

WHEN EMPIRES WORKED TOGETHER



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Distinguished British scholar and expert in Russian history Dominic Lieven is a descendant of an ancient Baltic noble family in the Russian Empire. Legend says the Lievens descended from Caupo, the leader of the Finnic-speaking Livonian people who was the first prominent Livonian to be christened and introduced to Pope Innocent III (1191-1198) who presented a Bible to the converted pagan chief. In XVII century the Lievens received the title of barons from the Swedish king. The Russian noble family of Lievens descended from Baron Otto Heinrich von Lieven and his wife Charlotte von Gaugreben who was invited

by Catherine II to educate the daughters and younger sons of Emperor Paul – Nicholas and Mikhail. In 1796 Charlotte and her descendants enjoyed the status of Counts and in 1826 – of Dukes with Your Excellency title. All males and females of the family were loyal servants to Russia.

The following works of Dominic Lieven are well-known in Russia: *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815-1914*, 2000; *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, 2007. In 2012 the Russian edition of *Russia against Napoleon: The Struggle for Europe* is to come out.

Dominic, you are a live branch of the tree called the Russian world and at the same time a foreigner, a Briton. For modern Russians it may be a paradox, but for a scholar it is a clear analytical advantage. How do you feel in St. Petersburg and what do you think about present-day Russia?

If we speak about identity I am first and foremost a historian. Petersburg is a historic monument of imperial Russia. Naturally, there is also family history. There are places here related to my ancestors which make history both more interesting and complicated for me. I first came

here in the times of the Soviet Union, a country which rejected its past. It was its weakness. There would have been no perestroika police had the national leaders understood the history of the country.

As a historian and a member of a Russian family I am glad that Russian past has returned and Russian history has become more “balanced”. However the present-day view of the past is often excessively romantic. How did the revolution and the whole tragedy of the XX century could happen?

In the book Russian Empire and its Rivals from XVI Century to Nowadays you call the Russian people the child and victim of the empire. On the threshold of the '90s of the XX century Russia did not suffer a defeat. However the public and the ruling elite perceive the developments twenty years ago as a historic fiasco. Can we draw lessons from the defeat which did not happen? I mean can we draw lessons like the Russians did it from a real and humiliating defeat in 1806-1807?

Do you believe the collapse of the Soviet Union was a defeat for Russia?

No, it was not. The question is in the time of inevitable destruction of the system which emerged because of Utopian and deadlocked policy. The Soviet collapse freed the Russian people from the useless burden.

Again, can we draw lessons from the defeat which did not happen? History shows the Russian elite is capable of learning productive lessons.

The Russian-Swedish Treaty of St. Petersburg was signed on 5 April (24 March old style) 1812 by Tsar Alexander I and Crown Prince Carl Johan of Sweden also known as Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, Marshal of France. The historic fact and accompanying developments are poorly known even to educated public although they exerted major influence on the history of Europe. One of the consequences was a turn in the history of Norway which ceded from the Danish crown, adopted a constitution and elected the king of Sweden as its own king on its basis.

The Russian-Swedish Treaty and its Aftermath in Northern Europe scientific conference was held in Astoria hotel in St. Petersburg on March 25-26, 2012. It was organized by the Fritt Ord Foundation (Oslo) and the Institute for Universal History at the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow).

Interesting and substantial reports were accompanied by communications between participants on the sidelines of the conference. The atmosphere of St. Petersburg prompted various issues for discussion – from the fate of the Russian Empire to reasonable limits of tolerance. The Amber Bridge recorded three discussions on the sidelines of the conference.

Alexander Chechevishnikov

The Soviet collapse was a complicated process. The main thing is that it shed no Russian blood. The collapse of big states is accompanied by major tragedies, as a rule. The Russian people suffered a lot in the XX century and it was extremely important to prevent a repetition of the horrible experience.

