The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650–1831

John P. LeDonne

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For Priscilla
with gratitude

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Preface

I must begin with a caution and a plea. Some readers will argue that writing a first book on Russian grand strategy without the benefit of monographs concentrating on specific problems—decision making, for example—is running the risk of writing about the "virtual past."[1] They will argue that what is presented here is nothing but "virtual strategy," in which the author attributes to the Russian political elite a vision they never had. I answer that if we must wait until enough monographs have been published—especially on eighteenth-century history, which has been so neglected—we condemn ourselves to purely descriptive history for a long time to come. But there is a more serious argument. One can think of history writing as the patient accumulation of facts which eventually yields an insight—or none at all. That is the work of the caterpillar, in Ihor Ševčenko's felicitous contrast between two types of historic writing.[2] But if the inductive work of patient accumulation adds to our knowledge of a historical period or subject matter, it often contributes nothing to an understanding of it. One can write an entire book on diplomatic negotiations or military operations without an understanding of their context, of their continuity with previous activities, and without seeking to elucidate why they took place. The inductive historian who gains an insight—not all do—after many years of research and contemplation may enlarge it into a vision that informs the period or subject matter. It is then for the scholar to select among the mass of facts those which support his vision and contribute to the building of an integrated and intelligible whole. That is the work of the butterfly, who sees a field of flowers where the caterpillar sees grains of sand and tiny leaves.

Facts by themselves are dead matter. They acquire life by becoming connected with other facts by the power of the imagination; the connections are virtual because they are fundamentally subjective. The historian's vision will help him create a historical interpretation reflecting both his personality and his own times. That is why, as William Walsh puts it, "each generation finds it necessary to write its histories afresh."[3] That we need to create such connections is especially urgent in Russian military history. Much information is available in collections of various materi-

als, be they "protocols" of Anna Ivanovna's Cabinet and Catherine II's Council or the papers of various army commanders, but they often contain very little that may be useful in constructing a paradigm of grand strategy as the term is understood here: an integrated military, geopolitical, economic, and cultural vision. What is striking in these documents is the abundance of details, as if the strategic purpose of a war had been taken for granted all along. The focus is on the modalities of execution: recruiting, troop transfers, logistics, appointments, and promotions. The papers of individual commanders tell us for the most part next to nothing about the goals of the war. The archives may tell us more, but one should not expect too much, and they will certainly tell us nothing about a grand strategy.

That the strategic goals of wars seem to be so seldom discussed is easily explained. Continental states usually did not have the choices available to sea powers. Making war on Sweden in 1700 meant for the Russians to dislodge it from its Baltic provinces and, after 1721, there was no alternative to the occupation of Finland and the Åland Islands as a prelude to a landing on the Swedish coast and a move on to Stockholm. Making war on the Turks did present a choice: either focusing on the conquest of the Crimean Khanate before moving toward the Danube or marching toward the Danube directly while keeping the Crimean Tatars at bay. After 1771, there was no alternative to a strategic offensive against the Turks alone for the purpose of establishing a permanent presence on the Danube. And any move against Persia meant launching an expedition from Astrakhan and, after 1804, from Tiflis as well. We know almost nothing about decision making in Petersburg; we have various projects, but what was done with them remains an enigma. In the absence of monographs throwing light on these matters, virtual history must remain undistinguishable from "real" history. This is certainly true when we discuss Russia's grand strategy. In a country where no public existed, where correspondence between members of the elite was routinely opened by the political police, where public policy was carefully fragmented so that each sector was the responsibility of individuals who jealously protected their turf against curious outsiders and sought to keep an open channel to the ruler alone, one could hardly expect to hear the debate so necessary to the articulation of a grand strategy combining military strategy with economic policy and geopolitical activities in the peripheral regions. Therefore, critics will say there could be no grand strategy.

But would it be true? The historian is perfectly justified in claiming there was one by establishing connections between what was repeatedly done in the diplomatic, military, and economic fields, by using a mass of disparate facts as so many building blocks for an integrating synthesis that infuses life where there was none. At least we know that the Russians had a sense of history and continuity in the eighteenth century—memories transmitted from one generation to another in elite families—and that Peter the Great's work was a constant reference. If anything, that work expressed the integrating vision of a great man: one cannot separate his military strategy from his commercial ambitions, his economic policy and his diplomacy. While he probably never said he had a grand strategy, are we justified in saying he did not have one? It would be very much like saying that he did not know what he was doing.

