

GÉZA GECSE: OROSZ NAGYHATALMI POLITIKA 1905–2021 [RUSSIAN IMPERIAL POLITICS 1905–2021]

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As a recognized researcher of Russian studies in Hungary, Géza Gecse (Assistant Professor, Ludovika University of Public Service, István Nemeskürty Faculty of Teacher Training) is committed to surveying the main characteristics of the hegemonic policies pursued by the Eurasian empire over the past 120 years. After the completion of the manuscript, the onset of the Russo–Ukrainian War in 2022 sadly lent the volume additional relevance. The author extended the original chronological time span (2001) of his research to the present day (p. 10.), i.e., to 2021. Gecse took this decision at the advice of his scholarly advisor, Géza Jeszenszky (former Hungarian foreign minister). In my review, I primarily intend to present the book's ideas concerning Russian geopolitical strategy.

The book consists of twelve parts. In the first chapter, the author writes about the current relevance and lessons of debates on the concept of imperialism. Following an in-depth analysis of theories of imperialism, we may explore the question of whether the Soviet Union can be considered an imperialist state. The author argues that the Bolshevik state “could at most be described as imperialist at the time of its formation in terms of its intentions, since although its goals aimed to achieve world revolution, it initially lacked the strength to do so.” (p. 35.) Gecse, in addition to providing an extensive analysis of the relationship between nationalism and imperialism, also presents Lenin's and Stalin's related views.

The second section is entitled *Russian Imperial Messianism (1905–1917)*. The author observes that political pressure on the empire's nationalities eased following the defeat in the Russo–Japanese War because of the reforms that were introduced (p. 47.). We can read a detailed depiction of the internal challenges arising from the Tsardom's ethnic composition. St. Petersburg often responded to these difficulties with Russification initiatives, although these achieved only limited success, particularly in Muslim-populated regions (pp. 48–49.).

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The author rightly notes that while Russian imperial expansion in Europe operated under the aegis of Pan-Slavism, in Asia it assumed the character of a distinct Eurasian imperialism (p. 50.). In the wake of the lost war with Japan, the foreign policy doctrine of Pan-Slavism gained renewed strength, placing the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy among the principal targets of Russian imperial ambitions. This shift contributed significantly to the ability of Russian liberals to mobilize popular support for war, which became an important factor in the Great War.

During the First World War, alongside their traditional Pan-Slavic aims, the Russians also sought to seize Istanbul; however, despite early successes, Russia ultimately collapsed under the strain of the conflict (pp. 57–60). Gecse analyzes the policies of the 1917 Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks in light of Russian imperial objectives and provides a detailed account of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. He rightly emphasizes that the treaty played a decisive role in the emergence of independent statehood in territories lost by Russia (i. e., Finland, the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine p. 69.).

The author also offers a complex overview of the Bolsheviks' foreign-policy dilemmas during this period. He concludes that Lenin and his comrades rejected the traditional imperial policies of the Tsarist regime during the Russian Civil War. For this reason, even for Hungary, Bolshevik Russia appeared to be the only viable partner. This circumstance explains the ease with which the declaration of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 occurred (p. 77.).

Part III of the book bears the title *Soviet Revolutionary Messianism (1917–1930)*. The author analyzes the political developments of the period through the lens of how they were shaped by the idea of Russian imperialism. He rightly points out that the Soviet Union pursued a Janus-faced foreign policy: alongside the public policy of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, a clandestine course operated through the Comintern (p. 89.). Particularly compelling is the analysis of Moscow's policy in Turkestan, where by 1929 the Soviets had succeeded in dividing the population of the Muslim villages, thereby consolidating the authority of the Russian center of power. The author then proceeds to outline the creation of the GULAG system (pp. 98–99.).

The fourth section bears the title *Soviet Consolidation (1930–1945)*. During this period, the Bolshevik state faced numerous foreign-policy challenges, most notably from Nazi Germany. Consequently, the goal of world revolution had to be temporarily set aside and superseded by the proclaimed mission of “defending parliamentary democracies” (p. 105.). The era was again marked by a peculiar duality: while the Bolsheviks projected the image of a humane state to the outside world, a wave of terror unfolded domestically in which, out of roughly 1.5 million convicted persons, 681,000 were executed (p. 108.).

