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**State Internal Sovereignty as Performative: The Bolshevik Uprising in the CER Alienation
Zone in 1917**

Abstract

How does the symbolic power of an imperial metropole persist across revolutionary rupture? This paper examines how newly established state agents in the metropole maintain internal sovereignty over imperial peripheries in moments of political upheaval. Sociological accounts have argued that performative recognition constitutes a key mechanism through which revolutionary states establish external sovereignty. Building on this insight, I argue that performative recognition by international audiences of central state agents can also secure internal sovereignty, that is, symbolic power over imperial peripheries in the absence of effective military or administrative control. I develop this argument through an analysis of political competition among Russian factions over the administration of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) and its associated alienation zone during the 1917 Russian Revolution. Revolutionary turmoil disrupted both the imperial center and its peripheries. While central agents of the emerging Bolshevik regime enacted claims to external sovereignty—albeit contested by foreign intervention—their communications with peripheral actors simultaneously performed internal sovereignty. In this context, processes of performative representation and recognition persisted among local actors who sought to position themselves as legitimate state agents. The CER's ambiguous legal status compelled international actors to reinterpret claims to authority in a setting where imperial symbolic power endured despite institutional collapse. Although Bolshevik efforts to assert control over the CER failed in 1917, these struggles reproduced a metropole–periphery relationship that later facilitated Sino-Soviet diplomatic negotiations.

Introduction

The modern period witnessed major revolutions across large empires characterized by uneven structures composed of imperial metropolises and their peripheral regions. Developments in the metropole are more frequently noticed by later scholars, and we often assume that events unfolding at the imperial center exert global effects that merit close attention. In the case of the French Revolution, dramatic events and political contingencies in pivotal locations such as Paris and Versailles appear to have had especially profound consequences for the political fate of the French people (Sewell 2005; Ermakoff 2015).

However, focusing solely on actors operating in the primary political arenas is insufficient. Revolutions unfold across multiple stages situated in diverse spatial contexts, and the actors in these settings also perform consequential roles. From a processual perspective, the construction of “the Revolution” cannot be understood without examining the overlap and reconfiguration of numerous events and entities embedded in their various local presents (Abbott 2026). For example, developments in Haiti formed an essential component of the broader French Revolution and significantly shaped its trajectory (James 1989). What appeared to be “global” was, in fact, nothing more than the interaction of multiple, situated “locals.” This does not mean that the analytical distinction between the metropole and the periphery is meaningless. Rather, it highlights the need to examine the interactions between actors operating in the political centers of an empire and those situated in its peripheral spaces in order to understand their consistent or shifting power relations.

In many cases, political actors in the metropole lack direct military control or even timely information and episteme about events in the periphery. Their capacity to govern may rest primarily on the symbolic power of the state which must be continually asserted and recognized

during the revolutionary temporality. How does the symbolic state power of the metropole persist across revolutionary rupture? In the paper, I will investigate political competition among Russian political groups over administration in the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) and its alienation zone during the period of Russian Revolution in 1917 as a heuristic case for my research question. Since its completion in 1902, the CER has occupied an ambiguous position between state institution and private commercial agents under the name of non-state director. The CER and its alienation zone became an attractive target for competing political groups during the conflict, which established multiple sovereignties, despite being a small enclave outside Russian territory. In December 1917, Vladimir Lenin's declaration on the CER was quickly interpreted by competing political groups as the language of the state, which contributed to construct a symbolic façade of "the state" in this region. I argue that the struggle for the railway administration was regarded as a performative theater by each political group to claim and show their diplomatic rights for publicity, which maintained the lasting symbolic power of the metropole of the Russian empire¹ (Reed 2013; Reed 2019).

Revolution as Struggling for the Monopoly of Symbolic Power

Symbolic power is the ability of the state to make it appear as natural, inevitable, and apolitical, which operates through misrecognition, as if no power is being wielded at all (Bourdieu 2015, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).² The framework of symbolic power has been widely applied to the study of administrative activities, such as schooling, census, civil registries, and taxation (Loveman 2005; Lara-Millán 2017; Zhang 2020), and the dynamics of symbolic power have been examined through two analytically distinct phases: the primitive accumulation of symbolic

¹ By "empire" I mean the metropole-periphery structure of the state; the Russian empire did not cease to exist with the fall of the Romanov monarchy.

