

## The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War

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The comparative history of empires has become a very popular subject in recent years, provoking interesting debates on the origins of the globalization process and on the future of post-Cold War international relations. (1) The focus on empires has also provided a constructive way to reassess the role of Europe in world history, going beyond the traditional great narrative of the 'rise of the West' and acknowledging the many contributions given by non-European peoples to the creation of a global, interdependent economic system. In this sense, historians have particularly emphasized the Eurasian context of the great turning points of the modern era, from the 'Age of Discovery' to the two World Wars, highlighting multiple social, political, and cultural connections between contemporary developments in Western Europe and East Asia. (2) According to John Darwin, it is in fact the dynamic interaction between these two geographical extremes of the Eurasian landmass which constitutes the real 'centre of gravity' of modern world history, favouring the gradual formation of a globalized economy in the late nineteenth century. (3) Yet it remains quite difficult to provide a comprehensive account of this complex relationship, avoiding the pitfalls of macro-economic or geopolitical determinism, while the turbulent history of the intermediate spaces (Middle East, Siberia, Central Asia) between the 'Far West' and the 'Far East' represents a powerful stumbling block for any great narrative of modern Eurasia, contradicting simplistic models of economic integration and political centralization. From this point of view, the case of the Russian Empire, which controlled some of these intermediate spaces since the early 18th century, is especially troubling for world historians: what role did it play in the increasing exchange between Atlantic Europe and Pacific Asia in the modern era? Did it help or hinder the process of globalization? What legacy did it leave in the internal regions of Eurasia?

Alfred Rieber's *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands* is an ambitious attempt to answer these questions, providing at the same time a fresh and insightful great narrative of modern Eurasian empires from the early 16th century to the end of the First World War. Through an elaborate comparative and transnational approach, Rieber highlights the complexity of Russian imperial history and the extreme variety of Eurasian responses to the process of modernization. Indeed, his analysis rejects the traditional geopolitical and civilizational approaches to the history of Eurasia, perceiving them as excessively deterministic, and adopts instead a flexible 'geocultural' perspective on the evolution of Eurasian imperial frontiers and

'borderlands', treating them as mutable concepts, changing over time and endowed with different ideological meanings by intellectuals and politicians. Looking at these 'borderlands' as 'a contested geopolitical space', Rieber is able to place the long process of Russian imperial expansion in 'a different context', seeing it as the fragile and contradictory product of 'a centuries-old struggle among rival imperial powers' (p. 8). Fought through both military and non-military means, such a struggle followed a dynamic pattern articulated in four different phases, which saw first the gradual ascendancy of Russia as the major land power in Eurasia and then the unexpected collapse of its hegemony at the end of the First World War.

From ancient times to the early 16th century, the first phase was shaped by the pivotal encounter between nomadic and sedentary societies across the Eurasian steppes, marked by the 'irregular and unpredictable rhythms' of warfare and trade (p. 11). Favoured by unique environmental conditions, nomadic peoples were often able to impose their terms over sedentary communities, and in the 13th century the most successful among them, the Mongols, created even a vast continental empire stretching from China to Central Europe, setting a powerful precedent which inspired all 'the subsequent struggle over the [Eurasian] borderlands' (p. 15). Yet Mongol domination over Eurasia lasted only 100 years and it assumed different forms in the various regions conquered by Genghis Khan's successors: while in Russia the Mongol invaders devastated urban life and imposed heavy fiscal burdens, for example, in Transcaspia their presence led instead to a period of religious tolerance and commercial prosperity, contributing to the development of a 'highly refined' Eurasian artistic style (p. 20). Far from unifying Eurasia along shared political and cultural practices, the Mongol Empire reinforced the original demographic and 'geocultural' diversity of the continent, especially in peripheral territories like the Caucasus or the Pontic steppe, leaving behind a complex web of ethnic identities and tribal loyalties which later resisted any incorporation within the political structures of its imperial successors.

