

CLASSICAL EURASIANISM AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF RUSSIAN IDENTITY

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“By its very nature Eurasia is historically
destined to comprise a single state entity.”
N. Trubetskoi 1925

One of the great fascinations of studying nationalist ideologies is to follow the complex process by which foreign notions and perspective are absorbed, rescripted and resignified, and then redeployed in a manner quite different from, if not indeed opposed to their original function. This borrowing process can be an elusive one, not least of all because the ideology itself generally seeks to conceal and deny it through an insistence on the absolute individuality and uniqueness of the national ethos it describes. We know nonetheless that external sources have been particularly important for the development of Russian nationalist thought, from at least the early 18th century. In this paper, I would like to suggest that important aspects of the thinking of the Eurasian movement of the 1920s and 1930s--which, we can surely all agree, was nothing if not nationalist--were heavily influenced as well by inputs from outside Russia, specifically from Western Europe. The particular example I will discuss comes from the writings of the ethnographer and philologist Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi about the geopolitics of Eurasia and the fate of the Russian Empire.

We can begin to approach Trubetskoi's ideas through a paradox which characterized the legacy of Russian nationalist thought of which he was a representative. Exemplified most illustriously by the Slavophiles and the Pan-Slavs, this brand of Russian nationalism consistently defined the essential character of their nation in terms of its imputed distinctions from the the civilization of the West. It categorically rejected the Petrine project to 'Europeanize' Russia and insisted that the associated belief that the country's destiny could be realized only as a part of the European fraternity had produced nothing but pernicious effects. Yet despite the vehemence with which this anti-European sentiment was articulated, the thinking of those who espoused it throughout the 19th century foundered consistently on a fundamental ambivalence. However much Russia might be said to stand apart from Europe,

the geopolitical terms in which the country was understood consistently remained those of a European empire. Russia was an *empire* by virtue of the simple circumstance that consisted of the territories of a dominant national group (Great Russians) which ruled over those of subordinate nationalities. And it was despite all protestations a *European* empire by virtue of the fact that most of its 'colonial' realm was in Asia, conceptualized explicitly as being alien to Russia in precisely the same way that India was to Britain, the East Indies to Holland, or indeed Algeria to France or Peru to Spain.

This conundrum of Russia as a European empire that was not really supposed to be European represented something of a Gordian knot, which Trubetskoi attempted to sever by dismissing both premises in a manner that left no room for ambivalence. Russia was clearly not European he maintained, because the vast region occupied by the Russian state, while indeed situated between the European and Asian continents, was nonetheless geographically and thus "objectively" quite separate from both. Instead, it comprised a continent entirely in its own right which he called Eurasia. To be sure, Trubetskoi was by no means the first Russian nationalist to posit a positive meaning in this imputed physical-geographical "fact," to be sure, but he pressed its implications much further than had anyone else. Throughout the course of history, he claimed, the Eurasian continent had served as the arena for the formation and development of an distinct civilization and culture, a civilization that absorbed and blended both European and Asiatic elements, transforming them in the process into a homogeneous synthesis that belonged to neither realm. His vision of the territorial contours of this continent coincided in large measure with those of the Russian empire, with the exception of its Western borderlands in Finland, the Baltic regions, and Poland. Across these broad spaces, Eurasia was a zone of profound ethnographic diversity, made up of a core of Russians, Ugro-Finnic peoples, and the Turkic population of the Volga Basin, Siberia, and Central Asia.

