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Internal Colonialism: From Maritime to Land Empires

ROLAND DANNREUTHER

Abstract

The theory of internal colonialism was originally developed during the 1960s and 1970s, representing a radical critique of the separation between core and periphery, metropole and colony, and nation and state. The theory was first applied to explain the persistence of coloniality in the countries who had gained independence from Europe in the Western hemisphere. The theory has not been applied systematically to the successor states of the Eurasian land empires, such as Russia and China. This article fills this gap by applying the theory through a comparative analysis of Chechnya in Russia and Xinjiang in China.

THE MODERN THEORY OF INTERNAL COLONIALISM WAS FIRST developed in the 1960s and 1970s, mirroring the contemporaneous rise of the theory of neo-imperialism. Both theories sought to explain the persistence of colonial and imperial subjugation despite the process of decolonisation and the formal ending of European imperial rule. While neo-imperialism explained the continuing forms of imperial subjection in the newly independent and postcolonial countries in Asia and Africa, the theory of internal colonialism highlighted colonial practices and structures in the postcolonial states in the Western hemisphere. During this period, protests against US neo-imperialism in Southeast Asia were mirrored by revolts against the repression of African American communities. These two spheres—the external imposition of neo-imperialism and the domestic imposition of internal colonialism—were seen as distinct but interconnected. Colonial practices within states were exported overseas, and practices of imperial control were imported back to the metropole.

The theory of internal colonialism had its origins in the Western hemisphere, with Latin American scholars initially developing the theory to explain the continued repression of the indigenous Indian communities in postcolonial Latin America. The theory was then extended to the United States and the political subjugation of the Chicano and African

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American communities and also to the West European metropolitan states, revealing the internal colonial experiences of the ‘Celtic fringe’ in Britain and of Brittany in France. This extension of a colonial critique to the internal territorial core of the European maritime empires radically challenged the idea of a nation-state distinct and separate from an empire-state. More broadly, it was suggestive that state-building can never be fully separated from internal colonisation.

The theory of internal colonialism has continued to inspire scholars to explain contemporary developments. The theory has been extended beyond the United States and Western Europe. These include case studies on Palestine/Israel (Zureik 1979), South Africa (Carter *et al.* 1967), Bangladesh (Das 1978), Alaska (Dryzek & Young 1985), Xinjiang in China (Gladney 1998), Thailand (London 1979), Estonia (Mettam & Williams 1998) and Central Asia (Loring 2014). More recently, the theory has been utilised to highlight the ‘colonial’ nature of the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan during the early twenty-first century and how the colonial practices from these Western counterinsurgencies have been imported back to frame domestic policies (Gregory 2004; Barder 2015). Alexander Barder describes these wars as ‘imperial laboratories’ which export colonial practices back into the United States. James Turner highlighted a similar dynamic for how the British experience in Iraq and Afghanistan influenced domestic counter-terrorism policy (Turner 2018). James Trafford widened this analysis to how postwar and post-imperial Britain rebuilt itself through deploying colonial strategies and techniques that helped to ‘reforge Britain after the collapse of empire through a post-colonial cut’ (Trafford 2021, p. 14). More generally, the theory has been used to challenge the idea of Europe being hermetically sealed from its overseas colonies, seeing instead a continuity of practice from the ‘internal’ to the ‘external’ whereby colonial knowledge and practices are diffused both from the metropole to the periphery and from the periphery to the metropole (Pasha 2009; Neocleous 2012; Tansel 2015; Bhabra 2016).

However, the theory of internal colonialism has never fully regained the popularity that it enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s. The decline from the 1980s onwards came partly from the difficulty of applying the theory to all the myriad forms of ethnic and racial domination globally and its failure to provide a persuasive causal mechanism for how ‘internal colonies’ emerge (Chalout & Chalout 1979, p. 96; Hind 1984). The theory also suffered from Marxist critiques that it undermined class solidarity across racial and ethnic lines as well as from feminist claims that it promoted a masculinist agenda that marginalised gender and sexuality (González 1974). The belief that the theory of internal colonialism promoted separatist nationalism also reduced its broader appeal (Spivak 1988; Ruiz 1998).

As a result of its perceived deficiencies the theory has not been applied in a systematic manner beyond the West, its original target. In particular, the extension of the theory to the major Eurasian land empires has been limited. This is also reflective of a more general feature of postcolonial thought. For example, Walter Mignolo, the major decolonial scholar, explicitly identifies the colonial powers as the West European maritime powers (Britain, Spain, France and the USA) while the Eurasian powers, such as Russia and China, are considered to be anti-imperial powers (Mignolo 2007, pp. 6–7). Timothy Snyder argues that this relative lack of interest in the legacies of land empires is because the main continental empires—such as the German, Austrian, Ottoman, Russian and Chinese—have generally been defeated by their opposing maritime powers (Snyder

2015, pp. 696–97). This has led to an under-valuation of the legacies of empire for their subsequent post-imperial successor states.

This article argues that this neglect of the coloniality of the traditional Eurasian land empires can be addressed by the application of the theory of internal colonialism. Indeed, the theory has an intrinsic resonance and relevance, as these empires often explicitly conceptualised their expansion in terms of ‘internal colonisation’. In Prussia, the concept of ‘internal colonisation’ was developed to promote the state-sponsored programme for managing the frontier between Prussia and the ‘Slavic wilderness’ to the East (Koehl 1953; Brubaker 1992; Zimmerman 2006). Alexander Etkind, a Russian scholar, took this one step further to argue that Russia’s history is nothing but one of ‘colonising itself’ (Etkind 2011, pp. 161–66; 2015, pp. 61–5). Etkind draws his ideas from the nineteenth-century historian, Sergei Soloviev, who argued that Russia not only colonised its new territories but, in the process, colonised itself in the imperial core (Soloviev 1988). In China, the influential early twentieth-century intellectual, Liang Qichao, noted that ‘the Chinese race has grown in two ways: through assimilation of the numerous alien tribes in and outside of our territory, and through colonisation by our own people on the frontiers year by year, thus enlarging our territory’ (Qichao 1982, pp. 267–68).