By the mid-16th century, these successors were gradually emerging in western, southern, and eastern Eurasia, conquering the lands formerly held by the Mongols and starting that great struggle for the 'borderlands' which constitutes the second phase of Rieber's great narrative. They were mainly agrarian and relatively centralized states, although some of them, like the Ottoman Empire or Savafid Iran, never lost completely their nomadic origins, justifying their territorial expansion on religious and ideological arguments rooted in steppe warfare. The Ottomans, for example, relied heavily on the *gazi* tradition of the early Turkic tribes of Transcaspia, and they imbued their imperial armed forces with strong spiritual beliefs, presenting their long and relentless clash with the Habsburgs over the Balkans as a 'just war consecrated by Islam' (p. 26). Nevertheless, these appeals to ancient traditions were not enough to administer increasingly vast and complex multicultural empires, inhabited by an extreme variety of peoples responding to different ethical values and regional identities. In this sense, the control of the 'borderlands' between different imperial powers appeared especially difficult, due to the heterogeneous social and political features of these areas: the incorporation of a 'borderland' into a multicultural empire remained in fact always open to internal or external contestation, threatening the authority and prestige of the imperial centre. Therefore all the great Eurasian empires (Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman, Iranian, Chinese) of the modern era adopted elaborate dynastic ideologies designed to justify their rule over the 'borderlands' and to promote the collaboration of local elites with central authorities, assimilating their different identities and competing loyalties into a unified imperial system.

Rieber analyses carefully these ideologies in the second chapter of the book and emphasizes their extreme political, cultural, and religious complexity, which often provoked serious tensions between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, and between provincial and metropolitan values. In the Russian Empire, for example, the Tsar claimed to be 'the direct representative of God on earth', and at times his 'semi-divine status' was formally sanctioned by the theological doctrines of the Orthodox Church (p. 95). Yet this close relationship with Christian Orthodoxy ran counter the assimilation of the Muslim population of Central Asia into the empire, while the inability of the Tsarist autocracy to formulate a secular, inclusive version of 'Russianness' alienated the Jewish communities of 'the Pale of Settlement', putting them at the head of destabilizing revolutionary movements in the early 20th century. On the other hand, China under the Qing dynasty successfully integrated ethnic and religious minorities within its bureaucratic system, legitimizing

imperial rule through the highly refined moral-ethical codes of the Confucian tradition, but the universalizing appeal of this policy was destroyed by the great rebellions of the mid-19th century, generating a secular Chinese nationalism deeply inimical to the imperial pluralism of the previous era. As observed by Rieber in the last paragraphs of the chapter, this was not an exceptional and isolate development, but the direct product of the gradual decline of religion as 'a spiritual mainstay of empires' in all Eurasia, eroded by the unrelenting pressure of Western scientific rationalism and political liberalism (p. 162). And these new cultural trends had also a dramatic impact on the military and civil bureaucracies of the Eurasian multicultural states, which had previously survived long periods of war and domestic unrest thanks to a remarkable capacity of technical innovation and administrative adaptation.

The long and dynamic evolution of these structures from the 16th to the 19th century is the subject of the third chapter of the book, where Rieber examines in detail the different ways used by the Eurasian empires to defend their military frontiers and impose 'order in the borderlands' (p. 166). Challenged by the changing nature of warfare during the late Renaissance era, the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Chinese reorganized in fact their armed forces to take advantage of the new firearms coming from Western Europe and to employ more efficiently on the battlefield the huge human resources of their expanding imperial domains. However, they failed to develop real standing armies, encountering the fierce resistance of privileged warrior elites like the Janissaries or the Qizilbash tribes, and their inability to master a new set of tactical and technological revolutions in the early 19th century accelerated the decline and disintegration of their empires, making them more vulnerable to the military power of Western nations. On the other hand, the Habsburgs and the Russians were able to create efficient and cohesive professional armies, which performed with remarkable success throughout the 18th and 19th century, expanding the authority of their rulers over the 'borderlands' of southern and central Eurasia. At the same time both Vienna and St. Petersburg developed centralized civil bureaucracies which tried to integrate the ethnically diverse population of their empires into a common administrative system, moderating the disruptive effects of economic modernization and securing the political loyalty of provincial elites. Even if these attempts ultimately failed, due to a complex mixture of administrative incompetence and ideological rigidity, they gave to the Russian and Austrian empires a significant advantage over their more direct Eurasian rivals, who instead suffered considerably for the absence of a central and coordinated bureaucratic system. The Ottoman state, for example, remained prisoner of the feudal politics of provincial elites, who resisted the authority of the sultan and created parallel networks of power working against the reformist impulses coming from the imperial centre at Constantinople. The partial rationalization and modernization of the administrative machinery during the Tanzimat era (1839–76) failed to overcome the influence and privileges of these networks, provoking widespread social and political unrest within the empire.

