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ANALYSIS OF CURRENT EVENTS

Russia and the Baltic states: problematizing the Soviet legacy discourse[†]

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Most studies of the post-Soviet space often explicitly or implicitly analyze Russia not as a new independent state but as the political successor of the USSR, thereby almost automatically leading to conclusions about Russian neo-imperialism. This paper explains how distorted discourses on the Soviet legacy originated and how they obstruct equal relations between Russia and other former Soviet republics using the example of the Baltic states.

Keywords: Russia; post-Soviet space; Soviet legacy; Baltic states; regional cooperation in the post-Soviet space

Introduction

Studies of the post-Soviet space usually present Russia as a regional hegemon because its territory is larger and its natural, demographic, economic, military and political resources are greater than those of all the other former Soviet republics put together. Moreover, most Western analyses argue that Russian policies in the post-Soviet space[1] stem exclusively from Moscow's imperial ambitions, inherited from the USSR. The newly independent states and the West perceive Russia as not only the legal but also the political successor of the Soviet Union. Such perceptions are also partly cultivated by the Russian leadership, which, at the official level, simultaneously issues calls for overcoming the legacy of the Cold War.

This paper argues that these analytical and political discourses do not correctly reflect the contribution of the Soviet legacy either to the Russian role in the post-Soviet space or Russia's bilateral relations with other former Soviet republics or to Eurasian integration efforts. It analyzes the origins and consequences of assuming that Russia is the political successor to the USSR in these regional bilateral and multilateral relations. I discuss the traditional explanatory discourses – namely, the post-colonial and the neo-imperial – and not only expose their deficiencies but also show the ways in which they damage current political relations in the post-Soviet region.

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Should Russia be blamed for the sins of the Soviet regime?

The first analytical and political discourse that relates Russian policies to the Soviet legacy can be called "post-colonial." Such a discourse is based on the perception of the Soviet Union as an empire, the successor to the Russian Empire (see e.g. Kuzio 2002). Such an analytical frame, however, raises a basic methodological question: Which countries should be considered the colonies of the Soviet Union and Russia? Should they include all former Soviet republics, or are Ukraine and Belarus exceptions because they are ethnically, culturally, and historically similar territories? And should the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe be considered colonies or semi-colonies?

However, to continue presenting this first discourse, I will disregard these methodological ambiguities and temporarily consider the USSR as an empire, with Russia its legal and political successor. From this logic, it follows that Russia has to be blamed for all the Soviet sins and is responsible for the Soviet colonial past. The leading examples of states that hold Russia blameworthy are the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), which have more grounds than other former republics to be considered colonized territories. These three countries were independent before June 1940, when they were occupied by the Soviet Union.[2] The legal basis of this occupation was the division of spheres of influence fixed in the secret protocol to the 1939 Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union (also known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). In August 1940, the Baltic states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as its republics. In 1941–1944 the Baltic republics were occupied by Germany, which invaded the USSR in June 1941. In 1944 the three republics were reoccupied (or "liberated," in Soviet terms) by the Soviet Union.

Soviet historiography of World War II clearly differs drastically from that of post-Soviet Baltic historiography. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the "politics of memory" played an important role in the political agenda of bilateral relations between Russia and the Baltic states.[3] Occupational and post-colonial discourses of the Baltic states often take the shape of the politics of guilt. In their disputes with Russia, these three countries consistently present themselves as victims of the Soviet regime. Given that Russia is regarded as the successor of the USSR, these states wait for Russia to take the first step towards reconciliation by acknowledging its "imperial" guilt.

Where do these blaming strategies of the Baltic states originate? The Baltic states use discourses based both on the European colonial experience and the national guilt recovery strategies of the Axis powers after World War II. Even if they differ in their specifics, both sets of cases involve national self-blame and repentance. Twentieth-century decolonization resulted partially from conscious efforts on the parts of colonial powers, while international pressure forced the states defeated in World War II to admit their guilt. The logic of de-colonization and post-colonial guilt, bolstered by modernization theory, led to the development of aid programs to former colonies. De-Nazification and similar processes in other defeated states involved shifts of ideology and changes in political elites. But post-Soviet Russia had neither. The question remains whether Russia therefore managed to escape remorse with impunity. From the viewpoint of the Baltic states, the obvious answer is yes if we take Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union.