All those words – empire, nation, state – are definitely conditional. If the Soviet Union was an

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empire it was a very complicated empire. Naturally, the loss of the Baltic republics, to say nothing about Central Asia, was a benefit for Russia. But I am not convinced the unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus could be preserved had things developed differently. I think had Stalin not annexed the Baltic republics and Western Ukraine the Soviet Union could have survived in some united form but without Central Asia. It is premature to say whether such an option would meet the interests of the Russian people or not.

The idea that each ethnos should have its own state is very dangerous. People of various nationalities should live together. Modern Asia looks unfit for the lessons of European history and European nationalism. If the XXI century history of Asia develops like the XIX-XX century history of Europe and the principle “every ethnos shall have its own state” is implemented it will mean a catastrophe not only for Asia, but for the whole world. Mankind may not survive it.

Therefore, my answer to the question about the fall of the Soviet Union is not definite. The main thing is that the Russians have not had a major bloodshed so far. There was nothing even slightly resembling the fall of the tsarist empire, the civil war, and the Bolshevik regime.

But why? To learn lessons you have to know the reasons.

It may be because the Russians have suffered so much in the XX century and drew one good lesson from it: it is very dangerous to truly believe in politics as a means of survival.

Two civil wars for one people in one century are hard to imagine. The lesson was very strong. It

is impossible to name another people who suffered more than the Russians in the XX century.

Your book Russia Against Napoleon is a kind of rehabilitation of the genius of the Russian military elite. It is not the General called Frost, it is not the cudgel of the people's war that won Napoleonic wars in the final end. Which lessons do you see in the victory for modern world, modern Russia, and modern Russians?

It may be dangerous to directly draw lessons from the past. The successful retaliation of the Russian government and the Russian military to the challenge of Napoleon is an interesting fact which is important in the Russian

history. As a general lesson it means the Russian state has not been always that severe and inefficient as they often believe in the West and sometimes in Russia. However it provides nothing definite for the solution of modern Russian problems. Historic past shall be considered without forthright prejudice. The state can be both good and bad at the same time. You do not have to be a Slavophile or westerner, a liberal or conservative. You have to soberly assess past realities and various epochs. In the final end the efficient Russian reaction to the challenge of Napoleon does not mean it reacted the same way to all challenges of the XIX century.

In the book Aristocracy in Europe 1815-1914 you wrote that high society abided by numerous rules and conditions. Ignoring them in public usually triggered an ouster from the elite. Sometimes the rules were based on moral values at least in theory.

Describing Russia in the same book you used the catchy phrase of Nigeria-style elite. Do you see ways and methods to cure the disease of modern Russian elite?

It is very important for the elite to feel responsibility before the state and the public. To a certain extent it was inherent in the traditional ruling class. The ideas of wealth, power and responsibility were interwoven. Now everything is more complicated. In conditions of globalization the wealth is not related to a specific place or people. It exists in the air. It is not only a Russian problem. If we look at the West today we shall see bigger wealth belonging to a smaller number of people. It is very dangerous.

What is a Russian specific? In the West the corresponding processes developed in a more or less natural way and citizens were protected by law from the worst globalization effects. After the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia found itself inside globalization without even perceiving all aspects of international capitalist society. A wealthy man in the West is not always a robber. In Russia it was inevitable in the '90s not because all those people were dishonest. It was impossible to be honest and believe in law as there was no law.

Rich natural resources are an important circumstance. In such countries there is a clear problem of corruption and dangerous connections between politics and economy. It is not only a Russian specific.

