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Misreading Russian Studies: A Response to Sarty

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Leigh Sarty's introspective essay "Misreading Russia" makes two core claims: (a) that understanding Russia's history is crucial to understanding Russia today and (b) that failing to appreciate Russia's history explains the West's perpetually misguided policy towards Russia since the 1990s, culminating in the war Russia is currently waging on Ukraine. The first claim could be formulated as a general stance on the importance of historical and area knowledge for policy-makers—a claim that I suspect few would find objectionable despite Sarty's admitted historical determinism. However, the implications of such a stance do not necessarily lead to the second claim, which I argue is factually detached from debates within the academic study of Russia as well as recent Russian history and politics.

The Tradition of "Getting Russia Wrong"

Sarty's article fits within the literary genre of "getting Russia wrong": every few years, a debate arises in Western capitals over policy towards Russia in which academics and policy-makers lament their failure to appreciate the true drivers of Russian policy. As a result of this failure to attend to Russia's history, culture, and regional specificities, Western analyses and policy are claimed to have produced pathological outcomes that repeatedly drive Russia away from democratization and into renewed conflict with the West. At times, this failure is ascribed to the West's ideological blinders—this was especially the case during the Cold War, though it also emerges in the claim that the West imposed market reforms on Russia—or otherwise to the West's inability to understand different peoples. Both of these implications are present in Sarty's essay, particularly as concerns the destructive path of Russia's economic "shock therapy" and privatization and the claim of the West's ethnocentrism (Sarty 2024, 129–33).

For example, the work for which this genre is named, Patrick Cockburn's *Getting Russia Wrong* (1989), argued at the tail end of the Cold War that Gorbachev's reforms were for real—a seemingly uncontroversial point in hindsight, but one which took aim at conservative voices in the West who argued that Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* were nothing more than a strategic pause in the Cold War between the USSR and the West.

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Stephen Cohen's *Failed Crusade* (2000) marked another significant contribution to the genre, arguing that the West (mainly the US) perceived only reform and success in Russia but downplayed the costs inflicted on Russian society—a claim that resonates with Sarty's observation that, "inattention to Russia's distinctiveness contributed to the tumult of the 1990s, and tarred well-intentioned efforts to assist Russia with a brush of insensitivity" (Sarty 2024, 132). Cohen further argued that the West's ideological motives were revealed in its failure to criticize Russia's leaders as long as their actions appeared to support Western foreign policy interests.

At best, such takes rely upon a highly selective reading of the vast research conducted during and since the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union occasioned a wave of state creation and, along with it, a wave of regime change that was claimed in the name of national democracies by those who led the revolution (Beissinger 2002; Huntington 1991; McFaul 2002). Academics vigorously debated ways to understand and model politics in Russia in the 1990s. In political science, the rush to incorporate Russia and other post-communist states into comparative understandings of political and market transitions sparked debates about the applicability of models from previous democratizing waves in Latin America or Southern Europe that occupied the pages of flagship journals in the field, most notably the *Slavic Review* (Bunce 1995a, 1995b; Schmitter and Karl 1994, 1995;). As a graduate student at Oxford, I was fortunate to witness a legendary debate between historian Timothy Garton Ash and Columbia University's Alfred Stepan over the merits of the so-called "transitology." Ultimately, the notion that "transitology" dominated comparative politics (Carothers 2002) and the field of Russian studies became more of a myth that informed critiques than a substantive reality that informed policy (Gans-Morse 2004).

The reverse influence of political openings in the post-communist world was felt within political science, as well. From the varied and somewhat chaotic range of approaches to studying Russia and post-communist states in the 1990s emerged a consensus around the need for systematic approaches in comparative research but also to integrate them with historical approaches and qualitative methods. In fact, the movement that challenged the centrality of rationalist approaches and quantitative methods in American political science even took its name from Gorbachev's *perestroika* (Monroe 2005).

Stephen Fish's (2001) rejoinder to Cohen (entitled "Russian Studies Without Studying"), lists in exhaustive detail the varieties of research ignored by the "getting Russia wrong" perspective. With particular regard to Russia's market reforms, Fish and others have documented (and historians are well aware) that the Soviet Union's economy was deeply corrupt at the elite level in the 1980s while the Soviet masses relied on black markets and bribery to survive the systems' problems including endemic shortages, hoarding of labour, and falsified statistics (Dallin 1992), while the process of stealing the state's assets began already under Gorbachev (Solnick 1998). Consequently, Fish argues that "blaming Yeltsin and the Americans exclusively for Russia's postcommunist agonies is like blaming Ronald Reagan for (or crediting Ronald Reagan with) the dissolution of the Soviet Union" (Fish 2001, 355).

Along similar lines, Sarty cites a controversial article by Shleifer and Treisman (2004) as evidence of a field consensus "that Russia's 'flaws' did not render it unique, that it was on track to develop like any other middle-income capitalist democracy, in accordance with the confident postulates of social science theory" (Sarty 2024, 130). Yet this claim misses the active debate that followed the publication of the article. Indeed, one of the most telling was the intervention by Leeson and Trumbull (2006), who noted that a key failing in Shleifer & Treisman's work was their reliance on

biased official statistics—in other words if Russia appeared to be "a normal country," it was because it aimed to present itself as such.

