

Empire and Legitimacy in Central Asia: Russian Claims to Rightful Rule

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Much recent research in international relations theory has concerned itself with the nature of empire, both as an object of social scientific explanation and topic of critical engagement. I focus on the political form of empires' claims to imperial legitimacy. I identify three forms of imperial legitimation claim: empires may be universalist, recognizing no legitimate equals; competitive, recognizing other empires as peer rivals; or mimetic, making no systematic legitimacy claims, instead emulating those of others. I show theoretically how these variations impact both internal politics of empires and inter-imperial relations. I focus empirically on the history of legitimation claims made by Russia, showing that (perhaps uniquely) Russian claims to political legitimacy have borrowed at various times from all three forms or traditions of imperial legitimacy. I show the consequences of these overlapping or conflicting claims at work in Russian expansion into Central Asia, in the nineteenth century. I then briefly contrast the Russian experience with the legitimacy claims of two other empires with which Russia interacted in the region: the British and Qing empires.

*****Draft Paper—not for citation**

Introduction

What kind of empire was Russia? This paper explores the roots of Russian exceptionalism by locating Russia's empire in relation to other imperialisms of the modern period. I argue theoretically that differences in how empires legitimate their rule shape both how they are governed and how they interact with one another. I identify three strategies of imperial legitimation, based on historical claims to imperial legitimacy. Empirically, I show that, while most historical empires employed relatively clear and consistent grand strategies to justify their rule, imperial Russia exhibited uniquely compound, overlapping, and inconsistent claims to legitimacy.¹ This suggests lessons for our understanding of Russian exceptionalism, and of Russia's standing in the world more generally.

Theorizing variations in imperial legitimacy, I argue, is likely a precondition for both the systematic comparative study of empires, and the study of inter-imperial relations. Historically, empires have taken multiple forms, acquiring and administering far-flung populations and territory in widely varying ways. In so doing, they have varied in how they justify their rule. European colonial empires commonly justified imperial expansion by appeal to a civilizing mission, predicated on their own elite status, and the

¹ While scholars of international relations have recently taken interest in empire, less attention has focused on variation among empires. The literature on empire in IR has grown rapidly. Such accounts have differentiated empires from other international structures (Nexon and Wright 2007), and evaluated historical (Macdonald 2009) and contemporary (Cox 2004; Mann 2005; Donnelly 2006) empires. While particular attention has been focused on putative American empire, other scholars address empire more generally (Doyle 1986), the historical particularities of European imperialism, both in colonial settings (Macdonald 2009) and within Europe (Nexon 2009), address international hierarchies more broadly (Cooley 2005; Lake 2009), or have imported postcolonial analysis into IR scholarship (Barkawi and Laffey 1999; Barkawi and Laffey 2006), re-evaluating empire from the political experience at the periphery. See also two recent journal symposia ("Symposium on Replication in International Studies Research" 2003; Jackson et al. 2011). More basically, empires are among the dominant political forms of recorded history—such analytical tools thus seem valuable. Burbank and Cooper (2011, 3–4) summarize: "[F]or most of human history empires and their interactions shaped the context in which people gauged their political possibilities, pursued their ambitions, and envisioned their societies."

imperative to compete economically and geopolitically with their European imperial peers (Armitage 2000). Some imperial Chinese dynasties justified dominance in East Asia by claiming a mandate to govern *tianxia* (“all under heaven”), based on traditional Confucian social hierarchy (Wang 2012; MacKay 2015a). The steppe empires on China’s northern fringe offered multiple justifications for their rule, depending on the audience they addressed (e.g., Brook 2010, 35–36; Rawski 1996, 832, 834–35). Such authority (imperial or otherwise) is generally predicated in part on claims to legitimacy (Weber 1978, 212–13; Hurd 1999, 381–82; Lake 2009, 17). Legitimacy means that rule is seen as *rightful*, in the sense that subject populations and their elites recognize and accept it. Where claims to legitimacy differ, authority exercised likely will as well. Differences in legitimacy claims may derive from a variety of geographical or power-political sources. However, once established, these claims imply different constraints on how empires can be seen to act legitimately before their subject populations. Having made specific claims to justify imperial rule, they face varied pressures to behave consistently with those assertions.

Drawing on the historical record of past empires, I identify three ideal-type modes or strategies of imperial legitimation: universalist, competitive, and mimetic. Each claims imperial legitimacy differently, thereby justifying distinctive imperial behavior.

Universalist imperialism asserts uniquely universal or quasi-universal authority, and thus a right to rule or subordinate much or most of the known world. Empires taking this approach recognize no other polities as their peers, justifying rule base on their unique status. Examples include the Roman Empire, Imperial China, and the Pax Islamica.

Competitive imperialism, in contrast, entails recognizing other imperial powers as having

formally equal status. These are rival peers, competing but co-existing—each benefiting from the spoils of imperial expansion. Here, putative civilizational superiority is shared among an elite club. Modern European colonial empires adopted this approach, as, perhaps less systematically, did most conquest empires in Classical Greece. They more closely resemble modern states, co-existing in a form of international society, and may have states at their cores. Last, mimetic imperialism neither makes universalistic claims nor recognizes equivalent elite peers. Indeed, such empires lack general narratives of imperial rule. Instead, they make opportunistic and varied claims to authority, borrowing legitimation claims from those they rule. Examples include nomadic steppe empires, as they imposed rule on peoples outside the steppe.

