Review: The Quest for Soviet Legacy in Russian Foreign Policy

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The Quest for Soviet Legacy in Russian Foreign Policy

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Russian foreign policy is a popular subject on which scholars have lately conducted much research. The current stage of these studies is competent in explaining various aspects of Russian foreign policy. Yet, considering both earlier and more recent works, there seems to be a trend of focusing solely on the post-Soviet era. Relatedly, the majority of the current literature adopts perspectives that analyze the period after Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. Moreover, almost all of the prominent and relatively less-cited research takes a leader-oriented approach. Hence, despite the satisfying heft of the current literature, there still is a gap regarding the Soviet legacy behind Russia’s foreign policy orientations. In other words, although most of the components and goals of Moscow’s foreign policy have been previously covered, the role of Soviet history/the Soviet mindset remains vague. To this end, this review article thoroughly analyzes the four selected books and engages with their contributions in terms of defining the role of the Soviet legacy in Russian foreign policy formulations.

Introduction

Russia has always held a significant place in global affairs. Ever since the imperial era, it has assumed a prominent role in world politics. Not only because of its material capacity, but also due to its ideology, identity, and influence, Russia has attracted pivotal attention from researchers. Throughout its rich history, its foreign policy has remained one of the most complicated, intriguing, and evolutionary topics to come under investigation. The phenomenon of Russian foreign policy is characterized by both significant and puzzling aspects. From an internal factors’ perspective, domestic politics, interest groups, political elites, institutions, the economy, and culture appear as important as well as very puzzling factors. They all require highly complex and comprehensive explanations. Furthermore, the external factors—foreign threats and security perceptions, polarity in world politics, Western countries, regional and global organizations— are as puzzling and significant as the internal ones. Scholars who aim to understand and explain the dynamics of Russian foreign policy ought to adopt a very broad scope and to some extent need to touch upon each of these aspects.

Considering the years between 1991-2020, we have witnessed three different Russian presidents, ten prime ministers (excluding Boris Yeltsin), and four ministers for foreign affairs. Each president and influential leader has brought diverse views with them. Each impetus has added more or less unique dimensions. Starting from the earlier post-Soviet times, then-President Boris Yeltsin and former Minister for Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev adopted a more Western-oriented foreign policy and prioritized liberal institutions and the economy. Yet after Yevgeny Primakov became the top diplomat, the direction of Russia’s external policy changed dramatically. Moscow started to pursue more proactive policies against
the unipolar world order, aiming to counter the Western influence and regain its former great power status. A dramatic change occurred despite President Yeltsin and continued to be effective after Vladimir Putin’s presidency. Various changes in policy direction and distinctive goals were adopted by different leaders. Yet the determination of the goals and sources of Russian foreign policy is not as simplistic as it seems. On the contrary, there are various reasons behind the differing policies adopted during Kozyrev and Primakov’s ministries, just as there were behind the policies pursued by Soviet leaders such as Stalin, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev. Although the goals and directions have been diverse, multiple, common issues have prevailed since Tsarist times and have continued to prevail in Yeltsin’s and Putin’s era under some kind of transformation.

In the current literature, while most of the other factors have been investigated in one way or another, the Soviet legacy behind the continuity and changes in Russia’s foreign policy formulations, directions, and goals is often overlooked. As such, Soviet-era ideologies, regime types, leadership politics, great power perception mainly stemming from the Cold War era, nationalism, identity of self and others, and post-Soviet security have significance to a certain degree. Furthermore, the mindset and institutions established before dissolution directly passed into post-Soviet Russia. It would be wrong to claim that they suddenly disappeared. Certainly considering the policymakers in the Kremlin and the bureaucrats in the State Department, we see a clear Soviet heritage. All of the presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers were born in the Soviet Union and were educated and gained experience under Soviet leadership. It is hard to overlook this legacy and identity. One of the most influential actors behind the Russian foreign policy of the 1990s and afterward, not only in the Middle East but overall, Yevgeny Primakov, is a clear illustration of Soviet inheritance in the Russian Federation. Thus, examining Russia as a newborn baby and as a separate entity from the Soviet Union is a clear mistake. Although some studies in the current literature do mention that legacy, there is a lack of broad and detailed elaboration. In other words, the place and impact of the Soviet legacy remain vague. In this study, I aim to put forth how and to what extent the four books under review address this issue.