Russia's geographical existence within a larger zone of Eurasian civilization meant that Russian culture had been shaped to a not insignificant extent by influences coming from Asia, a conclusion which Trubetskoi used to underscore and enhance Russia's elemental differentiation from Europe. Referring to a wide historical array of manifestations of Russian culture, including folk music, art, politics, religion, and even language, he repeatedly

emphasized the pre-eminent importance of connections to the east as compared to those to the west. “The Russians, the Ugro-Finns, and the Volga Turks,” he wrote, “comprise a cultural zone that has connections with both the Slavs and the ‘Turanian East,’ and it is difficult to say which of these is more important.” Trubetskoi argued moreover that Russia was Eurasian and not European (Slavic) not only by virtue of its cultural patterns, but in terms of anthropological-racial considerations as well. “Turkic blood mingles in Russian veins with that of the Ugro-Finns and the Slavs,” he observed: “[I]t is usually forgotten that our ‘brothers’ (if not in language or faith, then in blood, character, and culture) are not only the Slavs but the Turanians...”¹ This dramatic insistence on the Asian sources of the Russian ethos--on what Trubetskoi evocatively called Russia’s “non-European, half-Asiatic face”--was intended to leave no room whatsoever for any doubt as to the fundamental chasm that set Russia apart in every sense from Europe. As such, it forms without question the most well-appreciated element of Eurasianism overall.

At the same time, however, there was a second part to his argument which was no less important. The revolutions of 1917 had put an end to the formal existence of the Russian Empire, and Trubetskoi wanted to codify the new state of affairs at all costs. Russia’s existence as an empire, he affirmed bluntly, was a thing of the past. The identifiably Russian element, in other words, could no longer legitimately claim its traditional hegemonic position within the larger geographical-political realm of Eurasia. Instead, he argued that the Russians now represented just another one of the constituent “ethnographic” groups which collectively comprised Eurasia’s multi-cultural complexion. The true and properly homogenizing element of the Eurasian culture zone, however, was not Russian but a more general and comprehensive Eurasian culture. In pressing this point, Trubetskoi was concerned not so much to demonstrate the illegitimacy of this historical legacy of Russian imperial domination within the empire, but rather to establish that with the revolution, the old situation had undergone a fundamental transformation that was not to be undone. Indeed, he felt that the existential tremors of the revolution had been necessary to bring the true state of affairs in this part of the world into full relief. In the aftermath of 1917, it had to be recognized that the position of the Russians, who formerly had represented the “sole master” in the empire and “the official owner of the entire state territory,” had now become that of “one people among a number of

others” who in effect had to share their authority with that of the newly-enfranchised groups.²

Argued consistently, this unprecedented political pluralism had the obvious immediate effect of setting traditional Russian nationalism in conflict with the highest interests of the state. While before the revolution, a nationalist proponent of Russian domination could and certainly would have supported the geopolitical integrity of its imperial realm, this was no longer the case. Russia as a geographical entity was no longer vaguely identified with the entirety of its imperial domains, but was now more precisely refined as the ethnographic homeland of the Great-Russian population. As such it comprised only one segment of the territory of the state, and the demand for exclusive Russian control of it could lead only to its withdrawal from the larger entity. “An extreme nationalist,” he explained,

whose aim is that Russians should be the sole master in their own state, come what may, and that the state itself should belong to the Russians as their full and undivided property--at present such a nationalist must reconcile himself to a “Russia” that would lose all the “outlying provinces” and have borders coinciding approximately with those of the exclusively Great-Russian population up to the Ural mountains; a radically nationalistic aim could now be realized only within such narrowed geographic boundaries.

From the standpoint of the post-revolutionary situation, to insist on the priority of an exclusively Russian ethos within the Eurasian framework would be to degenerate to the same reactionary separatist tribalism for which he castigated other national groups, in particular the Ukrainians. An “extreme Russian nationalist,” he concluded, “turns out to be a separatist no different from a Ukrainian, Georgian, Azerbaijanian, or any other nationalist-separatist.”³ It was not to such nationalist particularism but rather to the “symphonic (choral) unity of the multi-ethnic nations of Eurasia” that the inhabitants of the region should now commit their loyalty.⁴

Trubetskoi’s veritable demonization of the notion of separatism betrayed one of his guiding themes, namely the fundamental commitment to maintain the essential unity and integration of the territory of the former empire, even at the cost of redefining and indeed subordinating the specific position of the Great-Russian element within it. The source of his

insistence on the indivisibility of the greater region was that it corresponded to the true nature of Eurasia as an “integral whole,” a “self-contained geographical, economic, and ethnic whole distinguishable from both Europe and Asia proper.”⁵ Of these three factors, the significance of the geographical was clearly predominant. Borrowing from a hypothesis developed in greater technical detail by his colleague, the geographer Petr Nikolaevich Savitskii, Trubetskoi maintained that by virtue of its physical-geographical configuration--the peculiar juxtaposition of certain ecological zones to each other and to the principal river systems--the Eurasian continent had been fashioned by nature itself into a tightly cohesive and compact landmass.