Better understanding distinct forms of imperial legitimacy will aid in assessing current and potential future behaviors of both states. I argue that varying claims to legitimacy shape what actions imperial cores can justify to their occupied peripheries, and thus potentially constrain imperial behavior. Following Weber (1978) and Jackson (2002), I understand legitimacy relationally, as a feature of interactions between two actors, a feature of their relationship that bounds acceptable actions. Here, it limits what imperial cores can be seen to do before peripheries. In practice, most empires adopt a single approach to legitimacy. While their claims may shift over time, during any given period, they will tend toward consistency. This paper however focuses on an exceptional case: Imperial Russia accumulated a variety of overlapping and inconsistent claims to legitimacy over centuries, ranging across all three approaches. Ranging across multiple forms of imperial legitimacy, it made varying and sometimes contradictory claims to rightful rule over the territories and peoples into which it expanded. I suggest these

overlapping claims help to explain the distinctive, indeed perhaps unique, character of Russian exceptionalism, and its standing in world politics today. Empirically, I focus on Russian expansionism in a specific region: Central Asia.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it explains the role of imperial legitimacy in theoretical terms, and develops the typology of legitimation claims. Second, it explores historical Russian claims to imperial legitimacy. Third, it offers a brief and exploratory account of these claims in action, during the period of Russian expansion into Central and Inner Asia. Fourth, it briefly contrasts the Russian experience with those of Britain and the Qing Dynasty.

Varieties of Imperial Legitimacy

Empire and Legitimacy

“Empire” indicates a hierarchical order between political communities, “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society” (Doyle 1986, 45).² An empire will comprise multiple such relationships, in an expansive and heterogeneous zone of imperial rule: “an extensive polity incorporating diverse, previously independent units, ruled by a dominant central polity” (Donnelly 2006, 140). These relationships are framed in terms of core-periphery relations—what Motyl terms an “incomplete wheel, with a hub and spokes but no rim” (Motyl 2001, 16). Nexon and Wright expand on this account to describe a power structure “in which cores are connected to peripheries but peripheries are disconnected—or segmented—from one another” (Nexon and Wright 2007, 253). The result is a system

² I focus here on the explanatory IR-theoretic literature on empire. There are, of course, myriad other sources, in critical IR theory, such as (Barkawi and Laffey 1999; 2006); the critical humanities, most importantly (Said 1979); in sociology, including (Eisenstadt 1963; Go 2009); and world history: (Alcock et al. 2001; Burbank and Cooper 2011).

typified by “heterogeneous contracting”: separation between peripheries, such that imperial metropolises strike distinctive bargains with each of their subordinates. Consequently, “disputes between core imperial authorities and local actors over the terms of a bargain tend not to spill over into other peripheries” (Nexon and Wright 2007, 259, 261). Cores thus face special incentives to maintain the separation or “segmentation” between peripheries, preventing coalition building across peripheries.

In consequence, according to Nexon and Wright, “empires face specific problems of legitimating their control” (Nexon and Wright 2007, 254). As Weber long ago noted, perceived material interest as such rarely dictates actions alone—it is instead shaped by the ideas constituting the social milieu in which rational action is calculated (Weber 1978, 213). Any appeal to legitimacy must occur within that context. Empires, like other polities, appeal to what Lake has called “rightful rule”: the belief, common to both parties, that a hierarchical political relationship is in some way legitimate (Lake 2009, 8). Following Jackson’s reading of Weber, I take a relational approach to legitimacy (Jackson 2002; Weber 1978). On Weber’s account, those in charge in any given political order will aim “to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy. But according to the kind of legitimacy which is claimed, the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, will all differ fundamentally” (Weber 1978, 213). Imperial cores should do the same, working to establish shared political beliefs, interactions, and practices that entrench imperial authority.

These will necessarily be articulated in relatively specific terms, endorsing some ideas and interactions, and excluding others. In consequence, significant differences in

actions by the core should follow from the claims to legitimacy undertaken. Thus, Jackson argues, Weberian legitimacy “becomes primarily a way of *bounding action*, limiting acceptable action to a certain conceptual region and thereby helping to ensure that actual behavior remains more or less within a certain range of variation.” What matters is not subjective belief in a given set of ideas, but the relationship established—in this instance, one or another form of imperial hierarchy—between ruler and ruled, and what actions by each party that relationship establishes. For Weber, legitimacy is “something relevant to specific political actions, and not so much a generic and fungible reserve that power-holders can utilize to justify whatever they wish to justify” (Jackson 2002, 451).³ It is, in other words, a feature of social relationships that motivates their participants in specific ways.

Under these conditions of specific legitimation, a given imperial core’s interlocutors (whether imperial peers or subordinates) may “rhetorically entrap” empires into behaving as they have agreed they legitimately should, thus binding them into specific behaviors (Krebs and Jackson 2007). These may be denominated in public goods provision, political autonomy, the formality or informality of hierarchical institutions, the maintenance of peace, and the like. Generally, imperial cores will face trade-offs in adhering to or derogating from established legitimacy arrangements, and inversely should be willing to incur costs to establish, maintain, and revise them. In short, empires have reason to act legitimately *vis a vis* their peripheries, and where actions are not legitimate to work to make them so. In consequence, the constraints of legitimacy should inform

³ This account of legitimacy is thus somewhat different from that in Hurd (Hurd 1999). Hurd treats legitimacy as a matter of subjective perception—one does something because one perceives that one should, as against material coercion or inducements.

both imperial policy and relations with the wider world—including relations with other empires. Action at the periphery thus may influence action at the core.⁴

Forms of Imperial Legitimacy

I identify three ideal-type modes of imperial legitimacy, differing the formal claims advanced to justify imperial rule. Modes of legitimation shape how empires will present themselves to domestic audiences, to subject populations, and to imperial peers. We need not expect empires to fit them precisely or exactly—rather, they reflect idealized methods of justifying rule, which may overlap in practice.

1. Universalist Imperialism

A universalist strategy for imperial legitimacy predicates rightful rule on the unique status of the metropole: the imperial core claims hierarchical superiority without equal, and an attendant right to rule without limit. Historically, such empires have based these claims on civilizational or religious grounds. Diagnostic cases include ancient Rome and Qin or Han Dynasty China.⁵ Two interrelated features indicate universalist imperialism. First, universalist empires recognize no necessary spatial or temporal limits. Second, authority claims without limit permit the metropole, in principle, to recognize no peers.⁶ Universalist legitimation claims couple distinct advantage with a disadvantage. On the one hand, universalist claims theoretically legitimate geographically unlimited authority. On the other hand, the metropole can recognize no equals. All claims to equivalent status must be greeted as challenges.