**Russian Foreign Policy**

As can be understood from its title, *The Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* is a very comprehensive and useful handbook that aims to thoroughly examine Russian foreign policy. The contributors to the book are highly diverse. Andrei Tsygankov, the editor of the book, is one of the most popular and competent academicians working on Russia and foreign policy. This handbook is the sixth and the most extended edition. Concerning the Russian foreign policy literature, this book distinguishes...
itself from popular approaches that define the theme through relations with the West. It adopts a scope that investigates the topic as a complex entity that requires a very diversified approach, just like the country itself. In this regard, the book is divided into four main parts, each of which aims to solve one of four puzzling themes regarding Russian foreign policy: the material and social circumstances that help us to understand change and continuity; the tools and actors in policy formulation and implementation; policies designed according to regional and geographical context; and the goals and interests that prevail in Russia’s membership in regional and international organizations.

The first part of the book provides an overview of Russia’s material and social conditions as well as the different theoretical approaches to Russian foreign policy. This section helps the reader to understand how distinctive theoretical methods may be utilized to grasp the essence of Russian foreign policy, and urges them to engage through diversified, theory-based approaches instead of being limited to only one. As such, an eclectic method under the framework of constructivism, structure-based explanations, the realist school, geopolitical theories, nationalism, and energy politics are applied by a variety of scholars through different chapters. The second part of the book covers the tools, factors, and actors involved in Russian policymaking, such as the military, diplomacy, intelligence agencies, energy resources, cyber power, and religion. The following part of the book provides invaluable information regarding Russian foreign policy directions in a regional, geographical context. As such, it uncovers Russia’s foreign policy orientations toward the United States (U.S.), the Asia-Pacific region and China, the European Union, Central, and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Arctic. Those who are curious about Russian international policy should at least take a look at this part of the book. Its sections are designated to provide a comprehensive overview of these regions’ roles in Russian foreign policy and Moscow’s perception of these regions. Obviously, after comprehending Moscow’s policy orientations towards these regions, readers will have a better picture of this topic.

The last part seeks to explore Russia’s aims and interests through its participation in seven regional and international organizations. These organizations, as is discussed, are highly significant for Moscow in terms of security and economic interests. They are mostly acknowledged by Russian policymakers as a means of keeping Russia’s backyards safe and sound, and of promoting its power status. In some of these organizations, Russia has been regarded as the most powerful actor, e.g., the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); while in others, it stands as one of the most influential great powers. Furthermore, it has little influence in European organizations; yet these attract great attention from
Russian policymakers. Among them, the United Nations (UN) and Russia’s role in the Security Council come to the fore due to Russia’s seat as one of the five permanent members. The UN has been a very crucial institution for Moscow to promote its interests and global standing, which is analyzed via an eclectic approach in this section.

Overall, *The Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* is truly one of the most comprehensive and informative handbooks that successfully covers numerous topics in Russian foreign policy. Having read this book, a Russian enthusiast or an International Relations/Areas Studies student would be very well-informed and have a comprehensive grasp of the various aspects of Russian foreign policy. Yet, the Soviet legacy behind the Russian foreign policy formulations and directions remains puzzling. In some parts and chapters, particularly in the first part, Soviet foreign policy, identity, nationalism, etc. are mentioned. The efforts put forward by Elena Kropatcheva in comparing foreign policy actions during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras under the realist framework help us to see the differences and similarities. However, there is no direct engagement that aims to specifically clarify Russia’s Soviet legacy.

**Russia in the Changing International System**

The second book, *Russia in the Changing International System*, is also an edited volume. Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen successfully bring together various prominent researchers. Compared to Tsygankov’s edited volume, it is shorter. Nevertheless, it contains very diverse perspectives and approaches. The book starts by questioning Russia’s current role in global politics and contends that Russia has both traditional great power and rising power characteristics. Dal and Erşen claim that, unlike the other studies, this book attempts to provide a more comprehensive approach to understanding Russia’s motivations, strategies, and perceptions regarding global issues and organizations. It indeed differs from country-, geography- and issue-based studies. The volume revolves around the puzzles of Russian leaders’ perceptions of international order and the role Russia assumes in the system, Russian perceptions of rising power, differences between great power and rising power positions, factors affecting Russia’s great power status, the prevailing discourse, i.e., anti-Westernist and post-Westernist, Russian perceptions of the East, its organizations and their role in global affairs, Russian interventionist policies in several regions and the concept of regional hegemony. This very recent work aims to answer all of these puzzles while adopting diverse perspectives. It elaborates on Russia’s role in global politics by focusing on regional organizations and various strategies ranging from security to political economy. Though Russia is traditionally defined as a great power, it is referred to in this text as both a great and a rising power. For example, Russia’s actions against Georgia and Ukraine are accepted as...
an indicator of its position as a great power, while its status improvement in the multipower system alongside such countries as India and Brazil, as well as its positional, behavioral, and functional power, are seen as indicators of its status as a rising power. In this context, it is claimed that Russia’s different roles provide it with leverage in its foreign policy actions.

