

Thomas Schmutz
Center for the History of Violence, University of Newcastle

Between Empires: Violence, dynamics and interaction in the Ottoman-Russian borderlands

The paper analyses the imperial borderlands between the Ottoman and Russian Empire (or Russia) in the period of 1895-1919. The Ottoman-Russian border should not be seen as a line that divided the two multiethnic political entities which were century-old enemies. The borderlands show the possibilities and limits for the transfer of knowledge, smugglers, insurgents, revolutionaries and violence. The Sublime Porte could hardly impose law and order in this periphery. The demand from Western diplomats to protect Ottoman Armenians in Eastern Anatolia put the region on the map of the international diplomacy. The anti-Western Young Turk revolution in 1908 could not restore the empire and the idea of Ottomanism was not persistent. The radical path of right-wing modernizers led to Turkish nationalism and Islamism. With the Japanese modernization in mind, the Young Turks aligned more and more with the German Reich to survive the geostrategic challenges of the time.

Ottoman and Russian elites faced similar challenges in the period of 1895-1919 to control the people in their territories. Both feared "fifth columns". The distrust in the loyalty of their Muslim or Christian subjects triggered various new forms of violent responses. Both empires used social engineering and deportations to enforce visions of order and stability. However, only the attempts of the Young Turk elite to homogenize Anatolia from non-Turkish "elements" reached furthermore momentum in a genocide against the Ottoman Christians. The borderlands showed unprecedented violence against civilians during the First World War. With the Russian revolutions came a window of opportunity for the German Reich to pursue the vision of a German Orient, whereas Enver Pasha followed his dream of a Pan-Turanian empire. At the same time, agency from the various peoples in the Caucasus region became more visible. Paradoxically, the Turkish nationalists found a Russian partner in their anti-Western struggle: The Bolsheviks.