Review of International Studies (2001), 27, 213–235 *Copyright © British International Studies Association*

The Russian-Soviet empire: a test of neorealism

WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH*

Russia is by some measures the most successful imperial enterprise in history. Surpassed in size only by the British and Mongol empires, Russia and its Soviet successor proved far more durable than either one. It retained its peak territorial extent longer than any other empire, and for most of the last 400 years it has been the largest polity on earth.[1] Moreover, both St. Petersburg and Moscow were hugely successful as great powers, playing major roles in European and world politics for the three centuries after 1700. And their influence as great powers peaked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—an era in which states based on nations appeared to have the competitive edge over old-fashioned polyglot empires.

Russia's brilliant career at the centre of the world political stage, however, came at a high price. Frequent and costly wars reinforced the empire's inefficient institutions, ultimately locking in Russia's backward position *vis-à-vis* its western rivals. The sprawling empire in both Tsarist and Soviet forms subsumed and truncated the Russians' own sense of national identity, and required St. Petersburg and Moscow to rule over scores of peoples—some with more developed national identities than the Russians themselves—sparking endless and draining expenditures of blood and treasure. Expansion eventually engendered opposition from other, wealthier great powers, producing costly arms races and rivalries that Russia could not win over the long run. And notwithstanding all the sacrifices, the state and empire collapsed twice in the twentieth century. The tawdry spectacle of early twenty-first century Russia—an oversized 'Upper Volta with missiles', as one popular article put it— drives home this message of ultimate failure.[2]

At the root of Russia's grandeur and tragedy is a bias toward expansion. That is, both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union were biased toward the acquisition and retention of territory, for which they were willing to pay high costs. Territory acquired was rarely given up without a fight. The underlying preference for holding territory fed a willingness govern it by strong central control whenever challenged internally, which further raised the costs of empire. There is thus no disagreement on

* I am grateful to Mathew Rendall for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.

[1] Rein Taagepera, 'Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia', *International Studies Quarterly*, 41:3 (1997), pp. 475–504.

[2] Jeffrey Tayler, 'Russia is Finished,' *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2001), pp. 35–52. A more graphic example of popular turn-of-the century views of Russia is the following from John Robson, Deputy Editorial Page Editor of *The Ottawa Citizen*, 'Normal for Russia is filthy, corrupt, menacing and hollow. Nothing good has ever happened there, nor will it. Russia is a lump of dung wrapped in a cabbage leaf hidden in an outhouse.' Cited in Dmitry Mikheyev 'Russia: Myths and Reality', Johnson's Russia List, no. 5292 (10 June 2001).

the key 'dependent variable' for IR theory. Russia appears to have suffered from an expansionistic bias that saddled it with too many territories and enemies and too few resources to deal with either.

How to explain this ultimately self-defeating propensity to expand? On this question turn a great many debates about both general IR theory and the explanation of particular cases. The standard approach in the field today is to assess a state's behaviour in a limited set of cases against a theoretically informed baseline account of the international system's imperatives. Scholars generally select cases that span a few years or at most a few decades. Within this restricted temporal domain, they normally find that the international system's incentives as described by Kenneth Waltz's neorealist theory cannot account for the given state's behaviour.[3] That is, the standard neorealist explanatory model—the imperative of survival in anarchy given the distribution of power—is either indeterminate or predicts a defensive non-expansionary stance on the part of the state. The conclusion follows that costly expansionism can only be explained by reference to domestic politics, ideas, or some combination thereof.[4]

These studies have contributed a great deal to our knowledge of international relations. Indeed, the basic approach taken in this literature is close to being the conventional wisdom in the field today. But the conventional approach presents an ambiguity. Neorealist theory concerns long-term structural pressures, not the explanation of specific events or even a limited series of events.[5] The theory is bound to be indeterminate concerning specific cases over short periods. Any finding concerning a temporally limited case, or even the cumulation of many such findings, cannot alter the theory's status. Intentionally or not, most of the case study literature is applying rather than truly testing the theory, a practice that has the effect of reinforcing its influence. The result is a growing body of empirical literature that appears to undermine neorealist theory, yet the theory continues to be used as a baseline for analysing state behaviour. There are few if any attempts to test it on its own terms: as an explanation of subtle structural influence over long stretches of time. In the absence of such tests, what grounds do scholars have for using neorealism as a baseline?

This Special Issue of the *Review* is thus fortuitous. It provides an opportunity to examine the neorealist explanation in exactly the domain to which it purports to

[3] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). It is important to stress that here I evaluate not the whole family of neorealist theories, but the central aspects of the theory set forth in Waltz's text that bear on the explanation of expansionism.

[4] For reviews of this literature, see Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (eds.), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Richard Rosecrance, 'Overextension, Vulnerability, and Conflict: The "Goldilocks Problem" in International Strategy', *International Security*, 19:4 (1995), pp. 145–63. Premier examples include: Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Snyder, *Myths of Empire; Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). On Russia, see Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive,* chs. 6–7. On the Soviet Union, see Matthew Evangelista, 'Internal and External Constraints on Grand Strategy: The Soviet Case', in Rosecrance and Stein (eds.), *Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy;* Snyder, *Myths of Empire,* ch. 6. Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Richard D. Anderson, Jr, *Public Politics in an Authoritarian State: Making Foreign Policy During the Brezhnev Years* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[5] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Waltz, 'International Politics is Not Foreign Policy', *Security Studies*, 6:1 (Autumn 1996), esp. pp. 54–57. Cf. Colin Elman, 'Horses for Courses: Why *Not* Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?', *Security Studies* 6:1 (Autumn 1996), pp. 7–53.

apply. For Russia's career as empire and great power is precisely coterminous with the seventeenth–twentieth century 'Westphalian' system. If neorealism is to be considered a useful theory of long-term structural causation, then it should be able to generate a broadly accurate explanatory account of major patterns of international behaviour over the entire three-century career of a great power within this system. If major schools of historical scholarship on the Russian and Soviet imperial past persistently question the existence and causal importance of the mechanisms that neorealist theory predict ought to have been in play, then we may fairly conclude that it has suffered a blow on its home turf and that its status as a 'baseline' theory has been impugned.[6]

My purpose in this article is to conduct such an evaluation, subject to the obvious space constraints. Given the frequency with which Waltz's project has been declared to be a 'degenerating' research programme or a fatally 'ahistorical' approach (as well as my own prior expectation based on my previous work), the result is surprising: neorealist theory turns out to have powerful explanatory leverage over the larger pattern of Russian and Soviet strategic choices.[7] From the standpoint of the historiography of Russian and Soviet imperialism, the problem with neorealism is not that it is wrong but that it is obviously true. The contention that international anarchy generates pervasive security problems that powerfully constrain states and influence their identities and domestic political arrangements is a truism for students of Russian and Soviet history. Moreover, Waltz's structural approach to theory, which highlights socialization and selection rather than strict rational choice as the key causal mechanisms, resonates strongly with the empirical literature on Russia. Neorealist theory clearly fails to tell experts much about the Russian and Soviet past that they did not already know, but it does provide a deductively based explanation for perennial forces that they regard as central to Russian and Soviet history.