² To draw a conceptual distinction between *symbolic power* and *hegemony*, I treat symbolic power as operating through unconscious misrecognition, whereas hegemony rests on conscious consent (Gramsci 1971).

power and its routine exercise (Mitchell 1999; Loveman 2005). Sociologists studying sovereignty in the period of early modern states utilize sovereignty theories to illustrate this process (Reed 2013; Brundage 2023). However, there has been limited attention to how revolutions, often culminating in regime change, intervene the dynamics of symbolic power. Revolution, in my argument, is a process through which competing potential state agents contest the state representation in the political field. “Situations of political crisis, revolutionary situations, are close to... symbolic struggles of all against all, in which everyone can claim the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, of naming, with an equal chance of success (Bourdieu 2015: 66).”

Colonial states typically governed their colonies through symbolic violence, and governors dispatched from the metropolitan center possessed symbolic power over particular colonial territories (Elkins 2005; Steinmetz 2008). When uprisings erupted in the imperial metropole and competing political groups contested the right to represent the state, previously stable symbolic relations were disrupted. Both the center and the periphery were compelled to renegotiate their mutual recognition of symbolic relations. Different political factions in peripheral regions sought to acquire symbolic capital through their ties to the imperial center in order to claim local political power. Amid such turmoil, the ways in which various actors interpreted messages issued from the center became crucial to the reconstruction of symbolic power of the periphery (Bourdieu 1991).

The 1917 Bolshevik Uprising in the CER Alienation Zone

The CER and its alienation zone

The Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) formed the backbone of Russian interests in Manchuria. Stretching from Manzhouli to Ussuriysk, it cut across the heart of northeastern China and linked Vladivostok with the wide area of the Russian far east. Constructed from 1897 to 1902, the CER was formally operated by the Russo-Chinese Bank (Russo-Asiatic Bank after 1910), a nominally private, nongovernmental enterprise. In practice, however, the line functioned under the close direction and strategic control of the Russian Empire. Figure 1 shows the map of the Far East Republic, a buffer state created by the Bolsheviks in April 1920, in which the CER was illustrated as the strip across the Manchuria.



Figure 1. The Far Eastern Republic. Map by U.S. Office of Strategic Services, undated.

During its construction, Russia obtained a series of land concessions along the railway route. These territories, commonly referred to as the CER alienation zone, were effectively placed under Russian administration. Within these zones, Russian authorities exercised civil jurisdiction

and maintained garrison rights through the deployment of Railway Guard Troops, creating a quasi-colonial enclave inside Chinese territory.

At the center of this zone stood Harbin, the railway's primary hub and the administrative capital of the alienation zone (see Gamsa 2020a). By the time of the 1916 census, Harbin had developed into a cosmopolitan city of 81,602 residents, including 45,481 Chinese, 34,155 Russians, about 2000 Japanese, and migrants from more than fifty other nationalities (Gamsa 2020b). This exceptionally diverse population would soon become a key factor in regional politics. In the turmoil of 1917, the presence of so many foreign nationals provided foreign powers with a ready pretext for intervention, especially when the authority of Russian administrators and military forces began to unravel.

A Region on the Brink

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the CER alienation zone in Manchuria occupied an unusual political space: geographically and legally Chinese, administratively and militarily Russian, and economically coveted by multiple foreign powers. At the center of its administration stood General Dmitry L. Khorvat, a Kadet (a member of Constitutional Democratic Party) in 1917, who had exercised executive authority since 1903 as the CER's General Manager. Backed by the commander of the Railway Guard Troops, he presided over the CER alienation zone, whose stability depended on both imperial Russian force and a delicate balance of external interests. After the February Revolution in 1917, the Russian Provisional Government reconfirmed Khorvat as the head of the zone's civil administration, effectively legitimizing his authority even as Russia itself descended into turmoil.

Revolutionary dynamics in Russia quickly spilled into the alienation zone. In March 1917, workers' and soldiers' soviets appeared along the CER. Harbin, the railway's central hub, soon hosted two powerful bodies: a Workers' Soviet dominated by moderate socialists (Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, etc.), and a Soldiers' Soviet led by Bolsheviks, chaired by Martemyan N. Ryutin, a captain in the Railway Guard Troops. On June 22, the two soviets merged under Ryutin's chairmanship, though the moderates continued to hold a numerical majority. By late 1917, Ryutin commanded roughly 2,000 of the 5,600 Railway Guard Troops, giving him meaningful but not overwhelming military leverage.

The CER alienation zone in 1917 was marked by political fragmentation and mounting insecurity. Public order deteriorated as rival Russian factions contended for power yet avoided outright confrontation. Outside powers saw opportunity in this instability. The Beijing government and Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin were eager to reclaim the railway territories, while Japan and other foreign states watched closely for chances to expand their footholds in Manchuria. Chinese warlord armies, already much larger than the Russian Guard forces, stood poised to intervene. Yet until December, all Russian factions, moderate and radical alike, remained united in one principle: no foreign power, including China, should determine the future of the CER alienation zone.