Universalistic claims require unique legitimating narratives, often with philosophical or religious sources. Thus, the Pax Islamica was legitimated based on a

⁴ On the influence of peripheries on cores in hierarchies, see (Grynviski and Hsieh 2015; J.-Y. Lee 2016).

⁵ Two recent edited volumes by historians compare the two: (Mutschler and Mittag 2008; Scheidel 2009).

⁶ See also Spruyt (2013, 27–28), who divides all empires into universal and bounded.

narrative of conversion through expansion, presumably obligating the Islamic sphere of influence to expand as far as was possible (Sicker 2000; Sabet 2003). Thus, for example, Uqba ibn Nafi, the Umayyad conqueror of North Africa, is said to have ridden his horse into the waters of the Moroccan Atlantic coast, announcing he would stop only because there was nothing left to conquer (Naylor 2009, 64). Elsewhere, the unique hierarchical role of some Chinese dynasties was justified based on a narrative of cultural or civilizational superiority (Pines 2012; Kang 2010, 55, 57). It usually proved unwilling or unable to recognize neighboring steppe empires as peers (MacKay 2015b).

In historical practice, universalist empires have not generally controlled the whole of the world known to them.⁷ Rome knew independent polities beyond its frontiers (A. D. Lee 2006). The Pax Islamica was, for much of its history, internally divided between multiple sites of authority (Hourani 1991, 38–42; Sicker 2000). Imperial Chinese dynasties could not always impose authority on the polities they claimed as their inferiors.⁸ The Byzantine empire experienced cycles of expansion and contraction, all the while making universalist claims derived from both Christian and Roman sources (James 2010). Nonetheless, their legitimation claims mattered. By failing to measure up to the standards they had set for themselves, they risked an appearance of illegitimacy, or hypocrisy. To accept, tacitly or overtly, the contrary claims of others undermined their claims to rightful authority over those populations and territories they did rule. Thus,

⁷ As specific, geographically instantiated imperial systems, actual universalist empires differ categorically from the “Empire” described by Hardt and Negri, which refers to a general, all-encompassing structural condition. They differentiate Empire in their sense from the imperialisms of “Rome, China, and the Americas,” and thus from specific empires of any kind. Hardt and Negri (2000, xiv).

⁸ Ming China, for example, was territorially reduced in almost every direction from the extent of its Mongol-founded Yuan forbearer. It claimed the whole of former Mongol possessions, despite not controlling them. (Brook 2010, 28–29). The Tang dynasty had equals in the region as well. (Rossabi 1983).

universalistic empires face a distinctive risk of delegitimation, one associated with the mere existence of rivals.⁹

2. *Competitive Empires*

Empires of a second kind do recognize peers. These constitute an elite group, with each claiming rightful rule over its peripheries. Relations between metropolises can be understood as a form of anarchic international society or, in cases of sufficient cooperation, a concert (Bull 1977, 13).¹⁰ Competitive empires face diverging incentives, speaking before two distinct audiences: their imperial subordinates and competing imperial cores. Competitive empires may arise historically where multiple large polities closely interact, but no one can dominate the others.¹¹ The European conquest empires fit this model, as do those that emerged around Athens and Sparta in Ancient Greece, giving rise to the inter-imperial warfare described by Thucydides.¹²

Inter-imperial competition produces two conflicting imperatives for legitimacy. The metropole may deploy a narrative of civilizational superiority, and a putative civilizing mission before its peripheries. However, before other empires, they may appeal to inter-imperial elite equality. The European colonial empires habitually claimed a right to expansion, to curtail that of their rival European peers. These narratives are not wholly consistent with one another, and must be kept separate. Thus, for instance, British rule in South Asia had to justify itself as legitimately hierarchical, even as it recognized that

⁹ Claims to universality are alike in form, not content—for example, those made by the Ming Dynasty and the *Pax Islamica* were substantively unrelated, emphasizing civilizational superiority and a theological remit to spread the faith, respectively. They had in common only their universalistic form.

¹⁰ Donnelly (2009, 68–69), differentiates concerts from intermittent cooperation based on the persistence of cooperation. It is sufficient for my account that this relationship is more cooperative than strict self-help. On the European concert system, see Mitzen (2013).

¹¹ This appears to be the mode of imperialism described by Blanken (2012).

¹² (Thucydides 2013). The Classical Greek polities fit the account somewhat less precisely, insofar as Sparta did not see itself as imperial. The clearest Classical Greek exception is the universalist empire of Alexander the Great.

French rule in much of Southeast Asia was equally acceptable.¹³ The competitive imperialism of the European conquest empires was closely linked to trade—the Dutch and British empires are exemplary¹⁴—and to Enlightenment theories of progress.¹⁵ More so than universalist empires, competitive empires face problems of what Nexon and Wright call “multivocal signaling”: the problem of speaking differently to different audiences.¹⁶ Competitive empires must send differing signals to other metropolises than to their own peripheries. In the case of European colonial imperialism, these tensions eventually facilitated the anti-imperial rhetoric of decolonization.¹⁷

3. Mimetic Empires

If empires either do or do not recognize equal peers as legitimate, what option remains? A third strategic approach makes no one systematic claim to legitimacy, instead borrowing or emulating claims to authority made by foregoing empires, or by the populations they rule. In both instances, the effect is mimetic, as empires mirror authority

¹³ On the varying imperial ideologies of the European colonial powers, see Pagden (1995), chapters in Armitage (1998). In comparing Spain to Britain and France, Pagden finds the former claims stronger roots in Roman imperialism, suggesting it may be an ambivalent case.

¹⁴ Thus, the construction of modern competitive empires has often been closely linked with trading companies, such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC) (Gaastra 2003; Andrade 2004) and the British East India Company (Sen 1997). They were important in the emergence of modern capitalism—the VOC was the world’s first joint stock company. On the Indian Ocean experience of imperial trading companies, see (Phillips and Sharman 2015).