Applying one of the most abstract IR theories ever written to a specific case does require one additional, though widely accepted assumption. For neorealist theory to explain important patterns of Russian-Soviet behaviour, one must accept that strategic choices are path-dependent. If an actor adapts successfully to environmental pressures, the probability of continuing down that adaptive path increases because the relative costs of switching back to some previously possible adaptive path increase.[8] States' adaptation to systemic pressures is therefore 'sticky' in that the costs imposed by initially successful but eventually suboptimal adaptations frequently must rise dramatically to prompt a change of course. States may therefore follow apparently inefficient strategic paths for long periods. When states do reverse course, the resulting changes may be sudden and dramatic—defying prediction and

[6] In other words, this is what Stephen Van Evera calls a 'hoop test', because neorealist theory is very likely to fit the Russian-Soviet case of expansion. 'To remain viable, the theory must jump through the hoop this test presents, but passage of the test still leaves the theory in limbo'. See Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 31. It is a less rigorous version of Harry Eckstein's 'most likely' test. See Eckstein, 'Case Study and Theory in Political Science,' in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (eds), *Handbook of Political Science*, vol. 7: *Strategies of Inquiry* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975): pp. 79–137.

[7] Paul W. Schroeder, 'Historical Reality versus Neorealist Theory', *International Security*, 19: 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–48; John A. Vasquez, 'The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs', *American Political Science Review*, 91:4 (1997), pp. 899–912.

[8] Paul Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 94: 2 (2000), pp. 251–68.

appearing to defy explanation based on the immediate initial conditions. Timing and sequencing matter: actors' initial advantages in a formative period have important consequences for their behaviour in subsequent periods.[9] All of these themes—timing, sequencing, inefficiency, sudden and dramatic reversals—are central in Russian history. That is why the *longue durée* perspective favoured in this Special Issue is so important for assessing arguments about the veracity of neorealist theory. The periods of Russian and Soviet history that appear in hindsight to present the greatest challenges to neorealist theory are in part explained by path dependency.

Three pervasive themes in the empirical literature on Russian and Soviet imperial history reflect the explanatory purchase of neorealism: the primacy of the security problem; the influence of geopolitics on identity and domestic institutions; and the causal salience of socialization and adaptation to external pressures. I consider these themes in the sections that follow. I then reconsider briefly a period of expansionist behaviour most analysts regard as particularly anomalous: Soviet policy from Brezhnev to Gorbachev. I conclude with a discussion of implications for theory and explanation.

The primacy of the security problem

Neorealist theory posits that the interaction of several states in anarchy renders their security problematic and encourages them to compete. Does the system induce an expansionistic bias on the part of states? Realists themselves frequently disagree on this question, with 'offensive realists' arguing that anarchy encourages such a bias while 'defensive realists' hold that such a bias is inexplicable without reference to the internal properties of states.[10] Conceptual differences do divide these theoretical strains, particularly over how to model human decision-making.[11] But often their differences turn on disagreements over the existence and causal effects of 'structural modifiers' (such as geography and military technology) that might reduce the benefits of conquest and decrease systemic incentives for security competition. So both may be more or less true in different degrees for different international systems in different periods, and the question of which applies in a given instance—and therefore whether an observed bias toward expansion is optimal—is often an empirical one.[12] While different strains of realist theory may generate different predictions concerning the optimality of expansion in general, they may converge on particular cases. There are three reasons, each one a major theme in the historical literature, that for most of its history Russia faced particularly severe security problems and therefore that the origins of its expansionistic bias lay in international rather than domestic politics.

[9] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), ch. 4.

[10] For a review of this debate, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited', *International Security*, 25:3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 128–161.

[11] Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms', *International Organization*, 51:3 (1997), pp. 445–77.

[12] Stephen M. Walt, 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Research Tradition', in Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (eds.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington, DC: The American Political Science Association, forthcoming 2002).

Geography

First, the flat geography of the Eurasian plain bred a genuinely Hobbesian international system in which a bias toward expansion was the only means of survival. Muscovy developed its statehood as the great nomadic Mongol empire that had sprung from the endless steppes to the south and east had begun to break down. There were no natural borders. The vast territory from the Carpathians and the Caucasus mountains north to the Baltic and east to the Pacific lies no more than 100 metres above sea level (excepting the Ural mountains that rise no more than 600 metres). There was no defence against offensively powerful rivals except for the resources and strategic depth provided by territory. A comparatively small and sedentary agricultural principality, Muscovy lay wide open to the offensively potent successor steppe khanates to the south and east, and the rapidly expanding Polish and Lithuanian kingdoms to the west. The units in this system were offensively powerful but defensively weak owing both to geography and to the susceptibility of domestic factions to manipulation by outside powers. It was characterized by expansive, unpopulated or sparsely populated tracts of land that were easy to conquer and potentially valuable strategically. National sentiments were weak and presented comparatively few barriers to conquest. Sovereignty was tenuous. International relations were carried out in the temporal shadow of an Empire that had stretched from the Himalayas and the Pacific to the Danube. The possibility that a rival might reunite seemingly independent units, and quickly obtain the capabilities necessary to eliminate the sovereignty of all members of the system, remained in peoples' consciousness.

Anyone familiar with this system would find the notion that a state could overcome the security dilemma by 'signalling benign intentions', or 'creating non-offensive defence' derisory. The system obviously did not determine which state would survive. Systemic pressures clearly do not explain why of all the Russian principalities it was Muscovy that succeeded. One must clearly look inside the units to explain why it was Russia and not Lithuania, Poland, or a Mongol successor state that prevailed. Much of the historical literature is rightly concerned with explanation at this level. But implicit in these studies is the finding that the unit that survived in this system would be big. Everything we know about the international politics of Eurasia in the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries suggests that there was no equilibrium in which a small eastern Slav state could have survived.

It was a game of conquer or be conquered. But successful conquest offered no lasting security, only the chance to play another round as it brought contact with a new neighbour and a new potential enemy. Those new challenges kept the pressure on for further expansion, whenever and wherever feasible. Russia solved the threat from the steppes by expanding until it became a great Eurasian empire, but in so doing it placed itself in the path of other more powerful and often far more efficient states. Thus, the Tatar khanates and Poland-Lithuania were eventually replaced by Sweden and Turkey, which were followed in time by even more formidable powers to the west. And the regional system where this contact took place—where western Eurasia, Asia Minor and Eastern Europe met—was as a rule more dangerous and sanguinary than the western European system with which many IR scholars are most familiar. Wars were continuous in both systems, but were bloodier in the east. Borders were unstable in both, but more so in the east. States were eliminated from

the map in both, but more frequently in the east. Geography in this system was only marginally more suited to the defence than that further East in Eurasia. If the European states system ever approximated the hellishly competitive world described by offensive realist theory, then it was in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. Russia lived in that system's most dangerous neighbourhood. And it stayed dangerous until the twentieth century, as a comparison of the casualty statistics from the eastern and western fronts of World War II shows.

Relative backwardness

The transition from the steppe system to the more developed and thus more lethal eastern reach of the European states system brings up the second reason Russia's security problem was so severe: relative backwardness. In competitive systems, states can either emulate the practices of successful rivals or maximize their own comparative advantages. The choice is contingent on timing and sequencing. It depends on past choices; and on whatever a state's initial advantage seems to be at the moment when the security problem happens to become especially acute. In the steppe system, Russia chose to emulate some of the successful practices of its local competition, particularly regarding autocracy (the Mongol khans were absolute autocrats), expansionism and diplomatic strategy. But since it was already a sedentary realm based on peasant agriculture, the costs of trying to become nomadic were fearsome, so it perforce exploited whatever advantages its existing practices conveyed. What turned out to be key was a mode of expansion that generated more capabilities than similar expansion by steppe rivals. Moscow would slowly penetrate the territory, co-opt some of the local aristocracy, dispossess some of their land, distribute some of the spoils to nobles who served the tsar, and seize some for the crown. The whole process was marked patience and persistence, with generations sometimes passing before local independence was totally eliminated.