Even if we refuse to accept that we cannot know the past in all its complexity,

that the historical past remains beyond our reach while the virtual past is ours for the making,[4] an integrated vision of the past offers a model with which one can agree or disagree. Disagreement is the engine of progress. But it must be a disagreement at the same conceptual level. Those who disagree with the model of a grand strategy in this book will have to come up with a different model, and a clash of models will sharpen our understanding of Russia's perceptions of the outside world. It has been said that a theory cannot be proved, that it can only be disproved. If this debate can encourage scholars to raise their sights and doctoral students to study in detail the various ingredients that went into the formation of a grand strategy, this book will have served its purpose.

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Introduction

This book is part of an ongoing project devoted to the formation of the Russian Empire from the 1650s to the Polish Revolt of 1830–31, which brought to an end the first and crucial phase of the empire's expansion. The seven generations separating the Thirteen Years' War from the crushing of the Polish Revolt witnessed the transformation of Muscovite Russia into a hegemonic empire in the basins of the eastern Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian, the culmination of an offensive that had taken the Russians far beyond their original goals and had given the empire mastery of the continental Heartland, defined as the huge land mass stretching from the Norwegian Alps to the Sea of Okhotsk and bounded by the continuous chain of mountains from the Dinaric Alps of the former Yugoslavia to the Stanovoi Mountains of northern Manchuria. This period deserves to be studied as the most dynamic in modern Russian history, and the concept of grand strategy provides an excellent tool to help us understand its uniqueness.

The Thirteen Years' War (1654–67) marked the beginning of an offensive strategy directed against the Polish Empire, Moscow's main rival and enemy. Its ultimate goal was to gain hegemony in the eastern marches of that empire—between the Niemen and the Dvina, between the Bug and the Dniepr—the old lands of Kievan Rus'. The peace gave Russia Smolensk and Kiev—one the gate to Lithuania, the other to the Right-Bank Ukraine. The Polish Revolt took place fifteen years after the Vienna settlement, which gave the Russian Empire the larger part of the Polish core and made the Russian emperor tsar of Poland, two hundred years after the son of a Polish king had been elected tsar of Russia. The crushing of the revolt settled the fate of Poland within the Russian Empire until the fall of the Romanov dynasty. The Thirteen Years' War was also directed against Sweden and aimed at gaining access to the Gulf of Finland. One hundred and fifty years later, the Russians were established on the Gulf of Bothnia. The Treaty of Turkmanchai with Persia (1828) advanced the periphery of the empire to the Araks, and the Treaty of Adrianople with the Ottomans (1829) consolidated Russian rule in Georgia and Bessarabia. The empire had reached its greatest territorial extent in the western and

southern theaters,[1] and only minor changes would later be brought about by the Treaty of Paris (1856) and the Congress of Berlin (1878).

This period in Russian history was unique in several ways. It is almost an axiom of Western historiography, and one also cultivated by the Russians themselves, that Russia was always on the defensive, surrounded and threatened by enemies, real and imaginary, and that the creation of a vast empire covering eleven time zones resulted from the need to secure protection against the encroachments of malevolent neighbors. It is certainly true that the invasions by Mongols, Crimean Tatars, and Teutonic Knights, followed by the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian empire, created in centrally located Moscow a psychosis of encirclement, heightened by the Time of Troubles, which followed Ivan IV's determination to break that encirclement in his campaigns against Livonia, Kazan, and Astrakhan. It is also true that the rise of Germany and Japan in the late nineteenth century, which took place in the larger context of a century-long cold war with Britain, renewed old fears of encirclement, upon which Stalin would build in the 1930s to whip up enthusiasm among his countrymen for the five-year plans. But it is also just as true that Moscow's central location was ideally suited to launch powerful deep thrusts seeking to destroy the regional hegemonies of Sweden, Poland, and Ottoman Turkey and replace them with Russia's own hegemony in the Heartland. Alastair Johnston, in his study of Chinese "strategic culture," has argued that scholarship has been too willing to accept at face value the traditional Confucian-Mencian central assumption that a benevolent China always emphasized accommodation and peacemaking in accordance with an all-encompassing vision that placed China at the center of the universe while overlooking the violent and offensive strategies that often dominated imperial thinking.