*Russia in the Changing International System* illuminates the changing world order and the ways in which Russian leaders have responded to the challenges that stem from these so-called changes. It enables us to see the international order through Moscow’s lenses. Themes and concepts like post-Westernism, multipolarity, and regional hegemony are addressed. The volume underlines the Russian perception of the international order as illiberal, and this fact has indeed led to certain consequences in its foreign policy formulations and relations with the West. The Russian understanding of the international order is defined through four aspects specified in the book: normativity, sovereignty, revisionism, and multilateralism. Understanding Russia’s global order perception is regarded as significant in terms of making sense of its relations with other regions and countries.

This recently published work makes a very significant contribution to the literature with respect to the puzzles it attempts to solve and the level of analysis it adopts. While going through the pages, readers will very much enjoy not only the diversified topics it covers but also the distinctive ideas it put forth. For instance, in the fifth chapter, Alexander Libman argues that, contrary to the general belief that sees the EAEU as an institution that fortifies Russian influence and status, it does not function in this way due to its organizational structure. In addition, the sixth chapter helps readers gain insight into the Russia-China rivalry and China’s rising influence vis-à-vis Russia. Moreover, the International Governmentality Studies approach adopted by Philipp Causa while utilizing criminal and Syrian cases in an investigation conducted on Russian foreign policy is well worth reading. The book also has a specific chapter devoted to Russian foreign policy toward political movements and de facto entities, which is very rare. However, despite its many strong points, this book too misses the Soviet legacy in Russian foreign policy. Even the Middle East section does not have a focus on the historic legacies that are crucial in Russia’s foreign policy orientations toward that region. Overall, the engagement with the Soviet heritage in *Russia in the Changing International System* in terms of foreign policy is very limited due to the aim and scope of the book.

**Changing Systems, Enduring Interests**

The third book, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, is co-authored by Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni. Unlike the books reviewed above, this particular volume takes a historical perspective and handles Russian for-
eign policy development accordingly. The book overviews the persistence of Russian foreign policy throughout history by investigating Tsarist Russia, the war periods that caused drastic changes, the Cold War, détente, the end of the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet era. The negative side of the study is the realist framework that the authors adopt. In this context, the concept of balance of power is centralized, which is not sufficient to explain Russia’s policy formation and developments since the Tsarist era. It indeed requires a more complex, multifaceted framework. Although the continuity debate and legacy derived from the past are built upon the aforementioned concept, the book, nevertheless, provides invaluable information about the internal and external factors that determine Russian foreign policy. Furthermore, the historic insights make this volume a very unique one. Overall, Russian diplomacy and foreign policy formulations are explained based on power, ideology, domestic politics, leadership, and polarity.

This study contains ten different chapters, three of which revolve around the historical legacy of modern Russian foreign policy. As such, Chapter 2 seeks to explain the Tsarist legacy behind Russia’s foreign policy formulations. The roots go as early as the 15th century, the era of Ivan the Great. The authors argue that expansionism was among the pivotal determinants for Tsarist foreign policy, much as it is for modern Russia’s foreign policy. This expansionism, it is claimed, cannot be explained only by a single aspect; instead, geopolitics, regime type, the international system, and ideology had an overall impact. This particular section could be very helpful for readers in terms of understanding the roots and continuity of Russian foreign policy. One of the lessons that should be taken from history is about the function of war: instead of triggering internal conflicts, it brings internal stability. Chapter 3 elaborates on Soviet foreign policy from 1917 to 1945. In this context, the authors put forward that Marxist-Leninist ideology was not the sole determinant shaping Soviet foreign policy; rather, there were some imperial heritages as well, such as autocracy, the regime’s strong power, Orthodoxy, pan-Slavism, chauvinism, etc. Yet, Marxist-Leninist ideology, its beliefs, and values created the main pillar/operational code of the Soviet policy formulations. This ideology affected the Communist view of global politics and the policies Soviet Russia pursued. There were also changes in diplomacy and the conduct of balance of power, as the authors emphasize. Chapter 4 makes us see that, unlike that of Tsarist times, Soviet diplomacy sought to win the competition over the Third World, Asian and African countries. Notwithstanding, Moscow had the goal of counterbalancing Western influence. It aimed eventually to win, as it was thought that one block would one way or another win over the other. This chapter deals with Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War but starts with the impact of Stalin. Later on, Khrushchev’s policies and his legacy over the Soviet Third World strategies are elucidated. Furthermore, a conflict that occurred be-
between China and the Soviet Union is discussed under Third World politics as well. Subsequently, Brezhnev and détente policies are explained. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Russia had to assume a variety of older problems, inherited conflicts, ideas and views. Though the ideas and views were challenged afterward, they are important in a sense for creating foundations. These three chapters indeed enhance the quality of the work and to some extent fill a gap in current Russian foreign policy literature.