This article extends the theory of internal colonialism to the successor states of the Eurasian land empires, illustrated through a comparative analysis of the two cases of Chechnya in Russia and Xinjiang in China. The first part of the article reviews the main development of the theory of internal colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s and its application to Latin America, the United States and Western Europe. The main insights of the theory are threefold: uncovering the layered nature of coloniality; challenging nationalist narratives of unity and integration; and identifying how the internal empire affects and is affected by the external empire. These insights are applied to the Russian and Chinese cases, revealing the layered nature of coloniality in the internal composition of both countries and the challenge that their restive regions (Chechnya and Xinjiang) pose for national narratives of unity and integration. Moscow and Beijing actively promote their repression of the Chechen and Uyghur desire for autonomy and independence to the Global South as models of counterinsurgency and the successful national integration of minority groups. Thus, internal colonialism, in this case study, demonstrates significant geopolitical effects.

The theory of internal colonialism and the Western maritime empires

As noted above, the concept of ‘internal colonisation’ has a long history. In the nineteenth century, it was used to justify and legitimate Prussia’s expansion into the Slavic East and for Russia’s imperial expansion. In the early twentieth century, Lenin (1956) used the concept to describe how capitalist development leads to uneven development within large states such as the United States and Russia. In the Russian case, he applied the concept of ‘internal colonies’ to undeveloped parts of Russia in regions like the Volga and Siberia. In the 1920s, Gramsci (2015) followed this Leninist precedent by explaining the backwardness of southern Italy as the result of the subjugation of the proletariat of the region as ‘exploitable colonies’ by the northern Italian bourgeoisie.

In these earlier applications, there was no requirement for a racial or ethnic differentiation between the colonising core and the colonised periphery. As such, there was a blurring of the idea of internal colonisation with the broader dynamic of state formation. However, this conflation of state formation and colonisation neglects what contemporary colonial and postcolonial scholarship sees as an intrinsic and necessary component of colonialism—the construction of difference and the racialisation of the colonised by the coloniser. In the theory's subsequent post-World War II development, this racial or ethnic differentiation became a constitutive part, as seen in John Chavez's definition of internal colonialism as a theory 'seeking to explain the subordinate status of a racial or ethnic group in its own homeland within the boundaries of a larger state dominated by a different people' (Chavez 2011, p. 786).

The theory of internal colonialism was first developed in the 1960s in the Western hemisphere. It is perhaps not surprising that identifying the legacies of colonialism, and the enduring nature of coloniality, initially emerged from the Americas as they had a comparatively early experience of formal liberation from the maritime West European empires. The turning point was 1776 and the United States Declaration of Independence. The American revolutionary war was followed by a succession of revolutionary wars on the rest of the continent that progressively dismantled much of the Spanish, Portuguese and French colonies during the early nineteenth century. Consequently, most of the postcolonial states in Latin America and North America gained their independence prior to the large-scale European imperial expansion in Africa and Asia in the late nineteenth century.

The theory of internal colonialism, like the development of dependency theory and theory of neo-imperialism (Frank 1967; Cardoso & Faletto 1979), argued that colonialism continued to exist despite the formal process of decolonisation. The Latin American decolonial scholars Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo called this persistence of colonialism a condition of 'coloniality' that continues to dehumanise and exploit the marginalised and racialised even after formal decolonisation (Quijano 2000, 2007; Mignolo 2007). The Mexican sociologist, Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, pioneered the idea of internal colonialism, applying it to the political and economic subordination of indigenous communities in independent postcolonial Mexico (González Casanova 1965). He challenged the state-promoted progressive narrative of Mexico's postcolonial nation-building that elevated the Indian peoples as national symbols of a post-racial and postcolonial Mestizo society. Gonzalez Casanova argued that, in contrast, the condition of the Indian peoples had not fundamentally changed from the colonial to the postcolonial period and that they continued to be repressed by 'different social classes of Ladino society, remained deprived of their native lands and forced into unskilled and low paid labour' (González Casanova 1965, p. 34). As such, they were the victims of internal colonialism. Resonating with the work of Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, Gonzalez Casanova saw postcolonial elites reproducing the mentalities and pathologies of the displaced colonial rulers (Memmi 1957; Fanon 1961). The concept of internal colonialism captured these elements of continuity in the shift from direct domination of foreigners over natives to 'domination of natives by natives' in the postcolonial period (González Casanova 1965, p. 37).

The concept of internal colonialism was thus first applied to the continued oppression of Amerindian communities that remained caught in 'internal colonies' and who had been the

historic first victims of the European maritime imperial expansions. The followers of Gonzalez Casanova applied the concept to other Amerindian communities in Latin America, including Peru and Guatemala (Stavenhagen 1965; Cotler 1967). It was then applied to the indigenous Americans in the United States who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, challenged the racialised stereotypes of passivity and absorption and increasingly made assertive nationalist claims. They demanded the protection and return of their lands, language preservation, and cultural and educational rights (Forbes 1967; Deloria 1970). They highlighted the historical record of resistance and activism and the continuous history of settler colonialism (Anders 1979). As Huhndorf argues, the study of native Americans ‘adds unique and crucial dimensions to critiques of US imperialism, not least because it reveals American national identities, from their origins to the present, to be constituted through continuous colonial domination’ (Huhndorf 2009, p. 362). As such, the USA was not only an imperialist power abroad, such as in Vietnam, but also at home, in its systematic repression of the indigenous American peoples. There is clearly resonance here with the development of the theory of settler colonialism (Wolfe 1999, 2016; Veracini 2010).