By the time Russia had seriously to contend with more advanced rivals to the west, it was already a vast multinational empire. Peter the Great's response to this new challenge was once again to emulate the new rivals' more successful practices where possible, but much more fundamentally to exploit the initial comparative advantages of his empire's very backwardness: the sheer size of its territory and population mobilized by an especially ruthless autocratic regime. As William Fuller has shown, this spectacularly expensive effort to exploit Russia's initial advantage turned out to be brilliantly successful in competing with more advanced rivals for more than a century after the Russians' victory over the Swedes at Poltava in 1709.[13] During the latter nineteenth century, Fuller and many other scholars argue, the advantages of backwardness declined *vis-à-vis* western rivals. When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, Russia's old problem of backwardness was more sharply posed than it had been since the eighteenth century.[14] This set the context for Stalin's horrendously costly industrialization drive. Though many contemporaries saw it as modernization, in hindsight most scholars see it as reinforcing the old Russian

[13] William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia: 1600–1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
[14] Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

pattern of adaptation by exploiting the advantages of size, resources, and centralized state power.[15] Once again, this costly effort seemed, initially at least, to be successful for the purposes of international security competition.

Success, however, had its price. As Jack Snyder has argued, the Russian-Soviet adaptation to competitive coexistence with more advanced great powers intensified the security dilemma in a number of ways.[16] Russia's adaptive response generated military-industrial rather than commercial power, which exacerbated the security dilemma—especially with commercial-naval rivals such as Britain and the United States. The mix of resources available to a state critically affects the costs and benefits of various strategies. Commercial capabilities convey reward power; military capabilities favour coercive power.[17] In general, this incommensurability between the kinds of capabilities available to Russia and its rivals complicated their relations.[18] When signalling intent, commercial and naval capabilities offer more flexible options than military capabilities. Russia's only option in signalling intent was often the mobilization and movement of ground forces or the seizure of bits of territory. This reduced bargaining manoeuvre and heightened the security dilemma with differently endowed rivals.

In a more general vein, Snyder notes:

> Backward Russia constituted a vulnerable yet provocative target for its European competitors. Huge and lumbering, Russia always seemed an immense threat, but one that could be neutralised by a bold stroke aimed at one of its innumerable weak points. The size of Russia's army fuelled worst case analysis about its aggressive capabilities and intentions, while the relative immobility of its forces convinced opponents that aggressive containment would fend off the threat. … At the same time, the sharp fluctuations in Russian power, linked to the stop-and-go nature of its efforts to catch up to the West, created strong incentives for preventive war initiated by Russia's foes.[19]

Snyder's phrase 'vulnerable but provocative' captures the essence of the way its adaptive response tended to exacerbate the security dilemma. Examples of these dynamics are legion. In the lead up to the Crimean War, Russia's only method of signalling its intentions was to occupy two principalities of the Ottoman Empire, a move with the unfortunate side effect of looking like preparation for attack.[20] As the crisis spiralled into war, Britain invaded Russia to defend itself in Europe and India against the Tsarist Empire's might, yet at the same time contemplated pushing Russia back to its seventeenth century borders in order to eliminate the threat for good.[21] Germany went to war in 1914 ostensibly out of fear of rising Russian power,

[15] Jack Snyder, 'Russian Backwardness and the Future of Europe', *Daedalus*, 123:2 (1994), pp. 179–87; Alexander Gershenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1962).

[16] Snyder, ibid., and *Myths of Empire*.

[17] Military capabilities do offer some ability to offer rewards to elicit desired behaviour, just as commercial capabilities can be used to coerce. However, military capabilities yield relatively more coercive power than commercial capabilities. The interaction between these different kinds of power is a central tenet of social exchange theory. See David A. Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[18] This is a theme in William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[19] Snyder, 'Russian Backwardness'.

[20] See John Shelton Curtiss, *Russia's Crimean War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979, pp. 148–150.

[21] Hermann Wentler, *Zerstörung der Großmacht Rußland? Die britischen Kriegsziele im Krimkrieg* (Göttigen and Zürich: Vandenhoek and Rupprecht, 1993).

but with a war plan that assumed Russia could be eliminated quickly. The Soviet General Staff assumed it could not win a war against the full economic might of the United States, so it devised a war plan for denying US access to Eurasia. Unfortunately, 'denying US access to Eurasia' was indistinguishable in practice from 'invading and occupying western Europe', which helped unite the West against Moscow. American war planners saw their Russian counterparts' strategy as a reflection of aggressive intent, and contemplated preventive nuclear war before another upward spurt of Russian power made it invulnerable. And so on.

Security dilemmas of empire

The key to Russia's adaptive response to a threatening environment was size, which brings up the third reason Russia faced particularly acute security challenges. Russia became a great Eurasian empire in order to survive in an unforgiving international environment. Had it not become a multinational empire, Russia would likely have ended up as provinces of Poland, Sweden and Turkey. But an empire is an international system waiting to emerge, so the imperial centre must pursue a bi-level deterrence strategy, one directed outward toward other states and another directed inward toward internal groups that might choose to become states. Applied to empires, standard deterrence theory predicts that the imperial centre will want to have a reputation for resolve. The theory's assumption of interdependence—that resolve demonstrated in T1 will carry over to T2 and that resolve demonstrated on issue *X* will carry over to issue *Y*—is most applicable to centre-periphery relationships in empire. The relationship is continuous, carried out within a well-defined framework, and concerns a single set of recurring issues.

Thus, the imperial centre will place extraordinary emphasis on its reputation for resolve that will, in turn, feed a bias against relinquishing territory. These 'domestic' reputational concerns constitute a powerful constraint on imperial foreign policy. In Russia's case, the Polish problem is an example. For almost two centuries, Russian fear of a Polish uprising was a constant constraint on St. Petersburg. In 1812, Napoleon bragged that his Grand Duchy of Warsaw was a pistol aimed at Russia's heart, and Alexander agreed, concluding that he had to break out of Tilsit at nearly any cost. Thereafter, Russians ruled out many territorial concessions that they may have thought optimal for external purposes for fear of their consequences for the touchy Polish question.[22] Needless to say, precisely these concerns re-emerged in East Central Europe after the Second World War. Fear that external concessions on the German Question or other issues in European security could destabilize the Warsaw Pact was a staple of Cold War Soviet policy, as were the high costs Moscow had to pay internationally for its internal reputation for resolve.

Securing an empire in a world of empires is one thing; doing so in a world of states is quite another. Russia's initial move toward empire took place in a world without modern nationalism. Immense security benefits accrued. With time, however, the challenge of being a multinational empire intensified as the European system of states based on nations strengthened. Many theories of empire predict a

[22] William C. Fuller, Jr., provides a brilliant analysis of this constraint in *Strategy and Power In Russia*.

tendency toward decay and decline even without international competition.[23] The implication is that old-fashioned polyglot empires faced particularly intense security challenges in a system based on states that exploited national sentiment to solve collective action dilemmas and generate power. The toughness of any system can be measured by the survival rate of its members. The systems of the Eurasian steppe and early modern Europe were fairly demanding, judging by the relative frequency with which states 'fell by the wayside'. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the European system matured and survival rates for great powers increased. But this was not the case for empires. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires were in terminal decline throughout the nineteenth century. All three polyglot empires collapsed in World War I. The nation-state based overseas empires were on the retreat after 1918, and clearly on the way out after 1945. Russia and the Soviet Union faced a true dilemma. Their empires were their main source of both security and insecurity. International pressures severely limited the degree to which they could be flexible in governing their empires. Internal pressures severely limited the degree to which they could be flexible in managing relations with other great powers.