The period under consideration in this book also requires a new vision. It witnessed the rise of a self-confident Russia that developed a long-range offensive strategy—not in response to an immediate threat, because none of the powers that had threatened the Russian core in the past were in a position to threaten it in the eighteenth century, but rather guided by its own expansionist urge in the basins of the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian. It was not Charles XII who declared war on Russia but Peter I who declared war on the king. Only Napoleonic France can be portrayed as a clear enemy, even though the conflict of 1812 can best be seen as the clash of two offensive strategies for the control of Central Europe. No Russophobia is involved here. Russian overland expansion paralleled that of the European powers across the seas with the same determination and ruthlessness. The Russians, like their European brethren, were on the ascendant in the eighteenth century and were no more threatened than the Europeans by the objects of their ambitions.

This period was unique in other ways. It witnessed the emergence of a ruling elite and a ruling class that crystallized during Peter's reign under the leadership of the Romanov house, bound together by serfdom, with which they rose and fell together. It was marked by a steady economic upsurge, which placed Russia among the great economic powers of the day and created the appearance of a convergence with the economies of the Coastland, while concealing from contemporaries deep structural flaws that would not appear until after 1831. It also witnessed the consoli-

dation on a truly continental scale of an original foreign policy inspired by the politics of the steppe, in which Moscow-Petersburg looked upon states and frontier societies in the Heartland from the Gulf of Bothnia to the Irtysh as so many clients to which the imperial government extended its patronage in return for their willingness to serve the empire's interests. Finally, this period witnessed the building of a powerful army capable of winning victories no matter where it fought, against Tatars, Turks, and Persians, Swedes, Poles, and Prussians. Its only defeats after 1700 were on the Prut in 1711 and in 1805–7. These were, in fact, more humiliations than shattering defeats. As a result, the empire projected a perception of invincibility enhanced by a cult of raw military power centered on Petersburg, built in the midst of a swamp by the indomitable will of a tsar and commander in chief, for whom brutality in the choice of means served the larger vision of an empire whose will must be irresistible among clients everywhere. Such a situation Russia had never enjoyed before Peter's reign and would not enjoy again during the imperial period after the reign of Nicholas I.

The structure of this work was inspired by Edward Luttwak's *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, a broad and stimulating study of Roman troop deployment and the client system along the imperial periphery from the reign of Augustus to that of Diocletian more than two hundred years later. Luttwak traces the evolution of that grand strategy in three phases. There was at first no demarcated imperial frontier and no system of fixed frontier defense. The legions were deployed astride major routes and served as mobile striking forces. Beyond the core area of the empire, there were client states creating an invisible frontier, still facing no empire-wide threat, and kept in subjection by their perceptions of Roman power. The second phase was marked by the appearance of such a threat and resulted in the creation of defended perimeters, networks of roads linking the frontier garrisons with one another, and the transfer of legions from the inner zones to the periphery. This in turn brought about the development of a policy of centralization and annexation that eventually destroyed the client system. A consequence was the administrative-territorial fragmentation of the empire and the creation of optimal regional perimeters from which a forward defense strategy sought to intercept and destroy enemy troop movements beyond the imperial periphery. The third phase witnessed the concerted offensive of the Teutonic peoples along the entire perimeter from the north to the Black Sea; it forced the Romans to fall back on a defense-in-depth strategy, in which the former surge capability of the legions had disappeared and the Romans were left with the defense of the rear until they were finally overwhelmed. Phases one and two provide extremely valuable lessons for a study of Russian grand strategy from the 1650s to the 1830s.[2] The Russian case is an excellent one to study the operation of the client system, and it had much in common with that of ancient Rome. In both cases, the imperial client system represented an extension of sociopolitical networks within the core to relationships with the elites beyond the core area. Much work remains to be done to clarify this process in the Russian Empire, but a beginning has been made, paving the way for more detailed studies of individual networks and subnetworks.[3]

The book attempts to do for the Russian Empire what Luttwak did for that of Rome: to formulate on the basis of much disparate information a number of princi-

ples that, taken together, contributed to elaborate an imperial grand strategy at various stages of the empire's evolution. They will also provide a conceptual framework for a debate on the strategic factors underpinning the formation of the empire.