In the late 1960s, the concept of internal colonialism gained greater traction and visibility through being taken up by Chicano/Mexican and African American activists who deployed internal colonialism in rejecting ideas of assimilation and integration in an independent United States. In the Chicano community, the idea of internal colonialism was promoted by Corgy Gonzalez, a charismatic young leader who established the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in 1968 and called for an independent state of Aztlan (Almaguer 1971; Acuna 1972). Among African Americans, the idea of internal colonialism was adopted by those who rejected the more moderate policies of Martin Luther King and who embraced Black Power and a separatist nationalism proclaimed by Malcolm X. In their influential 1967 book, *Black Power*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton argued that ‘the black people in the country form a colony and it is not in the interest of the colonial power to liberate them’ (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967, p. 39). This colonial analogy was not new and can be traced back to the nineteenth century, but it was being presented in a more radical and systematic manner (Du Bois 1961; Clark 1965; Pinderhughes 2011). Its main value, according to Carmichael and Hamilton, was that it highlighted the structural institutionalised nature of American racism ‘that purposefully, maliciously and with reckless abandon, relegates the black man to the subordinate, inferior status in society’ (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967, p. 39). The claim to action that the condition of ‘internal colonialism’ required was thus one of national liberation and a radical separation from a racist ‘white power structure’ (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967, p. 26).

These early concepts of internal colonialism were taken up by activist scholars and underwent further refinement. A key milestone in the latter was the work of Robert Blauner, an American sociologist, whose 1972 book *Racial Oppression in the United States* attempted to theorise internal colonialism through identifying US racial minorities as internal colonies of American capitalism (Blauner 1972). His theoretical development of internal colonialism challenged both the liberal and Marxist assumption that capitalist development inexorably leads to the decline of national form and ethnic/racial difference. In the case of the US, Blauner claimed that his theory undermined the sociological

assumption that assimilation was inevitable and that the race problem was contingent on class and would disappear as Black Americans become more middle class. Blauner argued that European immigrant groups had in fact set in place the structural conditions of domination and oppression over people of colour who were made ‘ethnic minorities en bloc, collectively, through conquest, slavery, annexation or racial labour policy’ (Blauner 1972, p. 55). The experience of African Americans was essentially the same as that of the colonial subject in Africa: the colonising power destroyed indigenous forms of life, enforced alien rule and imposed a racist system. There is a resonance here with Frank Wilderson’s theory of Afro-pessimism (Wilderson 2020).

Internal colonialism: from the Americas to Europe

The next stage of the theorisation of internal colonialism crossed the Atlantic to Western Europe. The shift was not just a geographical one but also a move from a postcolonial setting to the national heartlands of the post-imperial West European states. Michael Hechter, a US sociologist, radically challenged the idea of the major West European states as being homogenous nation-states, involving the historic voluntary incorporation of the different peoples and nations. Hechter identified parallels between the experience of the Irish, the *Mudéjar* (Muslims who stayed in Spain during the Reconquista who were eventually forced to convert to Christianity, becoming *Moriscos* until their expulsion in the early 1600s), and the Bretons with the Amerindian communities in Latin America. His main objective in developing this new application of internal colonialism was to provide an intellectual framework to explain the persistence of separatist national identities within what were generally considered stable, post-imperial and integrated European nation-states. His most influential publication, *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic Fringe in British National Development*, applied the theory of internal colonialism to Scotland and the other Celtic nations on the British Isles (Hechter 1975). Like Blauner, the significance of internal colonialism for Hechter was that it offered an alternative explanation to the ‘diffusion model of national integration’ (Hechter 1975, pp. 8–9) that sees a process of gradual assimilation and homogenisation of cultures through processes of modernisation and industrialisation. Indeed, Hechter argued that in the Celtic fringe, industrialisation had led to peripheralisation and uneven development that favoured the English core. This, in turn, had bred resentment and a desire by the peripheral, disadvantaged group to ‘assert its own culture as equal to or superior to that of the relatively advantaged core’ (Hechter 1975, p. 9). As such, rather than unifying England with the other nations, industrialisation invigorated national and cultural difference.

The geographical expansion of the concept of internal colonialism continued to other West European states. Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976) argued that France’s national integration was a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century development. Prior to 1870, Weber argued there was little common identity among the French outside of the urban centres. It was in the years up to the start of World War I that France rapidly modernised and the construction of roads, schools and military service swept away the ‘old commitments and instil a national view of things’ (Weber 1976, p. 486). The interesting comparative imperial insight is that the process of incorporation of traditional regions like Landes and Corrèze was taking place at the same time and in

similar ways to the French colonisation of Algeria. Indeed, for many French elites the challenges of integrating the French provinces and the colonies abroad were the same. For example, Adolphe Blanqui argued that Alpine regions presented the same problems of integration as the Kabylie in Algeria or the Marquesas in French Polynesia (Weber 1976, p. 489). As such, internal and external colonialism were both part of the French drive for integration and modernisation.

Looking more into the longer-term historical development of the main West European states, Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe* highlighted the antecedents of colonialism and imperialism in the cultural homogenisation that took place in the core regions of Britain, France, Scandinavia and Spain from the eleventh century onwards (Bartlett 1994). In the peripheries of these regions, however, this process of cultural homogenisation met with resistance and opposition, such as from the Irish, the Bretons, the Lithuanians and the *Mudéjar*. Bartlett argued that in this fringe zone, race relations mattered, and systems were developed based on domination and ideas of blood purity. In this sense, Europe's history of colonialism pre-dates 1492, the oft-stated year zero of European imperialism: the 'mental habits and institutions of European racism and colonialism were born in the medieval world: the conquerors of Mexico know the problem of the Mudéjar; the planters of Virginia had been planters of Ulster' (Bartlett 1994, p. 313).