Insecurity and empire

In sum, Russia had to become a great multinational empire to survive on the Eurasian plain. But once it came into direct contact with the powerful European states system lying to its west, it had to become a great power in that international society in order to remain a multinational empire. Unless Russia was a member of that society, it would end up its victim. To be secure, it was necessary to play—and influence—the European balance of power game. Otherwise, it could fall prey to an aggressive alliance of these powerful states, all on the prowl for land and resources to use in their mutual rivalries. And the main resource it had to achieve that status was its vast empire. Maintaining and periodically extending this empire were thus necessary in order to attain and retain great-power status, which was necessary to defend the empire. The Bolsheviks came to power contemptuous of the European international system and its rules. Once they realized that their revolution would not soon spread, however, they came to appreciate the security imperative of active participation in that system, and that one of their main assets in the balance of power game was the sheer size and resources of the territory they controlled. This mutually reinforcing relationship between great power status, security and empire goes a long way toward explaining the larger pattern of Russian-Soviet expansionism.

Realists may argue over the degree to which anarchy generates a universal bias toward expansion. Concerning the Russian case, however, the theory is unambiguous. Even if we take the lead from defensive realist theory and consider the 'fine-grained structure of power', we find in Eurasia and Eastern Europe Hobbesian systems. For most of their history Muscovy, Russia and the Soviet Union existed in

[23] See David A. Lake, 'The Rise, Fall and Future of the Russian Empire', in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds.), *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); Carlo M. Cipolla (ed.), *The Economic Decline of Empires* (London: Methuen, 1970); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Alexander Motyl, 'From Imperial Decay to Imperial Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Empire in Comparative Perspective', in Richard L. Rudolph and David F. Good (eds.), *Nationalism and Empire: The Hapsburg Empire and the Soviet Union* (New York, 1992).

dangerous international systems that fostered expansion as a solution to the security problem. It is true that both Russia's and the Soviet Union's solution to the security challenge began to obsolesce late in the history of both empires. Whether these periods present important anomalies for a neorealist explanation requires a far more nuanced specification of the dependent variable than one usually encounters.

Domestic institutions and ideas are endogenous to systemic constraints

In many explanatory accounts of the Russian-Soviet bias toward expansion, domestic institutions and identity take on autonomous causal powers. The upshot of the foregoing discussion, however, is that the Russian Empire was in important ways a product of systemic pressures. It follows that the institutions necessary to govern it and the ideas needed to make sense of it were also endogenous to the international system. To be sure, the further into the specifics we go, the weaker the systemic influences may appear. Neorealist theory does not predict the precise nature of institutions and ideas; it merely predicts the rough manner in which states will be shaped by the international system. This predicted endogeneity is strongly present in the Russian and Soviet cases.

Insecurity, autocracy, and Russia's 'imperial identity'

The importance of systemic pressures in explaining the European state-building process is a well-established finding in social science.[24] Given the especially competitive nature of the Eurasian and Eastern European systems, it is not surprising to find that this theme is even stronger in the literature on the origins of the Russian autocracy. As might be expected, specialists debate the causal weight that ought to be attributed to external pressures. When one compares the literature on Russian state building with that concerning other countries, however, the greater salience of external factors in the Russian case is striking. 'The fundamental fact was the primacy of external concerns', writes Robert C. Tucker.[25] Dominic Lieven summarizes his conclusion as follows: 'The demands of international power politics and of membership of the European and then global system of great powers were of overwhelming importance in Russian history. More probably than any other single factor they determined the history of modern Russia'.[26] So many and so tight are the links between insecurity, expansion, and the emergence of the institutions of autocracy—the power of the Tsar over the aristocracy, serfdom, the creation of the service nobility, and the subordination of the Church—that it is not possible to construct a narrative of the origins of Russian state structure without according major importance to them.

[24] See S. E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).
[25] Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 15.
[26] Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London: John Murray, 2000), p. ix.

The same goes for the origins of Russia's imperial identity. Given what we know about the Eurasian international system in the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, Moscow's seemingly fateful choice of identity as the 'gatherer of the Russian lands' functioned also as a grand strategy for survival as an independent polity. There was a catch, however. Ivan III's expansion to the north and east gave Moscow the resources without which it could not have deflected the last major effort by the lower Volga khanates to subordinate it in 1480. Moreover, this expansion yielded the means eventually to halt and reverse the rapid westward advance of Poland-Lithuania, a rival claimant to the identity of 'gatherer of Russian lands'. But in expanding to the east Ivan was already 'gathering up' non-Russian land and people (Tatars and Finno-Ugric tribes). When Ivan IV absorbed the khanates of Kazan' and Astrakhan, he gathered up large, coherent, territorially defined non-Russian and non-Orthodox polities. It was this expansion to the east that gave Russia the resources it needed to survive the Time of Troubles, during which it came perilously close to being partitioned among Poland, Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. However, this resource base came at the cost of Russia's original identity as the gatherer together of the Russian people *and* its nascent identity as successor to Byzantium and leader of the Orthodox faith. Neither of those identities would do for a state whose geopolitical position required the acquisition of territories inhabited by Moslem Tatars.

This captures one of the most important themes of Russian history: in the end, the empire defined the identity, rather than *vice versa*.[27] The fateful distinction between *rossiskiy* (having to do with the Russian imperial state) versus *russkiy* (having to do with the Russian nation) and the perennial ambiguity between identifying with Europe or Asia—both of which dog contemporary Russia—have their origins in the imperative to build and maintain an empire in response to systemic pressures. The Russians became just one of many peoples—indeed, worse off than many—within an empire run by a multinational elite. Ukranians, Poles, Tatars and eventually other non-Russians were welcomed into the imperial aristocracy. Baltic German aristocrats staffed the foreign ministry and army. A German Princess became Empress. Territories inhabited by nations with more developed national identities, such as the Poles and the Finns, were acquired and granted special freedoms. For over a century, this imperial identity served its purpose brilliantly, creating another instance of the path-dependency problem. In the nineteenth century, however, Russian rulers began to sense the competitive advantages their rivals obtained by exploiting national sentiment. They could either mimic their rivals or fall back on further entrenching the imperial identity. The costs and benefits of these alternatives were powerfully constrained by past choices. The Russians were numerous, and might form a national core, especially if Ukranians and Byelorussians could be induced to become Russian. But the power of Russian national feeling could only be tapped at the risk of alienating numerous non-Russian imperial subjects in the ruling class as well as the intelligentsia and peasantry, thus exacerbating the internal security problem and escalating the governance costs of empire.

[27] This is a central theme in Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). He carries it to the Soviet period in Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001). For a brilliant analysis of the Europe-Asia identity tension, see Marc Bassin, 'Russia Between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geography', *Slavic Review* 50: 1 (1991), pp. 1–17.

Socializing the Bolsheviks

The Russian Revolution provides a wonderful test for social science theory, though a tragic and costly one for the Russians and other subjects of the empire. A new Bolshevik elite came to power, imbued with radical new ideas and the motive to create new institutions. Yet it confronted the same security pressures as its Tsarist predecessors, and still had to contend with the effect of past Russian solutions to those pressures; that is, backwardness and empire. To be sure, the revolution itself exacerbated the security dilemma, and revolutionary ideology impeded co-operation with the west.[28] But systemic pressures in the dangerous multipolarity of the inter-war years powerfully influenced Soviet choices throughout the fateful years of the revolution. The result was a series of compromises between the revolutionary identity and the twin problems of security and the imperial legacy in which the latter continually and steadily gained at the expense of the former.