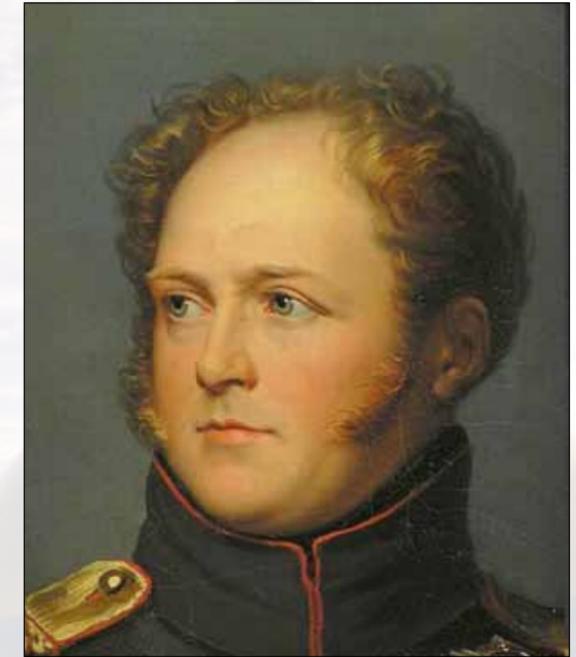
Definitely, Russia is no Nigeria. Nigeria is an artificial country created by the British Empire. Russia is an ancient country with national identity. Each Russian knows that Pushkin was Russian and there was the Battle of Borodino. You have what produces responsibility. But responsibility does not always emerge and it is a common problem for all elites.

You said in the book Russian Empire and its Rivals that the situation of Russians in the empire resembled that of aborigines in European overseas colonies. How did the situation promote the advent of the revolution and which role did it play in the revolution itself?

It is a difficult question. One quote will not explain my understanding of the situation with the Russians in the old empire.

The book is called The Russian Empire and its Rivals. Russia was one empire among others. They were rivals but not enemies. Up to late XIX century it was a world in which European empires worked together. It was a century in which popular wellbeing considerably increased both in Russia and everywhere else.

The answer to the question about the situation with the Russians depends on the social strata and the epoch we are speaking about. It is also related to general history of empires and general modernization history. For example, in the XVI century Russia was a more coherent nation than in the XIX century. Although the living standards of the elite and ordinary people differed radically, Russia was more united from



the psychological point of view than in the times after Peter the Great. The Romanov dynasty at the most cosmopolitan stage of development – in early XIX century – was still an empire to a major degree – the Russian elite, nobility, people, and Russian resources. The empire was more Russian than the Ottoman Empire was Turkish to say nothing about the Chen Empire as Chinese.

Empires are rarely a state of one people, one nation. Russia is no exception. Constant comparison of the Russians with other European

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nations and of Russia with foreign European countries complicates the issue to a certain extent. The main problems in the XIX and XX centuries were conditioned by modernization and growing nationalism in Europe. There was a growing feeling the empire can be saved only through gradual ethnic dominance. The Russians did what the Germans and Hungarians have done. It was an evident response to disintegration threats to such states.

In the context of international relations it looked in the end of the XIX century that future is with empires which have swallowed all other parts of the world. However nationalism was on the rise. Contradictions emerged because an

empire had a continental size and rarely comprised only one ethnos. How can you keep legitimate grounds for such a state in conditions of growing nationalism? The contradictions developed in all empires – Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian, British. Hence are internal political contradictions in Russia. The Soviet Union was a cunning response to the challenge but it was not successful. However I am not convinced its failure was inevitable from the very beginning. It was a shrewd response to imperial contradictions.

At whose expense the response was? A contradiction is overcome by using a certain resource.

The idea was to create a modern socialist society. Successful society could produce a coherent feeling of common citizenship. But that is in theory. It is different in reality. However the reality gives no sufficient grounds to say the final fiasco has been predetermined. For example, yet in 1985 the collapse of the Soviet Union, like it happened with the Russian Empire, was not inevitable. Many things are a play of chance. I will repeat: had Stalin not annexed Baltic provinces and Western Ukraine the Soviet or Russian Union could have emerged or a federation of Slavic republics plus Kazakhstan. It was possible.

The Soviet Union was a shrewd response to imperial contradictions.

In February 1914 Petr Nikolayevich Durnovo – one of the smartest officials in the generation in tsarist Russia – wrote to the emperor that Ukrainian nationalism naturally poses a threat, but insignificant without Western Ukraine. Together with Western Ukraine it developed into a major threat.