However, when the Baltic states or Ukraine (with its memory of the famine of the 1932–1933) blame Russia for the Soviet legacy, Russians are offended, because they also suffered from the abuses of the Soviet regime. Moreover, that Russians were also victims of the Soviet regime is almost always overlooked in the former republics' national discourses equating Russia with the former colonial power. Self-blame was not part of the Russian political discourse in the 1990s because Moscow believed itself to be a (self-)liberator and a

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victim of the Soviet regime, not a former oppressor: Rather than collapsing into one colonial power with 14 former colonies, the Soviet Union decomposed into 15 new independent states. Russia thus inherited Soviet legal liabilities and debts but not the Soviet regime. As all 15 former republics are equal in their relations to the Soviet system, from the Russian viewpoint the Baltic states can just as equally blame Armenia, Belarus, or Kazakhstan for the Soviet legacy.

As for colonialism and Nazism, the countries in which these phenomena originated acknowledged their guilt. The Soviet Union itself has acknowledged the sins of Stalinism, first in 1956 when Nikita Khrushchev gave his famous speech "On the Personality Cult and its Consequences" at the XX Party Congress of the CPSU. The second wave of de-Stalinization started in the late 1980s with Mikhail Gorbachev's politics of *glasnost*. Thus, self-blame and repentance occurred before the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, international condemnation of the crimes of the totalitarian communist regimes came only in the second half of the 2000s: The Council of Europe adopted a declaration condemning these crimes only in 2006; the European Parliament proclaimed the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism in 2008; and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe signed the Vilnius Declaration condemning the glorification of totalitarian regimes, including the holding of public demonstrations glorifying the Nazi or Stalinist past, in 2009. Although in Russia in 2010 the head of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, Mikhail Fedotov, attempted to revive the de-Stalinization process, this move did not get much publicity.[4]

World War II memories as a nation-building instrument in Russia and the Baltic states

If after the collapse of the USSR there is no political entity for the former "colonies" to blame, why do the Baltic states remain so persistent in aiming a blaming rhetoric at Russia? And if Russia pursues a self-victimization strategy, why did Russia not start de-Stalinization and de-communization right after 1991? The answers to both questions lie in the processes of nation building. Russia opted for a *civic* strategy of nation building, while the Baltic states chose an *ethnocentric* approach. While ethnic nationalism appeared to be the fastest way of self-determination in the Baltics, in other new independent states (i.e. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova) this nation-building strategy led to secessionist conflicts. As both a multiethnic and a federal state, Russia chose a civic nationalism strategy, which nevertheless did not preclude the emergence of different ethnic separatism movements (from the most overt case of Chechnya to the less obvious ones of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Yakutia). Despite different nation-building strategies, since their independence both the Baltic states and Russia have encountered problems of national unity, and both have tried to solve these problems by resorting to the Soviet legacy – but with opposite objectives.

For the Baltic states, their Russian-speaking minorities appear to be the only obstacle to national unity. Given that the Russian-speaking population migrated to the Baltic republics during the Soviet period, these states blame the USSR for their current lack of social cohesion – even though the underlying feelings fueling discrimination against their Russian-speaking populations is the desire to reestablish historic justice. However, since the former colonial power no longer exists as a political entity, and the Russian Federation also presents itself as a victim, the Baltic states are avenging themselves against those who personify the defeated regime but who are indeed not responsible for its sins – ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking minorities.

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Therefore, Russian-language minority issues in the Baltic states constitute reverse discrimination resulting from ethnocentric nation-building strategies and (if we accept the colonization thesis) from the colonial past. Meanwhile, Russians are offended by the treatment of Russian-language minorities in other post-Soviet states, not because Russians fundamentally question the ethnocentric approach but because they believe that the basis for post-colonial reverse discrimination is unwarranted. Colonial history is typically based on an ethnic discrimination discourse of civilization versus "barbarism." In the Soviet Union, however, the goal of creating a Soviet nation based on class identity excluded (at least at the level of ideology) any grounds for ethnic discrimination. Political repressions in the Soviet period affected different ethnic groups, including ethnic Russians. During the Soviet period, the titular nations[5] in the Soviet republics were always represented in local political structures, and their national cultures supported. Linguistic discrimination in the Baltic states, however, now leads to discrimination in both political and educational spheres, and is perceived in Russia as a response aimed at the wrong target.

In post-colonial theories, heavily influenced by the modern constructivist concept of Orientalism developed by Edward Said, the West socially constructs the Orient by negatively inverting Western culture and creating a discourse of hierarchy and civilization versus barbarism. It then uses this discourse to subordinate indigenous peoples (Said 1978, 1993). However, applying this concept to Soviet or independent Russia is difficult. For centuries Russians have been searching for their own cultural and geographic identity, and even now they cannot decide whether Russia is a European, Asian, or Eurasian nation. In contrast, the Baltics, even under Soviet rule, have always been perceived by their Soviet and now post-Soviet neighbors, including Russia, as more culturally advanced, European, and genuinely Western. At least at the level of popular perception, it was the colonial power that was culturally alienated, not the colonies.