¹⁵ For example, Mill claimed British imperialism both prevented colonies from “becoming a source of additional aggressive strength to some rival power” and “keeps the markets of the different countries [colonies] open to one another, and prevents ... mutual exclusion by hostile tariffs” (Mill 2008, 451). Whatever the costs of imperialism may be, “it has the advantage ... of adding to the moral influence, and weight in the councils of the world” the British Empire possesses (Mill 2008, 451) Tocqueville made similar references, with regard to Algeria (Tocqueville 2001, 59, 71). It is in these respects that competitive imperialism is closely linked to liberalism. It is thus also the form of empire critically addressed by (Lenin 1999). The literature on enlightenment political theory and empire is too large to survey—see review in (Pitts 2010).

¹⁶ (Nexon and Wright 2007, 264). They draw the term from Padgett and Ansell (1993).

¹⁷ See for example Fanon (1965), Memmi (1965).

claims back at the polities they oppose or occupy.¹⁸ They thus make multiple claims at a time, varying across contexts. The most prominent historical examples are the nomadic empires of Inner Asia. Expanding beyond the Eurasian steppe, they often appropriated legitimacy claims from conquered populations or empires. Mimetic empires leverage inconsistent legitimacy claims to their advantage, appropriating and repurposing the legitimization claims of those they coerce.¹⁹ The Chinggisid Mongol and Manchu Qing empires took this approach, as (to a lesser extent) did other steppe empires with which successive Chinese dynasties contended.²⁰

Empires pursuing a mimetic strategy are subject to competing theoretical accounts. They have often been characterized as “secondary” or as “dependent” and “predatory” upon other, larger imperial formations.²¹ However, new archaeological and anthropological research provides a more nuanced picture. Evidence from Inner Asia suggests complex societies may sometimes have arisen on the steppe independently (Houle 2009; Frachetti 2012; Rogers 2012, 217). Di Cosmo, Sneath, and others argue the dispersed structure of steppe life called for distinct political structures (Di Cosmo 2002; Sneath 2007; Rogers 2012, 214–17; Honeychurch 2014). These arrangements were more horizontal, mobile, and flexible, but nonetheless permitting intermittent large-scale organization and ambitious expansion, which in turn necessitated the rapid establishment

¹⁸ *Mimetic*, not *memetic*: the word derives from the Greek *mimesis*, meaning imitation or emulation. *Mimesis* has an extensive history of use as an analytical category in the humanities and social sciences. I intend only the basis sense of imitative behavior.

¹⁹ When not organized in this way, much of the likely steppe constituted what Scott would call “nonstate space,” in which diffuse, horizontal political order was the norm (Scott 2009).

²⁰ These and other steppe empires sometimes made claims. These may have been emulations of the traditional Chinese “mandate of heaven” (Neumann and Wigen 2013, 320). The lack of written sources makes this difficult to determine. Regardless of the claims these empires made in their core polities, they were prone to appropriating legitimization narratives when conquering and administering peoples beyond the steppe.

²¹ Such are longstanding (Lattimore 1940; Mackinder 1904; Barfield 1989; Barfield 2001). Scott, following Barfield, terms such polities “shadow empires” (Scott 2009, 22).

of legitimacy. A pragmatic approach to imperial ideology allowed these structures to be inventively grafted onto mimetic rule at empires' conquered peripheries.²² The Chinggisid Mongols justified ruling China by claiming they had provided it with what its ideology demanded—Chinese unity—thereby repurposing the legitimacy claims of others to their own ends (Brook 2010, 35–36). Below, I find the Manchu-founded Qing dynasty deploying a similarly mimetic approach to justify their rule across multiple peripheries (Rawski 1996, 832, 834–35; Waley-Cohen 2004, 199; Millward 2009, 97–101).

While mimetic imperialism tended historical to arise on the Eurasian Steppe, there is evidence that similar polities have occurred elsewhere.²³ Mimetic empire building may also describe the relationship between the crumbling late Roman Empire and the Germanic tribes that invaded it, now thought to have appropriated much of Roman civilization, inserting themselves atop its political structures (Wolfram 1997; Goffart 2006; Cameron 2013, 33–56). Many modern states are descended directly or indirectly from them, included those of Central and Inner Asia, and parts of the Middle East.²⁴ Thus, while mimetic imperialism may seem more historically distant, its impact extends to the modern world.

Comparative Legitimacies

The three variants of imperial legitimacy are models, capturing distinctive approaches to justifying rule, and imposing in turn distinctive incentives on imperial cores regarding how they manage relations with both their peripheries and with other

²² See an extended discussion in MacKay (2015b, 12–17).

²³ Turchin (2009) finds them wherever the migratory peoples of arid and semi-arid regions meet arable land, and thus sedentary populations, across Afro-Eurasia. Of the more than 60 “mega-empires” globally before 1800, most arose in or adjacent to the large arid regions of Eurasia and Africa. In East Asia, where the most empires formed, nomadic post-nomadic empires and settled agrarian empires arose in correlation.

²⁴ See also MacKay (2013) on early modern Chinese pirates as empire-builders.

empires. While these idealizations describe clearly differentiated or “pure” instances, empirical application of them will contrast the models with the necessarily messier practice of historically instantiated empires.

To explore this account empirically, I turn to the period of Russian imperial expansion in Central Asia. This setting permits the application of the idealized typology to real-world empires, in a relatively consistent setting. Because the present paper is exploratory, I limit myself to establishing the modes of legitimation Russia employed, and then briefly turn to how these played out during its expansion into Central Asia, shaping the authority it claimed.

Russian Claims to Imperial Legitimacy

Russian claims to imperial legitimacy, and their basis in pre-imperial Slavic politics, emerged gradually, over centuries. In its earliest forms, it emerged out of, and in dialogue with, the mimetic imperial traditions of the steppe. This was gradually joined by a form of universalism linked to the Russian Orthodox church, and claims to unique Russian status. Later, as Russia was gradually drawn into the European international system, Russian imperialism gradually took on features of competitive imperialism. These approaches to legitimacy accumulated and intermingled in the official rhetoric and imperial administrative practice.