Key insights from the early theorisation of internal colonialism

The main value and relevance of the theory of internal colonialism as developed in the 1960s and 1970s was in establishing a Weberian ideal type rather than a rigorous social scientific theory. As an ideal type, it challenged, provoked and destabilised prevailing normative assumptions and understandings. As seen in its original application to the United States and West European countries, the main force of its critique was to challenge the national narratives of integration, assimilation and ethnic and racial equality. For the United States, the target of the critique was the ideal of the US as a postcolonial and post-ethnic 'melting pot' where assimilation was the inevitable endpoint as economic prosperity was progressively shared across all different ethnic and racial groups. For African Americans, the assertion of internal colonialism highlighted that alienation and exploitation was the reality rather than assimilation. The concept also identified America's failure to address the underlying and continuous injustices of occupation and annexation of indigenous Indian and of formerly Mexican territories. In Western Europe, such as in the UK, France and Spain, the internal colonialism critique challenged the national narratives of integration and provided an intellectual rationale for the rise of secessionist movements in the Celtic fringes of Britain and France and in the Catalan and Basque regions of Spain.

Drawing from these predominantly American and European applications, the continuing value of internal colonialism as an action concept can be seen to have three main aspects. The first is to highlight the layered nature of colonialism. If you take away or strip out one layer of colonial control and subordination, such as that imposed by the West European maritime empires in the Americas, this does not remove all traces and legacies of colonialism. Particularly for empires that were forged through settler colonial occupation, the original injustice perpetrated on the indigenous population remains

unresolved even after the formal withdrawal of the extra-oceanic European powers. Similarly, the retreating colonial powers left racialised or particularist ethnic dominant hierarchies that have become entrenched and continue to privilege certain ethnic or racial groups over the others. This happened in the US with the continued subjugation of African and Mexican Americans and, in the UK, with the continued subordination of the Irish, Scottish and Welsh even after the British withdrawal from empire. In all these cases, the retreat from empire merely shifted control from dominant elites abroad to being controlled by dominant elites at home. In this sense, coloniality is rather like a Russian doll in that removing one colonial manifestation just reveals a smaller one underneath.

A second dimension of internal colonialism is that it challenges nationalist narratives of unification and integration. It is not just that the concept critiques traditional primordialist theories of a progressive national integration over many centuries; it also challenges modernist theories of nationalism that view national identities as modern constructions and the outcome of the rise of mass literacy, industrialisation and total war (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). The concept of internal colonialism is closer in its approach to the ethnicist theory of nationalism associated with Anthony Smith, who highlighted the critical role played by an ethnic core in the historic development of nation and state formation (Smith 1986). As Bartlett reveals, in Western Europe, this process of core domination and ethnic homogenisation can be traced back to the Middle Ages and that the resistance encountered then remains relevant to the present time (Bartlett 1994, p. 311). For example, the Irish question has not just been a critical concern for the United Kingdom over the last two centuries, including most recently over the Brexit question, but arguably goes back as far as 1156 when a Papal bull was promulgated by Pope Adrian IV that gave the English King, Henry II, authority over Ireland and when the process of English colonisation of Ireland was initiated.

The third contribution of internal colonialism is to break down the internal/external divides between state and empire, both spatially and temporally. The example of France demonstrates that the modernisation and integration of the 'backward' regions within France were contemporaneous with similar processes of integration in Algeria and other parts of the French empire. In the US, the rise of the movement promoting internal colonialism was also directly inspired by the anti-US and anti-imperialist struggles of the North Vietnamese in Southeast Asia. Colonialism is, therefore, not just a one-way trajectory from internal state to external empire but a set of practices and experiences abroad that can be re-imported back to the metropolitan state or inner empire. Recent postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has highlighted, for example, how the global 'war on terror' spearheaded by the US after the 9/11 attacks of 2001 had a major impact on the surveillance and repression of certain communities within the US (Gregory 2004; Barder 2015; Turner 2018). The concept of internal colonialism, therefore, rejects a 'methodological nationalism' and sees state and empire as part of a single field of vision (Tansel 2015, p. 78).

Extending the theory to the eastern land empires: Russia and China

As noted earlier, the focus of the theory of internal colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s was on maritime empires on both sides of the Atlantic. This has continued to be the case with

more recent adaptations of the theory, which have tended to highlight how the colonial practices of twenty-first century US and British neo-imperial expeditionary wars, namely Iraq and Afghanistan, have been imported back to frame domestic counter-terrorism strategies. What has been less evident in the academic literature is a systematic attempt to apply the theory of internal colonialism to continental Eurasian land empires. There have, admittedly, been some significant contributions, such as the application of internal colonialism to Austria-Hungary (Verdery 1979), the Stalinist Soviet Union (Gouldner 1977–78) and China in the case of Xinjiang (Gladney 1998). However, these have been discrete and disconnected case studies. A more systematic comparative analysis is lacking.

The rest of this article seeks to draw out the broader implications of internal colonialism to the successor states of the major Eurasian land empires by providing a comparative analysis of post-imperial Russia and China. The specific case studies of internal colonialism are the North Caucasus/Chechnya in Russia and Xinjiang in China. The choice of these case studies reflects the fact that both regions are internal provinces within contemporary Russia and China, and both have had recent experiences of significant civil and social unrest that have been suppressed by the authorities. In addition, both cases have generated significant external scrutiny and criticism that have contributed to increased international tensions, specifically in the relations of both countries with the West. Thus, they reveal what might be called the geopolitics of internal colonialism.

