable. It is true, that Chechenia today is de facto wholly independent and in all their declarations the current leaders of Chechenia are adamant to convert this de facto independence into a de jure recognition. And still in the future a possibility of some compromise, of some kind of a Russian-Chechenian confederation treaty is not excluded. If current trends are to be continued, there is perhaps also a possibility of a triple confederation of Russia, Chechenia and Belarus. Under these circumstances there seemingly is not going to arise in any foreseeable future a danger of a separation from Russia of and a proclamation of independence by any Ural or Siberian territories. But one cannot exclude a theoretic possibility of such events, when one remembers the separation of territories with a predominantly Spanish in their origins population from the Spanish empire in the course of liberation of the Latin America, or the separation of the United states of America from the British empire. The linguistic integrity, the feeling of loyalty, the cultural similarity or difference between the population of central Russia and the Russian and Russia-speaking population of Uralian and Siberian provinces is more or less of the same kind, that existed between Spain and the La-Plata region in the early 19th century, or between England and New England in the second half of the 18th century. The question is, to what extent the economic interests of these territories and their populations in Ural and Siberia will agree or disagree with the interests of the Central Russia and the Federal Center. And today we can see that a disagreement in this

sphere is rather growing.

The Transcaucasian Region, which we have compared with Philippines, consists now of three rather different independent states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaidjan, and if we continue to draw our analogies, these three parts of Transcaucasia very roughly can be compared with the Tagalog-dominated, Visayan and Moro parts of the Philippines. Azerbaidjan is just a part of the Near Eastern Muslim world in Transcaucasia to the same extent as the Moro lands in the Southern Philippines have always been a continuation of the Indonesian Muslim world in that archipelago. In this sense no agreement of Azerbaidjan either with Russia or with any Western power or block will ever be cordial, and it will always remain oriented towards the Islamic centers of wealth and power in the Near East.

The history of independence of Philippines differed from the history of independence of the Christian Transcaucasia, because in the former case a direct intervention and subsequent domination of the United states was crucial, while foreign interventions in Transcaucasia in 1918-1919 were only marginally related to the zeal of its peoples for independence, and played no part in the declarations of independence by Armenia and Georgia in 1991.

Today both Georgia and Armenia are more or less confined to the Russian sphere of interests. Armenia, certainly, is internally more pro-Russian than Georgia, which psychologically is not pro-Russian at all. But the forces, that would favor a loosening of ties with Russia, an exit from the Russian sphere of interests, and an establishment of a close and cordial partnership with America or some other Western power or block, are certainly very strong in Georgia and rather strong in Armenia. Such values and orientations were quite typical for the nationalist leadership of Georgia and Armenia in 1918-1920. Then they were defeated by Bolsheviks. But with a new force they were resuscitated in 1990-1992, when Russia was regarded with a considerable mistrust and even enmity and all hopes and expectations were directed towards America. It was the time when Raffi Hovannissian, a Western Armenian raised in California, a man with a strong pro-Western orientation, was the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Armenia.

The hopes for a close Western-Transcaucasian partnership were frustrated, however, in spite of some period of vague flirtations, mostly due to the inconsistency, and the undecided and short-sighted approaches of the American and generally Western diplomacy. But some attempts to shift the orientation of the Christian Transcaucasia from the Russian beacon to the West have already taken place, and they may be repeated in the future, especially if, as it is very likely, Russia once again betrays the interests of her not too securely chained Transcaucasian allies. What is really desirable from the point of view of the "peace-loving mankind" and of the actors of this drama, remains an open question.