The story of the uneven but inexorable 'socialization' of Bolshevik ideas and institutions to international system pressures is well documented. The main intellectual rationales were survival and competitiveness. The Bolsheviks had to adjust ideas and institutions to permit or explain actions deemed necessary to continue in power. In international politics as described in neorealist theory, survival over the long run requires competitiveness. Given the failure of the revolution to spread as expected, the revolutionaries' hopes perforce resided in their state, and the security of that state became paramount. If in the long run the state could not compete materially with rivals, the original revolutionary purpose would be lost. The logic of competition implied the standard mix of emulation of and asymmetrical response to rivals, however in this instance it was supplemented by the Bolsheviks' ideological commitment to modernism. The Tsarist autocracy was chained to its traditions. The Bolshevik dictatorship was ideologically committed to modernism. Because the Soviet Union's main international rivals were modern states, the commitment to modernism facilitated emulation. But because the Soviets inherited the same territory and mix of resources as their Tsarist predecessors, they found themselves opting for some of the same strategies to exploit the comparative advantages of backwardness.

Several studies have traced the precise intellectual process by which experience in international politics shoved and shaped Soviet ideas.[29] Intellectual socialization began almost immediately upon the Bolsheviks' seizure of power with tactical concepts, but over time it proceeded to encompass causal beliefs, worldviews, and the political elite's conception of its collective identity. The essential change was the steadily increased salience of the state. Tactically, Bolsheviks moved from orchestrating revolutionary movements to overthrow governments, to using them to influence governments, and finally to subordinating them entirely to balance-of-power considerations. The institutional career of the Comintern reflects this progression. At the level of causal beliefs, Marxism portrays the state as a reflection of deeper causes. It is an easy step intellectually to begin to focus on state behaviour as an indicator of these causes until the state becomes, *de facto,* an autonomous actor in operational thinking if not official doctrine. This process can be seen in Stalin's and Molotov's application of Lenin's theory of imperialism to the day-to-day analysis of

[28] Walt, *Revolution and War.*
[29] I trace this process in *Elusive Balance.*

Soviet foreign policy. For many members of the official class whose public lives were defined by manning a massive state apparatus, the worldview shifted from revolution to state building. To be 'revolutionary' was to make the Soviet Union modern and powerful. Eventually, the elite began to identify itself more with the state and its achievements—its vast territory, military victories, and status in international society—than the radical ideals on which it was ostensibly founded. Hence the original revolutionary identity became in time a 'revolutionary imperial', and for many simply an updated state-imperial identity.[30]

The mixture of system pressure, path dependence on earlier Tsarist adaptations, and the Bolsheviks' impulse to modernism is evident in the reacquisition and reorganization of the empire. In order to win the Civil War, the Bolsheviks concluded that they needed to reconquer the empire to deny bridgeheads to rivals (White forces and/or the 'imperialist' powers). They thus appealed to national self-determination where and when it would undermine adversaries, and reverted to the orthodox Marxist insistence on the priority of workers' class interest (represented, of course, by the Bolsheviks or their dependable allies) where 'bourgeois' nationalist leaders of former imperial territories seemed likely to opt for independence.[31] The logic was simple and very often identical to the thinking that had led to the Tsars' conquest of the same territories in the first place: imperial provinces lost to the Bolsheviks would end up dependent on hostile foreign powers. The result was that the new revolutionary state ended up territorially identical to the former empire minus Finland, Russian Poland, and the three Baltic states.

But the Bolsheviks had no interest in recreating an old-fashioned Eurasian empire. Empires of that type were obvious losers. Moscow was now competing with modern nation-state based empires like Britain and France. The Soviets wanted to retain the strategically valuable territory of the Russian empire yet use whatever advantages they had to undermine their rivals' analogous assets. The solution was 'non-imperialist colonialism', which stressed economic and cultural development in order to distinguish the USSR from both its Tsarist predecessors and its contemporary British and French rivals.[32] They built a state that radically concentrated political and economic power in Moscow; yet it was formally organized as a federation based on the national principle and it granted non-Russian nationalities far more cultural rights than they had ever had under the old regime. In hindsight, the fatal contradictions in this policy seem obvious. The USSR is now seen as the great incubator and constructor of Eurasian national identities.[33] But for many decades it appeared to be a brilliant competitive adaptation. It was highly effective for Soviet anti-colonial propaganda. It increased the appeal of Soviet Union Republics to co-nationals living immediately across the border. And it facilitated Soviet 'non-imperialist' expansion by incorporating new territory into existing Union Republics rather than 'Russia' or

[30] Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[31] Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954); Edward Hallet Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1950).

[32] Francine Hirsch, 'Empire of Nations: Colonial Technologies and the Making of the Soviet Union, 1917–1939', Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1998.

[33] Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

even adding new Union Republics, as in the case of Moldova and the Baltic states. As late as the 1960s, 'soviet colonialism' was seen as a far more effective form of imperialism than its Western counterpart.[34]

The most fateful and controversial question is the relationship between international systemic pressures and the Soviet political economy of autarkic forced-draught industrialization funded by a new enserfment of the peasantry on collective farms. As E. H. Carr discovered, any effort to defend this regime as somehow necessary given international pressures invites accusations of justifying a morally revolting system.[35] But as Stephen Kotkin has observed, the opening of archives has prompted a renewed emphasis on the political and international-political context of Soviet history, as opposed to the Cold War preoccupation with the 'totalitarian model'.[36] And this has brought back some of the themes if not the tone of Carr's work. Carr defended Stalin's violent 'revolution from above' because it appeared to be the only way to meet two critical criteria: (1) that the Soviet Union build 'socialism'—some system that was not capitalism and so did not rely on markets and private property; and (2) that it be capable of meeting the security challenge. Morally odious though they were, Stalin's policies can only be understood in light of the fact that they achieved these two objectives, which was no easy feat.

Ideology thus accounted in part for the high costs of Stalinism by foreclosing a capitalist road such as the Chinese took in the 1980s. But it is important to remember that without geopolitical pressure, the ideas would not have generated Stalinism. Moreover, in selecting a non-capitalist adaptive path, the Soviets were not consciously sacrificing international competitiveness. On the contrary, in the 1920s and 1930s, state planning and heavy industry were synonymous with both modernity and competitiveness. Given capitalism's performance in the 1930s, it was hard to see that system as optimal for the generation of power in international politics. Thus it was not the Soviets but the capitalists who were thought to be sacrificing state effectiveness to ideology or greedy domestic interests. And like so many Russian adaptations in the past, Stalin's was effective in meeting the security challenge in the medium term. Unlike many, it seemed to observers inside and outside the USSR to be progressive and modern. The fact that the kind of 'planning' envisioned in the Soviet official image was impossible in the slide-rule era was known only to those very close to the system. The fact that the giant 'Fordist' industrial enterprises built at such sacrifice would one day hinder rather than abet international competition would be known only to future generations.

Neorealist theory, ideas and institutions over the long term

In summary, neorealist theory cannot fully explain domestic institutions and ideas. But the Russian-Soviet case shows that the evolution of institutions and ideas

[34] See, for example, Michael Rywkin, *Russia in Central Asia: How Soviet Colonial Policy Operates and What it Portends* (New York: Collier, 1963). 'Confronted with the Soviet design for a world state', another scholar wondered in 1960, 'can the non-Soviet world confine itself to a precarious patchwork of expedients or must it not … hammer out some common plan for its own survival, which might ultimately foster the genuine integration of all nations?' Elliot R. Goodman, *The Soviet Design for a World State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. xviii.

[35] Carr, *History of Soviet Russia*.

[36] Stephen Kotkin, '1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks', *The Journal of Modern History*, 70:2 (1998), pp. 384–425.

cannot be explained without reference to the causal forces neorealism identifies. The salience of these causes depends critically on timing and case selection. If one focuses on periods of major adaptive effort, the 'second image reversed' argument is very strong. In the Russian-Soviet case, momentous adaptive efforts were frequently executed by strong leaders—Ivan IV, Peter I, Stalin—against the inclinations of the existing domestic interests and ideas. If one focuses on cases that occur in periods in which the last adaptive effort has begun to obsolesce, then the institutions and ideas shaped by that last great effort appear to hinder rational responses to system incentives. In the Russian-Soviet case, weaker leaders like Nicholas II or Brezhnev held the helm of state during such periods. The apparent deficiencies of these leaders and the regimes they headed are partly the results of their unavoidable dependence on past adaptations to security pressures.

