The Bleeding Edges: Borderlands Violence and Russia’s Enduring Empire, 1800-1917

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Research Abstract

This project addresses two significant lacunae in scholarship after the “imperial turn” in Russian history. First, most of this scholarship has focused on the Empire’s local particularities – the patchwork of special arrangements by which different ethnicities and confessions became part of the imperial whole. Second, Anglophone scholarship in particular has devoted little attention to the military history of the Empire, whether in traditional operational terms or through the social and cultural methods of the “new military history”. These gaps in the literature are products of the moment the imperial turn took place and its methodological demands, focusing heavily on local archives. As a result, we do not sufficiently understand what the disparate regions and ethnicities of the Russian Empire had in common under imperial eyes, or the violent practices that sustained an empire made by conquest and sustained by counterinsurgency. By working through several case studies drawn from multiple regions of the Empire (Turkestan, the northern Caucasus, and Poland) over the course of the long nineteenth century, this project aims to answer both questions.

Research Goals
The basic goal of my research, during nine months in the field, was to immerse myself in two Moscow archives whose collections I had already explored, the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and, especially, the Russian State Military-Historical Archive (RGVIA). Previous work with file registers at these archives had enabled me to produce a list of roughly a thousand potentially relevant files; of these, I was able to identify and work through more than three hundred of those that seemed most relevant. At GARF, my goal was to work mainly with the personal collections of key figures in the suppression of the Polish revolt of 1863 (F. F. Berg, M. N. Murav’ev). At RGVIA, the most relevant archive for my work and one with which I was more familiar, I planned wider searches, to include relevant personal collections (G. V. Rozen, P. Kh. Grabbe, F. K. Kluge von Klugena), the collections of especially important documents curated by the imperial Military-Scholarly Archive (voenno-uchenyi arkhiv, hereafter VUA), and the staffs of both armies in the field for relevant campaigns and military districts (after 1861) responsible for managing territories in which I was interested. I was and am aware of the existence of further useful material (personal collections especially) at the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) in St. Petersburg, but determined that the time lost moving from one city to another would be too significant; it was not my goal to work in these collections after the logistical difficulties of moving, and therefore significant time lost from research activities, became clear to me.

Beyond simply working through this body of material, I had further goals for the year. The first were logistical and relevant to moving from a broadly defined research project to something that would work as a monograph: selecting case studies from among a range of possibilities, identifying people on whom to center the narrative. More importantly, though, I was interested in finding the answers to a series of linked questions: what did tsarist officers
believe about violence – the situations that demanded its use and the rules that governed it? How did those beliefs change over time, and when fighting in different theaters (i.e., against racial “others” in the Caucasus and Turkestan as compared to fellow Europeans in Poland)? To the extent that certain of these beliefs crystallized over time, or moved from one theater to another, what mechanisms enabled this? And, finally, what was the connection between the culture surrounding violence in the tsarist army and its day to day operations? How did beliefs about violence and its actual practice shape one another?

Research Activities

I devoted roughly my first month and a half in Moscow to work exclusively at RGVIA, on case studies and locations with which I was already highly familiar and had already conducted significant archival research. These were the case studies taken from Central Asia: all materials concerning the Andijan revolt of 1898; multiple theaters of the Central Asian Revolt of 1916 that have been relatively understudied (especially Transcaspian and Turgai oblasts); and documentation from campaigns in Transcaspia during the 1870s, prior to the massacre of the Tekke Turkmen at Geok-Tepe in 1881 (on which I’ve already published). I found the collected zhurnaly voennykh deistvii (registers of military actions) on these campaigns to be especially useful as complements to the memoirs and other published materials I’m already familiar with. The mobilization orders on the 1916 revolt were especially revealing for their discussion of who exactly was doing the fighting (often scratch or second-line units), where they had come from, and their often appalling preparation. The sequence of files discussing Andijan shed useful light on the way the system of courts martial dispensed violence, outside of the battlefield proper, to suspected rebels against state order; the logic by which the tsarist state identified suspected
ringleaders; and what officials at multiple levels understood to be the origins of rebellion among their Muslim subjects.