As the Baltic states need a reason to justify their reverse discrimination against their Russian-speaking minorities, after the dissolution of the real occupier they focus their "occupational" rhetoric on Russia. Moreover, if the Baltic states hold Russia responsible, they have to regard it as the direct political successor of the USSR. But why has Russia accepted these rules of the game? Why does Russia care about Russian-speaking minorities who are not willing to migrate back to Russia? Discrimination notwithstanding, no serious ethnic clashes occurred in the Baltic states between the "Baltic" populations and Russian-speaking groups. As the main civil unrest in the Baltic states took place around events related to World War II,[6] not present-day politics, this time the answers are related to the Russian nation-building strategy.

In the 1990s some analysts predicted that the Russian Federation could disintegrate in the same manner as the Soviet Union did. Moreover, two Chechen wars[7] and the search for more political autonomy from different ethnic republics within Russia (Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Yakutia) reinforced such fears of partition. In addition, local regional governors[8] appeared to have more power than the federal government. Thus, the "power vertical"[9] that Russian President Vladimir Putin created in the 2000s was an attempt to centralize power and prevent the country from splitting apart. However, neither the military solution to the Chechen separatism problem nor the bureaucratic solution to the excessive freedom enjoyed by the local governors (i.e. replacing gubernatorial elections with federal appointments) helped unite the nation. Given that an ethnic nation-building strategy would destroy social cohesion in multiethnic Russia and that civic nationalism is likely to fail in the absence of a consolidated civil society, federal authorities were looking for a national idea. Eventually, they found part of the solution to the national unity problem in the mythologized fight against Nazism during the Great Patriotic War.[10] Establishing this idea was

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relatively easy, as in official Russian historiography the Russian people are always the "liberator," never the "occupier."

Thus, the mutually exclusive official Russian and Baltic historiographies of World War II are irreconcilable, not because a more or less objective (or democratic) version of history cannot exist but because both accounts serve as the foundations for nation building. However, at the rhetorical level neither Russia nor the Baltic states advance beyond arguments about whether the communist or the Nazi occupation was worse. But such arguments constitute a false alternative, because history has already condemned both the Stalinist and Nazi totalitarian regimes. So why do Russia and the Baltic states compete in such mutual accusations, leading to a kind of incrimination race, with each side vying for who can lay the most blame on the other?

In the end, both Russia and the Baltic states attempt to escape feelings of guilt. Accusations aimed at the Soviet regime permit some in the Baltic states to avoid acknowledging unpleasant or shameful facts in their own history, facts presented as an induced reaction to the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact and the subsequent Soviet occupation. In turn, in reaction to the Baltic states' negative attitudes toward Soviet policies, Russia embellishes its past, sometimes going so far as to deny the obvious abuses of the Soviet regime. The main challenge for Russia is to find the right balance between the positive and negative records of the Soviet regime. However, 20 years after the collapse of the USSR, Moscow remains morally unready to do so. If each side were to accept its share of responsibility for the common past, face the facts, acknowledge them, and move on (as the Baltic states appear to have done with Germany), bilateral relations between Russia and each of the Baltic states would become less tense.

Soviet legacy in regional cooperation: neo-imperialism or post-post-colonialism?

In Russia there is a widespread perception that NATO and EU membership was extended to the Baltics states mainly because they managed to convince the West that Russian neo-imperial ambitions pose a threat to their sovereignty. Despite some potential threats to Russia international image, one might even view neo-imperial analytical discourses as flattering to Russia, given that they affirm its role as a regional leader and as a real, not only legal, successor to the USSR. But the methodological problem is whether to regard Russian policies in the post-Soviet space as *neo-imperial* or *post-colonial*.[11] According to the neo-imperial approach, Russia as the Soviet successor has similar hegemonic ambitions; therefore, it should attempt to economically (if not territorially) reconquer its neighbors and exploit their resources. This thesis is often exploited by the Baltics states. According to the post-colonial approach, Russia as the successor of an empire should suffer colonial guilt and thus provide its former colonies with financial aid and help them modernize. While both these approaches follow from the assumption that Russia is the Soviet Union's political successor, their hypotheses are mutually exclusive. I therefore analyze both hypotheses.

Moscow remains conflicted about its "imperial" legacy and the "white man's burden" that it inherited from the Soviet Union. The most frequent Russian counterargument to the claim that the Soviet Union was an empire and that all 14 republics were Russian colonies is that Soviet Russia was not a dominant colonial power that exploited its "colonies" but, on the contrary, a central government that economically developed the Soviet republics. This behavior would be both post-colonial and post-imperial, in line with the communist ideological fight against "imperialism." Russian strategies after 1991 can thus be termed *post*-post-colonial. However, some analysts argue that the economic strategies of the central

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Soviet government were aimed not at developing the republics but at creating a strong single economy with divisions of labor among all of them, leading to disproportionate development and overspecialization of republican economies.