However Galicia and what was later called the Baltic republics are completely different things. There are other examples as well. Finland

experienced different regulations and controls from Petersburg than the Baltic republics, while west Ukrainian lands within the Russian Empire had a third option. I believe that out of the three examples the conditional Baltic area was most loyal to Petersburg in the late imperial period. It is important that various ethnic elites in the Baltic republics wanted to build up relations with Petersburg differently. Nobody in Lifland or Estland could imagine in 1914 that in several years different flags would be hoisted there.

They could have thought they would become a part of Germany. Had they not been annexed by Stalin they would have become an informal part of Germany. Could anyone think the Brest-Litovsk borders would one day become the borders of Russia?

The XX century history in Europe including the events in the winter of 1916-1917 contains a major share of multi-variety. Had the United States not entered the war on the background of emerging

revolution and disintegration of the Russian state the outcome of the war would have been different.

Subsequent events could have been different. The Germans could have created an informal empire in Eastern Europe and received a chance for dominating positions in Europe. The reason for the US engagement in the war was historically accidental but predetermined the defeat of Germany in the First World War.

However World War Two was by a half predetermined by the results of the First World War. The most important countries on the continent since the times of Bismarck to World War Two – Russia and Germany – were conquered in the First World War. It was a historically accidental result. The Treaty of Versailles was objectively unviable as long-term order without major elements – Germans and Russians – and simultaneously aimed against both is impossible



in Europe. That does not mean that Hitler was inevitable but the collapse of the Versailles system was definitely inevitable.

We can often hear that modern Russian-German relations comprise a specific historic phenomenon. We know each other pretty well and we know everything about each other. There was a lot of good and bad in our relationship. It is the basis for current close relations that are genuinely international. However there are forecasts in Germany that relations with Russia will be revised after a regular election to Bundestag. How do you assess prospects of Russian-German relations as a historian?

They are the most important relations in European history which are equal to the German-French relationship by significance. However as France has been no genuine super power for a hundred years the Russian-German relations are the most important. They are complicated as family relations are always difficult. Russia and Germany are neighbors. The Germans were much more important for Russia and its history than the French, English or Italians. Naturally, those nations also mattered but Germans were much more important in the state, economic, and cultural sense.

It is difficult to predict but I am optimistic. The relationship must be good because the prospects of the whole Europe depend on them. In 1913, i.e. in the last year of united European economy, Germany accounted for 44% of the total Russian foreign trade. The Germans and Russians are natural allies. I hope both peoples have learned the lessons of history. From all European peoples the Germans are most conscientious to their history.

There were a lot of dark developments in the Russian history of the XX century. We should not equate Hitler with Stalin although there are grounds for it. People of the generations lived through numerous hardships also moral and psychological.

But there is another side of the coin today as we are facing the beginning of a new era. The Russian history of the past three-four centuries is a history of perception of European images. Today all global system balances have an Asian component. We are facing major changes which will be a kind of return to the old world. Europeans

and their descendants in North America will no longer be the number 1. It will affect Russian relations with other countries, mostly in Europe. If the German growth was the main problem for Russia before the First World War now it is the growth of China. It creates both problems and opportunities and offers a major challenge for everyone – Russians, Germans, everyone. Russia has a very long border with China and its Siberian and Far Eastern territories have a scarce population. It needs a policy to protect the interests of future Russian generations and Germany can play a major role in it.

You already began to answer my final question. You formulated the aim of the Russian Empire and its Rivals book as follows: To place Russia in the international context. It is the task of a historian.

The formula looks vital also for modern and future Russian policy. Do you agree with it? If yes, what are its vital contents?

For any country and any people it is important to find its place in the international

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community and international context. The problem is more vital today than in the past. If you have the biggest country in the world you also have important interests in Eastern Asia, Central Asia, Western Asia, Europe, and the Arctic. It was always clear for me that the Russian position in the international system exerted a major influence on the development of the Russian state and on the psychology of the elite. The intensity of the influence did not change although the international context is different and continues to change. It is not only a political context. God knows what is in store for us in future if at least a half of Green movement predictions come true. It will be very difficult for the peoples and for leaders to maneuver between internal and external obstacles of the new world. I am horrified when I think about the problem of pure water. No country can resolve such a problem without a clear comprehension of its international position.