The main power who benefited from the internal crisis of the Ottomans was Russia, whose long and steady process of geopolitical expansion during the 18th and 19th centuries is dutifully chronicled by Rieber in the fourth chapter of his great narrative. Representing the third phase of the struggle over the Eurasian 'borderlands', this expansion took place in different geographical areas (Baltic littoral, Danubian frontier, Pontic steppe, Caucasian isthmus, Transcaspia, Inner Asia) and it saw a constant redrawing of Russian frontiers with other empires through both prolonged wars and peaceful diplomatic negotiations. In any case, all Russia's rivals were forced to give up territory to the Tsarist regime, while some of them, like the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, lost even their political independence, becoming part of the new 'borderlands' of the Russian Empire. At the same time St. Petersburg gained a significant sphere of influence in the western Balkans, thanks to its external support of the local struggle of Serbia and Greece against Ottoman rule, and used it effectively to promote its old geopolitical ambitions toward Constantinople. Yet, despite these unquestionable military and diplomatic successes, the position of the Russian Empire across Eurasia remained as fragile and problematic as that of its defeated rivals, due to the persistent social and cultural resistance of the 'borderlands' to any kind of imperial rule. The case of the Caucasian isthmus is emblematic of the hostility of frontier areas to permanent incorporation within a single imperial state: 'a shatter zone of great social and ethnic complexity' between the Ottomans and the Safavids, the region was gradually absorbed by Russia during the 19th century, but the extreme porousness of its borders made difficult any

definitive subjugation of the territory to the Tsar's authority (p. 372). Moreover, the religious fragmentation of the local population hampered the integrationist policies of the Russian government, who constantly oscillated between toleration and repression toward the Muslim mountain peoples of the north Caucasus. Faced by the fierce resistance of Chechens and Kabardians to imperial rule, Tsar Alexander II (1855–81) finally opted for a brutal pacification of the region in the late 1870s, which led to the mass expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the mountain areas, replaced by new Christian colonists from nearby Georgia and Armenia. But the harsh measure did not assuage Russian security concerns in the region, while all the following strategies of 'toleration, conversion, and bureaucratic co-optation' failed to ensure the submission of the remaining Muslim population, maintaining a dangerous state of instability for all the last decades of the 19th century (p. 394). China experienced a similar situation in Xinjiang, where a series of Muslim rebellions in the 1860s and 1870s accelerated the political and military decline of the Qing dynasty, creating the potential for further conflicts in the restless 'borderlands' of Eurasia.

And these conflicts soon came to life in the first 20 years of the 20th century, when all the surviving Eurasian empires were shaken by war, revolution, and large-scale civil unrest. This was the last and most violent phase of the long struggle over the 'borderlands', and Rieber depicts it with narrative vividness and analytical insight in the last two chapters of the book. The first great wave of imperial destabilization came with the Russian revolution of 1905, whose subversive appeal spread like a wild fire across Eurasia thanks to the 'contiguous and porous boundaries' connecting the multicultural states of the continent (p. 424). Nurtured by the twin modern forces of socialism and nationalism, this initial revolutionary shock exacerbated the resistance of frontier regions to imperial integration, forcing dynastic rulers to make important political concessions or pushing them on dangerous diplomatic paths. The Habsburgs, for example, faced the widespread rebellion of Czechs, Hungarians, and South Slavs to the traditional absolutist and German centric order of their empire; despite the reformist attempts of the Vienna government, the complexity of the different 'national questions' seriously undermined the internal stability of the empire, especially in peripheral areas like Bosnia and Galicia. On the other hand, Russian border nationalities were violently radicalized by the disastrous war against Japan of 1904–5, which showed all the arrogant incompetence of the old Tsarist regime, directly involved since the 1880s into an aggressive policy of Russification of the empire's ethnic minorities. Indeed, the revolution of 1905 took a more violent and destabilizing aspect in frontier regions like the Caucasus or the Polish provinces, where the constant 'involvement of peasants, workers, and other urban groups in mass actions' began to develop separate national identities opposed to the cultural chauvinism of the Russian autocracy (p. 474). A similar process was also visible in China, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire, leading to a general revolutionary mobilization of the 'borderlands' against the old imperial order in Eurasia. In all these three empires, the phenomenon brought the final collapse of dynastic rule and the attempt to build up 'alternative models' of multicultural states under the different 'banners of socialism, nationalism, and democracy' (p. 530). In Russia, however, the old regime was able to weather the storm thanks to the tactical alliance between the Tsarist court and the nationalist right, which crushed the autonomous aspirations of the border nationalities and pursued an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy from the Balkans to Inner Asia. Needless to say, this particular development played a crucial role in the outbreak of the First World War, sealing the fate of all the great Eurasian empires emerged from the collapse of Mongol hegemony in the late medieval era.

