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Whither Russia and Russian Studies?

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The invasion of Ukraine shattered the prevailing paradigms of Russian studies. It was the first full-scale invasion of one country by another in Europe since World War II, casting doubt on assumptions we all held about the norms governing state behavior. It also forced most observers to question their understanding of the dynamics of Russian politics, since few of us had imagined that a genocidal assault on Ukraine was in the cards.

The world post-February 24 looks very different than the pre-February 24 world, and that is particularly true for our understanding of Russia itself.

The impact of the invasion on the study of Russia was compounded by the fact that it disrupted the personal lives of the majority of the experts on whom we relied to follow Russian politics. Hundreds of scholars and journalists were forced to flee Russia and make new lives for themselves abroad. This limits their ability to gather information, as well as—given the exigencies of their personal trauma—their capacity to process it objectively and dispassionately. Those scholars remaining in Russia have either fallen silent or become mouthpieces of the regime.

The shock of the invasion was followed by the escalation of repression of the political opposition inside Russia: the arrest of some 20,000 protesters, draconian new laws suppressing criticism, long jail terms for leading dissidents, and the return of denunciations of people with dissenting views by members of the public.

On top of the increased repression, there was the disturbing realization that a majority of ordinary Russians support the war. At least half the population seem to have accepted the Kremlin narrative, while less than a quarter oppose the war, with the remainder adopting a wait-and-see approach. (The sociological evidence is expertly reviewed in Schulman 2023.)

Such a radical break in real-world events will undoubtedly produce an equally radical paradigm shift in how we explain Russian politics. It is far too early to say where this intellectual revolution is headed, and hence what kind of future scenarios for Russia we might envision.

The prevailing paradigm of the last three decades was the now-derided "transitology" school. It was assumed that the Soviet collapse meant the "end of history," and that Russia and the other newly independent states would transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism, albeit at varying speeds and with varying degrees of success. Even as Russia became increasingly authoritarian, much of the scholarly attention remained focused on the electoral system and opposition social movements, fueled by the hope that a color revolution of the sort that had overthrown authoritarian leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005 would come to Russia. The protest wave of 2011–12 that greeted Putin's return to the presidency was the apogee of that scholarly focus, but interest in Aleksei Navalny as the heroic leader of the opposition persisted up through his poisoning and arrest in 2021.

The invasion has terminally undermined the transition-to-democracy paradigm. No one seriously believes that liberal forces will come to power in Russia in the foreseeable future. (Their return in the unforeseeable future is still possible.) Even before the 2022 invasion there was a debate over whether it was appropriate to see Russia as a "fascist" state. Fascism is an emotionally charged term and tends to collapse into comparisons with Nazi Germany, a very distinctive political formation that lasted only 13 years.

The most readily available alternative to the democratic transition paradigm is the idea that Russia is reverting to its Soviet past. Although the Soviet Union collapsed 30 years ago, there is a high degree of continuity in some important social institutions (such as the repressive apparatus) and in the personnel running the state. Moreover, among the general population, those over the age of 65 are twice as likely to support the war as those under 30. The median age is 40, so nearly half of all Russians still have personal direct experience of growing up in the Soviet Union.

This means that scholars will have to go back to the history books and refresh their understanding of the dynamics of Soviet-type society. There are several problems with this. First, we don't know which Soviet Union is the relevant model: it is that of 1937, or 1970, or 1985? Second, the world has changed, and contemporary Russia lacks the rigorous ideological worldview that inspired and maintained the Soviet system for three generations.

Vladimir Putin's own preferred frame of reference is not the Soviet Union, but the Tsarist Empire. He made this clear in his infamous July 2021 article laying out the case for the invasion of Ukraine, in which he derided the idea of an independent Ukraine as a Soviet construct. Annexing Crimea restored Russia to its 1783 borders, and that is Putin's legacy achievement, jeopardized by Ukraine's rearmament and growing ties to NATO.

Russia's claim to great-power status rests on three factors. Two are inherited from the Soviet Union (its nuclear arsenal and the oil and gas export complex)

and one from the Tsarist Empire (its vast territorial expanse).

Perhaps the most obvious frame for understanding Russia is that of a return to empire. That is the position, for example, of Stephen Kotkin (Remnick 2022). However, such an approach is a minority view among Russia specialists, who see it as cultural essentialism and excessively determinist.

The dominant discussion among U.S. scholars takes place around the need to "decolonize" Russian studies. (That is the official theme of the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, to be held in November 2023.) This is a positive development, in the sense that it means turning attention away from Moscow-centric narratives and exploring the perspectives of groups on the periphery of the Russian Empire. However, there are some problems with the decolonization approach. First, it often involves *deconstructing* the concept of empire by stressing the hybridity and fluidity of colonial categories. Second, it is drawn directly from post-colonial studies of the European oceanic empires, whose empires were dismantled 50 years ago. Russia is currently actively engaged in imperial conquest, so it is not clear that "decolonization" is the most appropriate analytical framework.

At some point, the war will end. And at some point, Putin will leave the Kremlin. But given the deep structural forces that have driven Russia to war, it is hard to be optimistic about the prospects for radical change in the political regime any time soon.

About the Author
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Why Predictions Fail: Forecasting Russia's Future

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For experts on Russia, there is probably nothing more in demand, and at the same time more speculative, than the business of predicting Russia's political future. Many experts are valued in the eyes of policymakers, as well as those of the public, primarily for their forecasts, rather than for their theoretical explanations, methodological sophistication, and data analysis. If someone is able to make assumptions that prove to be factually correct over time, then he/she may be rewarded irrespective of the substantive grounds for his/her predictions. With regard to Soviet studies, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse is probably the best-known example of such predictions. In 1978, she published a book in which she argued that the Soviet Union would collapse by 1990 due to the rise of the Muslim population in Central Asia, which would cause Islamic revolt and a drive for independence from the Soviet empire. Although the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 for completely different reasons, she received outstanding academic recognition and became a permanent secretary of the French Academy, despite the fact that the academic value of her forecast was dubious.

The problem, however, is not only that experts' forecasts of Russia's future are no more precise or substantively grounded than predictions made by taxi drivers. Virtually all forecasts of this kind (not only with regard to Russia), whether made by professionals or amateurs, are based on projecting a current state of affairs into the future—albeit with some corrections and reservations, adjusting for either positive or negative factors. This has contributed to a status-quo bias, as major breakthrough changes tend to remain beyond the scope of forecasts. However, in response to major exogenous shocks such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the amplitude of predictions has multiplied greatly, paving the way for numerous far-reaching expectations, ranging from nuclear war to Russia's territorial breakdown. These expectations are often less grounded in data-driven analyses than they are reflective of the fears and/or hopes of those experts who tend to make such predictions. Meanwhile, real-world developments often follow a different logic, due in particular to "wild cards"—unexpected and sometimes unpredictable factors that alter possible scenarios.