Russian imperialism had longstanding linkages to Inner Eurasia. While early Russian political culture is difficult to document, it likely acquired approaches to imperial legitimacy through in part out of two distinct periods of prolonged sociopolitical interaction with and influence by the nomadic peoples of the steppe. First, the Russian precursor state of Kievan Rus emerged in interaction with the Khazar Kaganate, in the

late ninth century. Second, the founding crisis in the context of which Muscovy state consolidation occurred was the period of domination by the Chinggisid Mongols and their successor, the Qipchaq Khanate (the Golden Horde), from which Russia and Russian identity emerged only gradually. The Khazar Khaganate was the dominant polity on the Western Eurasian steppe at the time the Rus state emerged. When Kievan Rus emerged as a unified polity, it did so largely in response to Khazar pressure. It proclaimed itself a khaganate as well, and may also have taken on some Khazar political institutional forms (Noonan 2001). The precise reasoning for its having done so is unclear—Rus elites may have intended to interpose themselves as new regional hegemon. Alternately, they may simply have intended to signal that they were equal, rather than subservient, to the Khazars (Neumann and Pouliot 2011, 115–17). In either case, the effect was to claim political legitimacy using language and justifications borrowed from a steppe society.

Second and similarly, Muscovite borrowing from the Mongols—more specifically, from the Qipchaq Khanate, or Golden Horde—some centuries later, is controversial, but telling. The Moscow state, which by consolidating control over neighboring polities built the unified Russian polity, did so in large part by throwing off Qipchaq imperial rule. Minimally, Muscovy borrowed from them a variety of specific institutional elements (postal and taxation systems, judicial features, and others) (Halperin 1987; 2000). Maximally, and more speculatively, these may have extended to most of the political structures of empire (Ostrowski 1998; 2000).

The extent to which Kievan and Muscovite political culture and identity were shaped by the steppe is a matter of historical debate.²⁵ These influences no doubt waned over time. However, it is less ambitious to suggest their more specific strategies for justifying imperial rule over others were derived from these experiences of foreign influence. We can reasonably speculate that some part of the Muscovite state's later claims to legitimate rule derived from the authority traditions of steppe imperialism. Moreover, since much of Russia's eventual empire was geographically located in Central and Inner Asia, recourse to the region's traditional political narratives seems likely to have recurred. Those traditions were persistently mimetic.²⁶

Muscovite and later Russian political legitimacy was also founded in large part on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, on the basis of which the tsar could claim a personal right to rule. Russian Orthodoxy traced itself to Byzantine Greek Orthodoxy. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, the Church began to refer to its seat in Moscow as the Third Rome.²⁷ The logic of this basis for legitimacy was universalist, claiming a right to rule based on primacy within a monotheistic faith. The Russian church became the one true representative of the faith, and its power-political

²⁵ Still, as Goldfrank (2000) observes, there are limits on how far these influences can be downplayed.

²⁶ Rieber (1993) identifies Russia as oriental despotism as a persistent myth of Western thinking about Russia. I do not intend to invoke it as a monotonic or unchangingly persistent explanation of Russian foreign or imperial policy. Instead, I want to suggest that the political legitimacy tied to these ideas likely recurred historically as tropes or scripts of Russian imperial practice. We might similarly speak of the persistence of such ideas as "manifest destiny" or "exceptionalism" in American political discourse. Plainly they do not simply determine American foreign policy. They likely do nonetheless play an important role in shaping debates and framing possibilities. Thus, Neumann and Pouliot (2011) find recurring or lingering traces of these past ideational frameworks in later Russian interactions with Europe.

²⁷ Recent research has noted that reference to Moscow as a "Third Rome" originated chiefly in the Russian Orthodox Church, rather than the political establishment, and that political elites were distrustful of its implications for the Church's power within Russia. Still, this frame did contribute to public understandings of the Russian state, and thus to the content of its legitimacy.

affiliate—the Russian state—became a uniquely legitimate polity (Hosking 2001, 5–6).²⁸ These claims to universality were linked not just to unique theological status, but a set of religious beliefs and practices that were, in fact, quite distinctive: “in Russia we find the government and administrative authorities acting without regard to any distinction between the temporal and spiritual realm” (Raeff 1984, 3). It was the state that ordered and organized religious ceremonies to end epidemics. Governors carried icons and relics, selected by the state, when observing religious duties. Generally, the tsar operated in the sacred and secular spheres on the same terms (Raeff 1984, 3–4). Orthodoxy thus sharply differentiated Russia from both Inner Asia (which was not, in the main, Christian) and Europe (which separated church and state). Later, as Russian interaction with Europe deepened, Orthodoxy became a source of national differentiation and identity.

For much of later Russian imperial history, however, these contrasting roles played out in the additional context of Russia’s ongoing encounter with western and central Europe. It contended with Europe both for power-political standing in Europe and, at least potentially, for share of spoils at the imperial periphery. As Russia expanded to its south and east, it increasingly understood itself as a colonial empire on the European model (see for example Campbell 2014, 200). In short, it began to act like, and to see itself as, a competitive empire. We can usefully date the influence of early *modern* Europe on Russia from the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1721), who instituted a comparatively formalized and modernized bureaucracy. Medieval local allegiances were broken down, and a formal “Table of Ranks” imposed to order sociopolitical standing (Raeff 1984, 35). Peter adopted the title of Emperor, following the end of the Northern

²⁸ “The tsar was ‘God’s anointed,’ and the state had not become separated from his person” (Hosking 2001, 136), as it only later partially would.

War with Sweden, and instituted knowledge production on the European model. “The scholarly texts of the “great Northern expedition,” as it was often called, were potent symbols of Russia’s European character” (Wortman 2014, 225). In instituting imperial cartography—both a tool of imperial control and a mode of European modernization—Peter effectively invented Siberia as a distinct geographical entity, and, by exclusion, European Russia (Bassin 1991; Wortman 2014, 255–56). In brief, under Peter, “The Muscovite concept that Russian was ... to be administered and exploited like a private domain, made way for the notion of the state as a political and social institution, separate from the person of the ruler” (Raeff 1994, 76).