What, then, is grand strategy? It is not just strategy on a grand scale, as is often suggested in the literature. It is not even a purely military concept. Strategy is the art of deploying troops on the map, then on the ground, in order to reach a specific objective, which is the defeat of the enemy in a given theater of war.[4] It relies on strong logistical support, for an army cannot fight without food and ammunition; in eighteenth-century campaigns, more men died of malnutrition and resulting diseases than from enemy fire.[5] A successful strategy depended on the mobilization of economic resources; this was the responsibility of the political leadership. Grand strategy required the mobilization of the political and military establishment, of the economy, and of the country's leading cultural and ecclesiastical figures, in order to realize a global vision, which in Russia's case was the establishment of its hegemony within the Heartland.[6] The Mongols once had a similar vision when they planned a simultaneous invasion of Poland and Korea. Russia's global theater of operation was the Heartland,[7] and only seldom would the empire cross its periphery, usually with unfavorable results. Such a vision determined the means, including the creation of a client system requiring constant management, the shaping of an economic policy encouraging the formation of a military-industrial complex, and the reaching of an agreement on the nature of Russia's economic relations with the outside world. Russia was a warrior state, its nobility defined as a service class whose identity was inseparable from action on the battlefield in defense of the ruling house and the Orthodox faith. As a result, the ruling elite would not recognize a sharp distinction between the politicians and the high command until the late nineteenth century. Until then, general and lower-grade officers were found everywhere in the agencies of the government. It was a combined civil and military elite,[8] in which military objectives played a disproportionate role in decision making, though subject to the countervailing influence of the ruler as the supreme "politician" expected to impose a truly political solution—if he or she had the will and the ability to do so. Russia's military history supplies enough evidence to show how the more forceful rulers shaped strategy at a given time to fit the requirements of a grand strategy as they understood it, tilting the balance within the ruling elite in favor of political solutions. This work takes all these factors into account and traces the evolution of Russia's grand strategy in three major phases. One stretched from the 1650s to the 1730s, when such a grand strategy began to crystallize. During the second phase, from the 1740s to the end of the eighteenth century, Russia gradually won a position of hegemony within the Heartland. During the third, from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the Polish Revolt of 1830–31, it consolidated its hegemony for another generation.

Did such a vision exist? If the answer is sought in the existence of a single document, an official "position paper" analyzing Russia's options and capabilities on a continental scale, it must be negative. Such documents, drawn during various stages of the empire's expansion, probably never existed, if only because they would have been seen as usurpation of the power of the ruler who, in the ideology of the autocratic state, must always be allowed to initiate policy and retain his freedom of

action. Outsiders, however, were quite conscious of a Russian grand design, and those who forged the Testament of Peter the Great saw things insiders must have taken for granted. Adam Czartoryski, a Pole who was foreign minister of the empire from 1804 to 1806, wrote that no other state had pursued such vast designs with "indefatigable perseverance," seeking "the submission of the greater part of Europe and Asia, plus the arbitration of the destinies of its rivals."[9] At any rate, Peter's actions speak for themselves. In 1689, Russia had but a small—and short—access to the ocean at Arkhangelsk. In 1700, it had gained access to the Sea of Azov, which turned into a dead end once the Turks built forces at Kerch and Enikale barring entrance into the Black Sea. In 1711, Peter fought the Turks on the Prut after failing to reach the Danube ahead of them. In 1714, his troops occupied Finland, and in 1716, after Poland had been devastated by Russians and Swedes for nearly a decade, they were in Denmark, poised to cross the Sound for an invasion of Sweden. That same year, the Russians were on the Irtysh seeking a way to the mysterious city of Erkent, rumored to abound in gold, while others crossed the Caspian on their way to Khiva at the gates of Central Asia. And six years later, Russian troops marched to the coastal road from Astrakhan to Rasht to win from a disintegrating Persia the entire southern coast of the Caspian. Whether these moves succeeded or failed is irrelevant; what is certain is that they embodied a determination to demonstrate Russian power in the Heartland from the Baltic to the Caspian. While launching these deep strikes within the Heartland's periphery, the tsar set out with grim determination to build almost from scratch a powerful industrial base geared to produce the weapons of war and a new navy to wrest naval hegemony in the Baltic from the Swedes. He continued to dream, as had his predecessors, that Russia could become the intermediary between the commerce of the East and that of the West, a vast transit space occupied by the valley of the Volga and that of the Volkhov, which he connected by a canal, creating a single waterway between the Caspian and the Baltic. Last but not least, he encouraged a cult of power, a cult of Russia's "awesomeness,"[10] which churchmen and writers happily developed as the ideological support of Russia's striving toward hegemony. From this outline of a continental vision of Russia's role within the Heartland, there clearly emerges a grand design.