According to the logic of post-colonialism, Russia should modernize and develop the economies of its former colonies. Yet in the framework of the 2010 EU–Russia Partnership for modernization, Russia itself has become a subject of modernization, while the democratic Baltic states, as members of the EU and NATO, have ended up as a source of political and economic modernization for the former colonial power. The hierarchical relations are thus reversed.

As for economic relations with other post-Soviet states, Russia has been increasingly ready in recent years to become a "normal" regional power with no post-colonial guilt or neo-imperial aspirations. In practice, this trend has translated into Russia's desire to depoliticize economic relations with its post-Soviet neighbors, in particular limiting preferential policies, which provokes protests of the former "colonies" (e.g. Russian "gaz wars" with Ukraine and Belarus). The former "colonies" continue to seek financial assistance from Russia and, thus, actually support the idea that Russia is the genuine successor of the Soviet Union. And these former Soviet republics welcome Russian assistance, no matter whether assistance is provided by Russia to redeem its past colonial guilt or to extend its neo-imperial influence.

Conclusion

Russia is often perceived by its post-Soviet neighbors as a true political successor of the Soviet Union, a successor that has to take responsibility for all of the Soviet regime's sins. Such an approach may be flattering to Russia because it recognizes Russia as a genuine regional hegemon. However, this approach has many negative consequences. Thus, Russians are still of two minds about whether their country should behave like a regional leader-successor of the Soviet Union or simply be tired of paying (economically and morally) for its virtual regional hegemony. Russian strategies of avoiding responsibility and presenting itself as a victim in disputes with the Baltic states follow from Russia's unwillingness to make a positive and negative accounting of the Soviet regime's record. But such a task is necessary for Russia, despite the difficulty of reconciling its great power aspirations with its unwillingness to play the role of the regional hegemon. Twenty years after the "civilized divorce," it is high time for Russia to decide to be free of both the past and the "post."

Notes

1. The term "post-Soviet space" usually refers to the 12 former Soviet republics except the Baltic states, which are now members of the EU and NATO. However, in this article I use this term to designate all 15 former Soviet republics. I also use the established term "new independent states" as a synonym, although, of course, the former Soviet republics have been independent for over 20 years.
2. In this paper I analyze only the USSR as a colonizer of the Baltic states and disregard the Russian Empire because the colonial discourse in the Baltic states is limited to the conflicting interpretations of the Soviet history and almost does not make references to the Russian imperial past. If the Baltic states wanted to use arguments related to their colonization by the Russian Empire, they would have to admit that some of their EU partners also had imperial ambitions toward the Baltic states and, thus, they can be regarded as former colonizers as well. Another explanation of the choice of the Soviet Union for the main colonizer is that the Baltic states received a chance to build sovereign nation-states for the first time in their history only after

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the collapse of the Russian Empire when they gained independence. Thus loss of independence in 1940 is perceived now in the Baltic region as a greater damage to the process of the nation-building of the Baltic states than Russian imperial rule, because the Soviet occupation interrupted unaccomplished state- and nation-building processes.

3. "Politics of memory," a widespread political phenomenon, is commonly used in reference to the relations of Russia with the post-Soviet states. For more World War II examples, see *Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (ed. by Lebow, Kansteiner, and Fogu 2006).
4. The Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights established a working group on historic memory. This working group organized a series of seminars on Stalinism and launched a website "Historic memory: XX century" (http://istpamyat.ru/), presenting the history of political repressions from 1918 to 1991.
5. "Titular nation" is a Soviet term denoting a dominant ethnic group that gives its name to an administrative unit within the Soviet Union (e.g. "Ukrainians" for Ukraine or "Armenians" for Armenia).
6. For political clashes over World War II monuments in Estonia, see Brüggemann and Kasekamp (2008).
7. The First Chechen War, or the First Campaign, took place in 1994–1996; the Second Chechen War, officially called the "Counterterrorist Operation," had its active phase in 1999–2000 and formally ended in 2009.
8. Governors of the many official regions constitute the Russian Federation.
9. A term used in Russia for describing Russian president Vladimir Putin's measures to centralize power in Russia by making local authorities more accountable to the federal authorities.
10. The Russian name for the period of World War II from 22 June 1941 to 9 May 1945.
11. A similar methodological complication is discussed in: Wallander (2007).

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