Nonetheless, the centralization of power served also to entrench autocracy. Peter I’s reign and reforms present an inherent tension between reformism and modernization, and the personalistic rule of the tsar, upon which Peter relied to force through change (Raeff 1984, 35, *passim*).²⁹ More importantly, it showed the limit of bureaucratization and thus modernization. “The Russian state never evolved a conception of self-sufficient monarchical authority, reinforced with theological and juridical defences of sovereignty. Russia had no Bodin or Hobbes. Sovereignty was represented by images of empire, and these were elaborate in imperial ceremony, rhetoric, art, and architecture” (Wortman 2014, 27).

The maintenance of imperial legitimacy was, in short, never fully separated from the symbolic vocabulary of its premodern roots. Old ideas about political legitimacy likely persisted, at least in part, grafted into new ones, creating a pastiche of logically distinct but overlapping claims to authority. Russian imperialism thus had a less

²⁹ Indeed, this suggests one mechanism by which old ideas and practices may have persisted in the system, grafted onto new ones.

consistent narrative of legitimation than did conventional European empires, or even Qing China. Russian claims were less parsimonious than strict universal or even competitive authority. However, they were also not strictly mimetic, insofar as Russian elites appear to have genuinely believed in, or aspired to, the varying universal and competitive claims they made. This concatenation of legitimacies may offer an explanation of why Russia's legitimate place in the world has often been contested—not just by its interlocutors, but also by its own political elites. To European powers, Russia was not simply or absolutely foreign. Europeans could look at Russia and see had a long, if sometimes marginal, shared history of participation in what they thought of as European civilization. For Europe, Russia became a kind of internal other, the idea of which could be deployed discursively to demarcate Europe's limits (Neumann 1999). For Russia, Europe became a category to which it both did and did not belong. Its basis for political legitimacy as imperial power has generally been divided against itself, articulated in multiple, partially contradictory ways.

Claims to Legitimacy in Central Asia

The expansion of Russia to the south and east took centuries, dating from the annexation of Kazan in 1552—the first additional of a never-before-Russian territory to the Tsarist polity, as an imperial possession—to the gradual conquest of the Central Asian heartland, comprising the city states and nomadic peoples between the region's two great rivers, in the late nineteenth century. Below, I focus chiefly on the latter.

As suggested above, Russia had overlapping and often inconsistent claims to legitimacy. These inconsistencies had consequences. From the inception of Russian imperial expansion modes of legitimation were overlapping and changeable, containing

elements of both steppe imperialism and the dynastic, universalist monarchism endorsed by the Orthodox church.

The struggle for the inheritance of the Golden Horde followed the rules laid down by the Mongols and the world of the steppes.... However, the steppe code of conduct was at variance with the principle of patrimony that had arisen in sedentary Muscovy.... The irreconcilable nature of such fundamentally different traditions was to play an important role in the relations between Russia and the steppe right up to the nineteenth century. (Kappeler 2001, 23)

The Russians expected rule to be permanent, whereas the nomadic and post-nomadic peoples they annexed on the steppe viewed political allegiance as more temporary.

Confusion about the nature of imperial expansion was, thus, present from the start.

Initially, Moscow attempted a policy of forced coercion, but quickly found it unworkable in practice. “The continued use of existing traditions and institutions was designed to guarantee a smooth transfer of power and to underpin Muscovite legitimacy” (Kappeler 2001, 27, 29). Unable to impose the universalizing confessional basis for legitimacy they wanted, the tsars imposed a mimetic approach instead. That early pattern never entirely disappeared, but was later partially supplanted by Russia’s increasing Europeanization.

Russian elites were consistent at least in viewing the region as something *different*: “For Russia, Asia signified the world of the steppes and the world of Islam. Yet Russia’s relations with its Asiatic neighbours had always been ambivalent” (Kappeler 2001, 168). Russian imperial political structures differed from their European equivalents in less stringently distinguishing between core and periphery. Colonized peoples within the Russian imperium sometimes had access to formal political representation at the core—an arrangement that would have been unthinkable in, for example, British India. However, the degree of such access was correlated with cultural similarity. Georgians

and Armenians, for example, became nominal junior partners in Russian politics. In contrast, Turkic Muslim Central Asians generally did not (Morrison 2012a).³⁰

Ironically, as Russian imperialism moved further south and east into Asia, it became more explicitly modeled on European competitive, colonial imperialism. As Russian expanded into Central Asia proper, Russian elite attitudes varied. Some senior figures, like the general Mikhail Skobelev, were violently racist: “Do not forget that in Asia he is the master who seizes the people pitilessly by the throat and imposes upon their imagination” (quoted in Callwell 1906, 72). But as early as the 1750s, other imperial elites saw a different goal—not to dominate or destroy colonized peoples, but to transform them, turning occupied peoples into obedient ones—that is, to legitimate imperial rule. Russian elites aimed to transfer Central Asian allegiance from existing structures to a new community of imperial subjects, “exchanging clan loyalty for general communal loyalty, that is, for the Islamic community of Russia” (Yaroshevski 1991, 224).³¹ This approach suggests the civilizing missions of competitive imperialism. Late nineteenth century Russian elite perspectives on empire were increasingly liberal, in keeping with the gradual Europeanization of Russian imperialism. Indeed, conquering Asia made Russia seem more, not less European. Dostoyevsky wrote that

³⁰ While Burbank (2006) emphasizes this center-periphery porousness as distinguishing feature of the Russian empire, it was by no means equally distributed. When, for example, in 1906, the Duma began to include representatives from Russian Turkestan, they were disproportionately ethnic Russians, rather than members of Turkic ethnicities (Morrison 2008, 39). See also Morrison (2012b, 927): “Turkestan and the Steppe were not just treated differently from European Russia but also treated unequally.”

