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Continuities, Persistencies and Legacies in Russian and Soviet Foreign Policy

These notes are based on a talk at Helsinki's Aleksanteri Institute in October 2021. The presentation itself may be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJkrEKo4bmk

1. The paper is structured around an analytical schema of different approaches to the question of persistent patterns in Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian foreign policy:

- Essentialism
- Factoralism
- Legacyism

2. These are mere labels but they do relate to methodologies and ontologies that are widespread in the human and social sciences:

ESSENTIALISM – references reductive approaches that detect the existence of underlying causes and structures which purport to explain the surface level of actions and events

FACTORALISM – is focused on the interaction between objective realities and human engagement with them – an interaction that creates structures and processes that are deemed to have varying degrees of autonomy from the human action that initiated and sustains them. In Sociology this approach is often called 'structuration' or 'critical realism'.

LEGACYISM – the approach that sees continuities and patterns as contingent and concrete and as arising from the specificities of individual and collective action – this *idiographic* approach – to borrow a term from the philosophy of history - is typical of narrative historians like myself, for whom continuity,

pattern, persistence, and discontinuity are matters of fact, of description - and explanation of these phenomena is always concrete and specific.

3. In my own books and articles on the history of Soviet foreign policy there may be found many summaries of patterns and persistencies, most often in the form of continuities created by the role of ideology. But my research is not based on any essentialist assumptions – it's an exercise in narrative, in story-telling, in which I seek to show – on the basis of documentary evidence - what it actually was that created and sustained long-term trends in Soviet foreign policy.

4. My substantive interpretation of the history of Soviet foreign policy is positioned within the ideology rather than the realist school of thought, but with an important caveat: Soviet foreign policy was driven by ideology but the ideology in question was practical and experiential as well as doctrinally based, and its role in relation to decision and action is fully revealed only in unfolding narrative, which is a story of changing material conditions and contexts as well as a history of ideas.

5. When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 they were guided by the doctrine of world revolution. When the revolution failed to materialise and they found themselves under siege by internal and external enemies, they embraced the concept of peaceful coexistence with an antagonistic capitalist world. Initially conceived as a temporary tactic of survival, in the 1920s and 1930s this policy gradually transformed into a more long-term strategy. After the Second World War the idea of peaceful coexistence underwent many modifications, culminating in the 1970s détente in which Moscow's collaboration and interchange with the west was seen as necessary to prevent nuclear war but also as a means to consolidate the position of the socialist camp and to facilitate further shifts to the left in world politics. Instead, it opened the Soviet-communist bloc to corrosive outside influences that became, under Gorbachev, an important part of the story of the USSR's downfall.[1]

[1] G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution and Cold War*, 1945-1991, Routledge: London & New York 1999

6. Never in all my historical research have I felt the need for an explanation that harks back to Tsarist foreign policy or forward to post-Soviet foreign policy or reaches for some underlying structural factor or factors that transcend the temporality and specificities of Moscow's foreign policy. In other words, I have never felt the need to plug explanatory gaps by reaching for a version of the continuity thesis. Telling the story, constructing an evidence-based, empirical narrative, is, for me, a sufficient mode for understanding and explaining any state's foreign policy, let alone that of Russia and the Soviet Union.[2]

7. But speculative discourse about patterns and continuities in Russian and Soviet foreign policy remains stubbornly persistent and is endemic in political-ideological debate about the nature of Putin's Russia. Public discussion about Putin's regime and its foreign policy typically features essentialist, factoralist and legacyist approaches vying with each other to shape political discourse and policy choices in relation to Russia.

8. This debate exhibits sharply contrasting views about recent Russian foreign policy. Is it aggressive, expansionist, strategic and messianic? Or is it reactive, defensive, tactical and localised? Or some hybrid of these elements? Is the policy driven by Putin personally, or by structural dynamics – and, if so, what are they?

9. These various views often draw upon essentialist theories of underlying dynamics as a means to enhance their credibility and explanatory power.

10. There is an interesting parallel between this contemporary debate about the nature of Russian foreign policy and the cold war intra-western debate about Soviet foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War – a discussion prompted by Stalin's victory over Hitler and Soviet-communist military-political expansion into East-Central Europe.

11. One dimension of the early cold war debate was framed by the question: to what extent was Soviet imperialism the same or a continuation of Tsarist Imperialism?[3]

[2] G. Roberts, "History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR", *Review of International Studies*, vol.32, October 2006

[3] R.A. Gordon et al (eds), *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press: New York 1959

12. Some people argued that it was the same or similar, and had a common root – both Russia and the Soviet Union were great powers broadly located in the same geopolitical space and time, with similar interests and security concerns and were connected by a tradition of foreign policy and diplomacy which continued to exert its influence even after the Russian Revolution.