It was the physical configuration of these lands, Trubetskoi argued, that had conditioned and determined the historical movements and intermingling of peoples across them, the ultimate result of which--first achieved by Ghengis Khan--was the creation of a single unified Eurasian state system. Trubetskoi emphasized this natural-geographical teleology very strongly. The “geographical nature of a state’s territory” poses specific challenges to it, a “geo-economic mission” as he called it which must be mastered if the state is to be viable. In the case of Eurasia this mission had been to foster political, cultural, and economic unity across its broad spaces. This entirely particular path of historical development had been an “historical inevitability” from the very outset, “pre-ordained,” as he insisted repeatedly, “by geography itself.”⁶ And because the essential unity of the region derived in the final instance from Nature, it possessed Nature’s transcendental quality, making it no less imperative in the 20th century than it had been in the 12th when it had been recognized and achieved for the first time by Ghengis Khan. “It is the natural environment itself,” he summarized, “that teaches the peoples of Eurasia [today] to recognize the need to form a single state and to create their own national cultures while working co-operatively with one another.”⁷

Eurasia, Versailles, and Self-Determination

Trubetskoi’s ideas on the implications of Eurasia’s geographical character were ultimately intended to prepare new conceptual ground in support of what in the final analysis was a thoroughly traditional position, namely the overriding need to maintain the geopolitical

unity and integration of the historical spaces of the Russian state. That he should have been preoccupied with this problem in a period when no stable political structure had yet emerged to replace the destroyed empire, and when moreover the consolidation of such a structure was positively obstructed by the centrifugal impulses of local nationalist movements, is understandable, to say the least. What is rather less clear, and needs now to be addressed, is why he chose such an eccentric (and ultimately self-defeating) way to go about it. Why, in other words, did he depict this unity in terms of a greater Eurasian entity which restricted the Russian element and effectively undermined its dominant position? Earlier analyses of Trubetskoi and Eurasianism have stressed the influence of the legacy of *fin-de-siècle* culture in Russia, which already well before 1914 was already thoroughly preoccupied with a sense of the elemental significance of Russia's historical and cultural affinities with the Asia; Yet while the lingering impact of the pre-war mood in Russia was unquestionable, I would suggest nonetheless that Trubetskoi's basic project can be understood only in terms of a discourse that was in fact quite foreign to the Russian national tradition, and moreover was fully articulated only in the aftermath of World War I. This was the discourse familiar to us through the concepts of decolonization and national self-determination.

In many ways, the leading themes of the immediate post-war world were directed as much to the colonial realms of the defeated powers as to their European motherlands. In a noble if misguided attempt to extend the legitimacy of the fundamental principles of the nation-state, the "rights of nations," and national sovereignty beyond the Western-European core area where they had emerged and developed, some of the architects of the post-war order sought to use them as the basis for dismantling of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. This endeavor led to the wholesale creation of a series of new political entities. The guiding intention was that each of these new states would embody a discrete and maximally homogeneous national body politic, the legitimacy of whose state structure would rest on the circumstance that it was no longer imposed from without but rather represented the natural and free expression of the common national volition. The tenet of national self-determination as the reorganizational principle of the new age had been clearly set forth in the celebrated "14 points" which President Wilson offered to the United States Congress in January, 1918, and were endorsed at the conference of victorious powers that convened in

Versailles twelve months later. The most far-reaching consequence was as noted the creation of a series of new states across Eastern Europe. At the same time, however, a similar intention underlay the so-called mandate system that was established by the new League of Nations to administer the African and Middle-Eastern colonies of the defeated empires. The intention was that these extra-European regions were also eventually to acquire national independence and sovereignty; because of their “undeveloped” condition, however, full self-determination was delayed for an indefinite period during which they could continue to absorb the full “benefits” of European patronage.