The following part delves into the external and internal influences determining Russian politics in world affairs. It provides significant information regarding the continuity and changes debate in post-Soviet foreign policy orientations. Notwithstanding, it also identifies the influential institutions in the policymaking process. The sixth chapter explains Moscow’s policy directions and actions taken toward the post-Soviet geography (often described as Russia’s ‘near abroad’ or ‘backyard’). Chapter 7 deals with Russia’s relations with the West. It analyzes the changes in perception and policy directions throughout the post-Soviet era. The next part addresses non-Western regions that were not previously covered. At the outset, Russian foreign policy toward the Far East is investigated. Most of the space is given to China, while the authors also examine Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. Next, Moscow’s Middle Eastern policy is elaborated. Unlike the Middle Eastern chapter written in the previous book, this part is built upon the historical legacy and Russian Southern expansion starting from the 18th century. While Chapter 9 deals with the international world order debates and Russian policy orientations, the final part focuses on the new Cold War debate between Russia and the United States. The authors conclude that the recent experiences do not bear a resemblance to the Cold War era, but rather seem like a competition among great powers. In the final chapter, I very much enjoyed the citation from Yevgeny Primakov: “Russia doesn’t have permanent enemies, but it does have permanent interests” (p. 121), which also contains hints regarding the endurance of past legacies in Russian foreign policy.

The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy

The last book, The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War, edited by Celeste A. Wallander, stands as the most relevant work regarding the Soviet legacy in Russian foreign policy. This study utilizes a theory-based approach while explaining the Russian foreign policy puzzle. Through seven theoretical models that are significant for Soviet politics, this particular volume directly engages with Soviet foreign policy and Russian foreign policy studies. These models revolve around significant aspects that help us to make sense of contemporary Russian foreign policy: “regime type, the of ideology in foreign policy, leadership politics, bureaucratic and interest group politics, the external security environment,
and the constraints, and opportuni-
ties of the international economy” (pp. 2-3). Building upon these mod-
els and explaining historical legacies, this volume stands as a very unique piece in comparison to other studies in this field. Among its other merits, this volume is the most comprehen-
sive and well-established study in terms of addressing the Soviet legacy in current Russian foreign policy. As a result of this unique feature, it cer-
tainly fills an important gap in the lit-
erature that has not been systemically and extensively investigated.

In the first chapter, Wallander elabo-
rates on the aforementioned models; all the other chapters in the book are built upon the frameworks and theories provided in the first chap-
ter. There is very high coherence be-
tween the pages of the book. Having read the book, one would be very well informed about the Soviet legacy behind the Russian foreign policy di-
rections. In this regard, Wallander’s arguments given in the first chapter are very distinct discoveries. The po-
litical regime’s acknowledgment –to be more precise, the Soviet regime’s repressive and so-called illegitimate domestic policies and institutions– as the root cause of expansionist Rus-
sian foreign policy comes forward. Chapter 2 thoroughly explains the re-
gime type and contends that the post-
Soviet states failed to achieve a demo-
cratic type of regime, and mostly fail to establish liberal political institu-
tions and democratic peace. These failures and the incomplete process of democratization engender un-
stable and aggressive policies. This can be regarded as one of the start-
ing points of Russia’s policy analysis and the reasons behind certain for-
eign policy choices. The third chapter examines nationalism as a follow-up to the Marxist-Leninists ideological structure in Russian foreign policy orientations. This is a very significant insight provided for scholars and students working in Russian studies. Notwithstanding, Chapter 4 success-
fully investigates identity politics and the Soviet leadership. It puts forth the relations between foreign policy and its utilization in domestic politics. Leadership in modern Russia, com-
pared to the Soviet era, takes place in a more competitive environment that requires identity as a tool to consoli-
date the approval of its citizens when it comes to policy decisions. The fol-
lowing chapter specifically focuses on the defense industrialists as an influential group in Soviet and Rus-
sian foreign policy formulations (the bureaucratic and interest group poli-
tics model). The remaining sections revolve around the European security environment and its impact on Rus-
sian foreign policy, Russian identity, ethnic minority policies, threat per-
ception as it differs from Estonia to Uzbekistan, and the relationship be-
tween the international economy and foreign policy.