³¹ Thus, as attitudes liberalized, the salience of religion as a source of colonial difference changed. Islamic Central Asians were known in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as “inverts” —peoples of a different religion—but later came to be called “inorodtsy”: foreign or alien peoples. This shift from confessional to national language likely reflected an increasingly cogent Russian national (as opposed to Orthodox religious) identity, in contrast to which other peoples could be understood. “Civilizing” nomadic Central Asians no longer mean converting them to Orthodox Christianity: it meant causing them to settle into sedentary, agrarian lifeways. Indeed, officially sanctioned Islam became a tool of colonial legitimacy, deployed by Tatars friendly to the Russian cause (Kappeler 2001, 168–70). Where the Russian Orthodox claim to authority was universalistic, the secular project of settling nomads into putatively productive agricultural life was linked to the liberal economics and European politics of competitive imperialism.

In Europe we were only poor recipients of charity and slaves, but we come to Asia as masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we are also Europeans. Our mission, our civilizing mission in Asia will entice our spirit and draw us thither once the movement has gained momentum. (Quoted in Kappeler 2001, 207–8)

Even then however, “while most educated Russians... embraced an imperialist vision, they certainly did not embrace the same one” (Sunderland 2000, 210). Russia increasingly looked west for its models of imperial expansion administration, to Europe, and even across the Atlantic to the American frontier experience. But it also claimed a unique, geographically determined reason for empire building, linked to its lack of natural borders and its place near the center of the Eurasian land mass (Sunderland 2000, 220, 222). The justification for empire as such remained remarkably ambiguous.

The portion of the Russian empire geographically and culturally nearest to Qing Central Asia comprised the subject city-states of Khiva and Bukhara, the governate of Turkestan, and a variety of associated hinterlands. The imposition of Russian rule, and attendant justifications, varied widely. Russian rule over the city-states was indirect. Following intermittent warfare, Russia annexed Bukhara by treaty in 1868 (Malikov 2014), and Khiva in 1873 (Sela 2006, 459). Tellingly, Malikov argues that confusion as to what arrangements with Moscow should be were due largely to disagreement between the parties as to the meaning and significance of a treaty between them. Put differently, Russia was unable to secure agreement on how and why the cities might acquiesce in their rule. Even then, rule was indirect to the extent of Russia attaining little more than control over their foreign policies and an expectation of regular payments.³² In contrast, Turkestan was governed by military administrators in Tashkent. Its territory comprised

³² Following a period under a similar arrangement, from 1875, Khokand was rolled into Turkestan in 1883 (Bregel 2009, 410–11).

much of the land between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers not attached to the city-states, including the cities of Tashkent and Samarkand. The Russian presence in Turkestan was *colonial*—Russian settlers arrived in some number. This experience of colonial administration in the heart of Asia served to make Russians look, to themselves, more like the imperial peoples of Europe: “Turkestan served to affirm Russia’s Europeanness” (Khalid 2009, 418).

In contrast to both, Tsarist troops subjugated the Turkmens, in Khiva’s southern hinterlands, with a level of violence that suggests little concern for legitimacy whatsoever. In 1873, troops massacred the Yomut Turkmen tribe, on the orders of General von Kaufman, then military governor of Turkestan (Sela 2006, 459). In 1881, Russians under General Skobolev killed some 15,000 people (Morrison 2008, 7). Here, the intention seems to have been to impose authority rule by force, or simply to marginalize and destroy the populations in question to such an extent that “rule” conventionally understood would be obviated. (This is not to say that Russian imperialism was uniquely violent—it was not, by any means—but that the strategic reasoning behind it was often opaque.)

As this violence suggests, legitimacy as such was by no means persistent—often it had to be supplemented with other means of control. Previously independent peoples experienced Russian rule as “brutal foreign domination which sought to force on non-Russians a foreign administrative and social order, and also, in the long run, a foreign religion and culture” (Kappeler 2001, 153). Indeed, Russia allowed difference to persist on a large scale in part because those they ruled gave them little choice. “The fact that the ethnic diversity of the Russian empire survived can be traced back to the resistance of

non-Russians (above all to the non-Christian ethnic groups to the east)” (Kappeler 2001, 161). Russian authorities did not yield out of the kindness of their hearts. A pragmatic strategy of pluralism was a strategy for managing counter-imperial to pressure. Still, treating Asians as distinct from European Russians served an identity-building purpose at home. Even as Russia’s ability to impose rule on the region through violence increased, it distinguished more sharply than before between core and periphery, distinguishing anew between Russian imperial possessions and the emerging modern Russian state.

In sum, Russia adopted no one approach to establishing imperial authority, and based its claims on no one general approach or strategy. It attempted to convert subject populations to orthodoxy, until it did not. It imposed rule through coercive diplomacy or through extreme violence. It claimed it was right in so doing because it was like the European conquest empires, but also because it was different. None of this ambiguity significantly undermined Russia’s ability to annex territory. Its military advantages were massive, and conquest was not likely ever in doubt. But the manner in which it claimed that conquest as *rightful* was often confused and ambiguous. Having a plurality of approaches to or grand strategies for imperial legitimacy, it could fall back on no one approach. While Russian rule in Central Asia gradually did become more expressly competitive, on the model of the European conquest empires, it arrived at that position only gradually.

Alternative Legitimacies—European and Chinese Experiences

The Russian experience contrasts usefully with two other major empire-building processes: those of China and Britain. Chinese imperial ideology was, at least in its canonical form, expressly universalist. The so-called “imperial” period of Chinese history

begins with the Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE-220 CE) dynasties, which linked their claims to authority to a right to rule *tianxia* (“all under heaven”), a role construed as *tianming* (the “mandate of heaven”).³³ China was the Middle Kingdom (*zhongguo*), with the world arrayed around it, and rightly subordinate to it (Wang 2012; MacKay 2015b). This idea had a history, claiming descent from the values and institutions of the pre-Warring States period Zhou polity. The account was linked to Confucian values of harmony and social hierarchy. Chinese primacy was linked to the core’s putative civilizational superiority, framed in these traditional hierarchical terms. In practice, this authority was limited, and fluctuated greatly over time, as dynasties arose and collapsed. Nonetheless, the idea of it, and the goal of maintaining it, recurred. Indeed, one of the puzzles of Chinese imperial history is the persistence of a relatively consistent conception of imperial China across dynastic collapses and transitions (Pines 2009, 1).