13. In the cold war context, this kind of argument served to normalise the Soviet Union as a state no different to its Tsarist predecessor or any other great power. This normalising effect was intensified by those who added a supplementary supposition: Tsarist imperialism was not especially aggressive and expansionist compared to other imperial powers.

14. This relatively benign view of Russian imperialism is one I share with, among others, Paul Schroeder, who argued that when Russia emerged triumphant from the Napoleonic Wars it was well-placed to become a hegemonic world power, yet throughout the 19th century it remained a (mostly) satisfied member of the great powers' Concert of Europe. Russia's imperial expansion into Asia was not exceptional in the context of colonialist land grabs by all the European Great Powers (or, indeed, the United States' internal expansion on the American continent) and neither were the violent means of Moscow's expansionism untypical of imperialist states. According to Schroeder, 19th century Russia was "conservative, legalistic, anti-revolutionary and oriented towards peace and great power co-operation." [4]

15. Opposed to this normalising argument were those who argued that Russian imperialism was exceptionally aggressive and expansionist and so was Soviet imperialism – and they were so for some transcendent structural reason such as Russian authoritarianism or messianism or Russian culture and tradition. Others argued that Russian and Soviet imperialism were fundamentally different i.e. the communist-controlled USSS was much more threatening than Tsarist imperialism because there was a new factor at play – one that had broken the continuity and tradition of moderate Russian foreign policy – the

[4] P. Schroeder, "Containment Nineteenth Century Style: How Russia was Restrained" in P. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability and Statecraft*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2004; G. Roberts, "Restraining Russia Through Friendship: Lessons from the 19th Century", *Responsible Statecraft*, 23 April 2021 https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/04/23/restraining-russia-through-friendship-lessons-from-the-19th-century/

existence of a Marxist movement and ideology that sought to globalise itself. Hence Soviet Union was not a normal great power and could not be treated as such.

16. The parallels between this cold war debate and contemporary discourse about Putin's foreign policy are many and manifold but the principal polarisation is between those who essentialise Russia as a normal state and those who **'Other'** it as an existential threat to western civilisation – in much the same way that Russophobes did in the 19th century.[5]

17. My key 'factorialist' text is Alfred J. Rieber's 'How Persistent are Persistent Factors?', which was a follow-up to an earlier piece he wrote called 'Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy' – which dealt with the Tsarist era. In the latter article Rieber wrote that to 'pursue the theme of continuity in Russian foreign policy is to enter a minefield of historical mythology'.[6]

18. The three myths that Rieber sought to dispel in his first piece were the (1) the geopolitical myth that attributed Russian expansionism to the absence of physical barriers on the great Eurasian plain; (2) the leadership myth which perceived that expansionism as a function of Russian autocracy; and (3) the ideological myth of Russian Orthodox messianism – the idea of Moscow as the 'new Rome' and the successor to Christian Byzantine.

19. In the second article, Rieber argued that Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian foreign policies were shaped by four persistent factors: economic backwardness, permeable frontiers, the multinational character of the state, and cultural marginality.

20. Into the mix he throws what he calls two conjunctural factors: changes in the international system or environment and how Tsarist, Soviet or Russian leaders chose to respond to them.

[5] Mark B. Smith, *The Russia Anxiety*, Allen Lane: London 2019; https://geoffreyroberts.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Review-of-Mark-Smiths-The-Russia-Anxiety.pdf

[6] A.J. Rieber, "How Persistent are Persistent Factors?" in R. Legvold (ed), *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past*, Columbia University Press: New York 2007; "Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay" in H. Ragsdale (ed), *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1993 https://geoffreyroberts.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/How-Persistent-are-Persistent-Factors.pdf

21. Rieber's articles are broadly 'structurationist' – an illuminating example of analysing the interaction between the objective and the subjective. But Rieber is an Historian, not a Political Scientist or Sociologist, and his eye is always on human agency.

22. As he points out himself, his use of the phrase PERSISTENT factors is deliberate since its signals that the factors he has identified are neither impersonal nor permanent but fundamentally human creations. The driving force of the role played by the various 'factors' is human perception and the human solutions to the problems they have thrown up.

23. Rieber also described his approach as 'geocultural' – meaning that there are some things – material realities and entrenched practices, tradition and institutions - which are impermeable to rapid change. Thus does Rieber signal the limits as well as the causal power of human choices and action.

24. My third label – legacyism – was prompted by Mark Kramer's 2019 article on 'The Soviet Legacy in Russian Foreign Policy'[7] - a very timely article given this is a huge topic in current conversations about Putin's foreign policy: to what extent can we explain contemporary Russian foreign policy by reference to Soviet foreign policy?

