Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918

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theatres in 1905 were fairly ‘isolated events’ (p. 195), but as Quenoy observes, ‘the tsarist government demonstrated sensitivity to the stage’s potential for fomenting audience unrest’ (p. 196).

It could be argued that the autocracy’s policies towards theatre were repressive not because the theatre was particularly politicised, but because the autocracy feared the explosive effect words might have if spoken from the stage, especially on working-class and peasant audiences. The special censorship for popular theatres was not abolished until 1917, whatever one or another government official might have said in favour of such a move. In the years before the Fundamental Laws of 1906 gave Russians semi-constitutional government, when there was no legislature, no legal political parties or political papers, no freedom of speech or conscience, theatres were one of the few public places where people could gather into groups in large numbers and were occasionally the site of symbolic demonstrations of political opposition, even during the performance of entirely innocuous works. After the 1905 revolution, when social and political issues such as land reform and military budgets could be debated in the Duma and reported in the liberal, socialist, monarchist or nationalist press, art lost the social or political function it had served for some Russians. Perhaps this is why the censors became more lenient after 1905. Yet they still prohibited plays, even if they also permitted works such as Ibsen’s Miss Julie that were sometimes banned in other countries.

Stage Fright is a thought-provoking examination of the interaction of art, society, politics and the state in late imperial Russia. Quenoy has done enormous research and bases his interpretations on substantial evidence. Even if some of that evidence might be interpreted a bit differently, this is an important contribution to the history of Russian culture that rightly questions old assumptions about the interaction of politics and the arts in the years before the revolutions of 1917.

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Michael Reynolds questions traditional historical narratives of the rise of nationalism in the Caucasus before, during and after the First World War arguing that ‘interstate competition...provides the key to understanding the course of history in the Ottoman–Russian borderlands in the early twentieth century’ (p. 6). Building on the ideas of Charles Tilly, Reynolds positions the slow deterioration of Ottoman and Russian imperial power in the Caucasus as a direct result of those imperial powers creating or fomenting nationalist fervour for their own benefit, especially to undermine their rivals. This intensified during the First World War, and following the Bolshevik Revolution the Ottoman Empire scrambled to redraw the map of the Caucasus and the northern
Middle East in order to better protect itself from the eventual rebirth of Russian power. In this picture, whilst nationalism is a force, Reynolds argues that it developed as a result of geopolitics with the Great Powers strengthening relatively weak movements by providing armaments or exacerbating tensions between various ethnicities to undermine their rivals.

The final section, chapters seven and eight, which focuses on the aftermath of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and predominantly on the Ottoman rush to regain any territory in the borderland regions, contains his most convincing arguments. His assertion that the Transcaucasian nations had no desire to create distinct nation-states, and only reluctantly did so for their own security after intense pressure from the Great Powers, confirms Reynolds’s greater argument and most clearly illustrates how interstate competition forced the creation of new states on flawed ‘national’ terms. Reynolds notes that the Transcaucasian Federation exhibited no desire for independence and, while attempting to govern the region, declared itself to still be a part of Russia, despite not recognising Bolshevik rule. The Ottoman Empire, however, looking to develop buffer states to counteract what it felt was the inevitable resurgence of Russian power, forced the Georgians, Azeri Turks and Armenians to fragment and declare independence. It is here that Reynolds is at his most convincing, not only providing a clear elucidation of the lack of power that nationalist sentiment had politically, but also showing how the Great Powers, primarily the Ottoman Empire, negotiated the creation of three states, ostensibly based on nationalist feeling, in order not only to secure the Ottoman Empire but also to allow the Ottoman Empire to regain territory that it had governed historically.

While these chapters are the most convincing, his earlier ones suffer from the problem that his greater argument becomes obscured occasionally in the narrative. Reynolds is able to show brilliantly how interstate competition between the Russians and the Ottomans empowered some nationalities and dictated specific national policies, such as when the Russian Empire manipulated the Kurdish peoples to undermine Ottoman war movements, when the Armenians worked with both the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire to destabilise the security of the respective empire’s rival, when the Ottomans attempted to position themselves as champions of the Muslim people to gain support during the war, or when the Ottomans embraced ‘Turkishness’ for security reasons due to the difficulty of governing a poly-ethnic state. However, while these policies show that geopolitics, not nationalism, dictated Ottoman or Russian policies, it only provides one lens, that of how the national idea was used by the Great Powers. Reynolds’s treatment of these events is exemplary, but it often begs the question as to whether, outside these policies, people ascribed to a more passive or different form of nationalism than that which the Ottoman or Russian authorities attempted to strengthen or weaken. Reynolds’s later chapters do well to show how nationalism was not a concept that was politically powerful, but the lack of unity or the lack of a convincing political voice that spoke for all of a given national group does not mean it failed to exist or was trivial. This is further compounded by Reynolds including discussions outlining the hostility between Armenians and Muslims, treating each as a homogeneous group in which hatred for the other was a powerful force, seemingly on ethno-national lines. Reynolds’s argument is compelling, and certainly shows how Ottoman and Russian forces empowered some nationalities and fanned the flames of nationalism, but it still needs to be resolved as to whether those forces had already
existed, albeit in other forms, such as along clan lines or specific familial or religious loyalties.

A note should be made about his sources. Much of this book deals with the Ottoman Empire and the Transcaucasus, often focusing on how Ottoman officials responded to events. Reynolds indicates this is a function of the fact that the Russian Empire had better finances to engage in destabilising the Ottoman regime than the Ottomans had at their disposal to use against Russia. It also could be a function of the available literature. His archival research is commendable and he makes a genuine attempt to understand the decision-making process and the minds of key political figures and diplomats, especially on the Ottoman side. The only real drawback is one that is totally out of Reynolds’s control and only serves to reinforce the need for studies such as this one. While Reynolds was able to locate a wide variety of sources, some older, but many newer, dealing with the Ottoman Empire and nationalism in general, the same cannot be said for the Russian Empire and early Bolshevik rule. While there are some newer sources, many of his sources for the Russian dimension are older and show a clear need for further research in the field.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is a must-have not only for students studying the Transcaucasus, as well as the foreign policy of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, but also for those interested in the study of nationalities. However, since one requires a working knowledge of Ottoman or Russian politics of this period, it is not recommended as an introduction to this subject matter. Reynolds’s introduction provides an interesting paradigm and while his greater argument at times is not as convincing as it could be, it certainly deserves to be explored and developed, allowing scholars to eventually definitively determine, in the context of the Middle East and the Caucasus, to what extent nationalism proved to be a driving force and to what extent it was a by-product of the interstate competition between the Great Powers.

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Wayne Dowler combines a critical overview of the historiography of the pre-revolutionary period with a narrative of key events as they unfolded in the final years of empire. Driving both of these is a strong thesis concerning the formation of civil society within the autocratic state. Dowler argues for a shift in behaviour patterns across the social spectrum from one predicated on cultural, political and economic difference to an endorsement, whether pronounced or inchoate, of the pluralist ideals of civil society and social cooperation.

To build his case, Dowler confronts a whole host of accepted interpretations stemming from what he calls the ‘myth of the monolithic state’ (p. 12), and which, he argues, became a staple of the historiography in the twentieth century. These