Structural effects: socialization and adaptation

Surprisingly, given neorealism's poor reputation among those historians who have acquainted themselves with it, the modes of Russian behaviour featured in many historical accounts correspond closely to the theory's predictions. It is important to stress that neorealism is not a strict rational-choice theory in two senses. [37] First, Waltz places 'the notion of "selection" in a position of central importance' in his theory. [38] This does not mean that states are utterly insensitive to relative costs and benefits over the long run. It simply means that the mechanism through which system pressures 'shape and shove' states in particular ways is not rational optimization of each decision problem but rather socialization, adaptation, and selection—subtler processes that operate over a much longer-term period. Second, as Stephen Brooks has argued, 'neorealism does not have expected utility foundations'.[39] Instead, it assumes that rather than calculating the precise *probability* of various outcomes, decision-makers are generally driven by the mere *possibility* of worst case disasters.[40] The theory thus predicts that states will follow decision rules that are biased by systemic pessimism in ways that violate the assumptions necessary to make expected utility models work.

[37] Waltz states unequivocally that his 'theory requires no assumptions of rationality', *Theory of International Politics,* p. 131. My claim here is simply that the theory is not one of strict rational choice in the two senses discussed in the text below. There is considerable debate on this issue, much of which revolves around how narrowly to construe the concept of rationality. Cf. Robert O. Keohane, 'Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), and Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravscik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?', *International Security*, 21: 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5–55; with Miles Kahler, 'Inventing International Relations: International Relations Theory After 1945', in Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (eds.), *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) and Randall Schweller and William Wohlforth, 'Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War', *Security Studies*, 9:2 (2000), pp. 60–107.

[38] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics:* A Response to My Critics', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics*, p. 118.

[39] Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms', p. 454. Other scholars contend that the 'possibilistic' assumption Brooks identifies as intrinsic to Waltz's neorealist theory actually only assumes this role in 'offensive' neorealist theory.

[40] Ibid., pp. 447–50.

The Russian models of adaptation and expansion

When considered over the long term, Russian and Soviet behaviour falls into repetitive patterns that strike analysts as distinct and identifiable models. These models frame a great many secondary accounts. The best known of these is the 'adaptive model,' featuring a strong leader and a brutal state-led adaptation to external pressures. Less well known but equally important is the 'expansion model' into which many historians fit the extraordinary growth of the Russian empire.

The adaptive model is already implicit in the foregoing discussion.[41] It encompasses three stages. First, an innovative leader perceives or precipitates some new or impending challenge and forces the state through a wrenching adaptation to meet it. The adaptation tends to be crisis-driven and *ad hoc*; a series of hasty innovations in response to impending disasters followed by further frenzied responses to the unforeseen problems created by these innovations. This costly adaptation does not emanate from within, but is imposed by a leader preoccupied by external concerns. Ivan IV, Peter I and Stalin are the classic examples. But Ivan III's innovations necessitated by his 'gathering up' of Novgorod also fit on a smaller scale, as do Catherine II's revamping of Peter's earlier adaptation, and Alexander II's post-Crimean revitalization programme.

In the second stage, the adaptation turns out to be successful in international competition for a generation or more. Thus, the initial adaptation to the pressures of the steppe system produced the central features of a tsarist state that turned out to be 'one of the most effective mechanisms for territorial expansion ever known', as Dominic Lieven put it.[42] This initial comparative advantage in territorial expansion naturally affected the relative costs and benefits of subsequent adaptations to external challenges. As William Fuller has shown, Peter's asymmetrical response exploited the tsarist state's initial advantages and proved brilliantly successful for over a century after 1709.[43] By contrast, Stalin's reorganization of the empire and industrialization drive remained competitive for only about 40 years. In the third stage, the adaptation loses its competitive edge, and pressure builds for a new adaptation, though path dependency creates lags between the general recognition of a problem and a major effort to address it. Thus, defeat in Crimea exposed the new competitive weakness of Peter's adaptation, setting the stage for the reforms of Alexander II.

The Russian model of expansion is similar, except that it generally falls into four stages.[44] First, prodded by leaders, the state adopts a basic expansionistic bias. Again, the bias does not emerge from within the polity; it is imposed by the monarch. The reasons for doing so are many, but among them is always the expected long-term security dividend that will accrue from expansion. The bias generates a simple rule: expand where feasible until you come to a natural geographical frontier or the border of a strong state with which you can establish predictable relations.

[41] A concise description is Snyder, 'Russian Backwardness'. See also Fuller, *Strategy and Power.*

[42] Lieven, *Empire*, p. 262.

[43] Fuller, *Strategy and Power.*

[44] See, for general discussions, Marc Raeff, 'In the Imperial Manner', in Raeff (ed.), *Catherine the Great: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Raeff, 'Patterns of Russian Imperial Policy Toward the Nationalities', in Edward Allworth (ed), *Soviet Nationality Problems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); and S. Frederick Starr, 'Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension', in Jeremy R. Azrael (ed.), *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices* (New York: Praeger, 1978).

Take the territory now; we'll figure out what to do with it later. Implicit in the rule is the assumption that the costs and benefits of expansion are impossible to discern precisely in each instance, but over the long run expansion will probably pay. The bias derives from an underlying pessimism about security: threats will emerge, no matter what we do; territory will prove valuable in impending struggles, even if such struggles are not immediately in the offing. Generally, the technique of expansion is an adaptation of whatever worked last time to the new circumstances. Thus Ivan IV tried out on the khanates of Kazan' and Astrakhan the basic expansion model Ivan III had developed in gathering up Novgorod and other Russian principalities. The techniques that worked on steppe Tatars were tried out on Crimean Tatars, and then on Caucasian peoples to the south, and so on.

Second, the new territory often turns out to be quite costly to conquer and/or difficult to incorporate in the near-term. At times, overly ambitious rulers like Ivan IV and Peter I try to expand too far and suffer costly defeats. Often, the original rationales for acquiring the territory are quickly proved false by experience. And, the model of imperialism updated from the last expansionist enterprise frequently fails in the new circumstances, producing unexpected costs. Caucasian mountain peoples responded very differently than steppe Tatars to Russian tactics, fighting a bloody war against Russia for over half a century. The Poles proved impervious to Russian imperial strategies that had worked elsewhere for centuries. But reputational concerns prevent relinquishing such territory unless forced to do so.

Third, however, in the long term—sometimes a generation or two after conquest—the territory frequently proves immensely valuable for security and/or wealth, providing fresh evidence in favour of the original bias toward expansion and justifying the immense initial costs. Peter's costly acquisition of the Baltic provinces yielded only tiny amounts of land, but proved critical in the dramatic expansion of the empire's trade in the eighteenth century, and also provided the services of the extraordinarily talented Baltic German aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Catherine's expansion to the Black Sea eventually made Ukraine secure so it could prosper and become Europe's breadbasket and a major exchange earner for Russia. The process of taking Crimea ruined its economy, but the peninsula eventually proved valuable strategically. The partitions of Poland brought Catherine over seven million new subjects whose comparative wealth filled her treasury's coffers. The revenues and strategic depth provided by her westward expansion later proved critical in fending off Napoleon's Grand Army in 1812. The Transcaucasus expansion eventually put the Baku oilfields in Russian hands. In some cases, however, the expansion model extends to a fourth stage: in the very long term changing conditions that could not have been foreseen once again make the territory problematic, but the same concerns for internal and external reputation impede efforts to shed it. The rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century slowly changed the cost-benefit calculus for many lands that had formerly been successfully incorporated into the empire.