But what of his successors? Anna Ivanovna was steeped in old Muscovy, and the Crimean campaigns of 1736–38 were more a throwback to Vasilii Golitsyn's campaigns of the 1680s than to the Prut campaign of 1711, but the expansion of the industrial base continued. Most of her advisers had begun their careers under Peter, notably those most likely to take part in the formulation of a grand strategy, like Heinrich Ostermann, Burhard von Münnich, James Bruce, and Feofan Prokopovich, all of non-Russian origin. The role of Germans, Scots, and Ukrainians, not to mention Moldavians, like Cantemir, and later in the century, Greeks and Poles, in the formulation of a program of empire building and expansion has been neglected but deserves to be studied. Their knowledge of the outside world, where the empire would have to be built, their own interest in inviting Russian expansion, matched the imperial urge of the elite to create a powerful current drawing the high command into the three great sea basins of the Heartland. Anna's 1733 intervention in the Polish succession crisis and the dispatch of Russian troops to the Rhine two years later, together with her tariff policy, evidenced no deviation from the guide-

lines set by Peter. Elizabeth, Peter's daughter, made it clear she would rule in accordance with her father's precepts; her flamboyant reign witnessed a surge of Russian national self-consciousness and Orthodox proselytizing. While downgrading Russian activities in the southern theater, she continued to resort to a forward strategy in the valley of the Ural and Irtysh, and landed troops in Stockholm before fighting a bloody war with a Prussian client whose recalcitrance threatened to destabilize the client system along the western periphery of the Heartland. Russia's power had become truly awesome by 1762 and was about to become even more so in the last three decades of the century. Catherine II was a German usurper who needed to be more Russian than the Russians themselves. Her road to success lay in being faithful to the Petrine legacy, as she herself recognized in the inscription on Peter's statue in Senate Square. In her wars with the Ottomans and Persians she acknowledged following in Peter's footsteps. By 1796 she had established Russia's position as arbiter in the tense relationship between Austria and Prussia, confirming Russia's hegemony in the Heartland. Despite warning signs, the Russian economy continued to do well, and Petersburg became one of the great capitals on the periphery of Europe. Are we to claim that this extraordinary progression of Russian power and influence took place in a fit of absentmindedness, without the ruling elite's possessing a continent-wide vision of its ambitions and a sustained determination to realize them?

Alexander may have been less concerned with the Petrine legacy,[11] partly because he had nothing to prove (unlike Elizabeth, who was born out of wedlock, and Catherine II, who was a foreigner), and also because his reign resembled Peter's in some ways, bringing to a close a long eighteenth century that had begun in 1696, if not 1689. Like Peter, Alexander spent most of his reign at war with the greatest military commander of the day and left his country financially exhausted. Both carried out important domestic reforms inspired by the necessity to cope with the demands of war; both built powerful armies far exceeding in size those of their predecessors; and both reigns ended with the imposition of a prohibitive tariff wall. But Peter's reign signaled the acceleration of Russian expansion begun by his father, while Alexander's carried out the work of his grandmother to its logical completion. Czartoryski, who wrote his memoirs in the 1840s, noted under the year 1804 that "the spirit of Peter still hovered over his empire," and General Filippo Paulucci, a former commander of the imperial forces in the Caucasus, wrote in a memorandum of 1816 that the establishment of new boundaries with the Ottoman and Persian empires would bring the projects of Peter the Great to their completion.[12] Peter surely would have felt proud satisfaction in the annexation of Finland, in Russian troops stationed in Paris to weaken a France that had been Russia's major rival throughout the century, in the establishment of a quasi-protectorate over the Danubian Principalities, and in the defeat of the Ottomans and Persians in Transcaucasia from a new base of operations in Georgia. Contemporaries who had read up in ancient history could not fail to hear in the monster parades that marked the latter half of the reign after 1815 an echo of the tramping of the Roman legions returning from victory in Gaul and Egypt. Never had Russia appeared so awesome as it did then. It cannot of course be claimed that such achievements had been planned all along, but Russia's victories in the 1810s

and 1820s were nevertheless the logical realization of the Petrine vision of Russia as the hegemon in the Heartland, protected by high tariff walls, with a strong economy capable of supporting an invincible military establishment and with a cult of power to impose submission on client states and enemies alike. That vision, no doubt, owed something to the older Mongol vision of hegemony in the immense world of the steppe and to that of Ivan IV, who was ahead of his times, but it was Peter who laid the durable foundations for the transformation of that vision into realistic policy and Nicholas I who completed it.