Since some of the relevant documentation on Transcaspia was housed in the collections of the Caucasus district staff, I thought it made sense to transition to documentation on the Caucasian campaigns next. This phase of research took more than I began with the VUA collections (f. 482) before moving to both personal collections and the collections of the staff of the Caucasus Army and of troops located on the Caucasian Line. My results here were mixed, with several false starts, but ultimately successful. I found some interesting figures on whom to base the narrative, most notably F. K. Kluge von Klugenau, a career Caucasus officer who regularly came into conflict with superior officers who, he believed, did not share his deep local knowledge of how fighting in the Caucasus had to work. Happily for the project, he maintained an extensive record of his conflicts, seemingly for no other reason than personal spite. This is useful material for understanding the mindset of Caucasus officers during the first half of the 19th century. The existence of these conflicts also helped me to choose my case studies: one focused on raiding prior to 1825 (under A. P. Ermolov, the ur-Caucasus general, widely admired by men who made their careers in the reason); one on the conflict-ridden first years of the conflict with Shamil and Kazi-Mullah; and one on the end of that conflict under Vorontsov and Bariatinskii. Other personal collections were not nearly as useful as Klugenau’s, but can be complemented by published memoirs freely available online or in American libraries. Otherwise, the most valuable documents I worked with fell into two categories: zhurnaly voennykh deistvii, again, as well as the annual files planning campaigns for the next year and debating how best to allocate resources among different theaters. The former were vital to understanding the operational nitty-gritty of warfare in the Caucasus and for their extremely forthright descriptions, without the
euphemisms that so frequently crop up in memoir literature, of the actions of individual soldiers and whole units in battle. The latter, though of course tinged by all generals’ desire to get as many resources as possible under their own control, also tell us much about tsarist officers’ beliefs about their Caucasian opponents – the tactics that worked against them, the tactics that had been proven ineffective, and their sense of how and why the tsarist empire’s tenuous hold on the Caucasus was being threatened. Both sources, along with memoirs and diaries, give a strong sense of the narratives the tsarist army was creating about violence and its uses in this region – stories with the potential to influence narratives and practices in other regions later in the century.

I devoted roughly the last three months of work in Moscow to work on the Polish revolts of 1830-31 and 1863-64 at RGVIA and GARF. GARF was especially valuable for a collection of political mood reports leading up to the latter revolt, detailing how administrators understood the threat they faced and the stakes of the situation. RGVIA proved rich in several respects for the 1863-64 revolt. The VUA collection (f. 484) had multiple zhurnaly voennykh deistvii and significant internal correspondence; the collections of Warsaw military district (f. 1859) also had long runs of reports from lower-level force commanders. These documents are sufficient to understand the tsarist army’s modus operandi in 1863 and also to establish a basic operational timeline of events, which is especially difficult for this disparate and dispersed revolt. I was also able to access some unique documents from the courts-martial of Vilna and Kiev military districts. These shed light on, first, the uses (and logic) of judicial violence against participants in the revolt, and second, instances when officers were found to have acted unacceptably on the battlefield. I was also able to track several interesting figures from earlier service in the Caucasus, and others who went on to bigger things in Turkestan.
The one major setback in all of this was that I totally lost the archival thread on the earlier Polish revolt of 1830-31, which I had hoped to use as a second case study on the western borderlands. I was counting on the microfilms in the VUA collection of RGVIA (f. 478) to do significant work on this conflict. Unfortunately, the majority of files in this collection are no longer available to researchers. Less than a month remained in my stay in Moscow when I discovered this, so I decided, rather than looking for new sources on this conflict, to order additional files on my case studies from Central Asia and the Caucasus, hoping to establish more context and detail for things I already knew well rather than trying to begin from nothing. Study of this conflict will be the primary focus of my next summer research trip to Russia, probably in 2021.

**Important Research Findings**

My single most important research finding is that the army of the Russian Empire did develop, over the course of the long nineteenth century, a culture justifying large-scale retributive or terroristic violence when fighting to conquer or retain frontier areas. This culture developed in the Caucasus, continued in Poland in 1863, and reached its apogee in the suppression of the Central Asian Revolt in 1916. In the short term its coherence was maintained by officers moving from one theater to another and working by analogy to understand the problems they faced; it endured, however, because of a mutually reinforcing cycle of memorialization and practice. Old narratives provided the prism through which later officers understood the problems they faced and the actions needed to solve them; their operations in the field, seen through the same lens, were written down and further reinforced the older ideas on which they were based, making it likely that similar ideas would inspire future actions as well. What began as techniques for warfare in a specific time and place (the early years of the war in
the Caucasus, especially under Ermolov) became techniques for war on the borderlands, full stop. The writing practices of the tsarist army – obsessively producing histories of previous campaigns and distributing them in journals meant for the military elite of the empire – were vital to creating and sustaining a culture that minimized violence, justified it, and ultimately insisted upon it.

Excerpt from the register of military actions (zhurnal voennykh deistvii) of a small detachment fighting during the Polish revolt of 1863.