The Russian behavioural models and neorealist theory

These Russian models of adaptation to systemic pressure and territorial expansion raise two important issues. First, they exactly fit neorealist theory as described by

Waltz and Brooks. They were 'selected' by system pressures, and reflect biased decision rules that violate the basic precepts of expected utility models in the direction of neorealist worst-case pessimism. They discount the utility of rigorous cost-benefit calculations of any given decision to expand or adapt. They are thus consistent with a systematic inattention to finely grained expected utility calculations and the absence of institutions able to conduct them. They reflect the assumption that the uncertainty inherent in any given decision to expand or adapt is intractable; no *ex ante* measurement of costs and benefits is possible. Expansion is less a choice than an environmentally conditioned disposition reflecting an underlying pessimism. As Geoffrey Hoskings put it, 'like a cumbersome and nervous amoeba, [Muscovy] expanded to fill the space it was able to dominate, and was impelled into a perpetual dynamic of conquest'.[45] Similarly, Russian-Soviet adaptations are not usefully understood as calculating strategic plans with coherent sets of corresponding institutions but rather as frantic bursts of activity that haphazardly make the best of the mix of resources Russia happens to have at that moment.

It follows, secondly, that both neorealist theory and the Russian-Soviet patterns of adaptation are consistent with institutional arrangements and decision-making styles that appear suboptimal from the standpoint of a strictly rational 'logic of consequences'. As Waltz stresses, 'one cannot expect of political leaders the nicely calculated decisions that the word "rationality" suggests'.[46] This is important because neither Russian nor Soviet institutions and leaders were such as to inspire confidence in their capacity for optimally rational decision-making. Perhaps for this reason, evidence on decision-making is often thought to offer strongest support for explanations rooted in domestic institutions and identity. Behind nearly every decision that produced seemingly suboptimal results, one can uncover a decision-making process that looks deeply flawed. This connection between deficient institutions and flawed individual decision-making styles, on the one hand, and blundering, bellicose statecraft that produced seemingly avoidable costs, on the other hand, is at the centre of the mainstream literature that treats the behaviour as incompatible with system pressures.

For anyone familiar with late imperial or Soviet history, it is difficult to deny the appeal of this argument. Both regimes in their last years seem to epitomize incompetence.[47] But a longer-term perspective does undermine the significance of this connection between poor governance and poor foreign policy outcomes by revealing selection bias. If one looks at behaviour that seems in hindsight to have led to failure, one finds institutional and individual departures from the strict rationalist ideal of decision-making. But if one looks at apparent successes, one frequently finds the same thing. Territorial expansion that ultimately added immeasurably to the wealth and security of the empire, such as the expansion to control the course of the Volga River, or later to Siberia and Ukraine, or the acquisition of access to the Caspian, Black and Baltic Seas, occurred under rulers and regimes following decision rules just as biased as those who undertook seemingly unnecessary and ultimately costly expansion. Strategic adaptations that turned out to work spectacu-

[45] Hoskings, *Russia,* p. 4.

[46] Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*', p. 118.

[47] On late imperial Russia, see especially David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press: 2001). Compare, however, Dominic Lieven, *Nicholas II: Emperor of all the Russias* (London: John Murray, 1993), which stresses the path dependency problem highlighted here. On Brezhnev's Soviet Union, see Anderson, *Public Policy in an Authoritarian State*; and Hopf, *Peripheral Visions*.

larly were undertaken under leaders and institutions who were just as far from rationalistic optimality as those which stubbornly refused or bungled reforms.

Peter the Great is a case in point. His reputation among historians, as compared, say, to that of Nicholas II, is clearly not merely a product of hindsight. He was an unusually competent leader. He beat Sweden, secured access to the Baltic and won 'great power' status for his empire. But his chaotic strategic *modus operandi* bears scant resemblance to the rationalist ideal. True, he was adept at technical and tactical matters, and could cobble together institutions to manage them. When it came to designing a ship or directing a military campaign, few leaders were his equal. But he simply did not devote his formidable energy to the task of clearly articulating the strategic logic behind his relentless and astonishingly costly imperialism. If his expansionism was the result of expected utility calculations, he left no record of them. One historian stresses Peter's 'reluctance—inability even—to produce clear-cut policy statements'.[48] He frequently overreached his empire's capabilities, as in the campaigns to the Caspian and Central Asia. His real competence lay in putting the larger Russian patterns of adaptation and expansion into effect. Biographers portray him as in many ways the personification of these patterns. Expansion was less a strategic choice than a basic disposition.[49]

In sum, historians' analyses of the patterns of Russian expansion and adaptation strongly correspond to expectations of neorealist theory. Decision-making styles and institutional arrangements that seem maladaptive in certain periods are consistent with these larger patterns. Whether such patterns and decision rules were suboptimal given the state interest in security cannot be answered by examining only cases of apparent failure.

Reconsidering anomalies: the Soviet empire from Brezhnev to Gorbachev

If the foregoing discussion suggests that neorealist theory provides a valid explanation for the general Russian-Soviet propensity toward costly expansion, what about the specific periods that the standard literature views as anomalous? To be sure, as a theory of long-term structural causation, neorealism is always a limited tool in explaining specific cases. But the theory's ability to account for the longer-term pattern of behaviour may alter the way we interpret the cases that are generally seen as challenging to the theory.

The period that has attracted the greatest attention from IR scholars is the Soviet Union's continued expansionist bias in the years after its acquisition of a secure second-strike nuclear capability. Many analysts assume that the essential scope (though not the particular form) of Stalin's wartime expansion in the Baltics and Central Europe, as well as the creation of an informal empire in Central Europe in 1945–48, was strongly influenced by security concerns. Recent archival research buttresses this general interpretation.[50] But once the USSR obtained a secure

[48] Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 61.

[49] Ibid., M. S. Anderson, *Peter the Great* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).

[50] See Mark Kramer, 'The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: Spheres of Influence', in Ngaire Woods (ed.), *Explaining International Relations Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Mark Kramer, 'Ideology and the Cold War', *Review of International Studies*, 25:4 (1999), pp. 539–76; and Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

second-strike capability by the mid-1960s, subsequent willingness to pay high costs for an informal empire in Central Europe appears puzzling. Three answers emerge from the analysis here.

First, the security benefits of the informal empire transcended the region's role as a defensive *glacis* against NATO and a forward base for the Red Army's offensive war plan. Lacking the great commercial power of its US rival, the Soviet Union retained influence over European security policy, and indeed significant leverage over Washington, partly by courtesy of its informal empire in Central Europe. That is, the Soviet Union was still using its comparative advantage in territorial control to obtain a greater voice on European security matters than its economy and technological level would warrant. And unlike their predecessors in Moscow's Kremlin, Leonid Brezhnev and his foreign policy team had managed to extract undeniable security benefits from their forward positions in Europe that continued to matter even in an era of nuclear deterrence.

The much-maligned Brezhnev took power in 1964, when the Western economies were in the midst of the greatest boom in capitalism's history, and the United States was engaged in a furious military build-up. In a scant seven years, he and Foreign Minister Gromyko had attained favourable *modus vivendi* with West Germany, secured international recognition of the German Democratic Republic and most of their wartime conquests, and were engaged in a *détente* with the world's pre-eminent power, the United States, on formal terms of parity. A major source of Moscow's influence on these questions was its position in Central Europe. The costs and benefits of the informal empire were thus harder to calculate than scholars often assume. To be sure, Moscow's forward position was one factor helping to unite NATO. On the other hand, it gave Moscow the wherewithal to elicit deference from powerful NATO countries on crucial security questions. Whether it was better to have more influence over a relatively coherent NATO (and NATO perennially seemed on the verge of a major crisis in these years), or less influence over a less united NATO was a tough call for Moscow.