A lesser-known fact is that during the *chistka* (“Great Purge”), “repression on a national basis became widespread” (p. 110.). As part of this policy, German, Polish, Estonian and Latvian workers were removed from the Soviet military industry, and the national units of the Red Army were dismissed. As a result, the proportion of (ethnic) Russians within the Soviet Union rose from 53% to 58%. Géza Gecse provides a detailed analysis of the 1939 Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact. He cites, for example,

Stalin's speech of 19 August 1939—delivered four days before the agreement was signed—in which the dictator argued that socialism could not triumph under peaceful conditions and that a war was necessary to take power (p. 114).

Particularly compelling is the demonstration of how the Soviets, motivated by their own interests in power, effectively handed over the Western Slavs to the Germans (p. 117.). During the Second World War, a renewed and aggressive policy of Russification took shape, reinforced by the fact that nationalist considerations of homeland defense overshadowed communist slogans. It is also little known that Stalin planned the collective punishment of the Ukrainians (potentially through deportations), but since they constituted 18% of the entire population of the Soviet Union, their relocation to other regions of the Bolshevik state proved essentially impossible (p. 123.). Paradoxically, the war brought fulfilment of long-standing Pan-Slavic aims—as the Slavic peoples of Europe came under Soviet influence—and using the reviewer's phrasing, enabled the achievement of Bolshevik revisionist objectives in both Europe and Asia.

In the fifth section, the author surveys the activities of the Russian émigré community between 1917 and 1946. He points out that Soviet victory in the Second World War triggered broad recognition among Russian émigrés (pp. 133–134.). The volume acquaints the reader with various groups of contemporary Russian emigrants and their leading figures. Gecse provides a detailed account of Russian fascist and National Socialist politicians—constituting an important novelty.

The sixth section discusses the emergence of the bipolar international system (1945–1949). The author offers a comprehensive analysis of the diplomatic negotiations of the period. In relation to Yalta, he rightly emphasizes that the agreement originally served only as a temporary arrangement. However, because a peace treaty with Germany was not signed until 1990, “Yalta was ‘re-evaluated’ as a consequence,” meaning that it was often attributed far greater significance than its architects had originally envisaged (p. 149.).

This chapter also examines the establishment and application of the principle of collective guilt, as well as the geostrategic considerations guiding the Soviet Union during this period. Géza Gecse argues that the re-annexation of Northern Transylvania by Romania became possible partly because the long-term Soviet military presence in Hungary was not yet assured in 1945–46—unlike in Romania and Bulgaria (p. 156.). Particularly interesting and valuable are the sections discussing the Pan-Slav Congress held in Belgrade in 1946 and the analysis of the main characteristics of the early years of the Cold War. The author convincingly demonstrates that Pan-Slavic objectives receded into the background due to the heterogeneous nature of the Eastern Bloc, the internal social structure of the Soviet Union and the distancing of Yugoslavia.

The seventh chapter examines the global role of the Soviet Union between 1949 and 1953. During this period, the Bolshevik state managed to keep pace with the Western powers, a fact demonstrated most clearly by its acquisition of nuclear weapons. The death of Stalin fundamentally transformed Soviet foreign policy as well.

The eighth section, entitled *From Totalitarianism to Authoritarianism (1953–1964)*, explores the changes in Soviet foreign-policy principles during the period of de-Stalinization. The author offers detailed analysis of the main features of the Khrushchev era and concludes that through the doctrine of “peaceful coexistence,” the Soviet leader “creatively” moved Leninism in a direction in which this category had previously not existed (p. 180.). Nonetheless, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution demonstrated that the principle proclaimed at the 20th Congress of the CPSU—namely, the recognition of “different roads to socialism”—did not imply acceptance of a multiparty system or the possibility of independence from the Soviet Union (p. 184.). Gecse also outlines the foreign-policy repercussions of 1956, highlighting the reputational losses suffered by the Soviet state.