The concluding chapter is again written by the editor and contains a general evolution and assessment of commonalities. Consequently, it is claimed that to understand and inter-
pret Russian foreign policy correctly, there is a need for diversified and complex models that connect vari-
ous aspects of ideas, interests, institutions, internal power, and external constraints. These connections seem very crucial to comprehend the essence of the topic. *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War* overall stands as a crucial contribution, focusing on the Soviet practices that adopt various methods beyond the realist and power politics explanations. Readers interested in an analytical approach and realist perspective, and in better understanding the Soviet legacies behind Russian foreign policy should add this volume to their reading list. There is much more information provided within the context of the book, both regarding the Soviet legacy in policy formations and Russian foreign policy in general.

**Conclusion**

Studies conducted on the subject of Russian foreign policy uncover numerous topics, such as identity, geopolitics, leaders’ perceptions, national interests, security, etc. Moreover, researchers have adopted various theoretical approaches while investigating the aims, sources, and actors that have been influential in Russian foreign policy, and Russia’s foreign policy directions and sources have been discussed excessively. Considering the current literature on the topic and the numerous aspects that have been influential for the Russian Federation’s foreign policy formulation, we could contend that current scholarship has paid quite a lot of attention to this subject. Many scholars have attempted to explain, understand and predict Moscow’s external policy choices. These attempts have mostly been great power politics-oriented and security-perceptions focused, yet they also successfully identify the impact of power, domestic politics, institutions, international order, and leader’s identity. The trend in this topic area has mainly been to focus on the post-Soviet era and revolve around President Vladimir Putin and his approach toward the former Soviet countries and the West. They mostly cover the expansionist and interventionist steps taken by Moscow, their meanings and primary goals, specifically the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, and continuity and changes in Russia’s foreign policy directions have been discussed accordingly. Overall, the majority of the current literature contains either leader-, geography- or issue-based analyses. Although several works have aimed to understand the features inherited from Cold War times, the Soviet legacy behind the Russian foreign policy formulations as both a source and a direction determinant remains to be defined precisely.

The recent contributions made by the four books reviewed in this context seem very significant. They certainly bring invaluable information to the existing literature and enrich our understanding through distinctive findings, significant surveys, diverse approaches, various methodologies, models, levels of analysis, and theoretical frameworks. Among the books under review, *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War* particularly engages with
past legacies, including the Soviet legacy, while explaining the sources and origins of Russian foreign policy. This is a very distinctive work and it would be fair to claim that this edited volume makes the most significant contribution to the current Russian foreign policy literature in terms of defining the Soviet legacy in Russia’s present-day policy formulations.

Furthermore, the book co-authored by Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni contains three chapters targeting the past legacies of Russian foreign policy. The authors not only explain the Tsarist legacy in Soviet foreign policy formulations but also put forth the roots of modern Russia’s expansionist policies. Moreover, this study contributes to the continuity and change debate in Russian foreign policy, and the roots of modern Russia’s nationalist policies are discussed in the context of Marxist-Leninists ideology. The role of war in policy considerations is clarified as well. Although the balance of power concept has been mainly adopted, this volume still makes a clear contribution to the Soviet legacy gap and the Russian foreign policy literature in general.

The handbook edited by Tsygankov is one of the most comprehensive and broad studies conducted on this subject. It successfully covers most of the puzzling aspects of Russian foreign policy, including the theoretical bases, important instruments and actors, policy directions concerning different regions, and objectives concerning international organizations. In some chapters, the authors mention historical inheritance. Yet, there is not a direct engagement with the past legacies, which would require broader research. Moreover, since the past inheritance and Soviet legacy are not particularly included within the scope of the book edited by Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen, it understandably does not make a significant contribution to the Soviet legacy gap. However, it does successfully elaborate on Russia’s role in global politics by focusing on regional organizations and helps us to understand Russia’s motives, strategies, and perceptions regarding global issues and organizations. These issues are also among the missing pieces in the Russian foreign policy literature that have not been discussed systematically. In this respect, this volume’s contribution should not be ignored.

Endnote