Second was the old imperial problem. In retirement at his dacha in the mid 1970s, Molotov entertained a Georgian fighter pilot—a hero of the Great Fatherland War—who emphatically reaffirmed his willingness to die for the 'motherland'. 'You mean Georgia?' Molotov asked. 'No! Our Soviet Motherland'! his guest insisted.[51] The Old Bolshevik was under no illusions about the imperial nature of the Soviet federal 'state'. And he and his contemporaries knew well that the geopolitical expansion that had brought Russia the Baltic States, Moldova, and a major swath of new territory for Ukraine were linked historically with the creation of the informal empire after the war. Hence, retrenchment from the outer empire would be very hard to separate from the inner empire. The pact Molotov had negotiated with Ribbentrop in 1939 brought Russia back into Poland and the Baltics. If Poland were set free, pressure would rise in the Baltics, and thence, perhaps, to the Georgian motherland of his war hero guest. The old imperial problem reasserted itself. The flexibility that might be optimal for external purposes contradicted the internal requisites of empire.

Third, given the remaining security benefits and the imperial problem, any decision to retrench from the outer empire looked very costly indeed. Hence, it

[51] Feliks Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotvym: Iz dnevnika F Chueva* (Moscow: Terra, 1991), p. 54.

would take prolonged and salient evidence of rising relative costs to prompt a policy departure. As it turned out, the costs of empire increased steadily, but at about the same time oil prices boosted Moscow's ability to absorb them. Thus, the crunch truly intensified in the 1980s, as imperial costs soared and oil revenues plummeted. The result was building pressure throughout the decade to put the relationship on a new footing.

The decline and fall of the Soviet Union serves as an illustration of many of the arguments made herein. The perception of Moscow's willingness to enforce its dominion in Central Europe militarily appears to have been a necessary condition of its external empire. In 1953, 1956 and 1968, Soviet rulers decided to pay the international costs of repressing perceived or anticipated defection. But during the 1970s and 1980s, Moscow also responded to the classic problems of the decay of its imperial rule by devolving considerable authority to local agents in Central Europe and in the Union Republics of the USSR. By the time Gorbachev took the helm, the policy of dealing with principal-agent problems by increased decentralization was already well entrenched. Gorbachev's response combined continued devolution in Central Europe with intermittent efforts at re-centralization in the inner empire. Externally, he began to implement a policy of careful appeasement that required dispelling external perceptions of the Soviet threat. This proved to be a volatile mix of policies: dispelling the Soviet threat abroad did deliver *détente*, but it also dispelled Moscow's reputation for resolve in the outer empire, which rapidly became unglued. The collapse of the outer empire then fed into the centre-periphery struggle in the Soviet Union itself, as Moscow's centralizing effort to control local agents clashed against its declining reputation for coercive sanction.

Gorbachev tried the policies of retrenchment and reform that are the obvious alternatives to the expansionist bias favoured by his predecessors. On balance, those policies should be applauded for minimizing the bloodshed that accompanied the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But, it does need to be pointed out that those policies failed miserably in achieving Gorbachev's goals. It is simply much more difficult than often realized to make the case that Russia was too concerned with territory and status and too reluctant to consider retrenchment and reform as solutions to imperial decline. When Nicholas II decided in 1914 to fight for status, his empire collapsed. When Gorbachev declined to fight for status and banked instead on retrenchment and reform, his empire collapsed. The two decisions and their consequences speak volumes about the intrinsic difficulty of the task both men faced. The argument that Russia was too concerned with territory and status suggests that alternative policies were available that could have maintained the empire longer, or as long at smaller cost. The analysis here suggests otherwise.

Conclusion

Neorealism occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary IR. It is the theory that is most frequently proclaimed dead; and it is the theory that is most frequently proclaimed dominant. The reason is that the theory's main role is as a foil for scholarly research. It serves as the ubiquitous baseline argument against which any case study's findings, no matter how limited, may seem to loom large. But

neorealism's actual claim to be a theory of very long-term structural causation that accounts for persistent patterns of state behaviour is never subjected to focused empirical evaluation. The origins of this lacuna may lie in American IR's bias against historical research. But whatever the cause, the absence of such studies makes it difficult to justify the theory's continued influence as a baseline account. In this article, I conducted such a review in the broad-brush manner dictated by space constraints. I found that Russia and the Soviet Union are good cases for neorealism. The theory provides an explanation for pronounced patterns of Russian-Soviet behaviour that finds very strong validation in the historical literature. Given the prior expectation that would follow from recent discussions of neorealism as a 'degenerating research programme,' the finding is strikingly favourable to the theory. However, the evaluation conduced here was perforce a cursory one, and the Russian-Soviet case may well be an especially good one for the theory. If this finding tends to be replicated in other cases, then neorealism's baseline role may rest on firmer foundations.

This is not to conclude that the Russian-Soviet historical experience contains no lessons for neorealist theory. Even when applied over long spans of time, the theory's reliance on the elusive concept of 'power' is a central weakness. The experience of the Russian-Soviet empire shows that the imperative of survival under anarchy fosters power maximization. The system socialized Russian and Soviet leaders to maximize power, but they remained uncertain about how to measure it. In practice, how do we know when we are more 'powerful' and thus more secure? Russian and Soviet leaders responded by exploiting their comparative advantage in territorial expansion and monitoring the results over the very long term. Overall, this bias toward expansion worked in securing an inherently insecure state over centuries.

However, the evidence shows that Russian and Soviet leaders did have a more fine-grained approach to measuring 'power' and thus monitoring the effectiveness of their power-maximizing strategy. They appear frequently to have used status as an index of power. The Russian and Soviet affection for status in international society is a ubiquitous theme in the historical and diplomatic literatures. The quest for status is a standard explanation for late imperial Russian expansion, as well as Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's competitive behaviour in the Third World. Russian and Soviet statesmen frequently appear to have selected strategies with an eye toward eliciting formal indicators of deference on the part of other states. Using status as a metric for power is especially compelling for backward states playing catch-up ball with the system's leaders, as both Russia and the Soviet Union had to do. Measuring status demands a keen sensitivity to the symbols, signals, and discourse that indicate degrees of deference. It involves monitoring the relationship between recent policy choices and status—a task subject to error, to be sure, but one that may yield information extremely valuable to decision-makers.

If the quest for status becomes an end in itself, divorced from power politics and security, it may fit far more comfortably into a British School or constructivst theoretical framework than neorealism. The Russian experience would then be seen as a story of socialization to a particular and contingent sort of status society that happened to take shape in western Europe around the time Russia became a major power. On the other hand, Russia's strong preference for high standing in the interstate hierarchy may be consistent with neorealist theory. The theory would portray status-seeking as endogenous to insecurity. The more insecure a social

system is, the more any member's fate is contingent upon its rank in the social hierarchy. The more insecure a member of a system is, the more it will seek reassurance of its relative rank. States exist in a primitive society, and thus care about their standing in that society not just for the intrinsic gratification it brings but also because of the security it conveys. Russia faced particularly acute security challenges, and thus placed greater emphasis on its status than relatively more secure powers.

The relationship between status seeking, power maximization and security has yet to be worked out in realist theory or IR more generally. Russia's historical experience may provide useful material for advancing our understanding of these relationships. And such understanding has more than theoretical implications. For Russia's sense of insecurity, its problems of backwardness and its sensitivity to its status in international society did not disappear with the Soviet empire. All of these themes frame the discourse in Moscow, as well as Beijing, Delhi and other capitals. Historical research on long-term patterns has much to add to an explanation of their interconnections.