This study of Russia's grand strategy will also suggest the need for a fresh look at the old and perhaps insoluble question of Russia's relationship with "Europe." It is a well established assumption in Western historiography that with Peter's reign Russia entered the European state system and became Europeanized, as its ruling class adopted European manners and enjoyed and copied European art and literature. The depth of Russia's Europeanization very much remains to be assessed. Its manifestations may well be seen as forms of grandstanding and playacting before the rulers who became less and less Russian and genetically more and more German as the Romanov dynasty grew older. Indeed, a historian of eighteenth-century Russia, Iurii Got'e, would ask in the summer of 1917, soon after the collapse of the old regime, whether the Petersburg civilization, which had been equated for so long with Russian civilization, had not in fact been but a "thin veneer"[13] that had fooled the unsuspecting observer. Surely the fact that so many Russians, and not just the Slavophiles, before 1917—and the Bolsheviks for seventy-five years thereafter—insisted that Russia was not part of Europe or the "West" and showed open contempt for it should give pause to those who insist uncritically that it was (and remains) part of a Europe stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals, Siberia's place in "Russia" being conveniently ignored. A persistent Eurocentric attitude has presented Russia as an isolated eastern margin of Europe that must sooner or later be brought into the fold. The Moscow-centered Russians could with better justice and with a greater appreciation of their history and geography claim that the European Coastland was the margin, more dynamic indeed, but also alien to a way of life based on the mastery of great spaces, the exercise of arbitrary power by the very few over a largely passive population, and an Eastern Orthodoxy declared incompatible with Latin Christianity since 1054. It is suggested here that Russia was not part of Europe. It certainly was not so for the eighteenth-century contemporaries of its expansion, like Louis XV of France and Frederick II of Prussia, who said so openly. In 1770, in Neustadt in Moravia, the Prussian king and Joseph II, the Holy Roman emperor, agreed that Russia was a menace to European civilization.[14] In our own day, Walther Mediger entitled his major monograph on eighteenth-century Russian foreign policy *Moscow's Advance toward Europe* and Christopher Duffy called his book on Russia's strategy *Russia's Military Way to the West*, obviously implying that Russia was not part of either Europe or the "West." It was instead a sui generis Eurasian state seeking hegemony in the Heartland stretching from the Elbe to eastern Siberia and manipulating not only the European state system to achieve its goals but also the system of states and societies in the immense steppe from the Danube to Lake Baikal.

Ensconced in the forests of the Volga-Oka Mesopotamia and with its back to the wastes of the White Sea and Arctic Ocean, the Muscovite state had a mission defined by the church as the standard bearer of Eastern Orthodoxy against Latin Christianity and Islam and which behaved as the proponent of political, economic, and cultural autarky. It steadily consolidated its power in the forest and wooded steppe zones until it came up against the outer peripheries of those two civilizations—in the Baltic frontier, in the eastern marches of the Polish Empire, in the successor states of the Golden Horde. From their position of strength, the Russians took advantage of the weakening hold of the Swedes, Poles, and Ottomans on their frontier zones in order to manipulate client relationships within those empires, transforming frontier societies and even core areas like Prussia into clients of their growing empire. But they manipulated those relationships from the outside, not from within. It would greatly help our understanding of Russian history, strategy, and foreign policy if we chose to see the Russians not always as part of something else, but as the bearers of an autonomous civilization engaged in an age-long competition within the Heartland with the other two great civilizations of Latin Christianity and Islam with which they had (and still have) so little in common.