With this, we come to the principal argument of my paper. It was within the context of this post-war European and trans-Atlantic discourse of self-determination, I would suggest, that Trubetskoi’s proffered vision of Russia-Eurasia has to be understood. He signalled this quite clearly with the suggestion--implicit in the title he chose for his most important manifesto *Europe and Mankind*⁸--that the particular opposition between Russia and the West could be considered as part of a more fundamental cleavage between Europe on the one hand and “mankind” in general on the other. The latter, he observed a year after the Versailles treaty, was comprised of “Slavs, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Negroes and other peoples, all of whom, regardless of color, are groaning under the heavy Romano-Germanic yoke and squandering their national energies on the production of raw materials for European factories...”⁹ Russia in other words was part of the colonial realm, of what some decades later we would become accustomed to call the 3rd World, and the stigma associated with this colonial status was particularly apposite at the moment he was writing, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, for a weakened and defenseless Russia would be utterly powerless to resist European efforts to subjugate and exploit her even more fully. “Collectively,” he wrote,

Europeans look upon Russia as a potential colony. Her vast dimensions disturb them not in the least. In terms of population, India is larger than Russia, but England has snapped up the entire country. Africa exceeds Russia in size, but it has been divided among several of the Romano-Germanic states. The same will probably happen to Russia. Russia is [seen only as] a territory on which certain things grow and within which such and such minerals are available.¹⁰

“Russia has now entered a new epoch in her life,” he went on, “the epoch marking her loss of independence. In the future, Russia will be a colony similar to India, Egypt, and Morocco.” Indeed, Trubetskoi did not miss the opportunity to translate the old belief in Russia’s messianic mission of salvation into terms appropriate to the early 20th century. Taking an unmistakable cue from the Bolsheviks, he observed that Russian resistance to European hegemony “may provide a critical impetus to the emancipation of the [entire] colonial world from Romano-Germanic oppression. Russia can assume leadership in this worldwide movement immediately.”¹¹

Trubetskoi made no real attempt to expand or substantiate this altogether unlikely comparison of Russia with Morocco or India, for his ultimate intention went in a rather different direction. The explicit association of his homeland with the colonial realms of the non-European world was motivated by one simple desire, namely to appropriate for post-revolutionary Russia the same principles and standards that were now beginning to be accorded these other post-colonial and still-colonial regions and peoples. The most fundamental of these was the recognition of the inviolable integrity of the national entity and the sacrosanct quality of its political self-determination. Such a deliberate appropriation could hardly have been more necessary (and by the same token could hardly have seemed, at least to many, to be more essentially inappropriate) than in the case of Russia, which after all was itself a disintegrated empire where Wilsonian principles of national sovereignty would appear necessarily to lead not in the direction of geopolitical cohesion but rather to fragmentation. In his writings, Trubetskoi might have tried to acknowledge and even endorse the new nationalist aspirations across the regions of the former empire, but in the end as we have seen he subordinated their legitimacy quite unequivocally to that of the greater entity, for it was precisely the organic geopolitical framework of Eurasia as a whole which was the truly legitimate repository of national sovereignty over these continental expanses.

In order for this to be recognized, this greater entity itself had to be a fully authenticated, “nation.” It had in other words to represent a group or group of groups which understood itself in the final analysis as a single, homogeneous, and voluntaristic community. It was in this manner, and only in this manner, that the claim of the larger unit for self-determination and sovereignty could possibly supersede and absorb identical claims on the

part of its assorted constituent peoples. By virtue of its imperial legacy, it was obviously quite out of the question that the Russian element could supply the unifying basis for national cohesiveness, and thus an entirely new identity had to be supplied, which could assemble and unify the different parts of the former state. In this connection, we can appreciate the significance of Trubetskoi's insistence on the plasticity of the national ethos, an insistence that was implicit in his assertion of the superiority of cultural over anthropological or racial criteria. To replace imperial Russia, Trubetskoi offered the alternative of Eurasia: a cultural edifice as yet "under construction," as he conceded with admirable frankness, but which he nonetheless quite sincerely believed to correspond to historical, cultural, and political reality.