The real course of events in the future will considerably depend on the choice of the Russian politics between tactfulness and brutality. Unfortunately, most politicians in the past and present could never learn the simple lesson of history, that in politics, unlike the laws of Newtonian physics, the reaction or counter-action is usually stronger than the action itself. In the past, the revolutions both in the South and North America, against both Spanish and British royal colonial rule, acquired an especially violent char-

acter, lead to an avalanche-like disintegration of the system of colonial possessions mainly because the attempts of the royal power in both cases to crush the starting demands of changes in their initially rather moderate beginnings were so brutal. In the North America, and probably in the Latin America as well, should the royal powers show more flexibility, more readiness to compromise, the result might be not a non-compromised secession, but rather a formation of dominions, just as it happened in Canada. It was exactly the lack of flexibility on the side of royalists, the desire to prevent a disintegration of an empire exclusively by brutal force, that made the process of disintegration so violent and rapid. Now, if we turn to the reactions of the federal center, even not so much of the president B. Yeltsin himself, as the reaction revealed in the statements of many other politicians of influence, like Luzhkov, Shumeiko and many others, to the attempts of republics and provinces to broaden the sphere of their autonomy, we may observe the same lack of flexibility, the same appeal to methods and ideals of gendarme approach. When the Ural Republic tried to declare itself, the reaction of the Center was quite like a paranoia. The ethnically Russian provinces and territories will inevitably be aspiring to obtain a republican status, and the trends towards this end are visible not only in Ural, but also in Siberia, in the Russian Far East, and they will probably emerge in the Cossack-influenced South of Russia.

If the Federal Center admits the inevitability of these trends, if it is prepared in a due way to their development, is prepared to accept them and to reform its relations with the subjects of the Federation on the base of their broadened autonomy, the Federation will survive. But if the Center attempts to quell these trends down by a brutal force, just as it attempted this in Chechenia, the result may be disastrous and a dismemberment of the Federation may become a real danger.

It is important also to remember, that after the disintegration of the Spanish colonial empire, nearly everywhere, both in the former colonies and in the metropolis itself, after a short-lived upheaval of romanticist liberal-democratic aspirations, the power was seized by totalitarian and semi-totalitarian regimes, which gradually evolved later towards an authoritarianism of various shades, and the subsequent development of normal democracies was very slow and in many cases is still very far from its completion. A return of a true totalitarianism in Russia is not very probable, but various forms of authoritarianism, mostly in some pseudo-democratic disguise, are obvious in its many parts and in the overwhelming majority of other countries of CIS, and their further development is to be expected.

The authoritarian character of the newly emerging leadership is especially evident in the post-Soviet Muslim states, and probably it is not realistic at all to expect there a development of any Western-type democracy. At least, this has not happened in any of the Muslim states which arose from the former Spanish and French colonial possession. The question remains, whether an eventual victory of Islamic fundamentalism is to be expected in any of these post-Soviet regions. Again, a comparison with the former colonial possessions of the Western powers rather seems to demonstrate, that in the areas where the Western rule and some cultural and educational Westernization were taking place for a considerable time, a shift towards any form of Islamic fundamentalism is at least more difficult than in the areas which had not experienced a

direct Western rule. This creates a hope that the spread of the Islamic fundamentalism in the post-Soviet Muslim states and republics can be avoided.

Another very complicated question is the future fate of Russian settlers in the countries of CIS. A comparative material is provided by the history of Morocco (both Spanish and French), of such enclave as Tanger or Sidi-Ifni, of the Spanish Western Sahara, and of course, of Algeria and Tunisia. Practically nowhere the European Christian settlers were able to remain in their former positions, and the majority of them had to emigrate to the countries of their origin or elsewhere. There is no “elsewhere” for Russians who live in Central Asia, and they can only either remain where they are or go to Russia. A formation of enclaves, like Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, is not a probability, either. We see that Russians today are gradually squeezed out not only from Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but to some extent even from predominantly Muslim republics of the North Caucasus, let alone Chechenia. But what may be the future fate of Russians living in Kazakstan or Kyrgyzstan where they have deeper roots and where their numbers are too high to allow for a gradual “squeezing out”? Alas, no comparison with any other post-colonial experience seems to be able to provide an answer to this question.