A range of key ideas and rhetorical forms worked to justify or minimize the violent practices of the tsarist army on the imperial borderlands – I will highlight several here. One common formulation witnessed commanders in the field stripping themselves of agency in describing their actions: thus they describe the active behavior of e.g. Polish insurgents or Chechen villagers with a phrase like “I therefore found myself forced to….” In other words, the knowingly malevolent behavior of the opponent provoked an involuntary response, outside the ordinary character of the Russian soldier. And this opponent was ill defined; principles of
collective responsibility underwrote the judicial and martial punishments the tsarist army meted out, such that violence against even people who were far removed from active participation in revolts, but who failed to report or “could not but have known” about an incipient revolt, was considered justifiable. Agency, oddly, extended to opponents of all stripes, but not to the army itself. Environmental and logistical difficulties, too, took agency out of tsarist officers’ hands. Descriptions of extreme heat, cold, and precipitation created a sense of the sublime in which extreme violence could also thrive. At the same time, the formidable actually existing logistical difficulties (especially in the Caucasus) necessitated frequent requisitioning from people who were, at times, hostile or of dubious loyalty; according to the tsarist script, though, these were not requisitions proper but for the greater good of locals deprived of their resources. The slower violence of requisition and deprivation, too, had its justification. Categories like “bandit” and “fanatic” positioned opponents on the borderlands as unusually violent, sometimes even animalistic, and failing to operate within the generally understood rules of warfare; the response they received, therefore, also did not need to conform to these rules, and instances where the tsarist army did show restraint only served to reinforce the difference between itself and its opponents.

Gender analysis – in particular, ideas about masculinity – provides a useful lens for understanding some of these ideas and narratives. One particularly telling scene I found in the Caucasian campaigns involved the commander of a detachment inviting the wife of an imprisoned tribal leader to the center of his camp and receiving her petition before theatrically pardoning him. His logic was telling: this was meant to humiliate the other male tribal leaders whose efforts to free the prisoner had failed, and to show that Russians “will always be indulgent to the tears of wives and children”. The military failure of opponents was presented precisely as
a failure of their masculine qualities, both martial skill and their duty of care to the women and
children in their families. In fact, tsarist officers were much more prepared to acknowledge the
skill, strength, and bravery of their opponents (which, after all, reflected well on them too, when
they won) than their qualities as heads of household. Conquering Russian soldiers had
succeeded, in no small part, because they were better men, at times literally replacing the
conquered through adoption and intermarriage. (This notably took place after the siege and
storm of Geok-Tepe in 1881.) Any incidental violence against women and children was not a
failure of tsarist soldiers’ masculine restraint but, again, a failure of opposing men, who had not
seen to their responsibility to keep their families out of harm’s way; it was at worst a sadly
inevitable tragedy, not an atrocity.

It was especially these gendered justifications for conquest that prepared the ground,
rhetorically, for a pivot to counterinsurgency when the situation required. Conquered people
frequently found themselves described as unlikely recipients of what Bruce Grant has called the
“gift of empire.” If at times this did not seem much of a gift – sparing villages that were slated
for destruction, for example – it often involved material support in food or medical treatment for
survivors. This, again, posited tsarist soldiers as makeshift heads of household, providing for all
new subjects (especially women and children whose male relatives had allegedly failed them) in
ways they had proven unable to for themselves. The gift accepted, any later rebellion constituted
its rejection by an ungrateful populace, and therefore justified especially harsh measures.
Performatively, moreover, was always a part of the script of counterinsurgency too. Courts-
martial passed significantly more death sentences than were actually carried out. This meant, in
turn, layers of perceived mercy and ingratitude, heightening the stakes of every further
confrontation.
These ideas could be seen through the lens of racial, ethnic, or religious difference, but did not have to be. Ideas about banditry or partisan forces could be seen through an Orientalist lens, and they certainly were in the Caucasus, but the western borderlands had partisans too and they were not understood to behave in a fundamentally different manner or to require fundamentally different solutions. Informal troops were described as “gangs” and “throngs” no matter where they were. The category of the “ fanatic,” so notorious in discussions of Turkestan in the aftermath of the Andijan revolt of 1898, had already been applied to Catholic Poles in the 1863 revolt. Tsarist officials feared the workings of an unknowable Sufi conspiracy in Turkestan; they expressed the same fears about Jesuits more than a generation earlier in Poland. The collective punishments in such cases where it was difficult to ascribe direct responsibility for actions to individual participants were the same: land confiscation, fines, the so-called ekzekutsiiia (essentially, quartering a company on a recalcitrant village, at the latter’s expense, until it fell into line). We are talking, in short, about an eminently portable logic onto which tsarist officers fit the local conditions they were observing.
Policy Implications and Recommendations

I would highlight three significant policy implications of my research so far, two pertaining to the Russian Federation’s relationship with its near neighbors, one pertaining to other Eurasian states.