The approach taken is to apply the three main theoretical insights drawn from the earlier development of the theory to these two cases: the layered nature of coloniality, the challenge to nationalist narratives of unity and integration, and the linkage between internal empire and external foreign policy.

Layered coloniality

Looking at the Russian case first, the North Caucasus and the Chechen people were incorporated into the Russian empire in the nineteenth century. This came only after a three-century-long process of empire-building, which most historians date back to the occupation of Kazan in 1552 and the subsequent annexation of Astrakhan four years later, resulting in Russia gaining access to the Caspian Sea as well as the foothills of the mountainous Caucasus range (Barrett 1999). While Russia expanded into Siberia at this time almost unopposed, it was unable to subdue the predominantly nomadic people of its southern steppe regions. It was only two centuries later, in 1783, that Crimea was captured and annexed, consolidating Russia's control over the southern steppes (Fisher 1970). During the same period, Poland was partitioned, and substantial new European territories were incorporated into the empire (Snyder 2003).

The colonisation of the North Caucasus only took place, therefore, after a long period of gradual and layered Russian imperial expansion to its east, west and south (Lieven 2003, ch. 6; Morrison 2015, p. 206). Indeed, the ambition to gain control of the North Caucasus initially reflected a strategic requirement to support Russia's interests in the South Caucasus where it was competing with the Ottoman and Persian empires. Unlike in the South Caucasus, where Russia made gains relatively swiftly, the subjugation of the peoples of the North Caucasus was a drawn-out and bloody affair, with the 'Great

Caucasian war' lasting from 1817 to 1864 (Gammer 1994, 2005; Souleimanov 2007). A tenacious anti-Russian guerrilla war was led by the charismatic Imam Shamil, who also forged the military-theocratic state of Dagestan and Chechnya (Zelkina 2000). In so doing, Shamil succeeded in what had been previously thought unthinkable, uniting 'under his authority a diverse collection of Caucasian ethnic groups' and introducing the idea of a 'single centralised and powerful state' to the regional peoples (Souleimanov 2007, p. 62). When Shamil's last stronghold was overrun in 1859, the North Caucasus was brought into the Russian empire. With the Caucasus now under control, the next and final wave of the expansion of the Russian empire was into Central Asia.

Xinjiang was similarly a relatively late addition to the Chinese empire, being colonised in the eighteenth century (Millward 1998, 2007; Khalid 2021, pp. 41–51). While the history of Chinese imperial expansion has a much longer lineage than Russia, the ability of the various imperial dynasties to subjugate the nomadic peoples on its northwestern periphery and to extend control to Central Asia was only ever episodic and temporary. This changed with the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), which conquered and occupied modern-day Xinjiang in the period 1755–1759 (Rowe 2009; Bello 2016). As with Russia in the Caucasus, China was drawn indirectly into Xinjiang because of inter-imperial rivalry, in this case, with the Zungharian and Russian empires. The Zunghar empire was the last of the Mongol tribal confederations that had consistently challenged both the Chinese and Russian imperial states. In the decisive war waged by Emperor Qianlong in the mid-eighteenth century, most of the Zunghars were killed, bringing Chinese forces further west than had been the case for over one thousand years. The victory represented what Peter Purdue has called 'the final solution' to China's northwest problem (Perdue 2005, p. 285).

The North Caucasus and Xinjiang were thus annexed through colonial conquest. The subsequent history of both regions is similarly one of episodic acts of anti-colonial resistance followed by colonial repression and persecution. In the North Caucasus, three traumas remain deeply embedded in the national consciousness. The first was the great Caucasian war itself, which Soviet historians estimated as having resulted in the emigration, displacement or killing of 1.8 million among the mountain peoples (Souleimanov 2007, p. 67). Alexei Yermolov, the Russian viceroy of Georgia, conducted indiscriminate warfare, targeting civilians as well as combatants. He described the Chechens as an 'insolent and dangerous nation' and said that he would not be satisfied 'if there was one Chechen left alive' (quoted in Souleimanov 2007, p. 49). The second trauma was the forceful deportation of the whole Chechen and Ingush nations from the North Caucasus to Central Asia in 1944 due to Stalin's suspicions that they had collaborated with the Nazis. Of the 520,000 Chechens and Ingush displaced, only 240,000 were still alive by July 1954 (Flemming 1998; Gall & de Waal 2000). The third trauma is the post-Soviet Chechen wars (1994–1996, 1999–2007) where Chechen anti-colonial resistance was suppressed only through sustained military force (Lieven 1998; Russell 2007; Hughes 2008).

Compared to the peoples of the North Caucasus, the Uyghurs and other non-Han ethnic groups in Xinjiang had historically greater opportunities for asserting their claims to national autonomy and independence. This was due to the weakness of China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century relative to Russia. There were three successive attempts to carve out an independent polity that would remove Chinese colonial rule. In the 1860s, there was a

Muslim revolt against the Qing that resulted in the establishment of a Muslim state in East Turkestan under the rule of a neighbouring Khoqandi warrior, Yaqub Beg. Qing control was only reasserted in 1878 after the successful military campaign of General Zuo Zontag. Chinese control was again challenged after the collapse of the Qing empire, when an East Turkestan Republic, based in Kashgar, the southern part of Xinjiang, was proclaimed in 1933. This republic, however, only lasted a few months. It was then followed in November 1944 with the establishment of the second East Turkestan Republic, supported at that time by the Soviet Union. This republic, which lasted five years, asserted a modern nationalism with a strong anti-colonial and anti-Chinese ideology (Trebinjac 2024). It was ultimately overthrown by the People's Liberation Army in 1949 when the Soviet Union supported the Chinese communists in regaining control of the region.