On November 3, newspapers in Harbin published the list of candidates for the election of the 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly: (1) Volfovich, representing the Socialist Revolutionary Party; (2) Strelkov, representing the Menshevik Party; (3) Ryutin, representing the Bolshevik Party; (4) Khorvat, representing the Harbin branch of the Constitutional Democratic (People's Freedom) Party.

After the list was announced, the various parties launched their election campaigns. The Mensheviks held a majority in the trade unions, which made the situation most favorable to them. Khorvat exercised almost complete control over Harbin's newspapers and thus enjoyed a clear advantage in shaping public opinion. The Bolsheviks found themselves in the most difficult position: they lacked both campaign funds and propaganda.

Table 1 shows the result of the election. The Bolsheviks enjoyed relatively strong support among the workers of the CER. Their votes were the highest in Harbin, but their influence along the railway line was weaker, only slightly exceeding that of the Mensheviks. These results clearly reveal the political differentiation of the population in the CER alienation zone on the eve of the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks achieved a significant victory in the election, especially when we take into account that they won a majority of the votes in the Harbin Main Workshops and among the Harbin garrison troops. If we compare the election results in the CER alienation zone with the results of the nationwide elections in Russia, it becomes apparent that the Bolsheviks' vote share in the CER alienation zone reached 30.1 percent, exceeding the national Russian average of 23 percent.

Candidates	Party	Votes	Percentages	National Average Percentages of the Party
Strelkov	Menshevik Russian Social Democratic Labor Party	13,139	37.4%	3%

	(RSDLP)			
Ryutin	Bolshevik RSDLP	10,612	30.1%	23%
Khorvat	Constitutional Democratic Party	6,327	18.0%	5%
Volfovich	Socialist Revolutionary Party	5,081	14.5%	37%

Table 1: The election results of the 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly in the CER alienation zone (November 1917)

Lenin's December 4 Telegram: A Shockwave

The fragile balance broke when Ryutin received a decisive instruction from the new Bolshevik government. On December 4, 1917, Lenin sent a telegram ordering him to seize power, assume control of customs stations, and replace existing administrative organs with Soviet-appointed commissioners. The message implied that the Bolshevik center prepared to assert direct authority across the CER, regardless of local political complexities.

Foreign consuls reacted immediately. That same night, the Japanese, American, and British representatives in Harbin held a secret meeting and agreed they could not recognize the Bolshevik authority. They urged their governments to deploy forces in support of Khorvat.

Khorvat himself sought clarification. On December 5 he informed the Japanese consul that he intended to meet Ryutin to test the intentions of the radical socialists. Later that afternoon, Ryutin

presented him with Lenin's telegram. Though Ryutin reassured him that "we do not wish for turmoil... we still recognize your authority," Khorvat countered that any transfer of power would need the consent of Harbin's citizens and the approval of the foreign consular corps.

On December 6, the Harbin Soviet convened to debate Lenin's orders. The moderates denounced the plan as reckless and withdrew en masse; 80 delegates left the meeting, allowing 53 radicals to pass a resolution declaring the Soviet the legitimate authority in the CER zone. This event marked the split within the Harbin Soviet. Even so, the Soviet refrained from immediate military action.

Khorvat, meanwhile, explored his alternatives. Perceiving his precarious position, he negotiated with Chinese warlords and urged the Beijing government to send troops. Ryutin soon learned of these contacts, deepening the crisis.

On December 8, Ryutin appealed to Petrograd, acknowledging receipt of the directive but warning of serious obstacles. Though the radicals claimed control of the Soviet's leadership, they did not command a true majority, and any move against Khorvat risked armed conflict. Ryutin asked for additional guidance, stressing that only Lenin, with understanding of international conditions, "could authorize decisive action."

Polivanov's Order and the Decision for Uprising

New clear instructions arrived on December 13 from A. A. Polivanov, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs: Ryutin must remove Khorvat, replace the Russian diplomatic staff in China with Soviet commissioners, and assert control over consulates in Hailar and Kuanchengzi (two other cities along the CER).

With this explicit mandate, compromise was no longer possible. That same day, Ryutin convened the Harbin Soviet and created a Revolutionary Military Committee. On December 14, it announced the dismissal of Khorvat and declared itself the new executive authority over the CER zone (see Sablin 2018).

Crisis escalated rapidly. On December 17, the Beijing government held an emergency meeting and resolved to dispatch troops to occupy the CER alienation zone. The next day, Khorvat coordinated with Chinese officials to request military intervention against the Bolsheviks. On December 24, Beijing issued an ultimatum demanding the dissolution of the Harbin Soviet and the expulsion of troops loyal to Ryutin.