A noteworthy development was Khrushchev's increasing reliance, even in diplomacy, on individuals of non-Russian, i.e., Central Asian origin, thereby projecting the multiethnic character of the Soviet state—one that possessed both a European and an Asian elite (p. 187).

The author titles the ninth chapter *The Specific Features of Soviet Expansion (1964–1983)*, offering a detailed analysis of the Brezhnev Doctrine. In Gecse's view, the Soviet dictator revived Lenin's theses when he asserted that “there are no different paths or forms for the construction of socialism” (p. 198.). As in earlier periods, Soviet foreign policy retained a Janus-faced character: it was marked simultaneously by expansionism (e.g., in Afghanistan and/or through pro-Arab steps in the Middle East) and by the application of the doctrine of peaceful coexistence (e.g., the signing of the SALT agreements with the United States).

In the tenth section, the author analyses the continuation of the Cold War “with new tools” from 1983 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He concludes that Gorbachev's slogans of *uskorenie* (acceleration), *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reform) had no connection whatsoever to the Bolshevik tradition (p. 210.). Particularly innovative is the examination of the Gorbachev era from the perspective of nationalities policy, which ultimately led to the federalization of the CPSU. Several of the opposition movements that became legal at this time argued that “during the seventy years of the Soviet Union's existence, Russians had been oppressed: Zionists and Freemasons had deliberately led the country to the state in which it found itself by the mid-1980s” (p. 220.). Under the banner of *glasnost*, the ethnic tensions of the vast Eurasian empire quickly resurfaced. The irreconcilable contradictions of Soviet domestic politics, combined with the arms race dictated by the United States, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Part XI, Géza Gecse examines the period between 1992 and 2001. He outlines the ethnic tensions of a drastically reduced Russia—paying particular attention to the First Chechen War of 1994–1996. The author notes that in mid-1992 a new term emerged, “near abroad,” which referred to the non-Russian parts of the former Soviet Union (p. 241.). During 1992–93, the possibility seemed quite real that Russia might revise its existing borders and unite the Russian populations living along them. These intensions were based on a national ideology. By this time, the idea had also emerged of annexing the Crimean Peninsula as well as the eastern, southern and southwestern regions of Ukraine, which were predominantly Russian speaking (p. 245.).

The book offers a detailed account of the “Partnership for Peace” programme, which successfully mitigated earlier tensions between Russia and NATO in the first half of the 1990s (pp. 252–256.). Gecse provides a meticulous overview of the domestic political changes and economic crises that weakened Russia. Nevertheless, efforts to approach the Western states came to a halt during NATO’s 1998 bombing of Yugoslavia.

The twelfth and final chapter are titled *Russian–American Role Reversal (2001–2021)*. During this period, Putin’s Russia gradually regained the influence it had lost in the post-Soviet era. One leading intellectual, Mikhail Smolin, even declared that “the future of Russia will lie in imperial rebirth” (p. 284.). The book essentially traces this process, for example, through the experiences of the 2008 Russo–Georgian War, as well as through the analysis of the 2014 aggression against Ukraine.

In preparing his work, the author surveyed an impressive range of domestic and international bibliographical sources. His 1,208 footnotes go far beyond the mere citation of sources, as they enrich the main text with additional observations and insights. Nevertheless, in a work of such grand scale, certain redundancies are inevitable. A second edition would justifiably need to incorporate the events that have taken place since 2022, as the Russo–Ukrainian War may well cast earlier chapters in a new light. A good example is the author’s statement—based on extensive literature—that “from a military standpoint it would not pose a problem for [Russia] to occupy Novorossiya, that is, the territory stretching from the Donbas to Transnistria, yet it refrains from taking such a step” (p. 314).

Géza Gecse’s work is essential reading for anyone interested in the 20th–21st century history of Eastern Europe. An extended version of the monograph, which emphasizes the events of the Russo–Ukrainian war, would be worth publishing in English as well.