While both the North Caucasus and Xinjiang appeared relatively calm and stable in the late Soviet and post-Mao period, this was to change radically with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was at this historical juncture that the layered nature of coloniality evident in both post-Soviet Russia and in China became most visible and, from the perspective of the peoples of the North Caucasus and Xinjiang, most egregious. Through the process of Soviet disintegration, the eight former Soviet republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia that are respectively contiguous with the North Caucasus and Xinjiang, gained their independence. For the peoples of the North Caucasus and Xinjiang it could only appear arbitrary that these 'nations' were recognised as having the right of national self-determination where their historic rights for political autonomy and independence were to be denied.

This led to nationalist struggles in both regions. In the North Caucasus, an independent state of Ichkeria was proclaimed in 1991 and survived a Russian military campaign to gain *de facto* sovereignty from 1995 to 1999 (Lieven 1998; German 2003). In Xinjiang, the resistance was more sporadic; nevertheless, there were significant and violent revolts during the 1990s, and then a major revolt in 2009. In both Russia and China, particularly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, the response to this resistance has been brutal and repressive. When Putin came in power in 1999 (first as prime minister and then as president in 2000) he made it a key priority, declaring, 'my mission, my historic mission—it sounds pompous, but it is true—is to resolve the situation in the North Caucasus' (Dannreuther & March 2008, p. 99). He then initiated the second Chechen war (1999–2007), which resulted in the forceful ending of Chechen autonomy, though also spawning a wider Islamist insurgency across the North Caucasus. When Xi Jinping assumed paramount power in China in 2012, he demonstrated a similar determination to quash Uyghur separatism and desire for autonomy. In response to episodic acts of resistance, terrorist attacks and unrest in the period 2009–2014, Xi initiated the Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism. He stated that 'we must be as harsh as them', and that a 'Great Wall of Steel' had to be constructed around Xinjiang (Bovingdon 2019, p. 508).

To consolidate central rule, both Putin and Xi instituted harsh regimes of surveillance and repression. Both leaders also benefited from the post-2001 'global war of terror' to present their counterinsurgency campaigns as part of a broader international effort (Russell 2002). Despite these areas of commonality, they have taken different approaches. This divergence is, to some extent, driven by the differing nature of the geography and

demography of the two regions. Given the mountainous nature of the North Caucasus, which makes it suited for a sustained insurgency, and the post-Soviet reality of the large-scale emigration of ethnic Russians from Chechnya, Putin took the pragmatic decision to shift from waging war with Chechnya to supporting a local inter-Chechen struggle between separatists, who were increasingly Islamist in orientation, and pro-Russian loyalists (Ratelle & Souleimanov 2016). The loyalists won, resulting in a pro-Moscow Chechen Republic in which personalised and arbitrary power is concentrated in the ethnic Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov (Russell 2011). According to Ekaterina Sokiranskaia, this has created a totalitarian Chechen state, a territory of fear and intimidation, where ‘the institutionalisation of destructive violence’ has destroyed the ‘existing self-regulatory mechanisms of society’ (Sokirianskaia 2019). For some analysts, Russia has itself become ‘chechenised’ with a heightened level of authoritarianism, the arbitrariness in the rule of law and increased levels of repression (Sakwa 2010; Ware 2011).

In Xinjiang, the absence of comparable mountainous terrain, which limits the potential for armed resistance, and the reality of an almost evenly balanced Han and Uyghur ethnic population, means that Chinese rule has been much more direct and significantly more corrosive of Uyghur autonomy and self-expression, particularly since Chen Quanguo took over as leader of the Chinese Community Party (CCP) in Xinjiang in 2016 (Kam & Clarke 2021). He introduced a mass surveillance apparatus, the so-called grid management system, which he had previously developed as CCP leader in Tibet (Cain 2021). This highly intrusive regime of surveillance has been complimented by mass arrests of opposition figures and by a re-education programme with an estimated 380 camps by 2019, incarcerating up to one-tenth of the local Uyghur population (Trebinjac 2020, 2024; Xu *et al.* 2020; Byler 2021). The repression has not just been of Uyghur national rights but also their Islamic identity, with the requirement that Muslims must allow ‘traditional Chinese culture to permeate Islam and jointly guard the homeland of the Chinese people’ (Bowie & Gitter 2018). These coercive efforts to enforce the assimilation of the Uyghurs into Chinese culture and society have been complemented by mass Han Chinese migration to the region. In 2020 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights presented a detailed breakdown of the human rights abuses, torture, forced labour and other ill-treatment involved in the Chinese campaign in Xinjiang (OHCHR 2022). In 2021, the United States, followed by France in 2022, declared that the atrocities constituted genocide (Whitehouse 2024).

Challenging nationalist narratives

Putin and Xi have both adopted a highly assimilationist and integrative conception of national unity that permits almost no political rights to minority national groups, but this does not reflect a more complex past reality of competing and diverging views. Indeed, when the Qing empire and the Tsarist empire were overthrown, in 1911 and 1917 respectively, the successor states of China and Russia faced a significant challenge to justify the reincorporation of regions such as Xinjiang and the North Caucasus, which were clearly the outcomes of imperial expansion. This challenge was accentuated by the success of both communist regimes to overcome a nationalist opposition that promoted a highly integrationist and racist vision of the constituent nation. For example, Chiang

Kai-shek, the leader of the nationalist Guomindang party, claimed the existence of a single Chinese nation that had lasted for over 5,000 years and in which non-Han peoples were part of a single ancient and homogenous Chinese nation (Chiang 1947). The White opposition to the Bolsheviks had a similarly integrationist Russian imperial agenda. In opposition to this, the communists in Russia and China formally promoted an anti-imperial ideology that promised to liberate oppressed peoples and nations across the world, including within the territories of the former Russian and Chinese empires. Both parties, therefore, offered significantly greater rights to their national minorities than did their nationalist opponents.