First, it is too easy to consider Eurasian political space as being defined by the borders of the former Soviet Union. My research indicates that the western borderlands of the former Russian Empire (including Poland) shared some important experiences in common with those territories of the Empire that later entered the Soviet Union. This invites us to consider the boundaries of the former Russian Empire as also being relevant to contemporary politics, and to develop new comparative research in the future.

Second, the Russian Empire was generally much more violent on its borderlands than the existing scholarship allows. Indeed, the belief that this was not the case stems in part from the rhetorical strategies of tsarist officials during the long nineteenth century, who both sought to justify and actively minimized their actions. These rhetorical strategies were meant both to legitimate tsarist rule in new and/or contested borderlands and to differentiate tsarist imperialism from the practices of Western empires. State actors and historians of a more nationalist ilk alike continue, today, to repeat these ideas, which militate against an honest assessment of the tsarist past and inspire fears of what they conceal among neighboring states.

The tsarist empire’s violent past, finally, should inform our understanding of memory politics in states that were part of the tsarist empire, and indeed of their present relationship to the Russian Federation. To become a part of the Russian Empire, or indeed of the Soviet Union, was to be written into a story that minimized the losses that accompanied incorporation. The equal and opposite reaction of nationalists in former Soviet (or former tsarist) states has been to
assert, often even to overstate, the existence of these losses. An awareness of this dynamic should help policymakers to understand the uses (and misuses) of history in contemporary Eurasian politics and to understand better what is at stake, both internationally and domestically, in competing interpretations of seemingly obscure or distant events.

Co-Curricular Activity

Most of my collaboration with local scholars at RGVIA was at the informal level – brief conversations about potentially useful files and checking in about changing work conditions. I attended talks and participated in subsequent discussions at the Higher School of Economics, which sponsored my scientific-humanitarian visa, whenever it seemed that attending would not take too much time away from the archive. My most fruitful potential collaboration came with two other foreign scholars, Siobhan Hearne and Masha Cerovic, who share my interest in exploring gender as a lens of analysis for Russian military history. We came to realize this shared interest over a series of impromptu lunches outside RGVIA’s reading room and are now planning to develop first a conference panel for the ASEEES conference in 2020 and, subsequently, a collection of articles to be published in a major peer-reviewed journal (Slavic Review is our first choice).

Conclusions

It is clear that the tsarist army had a distinct culture of violence on the borderlands of the Russian Empire. In this it had much in common with the beliefs and practices of other European colonial armies of the long 19th century, and was informed by international connections, but it also developed its ideas on the basis of ideas and experiences specific to (and internal to) itself. Rhetoric and practice interacted in a mutually reinforcing cycle to enshrine certain violent practices as not only good sense, but the only means to achieving desired ends with unruly
subjects. It was these logics and practices, eminently portable, that helped to weld the empire together in times of crisis, and that constituted an important part of the shared experience of empire for non-Russian borderlands.

**Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications**

My most immediate need is to process the numerous microfilm images that I photographed while working at RGVIA in particular. Another crucial goal for the coming academic year is to compare the archival findings I’ve already got with the vast published record available in 19th century Russian journals, both specialist military journals like *Voennyi sbornik* and “thick journals,” especially historically focused journals that published memoirs, like *Russkaia starina* and *Istoricheskii viestnik*. Since these are easily accessible in PDF within the US, I did not spend valuable field time working with them, and I already have a rich working bibliography ready to go. In the longer term, I probably need two more trips of six to eight weeks into the field to be truly confident that I haven’t left any stones unturned as I write my book – one of these would be to Moscow, summer 2021, to try some new approaches to the collections at RGVIA, and the other would be to St. Petersburg, in summer 2022, to investigate collections at the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), especially the files of the Caucasus and Western committees, as well as some personal collections.

The most important future publication to ensue from this research will be a full-length monograph, of which I’m already prepared to write some chapters, and which I’ll be able to complete pending future summer research trips. In the next year I plan to write three further articles. Two will pertain to the gender and military history project mentioned above – one a conceptual/historiographical article (possibly co-authored with Hearne) on what masculinity studies can offer to Russian military history, another following themes of gender and family in
narratives of Russian colonial warfare. The other will follow the career of a single imperial troubleshooter, Aleksandr Konstantinovich Geins, between the suppression of the Polish revolts in 1863 and the conquest of Turkestan later in the 1860s, with an emphasis on his understandings of organized warfare and racial/ethnic difference.

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