The only real obstacle to this process of construction, as he saw it, was the failure of the populations involved to recognize and acknowledge the objective fact that they were all joined together by a common Eurasian ethos. This was a predicament, however, which he hoped was only provisional. In a passionate essay entitled "Pan-Eurasian Nationalism" Trubetskoi made a strident appeal for all concerned peoples to recognize their essential commonality. "Each people of Eurasia must be conscious of itself first and foremost as a member of that brotherhood. The consciousness of belonging specifically to the Eurasian brotherhood of peoples must become stronger for each member than the consciousness of belonging to any other group."¹² A pan-Eurasian nationalism was necessary to provide the subjective sense of unity which was necessary for a viable state: it was "not only pragmatically valuable, [but] nothing less than a vital necessity, for only the awakening of self-awareness as a single, multi-ethnic Eurasian nation will provide Russia-Eurasia with the ethnic substratum of statehood, without which it will eventually fall to pieces...." By virtue of the pluralism of the ethnic groups that comprised it, Eurasia might have been as he put it a "peculiar" type of nation, but a nation it was nonetheless.

[T]here is no return to the situation in which Russians were the sole owner of the state territory, and, clearly, no other people can play such a role. Consequently, the national substratum of the state formerly known as the Russian Empire and now know as the USSR can only be the totality of peoples inhabiting that state, taken as

peculiar multiethnic nation and as such possessed of its own nationalism. We call that nation Eurasian, its territory Eurasia, and its nationalism Eurasianism.¹³

The great irony of this position, of course, was that in proclaiming nationhood for Eurasia on this particular basis, Trubetskoi was continuing at least one vital aspect of the very Petrine project that he had himself denounced so bitterly. That is to say, he offered his particular nationalist redefinition of Russia's unique identity in terms of concepts and categories that came from the West.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ N.S. Trubetzkoy, "The Upper and Lower Stories of Russian Culture," in his *The Legacy of Ghengis Khan and other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publication, 1991), pp. 81-99; here 96, 99.
- ² N.S. Trubetzkoy, "Pan-Eurasian Nationalism," in his *The Legacy of Ghengis Khan and other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publication, 1991), pp. 233-267; here 233-4.
- ³ Trubetzkoy, "Pan-Eurasian Nationalism," p. 235.
- ⁴ Trubetzkoy, "Pan-Eurasian Nationalism," p. 243.
- ⁵ N.S. Trubetzkoy, "The Legacy of Ghengis Khan: A Perspective on Russian History not from the West but from the East," in his *The Legacy of Ghengis Khan and other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publication, 1991), pp. 161-231, here 220.
- ⁶ Trubetzkoy, "Legacy," pp. 161, 204.
- ⁷ Trubetzkoy, "Legacy," pp. 220-221.
- ⁸ N.S. Trubetskoi, *Evropa i chelevechestvo* (Sofia: Rossiisko-Bolgarskoe knigoizdatel'stvo, 1920).
- ⁹ N.S. Trubetzkoy, "Europe and Mankind" in his *The Legacy of Ghengis Khan and other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publication, 1991), pp. 1-64; here 59.
- ¹⁰ N.S. Trubetzkoy, "The Russian Problem," in his *The Legacy of Ghengis Khan and other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publication, 1991), pp. 101-116; here 103.
- ¹¹ Trubetzkoy, "Russian Problem," pp. 107, 108.
- ¹² Trubetzkoy, "Pan-Eurasian Nationalism," p. 241.
- ¹³ Trubetzkoy, "Pan-Eurasian Nationalisms," p. 239 (emphasis in original).