Once in power, the Soviet authorities did in fact go to considerable lengths to try to de-Russify the post-imperial polity while keeping the overall territory intact. A complex federal structure was constructed that deliberately did not specify an overarching dominant ethnic nation (Slezkine 1994; Martin 2001). There was a commitment to overcome the legacies of ‘Russian chauvinism’ with an indigenisation programme (*korenizatsiya*) that brought non-Russians to positions of power within their respective republics. These republics also had the formal right of secession. This commitment to national devolution was mitigated ideologically by the belief in *sblizhenie* (the drawing together of nations) through a common supranational Soviet identity based on class. While this marginalisation of ethnic Russian identity was weakened during the late Stalin period, with Russia gaining the status of ‘elder brother’ to the Soviet nations, the basic federal structures remained in place (Seton-Watson 1956; Pipes 1970).

In the 1930s, Mao Zedong promised to implement a nationalities policy similar to that of the Soviet Union (Connor 1984, pp. 80–1). In practice, he never had the same commitment to a radical devolution of power from the dominant Han ethnic group. While Sun Yat-sen had spoken of five races inhabiting China, the CCP recognised 56 nationalities but also used the slogan ‘55 + 1 = 1’, meaning that the 55 smaller nationalities plus the Han nationality was equal to one historic and enduring Chinese state. In this way, the Chinese model diverged from the Soviet one, which never conceptualised a single Russian nation over the centuries. Following the Soviet model, Xinjiang was granted autonomy in 1955 and carried the name of the Uyghurs (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), but the region was never viewed as the national homeland of the Uyghurs and, unlike the Soviet republics, had no formal right to secession. Moreover, the ideology of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s identified the Han with modernity and other minority cultures and peoples with backwardness. During the turbulent years of Mao’s rule, there was continuous repression of both Islam and Uyghur culture. However, this was partially reversed with the liberalisation of the Deng Xiaoping period. During the 1980s and 1990s, Uyghur intellectuals were free to develop a cogent narrative of a Uyghur national culture and history (Khalid 2021, p. 370).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 radically reversed this ambivalent accommodation of minority groups in both China and Russia. The CCP interpreted the disintegration of the Soviet Union as the result of a fundamentally flawed policy of federalisation and indigenisation. This strengthened the conviction that the survival of the CCP and the integrity of the Chinese nation demanded centralisation and national assimilation. This intensified in the context of the post-2001 war on terror that provided the ideological justification for the suppression of Uyghur national culture and an enforced assimilation through re-education of the Uyghurs in a unified Han-dominated

Chinese state. Post-Soviet Russia has, under President Putin, adopted a similar conceptualisation of Russian unity and identity. Putin regularly promotes the notion of a ‘Russian World’ (*Russkii mir*) and a continuous Russian state that has existed for over a thousand years (Laruelle 2015; Suslov 2018). He has also been explicit that one of the main causes for Russia’s weakness was the Soviet nationalities policy. Indeed, as Sergey Radchenko notes, Putin is consistently critical of the Soviet project: ‘He feels Soviet leaders—Lenin in particular—committed an unforgivable crime by setting up titular republics and thus allowing non-Russian nationalism to take root’ (Radchenko 2023, p. 58). The enforced reintegration of Chechnya into the Russian Federation was thus merely the prelude for further imperial expansion, into Ukraine. Putin has regularly railed against how successive Soviet leaders constructed a Ukrainian nation through carving out parts of Russia and giving away Crimea (Radchenko 2023, p. 58).

The theory of internal colonialism challenges these national narratives of the timeless and progressive unity and integrity of the Russian and Chinese state. The resistance of the Chechens and the Uyghurs draws attention to the historical specificities of their enforced incorporation through colonial conquest and sheds light on the fragility of these national myths of unity. Historians of China have regularly highlighted the problematic nature of conceptualising a continuous Chinese history over 5,000 years (Duara 1995; Mackay 2015, 2019; Krishna 2017). In the context of Xinjiang, the province was only under effective Chinese rule from the late Qing period onwards. As Andy Hanlun Li has argued, as recent as the late nineteenth century, Xinjiang (and Taiwan) were still viewed by some Chinese nationalists as being outside China (Esherick 2006; Li 2022, p. 257). He notes that the promotion of an undifferentiated Chinese unity means that ‘China has been transformed from a geographical and cultural component of the Qing empire to be retroactively pronounced core and proprietor of that empire’ (Li 2022, p. 257). Similarly, Russia has, under the aggressive nationalism of Putin, been transformed from a geographical part of the Soviet empire to a core of the post-Soviet Russian empire. In both cases, empire and nation have converged to the detriment of those who have experienced the suffering of internal colonisation.

Breaking down the internal/external divide

Although both Russian and Chinese governments argue that the repression of Chechen and Uyghur nationalist resistance is an exclusively domestic matter, they have also promoted their regional policies as models for emulation and export internationally. For example, the influence of Xinjiang is clear in the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a Chinese initiative in 2001 which brought together Russia, China and the five post-Soviet Central Asian states based on confronting the three evils of ‘terrorism, separatism (or splittism), and religious extremism’ (Bailes *et al.* 2007). China has also been keen to promote the economic development and modernisation model applied to Xinjiang, as an approach that ensures national unity and counters the malign influence of extremism and terrorism. This is evident in Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, that has sought to connect Xinjiang and western China along a revived silk road through Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe (Huang 2016; Cui 2017). It is notable that this expansion of Chinese economic interests and political presence has

effectively silenced any substantive criticism of the Uyghur repression among other Muslim majority states (Idris 2023).