Ryutin responded with a manifesto accusing Khorvat of betraying Russian interests by “handing Manchuria over to Chinese bureaucrats.” The balance of power was no longer on his side. On December 25, after a brief exchange of fire, Chinese forces disarmed the Railway Guard Troops, crushing the Soviet uprising.

Ryutin later described the last hours of resistance in his memoir: “Around 1 a.m. on December 12 [in O.S. calendar, December 25 in N.S. calendar], (the Chinese troops) demanded that we lay down our arms before 7 a.m. Resistance was meaningless, so we agreed on the condition that no violence would be used against me, Slavin [Note: vice chair of the Harbin Soviet], or the soldiers when leaving Manchuria and crossing the border. (The Chinese side) agreed to our conditions. We did not trust them, but had no other choice... At 9:30 a.m., despite the assurances, guns and artillery from (the Chinese troops) fired at the barracks, resulting in deaths and injuries. I had no choice but to hide near the workers’ quarters at the (Harbin) main factory...”

During the Russian civil war, Chinese local government took back the garrison rights along CER, and finally the jurisdiction of all CER alienation zones along the railway were returned from the White government of Khorvat to China. However, the administration of the railway itself still be held in the hand of Khorvat, and after the military success of Bolshevik army in the far east in 1919, the Soviet government gained and insisted the control of CER. This situation did not change until Japan's invasion in Manchuria in 1931.

Discussion

In 1917, the political actors involved in the affairs of the CER and its alienation zone came from a wide range of places: Harbin, Shenyang, Beijing, Petrograd, and even Tokyo, Washington D.C., and London. These actors effectively operated on different planes. In Harbin, Khorvat and Ryutin confronted events occurring locally along the CER; they were well informed about, and directly engaged in, every development on the ground. Zhang Zuolin in Shenyang, as well as officials of the Beijing government representing China, can likewise be understood as local actors. By contrast, Lenin—directing revolutionary and military operations from distant Petrograd—was unfamiliar with the origins of the CER and unaware of its specific political situation. The reports he received concerned military and political developments across the entire country, and his task was to respond to these reports rather than to local details in Manchuria. Meanwhile, political actors in Tokyo recognized the potentially enormous strategic and economic interests embedded in Manchuria. As for political actors in Washington D.C., and London, what they perceived was that Russia, a key member of the Entente, had been thrown into revolution. In order to ensure Germany's defeat, they believed it necessary to support the Russian Provisional Government and hoped that, once the Bolshevik uprising was suppressed, Russia might rejoin the war against the Central Powers. These diverse actors, operating from

different locations and with different understandings of the situation, collectively shaped the unfolding events along the CER.

The ambiguous legal status of the CER and its alienation zone compelled local actors to reinterpret their symbolic power. Much of Khorvat's symbolic capital derived from the Provisional Government; after the October Revolution, however, he largely lost his symbolic relationship with the imperial center. As a result, he appeared at a loss when confronted with orders from Lenin and was forced to search for new sources of symbolic capital within Harbin itself. Ryutin, by contrast, as the local representative of the Bolsheviks, quickly reestablished mutual recognition with Lenin within the symbolic language system. He treated Lenin's orders as commands emanating from the imperial center, thereby positioning himself as a potential symbolic representative of state authority at the local level. Although Ryutin recognized the limits of his own military power, he nonetheless had to comply with directives from the state metropole in order to preserve Bolshevik legitimacy in the region.

Chinese local government and warlord seized upon the ambiguity of the CER's legal status, hoping to use Russia's internal turmoil to reclaim administrative control over the area. Although they did not recognize Bolshevik rule, they nonetheless had to acknowledge the symbolic capital Lenin held as a political actor representing the imperial center. Lenin, for his part, sought to use that symbolic capital to assert Bolshevik legitimacy over the CER and its alienation zone. In other words, although the Bolshevik uprising along the CER and its alienation zone ultimately failed, this sequence of events preserved the center-periphery relationship between Petrograd and the CER, thereby providing a political and symbolic foundation for diplomatic negotiations between the Soviet government and the Chinese government after 1919.

Contingency: epistemic impacts; common knowledges and common beliefs

Why symbolic power? Why not infrastructure, political, military power?

Steinmetz 2008 Social fields, subfields and social spaces at the scale of empires; generic and field-specific symbolic capital

Brundage 2023 AJS Representation and Recognition

Ermakoff 2010 epistemic coordination

Bring in the definition of Mara, symbolic power

Archival sources

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