The emergence of the Russian Empire was a long process. The principality of Moscow developed in the heart of a vast hydrographic network linking it with the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian. It was subjugated by the Mongols in 1237. For the next three centuries the nomad ruled supreme not only in the steppe but even in the forest zone, where the principality became a pliable yet recalcitrant client. The Moscow princes rose to power by taking full advantage of that favorable geographical location and by obtaining from the khan of the Golden Horde, headquartered north of Astrakhan, the political charter that eventually established their legitimacy over the entire Russian land and confirmed their position as chief vassal of the steppe khan.[15] Meanwhile, the Teutonic Knights had consolidated their hold on Livonia and established a Germanic empire along the eastern Baltic coast. It would have become a territorially contiguous empire had it not been for the rise of Lithuania around 1300. The new state rapidly expanded to include by the end of the fourteenth century almost the entire valley of the Dniepr to the Black Sea, encroaching into the southern steppe, the domain of the nomad. The stage was thus set for Moscow's relations with three political configurations: the Germans, the Lithuanians, and the Turco-Mongols, in two theaters, the Baltic and the Black Sea, from which trails and rivers led to Moscow and from Moscow to the sea. In 1386, the grand prince of Lithuania married the heiress to the Polish throne to create a powerful empire soon dominated by Poland, and Poland would become Russia's rival for the lands of the Lithuanian principality that had once been part of Kievan Rus', to which the Muscovite church claimed to be the heir after the incorporation of Novgorod in 1478. After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the final destruction of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman Turks, Ivan III married a Romanized Byzantine princess in 1472. The grand princes who had derived their legitimacy for so long from the Mongol khans now saw themselves as the heirs to the Byzantine Empire, a claim that would eventually set the stage for the long and bitter Russo-Ottoman conflict over hegemony in the Black Sea basin.

If empires are "relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies,"[16] they also contain a strong ethnic component. They are political systems in which an ethnic group or a "super-ethnicity"—like the "French," the "British," the "Russians"—imposed their will on other ethnic societies. The Athenian empire of the Delian League and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation may have been the only exceptions, and the latter with substantial reservations. In such a case, the formation of the Russian Empire began with Ivan IV, who was crowned tsar in 1547 and launched an expedition against Kazan in 1552 and another against Astrakhan in 1556, resulting in the annexation of the entire valley of the Volga below Sviiazhsk to the Caspian, leaving only the Crimea beyond Russian control. Two years later, in 1558, in the wake of the secularization of the lands of the Teutonic Knights, who embraced Protestantism and committed political suicide, Ivan sent his troops into Livonia in order to enlarge the narrow frontage Russia possessed on the Gulf of Finland. The war went well at first, but Russia found itself face to face with Poland and Sweden, which also claimed the legacy of the Knights. Their combined opposition rolled back the Russian advance, and when peace was made in 1581–82, Ivan had lost all his former gains. The appearance of Sweden was a momentous event. This new power, created in 1526 when Gustav Vasa broke with Denmark, was embarking on a course of expansion that would soon establish its hegemony in the Baltic and make it Russia's main enemy in the region. Russia would face the oppositions of two powers in the western theater.

Its expansionist surge was in evidence in the east as well. Peace had hardly been made with the Swedes and the Poles when an expedition was sent across the Urals against the Siberian Khanate, followed by the annexation of "Siberia" and the construction of Tobolsk in 1587, which would remain the capital of the new territory for 180 years. The Time of Troubles (1598–1613) put Moscow on the defensive. When the new Romanov dynasty ascended the throne, the Swedes were established in Livonia and the Poles beyond Smolensk and Kiev: the two powers, although rivals, exercised a joint hegemony in the western theater and barred Russia's access to the Baltic. The Ottoman Empire, with the help of its client societies in Moldavia-Wallachia and the Tatars in the Crimea and on the mainland to the Kuban, blocked Russia's access to the Black Sea. It had become the undisputed hegemon in the southern theater. Beyond the Volga and the Urals, an indeterminate eastern theater was taking shape while a powerful Manchu dynasty was about to seize control of China. By 1650, however, Russia was ready to resume its expansionist surge. The consolidation of the dynasty, the emergence of a ruling class whose raison d'être was the management of the country's resources, and the tremendous energy released by the civil war that had brought the dynasty to power combined to transform a defensive into an offensive posture.[17] The geopolitical environment had created three theaters, two of them, the western and the southern, dominated by hegemonic powers. The means of a grand strategy operating within a remarkable constant geopolitical environment were the modernization the army, the foundation of an industrial base, and the maximum extraction of resources from an increasingly dependent population; the goal was to challenge Swedish, Polish, and