25. Kramer sees quite a few active Soviet legacies in Russian foreign policy:

- Legacies arising from Russia's status as the official successor state to the Soviet Union (such as permanent membership of the UN Security Council)

- Continuing foreign policy issues and disputes from Soviet to post-Soviet times (in relation to Japan and the Kuril Islands, for example)

- A high degree of continuity in terms of personnel and institutions

- The Eurasian location and interests of the Soviet and Russian states

[7] M. Kramer, "The Soviet Legacy in Russian Foreign Policy", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol.13, no.4, Winter 2019-20

- Russia's role as a global weapons supplier to developing countries

- The great power mentality – at popular as well as elite level – prevalent in both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia

26. In that light, the strength of the Soviet imprint on contemporary Russian foreign policy is not so surprising.

27. Kramer's analysis is concrete and specific and appropriately evidenced. It's possible to disagree with his assessment on an empirical basis without getting into fundamentalist arguments about methodology or the underlying factors or forces that may or may not be at work.

28. While I agree with quite a lot of what Kramer says, it seems to me that he skips over the crucial importance of the abandonment of Soviet ideology as a moment of rupture and discontinuity in relation to both Russian foreign and domestic policy.

29. Which brings me to Sergey Lavrov's article on the historical background to Russia's foreign policy, published by the journal *Russia in Global Affairs* in 2016.[8] Foreign Minister Lavrov is a product of the Soviet era, as are many other senior members of the Russian diplomatic corps. But there is very little that is Soviet about his discourse in this article.

30. Lavrov's article is a reminder that it's not only historians who like to think and talk about the *longue durée* in history. Politicians do it too – often more clearly and effectively than academics! Crucially, politician's views on history are often highly revealing of the general perceptions that shape their motivations and actions.

31. Lavrov's synthesis of the history of Russian foreign policy combines elements of essentialism, factoralism and legacyism.

32. According to Lavrov, the **essence** of Russia as a great power is that its people and governments have had – and still have – the capacity to take on the

[8] S. Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy: Historical Background", *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 2016

burden of resolving world problems in a creative manner that serves the interests of all peoples and states.

33. The main historical **factor** in Russia's foreign policy, writes Lavrov, has been its long struggle against attempts to isolate it from European affairs. In this connection he points out that all efforts to unite Europe without Russia's participation have ended in tragedy, while the most successful examples of unifying episodes have been those in which Russia has taken a lead, such as the 19th century Concert of Europe.

34. In relation to the Soviet **legacy**, Lavrov emphasizes discontinuity, pointing out that Russia now stands for evolution not revolution, that it no longer encourages what he calls 'artificial transformations' in other countries internal affairs, and its search for the partnership of different civilisations is based on human solidarity and respect for difference and diversity.

35. Lavrov's article reflects pressing current political concerns and interests and was framed and articulated as part of the ongoing propaganda war with the West that erupted in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. But that doesn't make Lavrov or his article insincere. On the contrary it was quite an accurate reflection of views then prevalent in Russian ruling circles, among Russian intellectuals and in popular culture.[9]

36. Similarly, the fact that so much scholarly discourse about Russian foreign policy is shot through with ideological and political passion and positioning doesn't make it inauthentic or valueless.

37. Political partisanship can play a useful role in generating new insights and knowledge about even the most contentious subjects, as long as evidence remains sacrosanct and alternative views are treated fairly.

[9] A.P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, 5th ed., Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD 2019

POSTSCRIPT

38. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 precipitated an avalanche of speculative explanations of Putin's momentous decision to go to war. Particularly popular were assertions that the war was part of persistent patterns of centuries-long Russian aggression, authoritarianism and expansionism. Such commentary was typically highly politicised – more often than not an exercise in propaganda rather than scholarship.

39. The problem with all such essentialist theorising is its circular reasoning and lack of independent, confirmatory evidence. Putin's rationale for war is read back from a perceived pattern of events which is then deemed to fit the attributed motivator of his actions. Rather than hypotheses deriving from empirical data, it is pre-existing theories and concepts that self-servingly define and select the evidence that demonstrates their own validity.

40. For narrative historians, the motivation for action is the starting point of analysis, and interpretations should be based on ALL the evidence, not just a selection to suit an hypothesis. Arguably, the best *available* evidence of Putin's reason for war is what he said it was in numerous interviews, press conferences and speeches during the run-up to the invasion. As John Mearsheimer has argued, while politicians do lie, it is mainly in the domestic context, whereas in the international arena they generally strive to clarify for foreign counterparts what they are really thinking and feeling in relation to big decisions and actions.[10] Putin's statements indicate that he went to war for specific, conjunctural reasons, namely, that NATO's military build-up of Ukraine was materialising a threat that would pose a dire danger to Russia's security, not necessarily immediately, but certainly in the medium and long-term. The invasion of Ukraine was, for Putin, a preventative war designed to force Ukraine and the West to accept Russia's security demands – a plan that, like many such ventures, did not work out as intended.[11]

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[10] J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics*, Oxford University Press: New York 2011

[11] G. Roberts, "'Now or Never': The Immediate Origins of Putin's Preventative War on Ukraine", *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, no.2, vol.22, December 2022 https://jmss.org/article/view/76584