The war and its revolutionary aftermath destroyed in fact the Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman multicultural states, leaving in their place a long string of politically fragile and geographically ill-defined independent nation-states. At the same time it accelerated the territorial disintegration of China, still reeling from the republican revolution of 1911, and transformed Iran into a military autocracy heavily dependent upon the diplomatic benevolence of the British Empire. All these dramatic changes and the rise of the Soviet Union as the main heir of the Tsarist autocracy created new contested 'shatter zones' in the heart of Eurasia, which remained extremely vulnerable to the geopolitical ambitions of external powers (Britain, Germany, Japan) operating on the margins of the continent. Moreover, the huge social and political void created by the conflict allowed the rise to power of 'new men' (Stalin, Pilsudski, Atatürk) in the successor states, who promoted radical socialist or nationalist solutions to the old demographic and territorial problems faced by

the deceased multicultural empires (p. 532). But these solutions were often the same adopted by the imperial elites before the great revolutionary upheaval of the early 20th century, including the ‘assimilation, resettlement, or expulsion’ of restless ethnic minorities in the frontier areas (p. 533). And the inevitable reaction of minority groups to such repressive measures was outright resistance, replicating again the old conflict between central authorities and peripheries of imperial times. The persistence of these social and political patterns of the pre-war era ‘virtually guaranteed that the struggle over the borderlands in Eurasia had not yet come to an end’ (p. 614). A new destructive period of internal crises and international conflicts was soon to begin on the ruins of the great empires of modern Eurasian history, reaching levels of violence and destabilization which are still haunting their successor states today.

Rieber’s work is impressive for both scholarship and breadth of analysis, although not all the Eurasian empires receive the same amount of attention in his great narrative. The complex evolution of Safavid and Qajar Iran, for example, is often summarily presented, while the general exclusion of Mughal India from the big picture of Eurasian frontier conflicts is quite problematic, especially considering the key importance of this imperial actor for the historical evolution of Afghanistan and the Himalayan region, two major ‘borderlands’ at the centre of intense conflicts between different great powers and border nationalities. Several studies have analysed in detail the dynamic interaction between the Mughal ruling elite and the peripheral regions of their domain, and their arguments may have helped to expand Rieber’s focus on Transcaspia and Inner Asia, comparing the imperial parable of India in such areas with those of China, Russia, and Iran.<sup>(4)</sup> Yet these minor flaws do not detract at all from the excellent scholarly value of *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands*, which remains a very significant and reinvigorating book in the field of global imperial history. It is destined to be an indispensable reference work for both students and researchers for many years to come.

## Notes

1. See for example John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400–2000* (London, 2007); Herfried Münkler, *Empire: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-Imagining Eurasia to c. 1830*, ed. Victor B. Lieberman (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999); Geoffrey C. Gunn, *First Globalization: The Eurasian Exchange, 1500 to 1800* (Lanham, MD, 2003); *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West*, ed. Gerard Delanty (London, 2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, pp. 18-20.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and Punjab, 1707–48* (New Delhi, 1986); Richard C. Foltz, *Mughal India and Central Asia* (Karachi, 1998); Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire, 1500–1700* (London, 2002); Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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