Similarly, internationalising the Chechen repression has been a key aspect of Russian foreign policy. In the Russian case, this dynamic of ‘export’ has been embodied by President Ramzan Kadyrov and his personal army. In 2016, a Chechen battalion of military police was sent to Syria to ensure post-conflict stability and to act as critical interlocutors between Russia, the Syrian regime and local communities (Sokirianskaia 2019). Kadyrov’s personal charity, the Kadyrov Foundation, did much to help restore damaged historic mosques within Syria. He also took a lead role in the repatriation of Russian children from ISIS in 2017. In the war against Ukraine, Chechen forces have been very visible as one of the most loyal pro-Russian minority ethnic groups fighting on behalf of the Kremlin (MacFarquhar 2024). Lessons from the war in Chechnya, in particular the mass violation of human rights as a tool of counterinsurgency, have been applied to both Syria and to Ukraine.

Most of the direct criticism of the repression of the Chechen and Uyghurs has come from the United States and Europe. Both Moscow and Beijing have viewed such criticism as part of a broader Western strategy to undermine and weaken them. Given the prominence of ‘a hundred years of humiliation’ in China’s national mythmaking, such criticism from former colonial powers is viewed as hypocritical and a perpetuation of the Western imperial ambitions to weaken and humiliate China (Callahan 2004; Kaufman 2010). It is notable that the official Chinese response to the 2002 UN report on Xinjiang, and the subsequent US decision to declare a genocide, was to accuse the US of ‘five sins related to human rights: colonialism, racism, exporting unrest, interference in domestic affairs, and double standards’ (Albert 2021). In this sense, China highlighted the enduring reality of internal colonialism within the United States.

The contemporary Russian national narrative also presents Russia as a victim of Western imperial expansion. A core article of faith of this narrative is that the West reneged on the promises allegedly made in 1990 not to expand NATO beyond Germany and that subsequent NATO expansion has been directed at containing and undermining Russia (Dannreuther 1997; Tsygankov 2013). Post-Soviet Russia has thus presented itself as a ‘subaltern state’ that, like other parts of the Global South, is resisting Western imperial penetration (Morozov 2016). A further element of this anti-imperialist and anti-Western narrative is that the ultimate ambition of the West is to destroy and fragment the historic Russian state by supporting internal unrest and secessionist forces. A *Foreign Affairs* article by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former US National Security Adviser under President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) is often cited in evidence (Brzezinski 1997).¹ An insight into this outlook can be seen in Putin’s emotional response to the Chechen terrorist attack on a school in Beslan in 2003 which he saw as orchestrated by Western security services who wanted to weaken Russia from within (Medvedev 2004). Thus, as with China and Xinjiang, Russia views Western criticisms of its counterinsurgency in Chechnya from an anti-colonial perspective that only adds to a deep anti-Western resentment.

¹See also Evangelista (2002).

Conclusion

The first section of this article revisited the theory of internal colonialism as it developed during the 1960s and 1970s. This revealed a dynamic and progressive research programme that extended its analysis from Latin America to the United States and then to Western Europe. In so doing, it expressed a radical conceptualisation of the struggles of the Amerindians, the Mexican and African Americans, and the Celtic nations. It demonstrated that anti-colonial resistance was not restricted to Africa and Asia but was also present in the formally postcolonial and post-imperial states of the West. It also highlighted that the great maritime imperial states, such as Britain, France and Spain, were themselves constructs of internal colonisation. In so doing, the theory crystallised the notion of the layered nature of coloniality and how lifting one layer of colonial rule only reveals other deeper layers of coloniality. The theory also represented a major challenge to official narratives of national unity, assimilation and integration. The theory also disrupted the conventional methodology of the separation of the nation-state (the metropole) from the empire (the periphery) and highlighted not only how the external empire affects but also how it is affected by the legacy of internal empire.

The second section of the article extends these theoretical insights to the successor states of the Eurasian empires that have generally been marginalised in the development of the theory. This is puzzling as many of these land empires, such as Prussia, Russia and China conceptualised their expansion in terms of internal colonisation. This section developed a comparative case study of North Caucasus/Chechnya in Russia and Xinjiang in China, which illustrate the potential salience of the theory to contemporary politics. The study demonstrates that the historic colonisation of these regions was just one layer in the complex colonial structures of the Russian and Chinese empires. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the arbitrariness of the denial of their right of secession, when this right had been given to the newly independent states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, generated a powerful anti-colonial resistance by the Chechen and Uyghur people. This resulted in extensive unrest, conflict and war during the 1990s and 2000s that was brutally suppressed by the Russian and Chinese authorities.

These case studies reveal how the lens of internal colonialism exposes the fragility and artificial nature of the post-imperial national narratives in contemporary Russia and China. In both countries, particularly under the leaderships of Putin and Xi, a convergent view of national identity has emerged whereby minority nationalities are subsumed into a larger undifferentiated and unitary nation-state. The Chechen and Uyghur case studies challenge this narrative of unity and integration and highlight how there have historically been alternative ways of recognising and managing difference. This was evident, for example, in the Soviet nationalities policy that historically constrained, if intermittently, Russian nationalism and supported the indigenisation of national elites and the cultural identities of the non-Russian nationalities. In the case of China, the notion of a continuous 5,000-year Chinese state is contradicted by the historical reality of the incorporation of Xinjiang in the eighteenth century, with many doubts about whether the region was really an integral part of China.

The application of internal colonialism is not limited to academia. One of its strengths is its close alignment with activist politics. In the 1960s and 1970s, the theory provided an

intellectual framework for radical claims of autonomy and independence among minority ethnic peoples in the US and Western Europe. The same potential is open to minorities within Russia and China, strengthening their power and voice. The internal colonialist policies of Russia and China also provoke Western criticism and exacerbate tensions, highlighting a further geopolitical dimension to this concept.

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