However, that order was disrupted permanently with the fall of the Ming and establishment of the Qing Dynasty, by the invading Manchus, in 1644. Like the Mongols, the Manchus had roots on the Inner Asian steppe, and thus faced the challenge of legitimating their rule over an alien people who saw themselves as the natural center of civilization. However, they differed in coming from a zone of Chinese-steppe cultural hybridity on China’s northeastern frontier.³⁴ They also gave rise to the first extensive conquest of Central Asia by a Chinese polity. While historians once viewed the Qing as having effectively become Chinese—that is, adopted the Confucian universalist worldview—they increasingly see the Qing dynasty as having remained persistently Manchu, and thus partially Inner Asian, in its political culture and outlook (Rawski

³³ Canonical accounts in IR include Zhang (2001) and Kang (2010). See also MacKay (2015a; 2015b).

³⁴ Crossley (1990, 5), provides a brief, useful historical summary.

1996). Their conquest of China proper folded China into what is now thought to have been a broader Manchu imperium: “not so much as the center of their empire, as only a part, albeit a very important part, of a much wider dominion that extended far into the Inner Asian territories of Mongolia, Tibet, the Northeast (today sometimes called Manchuria) and Xinjiang, or Chinese (Eastern) Turkestan” (Waley-Cohen 2004, 194–95). The Manchus could and did legitimate their rule differently before different political cultures. In short, Qing rule was diagnostically mimetic, deriving justifications for imperial rule from the traditions of those the Manchu’s conquered.

In contrast, the modern imperialism instituted by Great Britain was consistently competitive. Armitage (2000, 8) has usefully glossed the ideology of British imperialism as “Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free.” Religion distinguished it from the earlier European empires of Spain and Portugal, which made more ambiguously premodern claims to legitimacy, linked to the Catholic Church. It was commercial insofar as it expanded in the name of trade. Like the Dutch Empire, it positioned privately funded joint stock companies at the forefront of imperial expansion, deploying subsequent armed force to capture markets and secure trade routes. In consequence, it was necessarily maritime, since trade over long distances had to be by ship, in turn requiring the maritime security provided by a vast navy. Finally, it was free in the sense of being liberal: the capitalist and rights-based ideology of modern liberalism was essential to the spirit of British empire building, both as a basis for trade (however coercive) and as a justification for the “civilizing missions” that attended conquest. Consequent to all this, British imperialism was resolutely competitive. It accepted the existence of legitimate imperial rivals, chiefly other European states, with which it shared a commercial and civilizing

agenda. Those imperial states each claimed a right, recognized by one another, to place other peoples under imperial tutelage.

As Russia expanded into the region, it encountered these two empires—the Qing to the east in Xinjiang, and the British to the south in Afghanistan. It interacted with them in varying ways. In the Qing, the British found a classical mimetic empire, one that shared its largely pragmatic attitude toward political authority. That pragmatism about the sources of legitimacy likely facilitated diplomatic relations. Two treaties—the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk and 1727 Treaty of Kiakhta, which formalized their shared frontier—were the Qing Dynasty’s first with a major Western power, and helped to shape a largely conflict-free relationship going forward (Perdue 2005, 161, 172). On the other hand, Russia could face the British increasingly as a competitive empire on the European model. As Campbell has recently shown, the British and Russian experiences were mutually reinforcing. Both empires sent imperial diplomats, travelers, spies, and others into the region, gathering information not just in competition with one another, but in a shared enterprise of imperial knowledge gathering: “Russian and British missions to Eastern Turkestan participated in a transnational knowledge-gathering project based on common civilizational assumptions, but the information they collected was applicable to conflicting geopolitical purposes” (Campbell 2014, 201). That dynamic was as much competitive as conflictual, reflecting a common understanding of the nature and practice of imperialism. Taken together, these Russian experiences of inter-imperial relations were unique—it seems likely no other empire could have found a familiar interlocutor in both of these other powers.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an explanatory framework for addressing historical variation in imperialisms, with a mind to assessing Russian claims to imperial legitimacy. I argue empires can be fruitfully differentiated by how they legitimate imperial rule. I deploy a typology of imperial legitimation narratives, based on existing accounts of historical empires. These differing ways of claiming legitimacy—universalist, competitive, and mimetic—encourage imperial behavior in different ways, helping to shape expansion, inter-imperial war and diplomacy, and eventual decline.

I have deployed the typology to assess Russian imperial expansion in Central Asia. Russian claims to legitimacy exhibited a relatively mixed bag of claims being made, as modes of imperial authority accumulated over centuries. We find these at work in the Russian experience of rule in Central Asia. Russian claims were ad hoc and often simply confused. While it later trended toward a broadly European mode of competitive imperialism, it did so only after prolonged periods of experimentation with mimetic and even universalist justifications for rule. Perhaps most importantly, none of these modes of legitimation was ever wholly abandoned. The accretion of them in Russian imperial politics appears to have lent the Russian imperial project a distinctive polyglot or ambiguous character, as styles of imperial rule overlapped and combined in idiosyncratic ways.

While I have constrained myself to historical analysis above, the account may offer insights into the distinctive character of Russia's contemporary exceptionalism. No other contemporary great power offers anything quite like the Russian accumulation and overlap of legitimacy traditions. Future research might thus consider how Russia has

positioned itself in contemporary world politics, justifying its policies and strategic decisions in varying and perhaps inconsistent ways. It may similarly offer insights into contemporary Russia's goals or priorities—shaped as they may be by a history of overlapping imperial traditions.

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