Mistaking the Politics of Ignorance in Autocracies

Another crucial oversight found in the "getting Russia wrong" perspective is the influence of regime context on the production of knowledge about autocracies and hybrid regimes like Russia. Autocracies are producers of ignorance about their own operations, concealing both the formal and informal means by which power circulates in closed regimes (Ahram and Goode 2016). Scholars conducting research within autocracies face significant obstacles, ranging from restricted access for conducting fieldwork and interviews to risking surveillance and reprisal (Glasius et al. 2017; Goode 2010). Often, the constraining effects of rising authoritarianism are not felt or can be dismissed until open repression becomes impossible to ignore.

In 2009, I presented a paper at a conference on "The Russian Field" hosted by the Center for Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg, where I provided evidence of the decline of fieldwork conducted in Russia that tracked with autocratization in the 2000s. By contrast, field research suddenly increased after democratic openings in countries like Georgia and Ukraine. Russian scholars in attendance told me that they did not see this as evidence of a problem for Russian scholarship so much as it suggested the "degradation of Western political science." In this regard, ironically, Russian academics reflected the perspective that Sarty attributes to Western social scientists about Russia and post-communist states as semi-democratic or democratizing. By contrast, my own meta-analysis of all publications in top disciplinary and area journals found that scholars who continued to conduct fieldwork in the 2000s and 2010s (publishing their research mainly in area studies journals) produced important consensus-infirming research that signalled rising authoritarianism in Russia and throughout the region (Goode 2016).

Fast forward to the present day and we now find Russian school and university curricula re-written to require patriotic education and emphasize the Kremlin's preferred version of history. Russian researchers have found themselves cut off from access to foreign sources of funding, which are declared "undesirable" organizations. University administrations patrol what academics can present at international conferences or publish abroad and require Russian scholars to report on contacts with foreign researchers. In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the few remaining independent research centers and private universities were either closed, absorbed into state-run universities, or their leadership replaced or co-opted. Many researchers were fired for their critical stances on the war and thousands fled Russia. As one Russian colleague wrote to me in 2022, "we no longer know where the regime's red lines are."

In post-Soviet autocracies, regimes use a range of repressive measures to pre-empt political challenges, including "the manipulation of public consciousness and collective memory to spread stereotypes and myths about the domestic opposition, the West, former communist countries that shifted to the democratic track, and democracy in general" (Silitski 2010, 276). Among Western observers, these regime narratives are often mistaken for real grievances, while public silences or conformity with regime narratives are treated as indications of their legitimacy. Consequently, one risks becoming complicit in autocratization when repeating regime narratives that discredit opposition, facilitate domestic repression, and even justify foreign aggression. In Sarty's essay, for example, Putin's lamentations about the 1990s are implicitly treated as legitimate reflections of

public sentiment,[2] while NATO's intervention to halt genocide in Kosovo is presented as "actions against fellow Slavs in Yugoslavia." Indeed, he draws a straight line from the Kremlin's narratives about the 1990s to the current war, stating plainly that "Once this background is understood, the logic of the decision to invade Ukraine becomes apparent." (Sarty 2024, 131)

Misreading Putin's Politics of History and Memory

In arguing that the West's failure to appreciate the distinctiveness of Russia's geography and culture culminated in the consolidation of Russia's elite consensus around anti-Westernism (for whom Putin emerged as the chief advocate), Sarty elides the vast mobilization of domestic repression in Russia that keeps Putin in power. Moreover, there is little evidence that the Kremlin does a better job of appreciating Russia's history than the West. Defenders of Russia's war in Ukraine sometimes point to Putin's now-infamous essay from the summer of 2021, "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," as justification (Putin 2021), yet the essay was roundly criticized by professional historians within Russia for its many inaccuracies. In a study of the evolution of Putin's historical references over the years, Alexei Miller concludes that "attempts to analyze these texts…as, above all, statements on historical issues, and to see the roots of political decisions in the author's views on history are fundamentally wrong" (Miller 2023, 71–72).

There is also ample evidence that few Russians have a clear understanding of recent history or that they share Putin's predilection for re-writing Russia's history. In my own interviews conducted in 2014–2016, I found that many Russians had only a loose grasp of recent history, struggling even to identify when the Soviet Union ceased to exist or when Putin came to power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Putin invoked an obscure historical reference to Pechenegs and Polovtsy in likening the threat of the pandemic to historical challenges overcome by Russia in the previous millennium. Rather than inspiring the Russian people, Putin's comment was relentlessly ridiculed online and became a popular meme on Russian social media (Gaufman 2023, 124–25).

In short, we should not take Putin's quotes about the lessons of history as accurate, nor should we assume their popular resonance stems from Russians' knowledge of history. In fact, the Kremlin is most successful when it uses history as a pretext to mobilize emotional attachments rather than using it to convince and educate. For example, the committee established under former President Dmitrii Medvedev[3] to correct "historical inaccuracies" about the Great Patriotic War quickly faded into obscurity. By contrast, the Kremlin's annual campaign to commemorate the Great Patriotic War around May 9th succeeds by cultivating the sensation of being part of a great victory (Oushakine 2013).

Claiming Agency on Russia's Behalf

Beyond its reliance on a caricature of the field of Russian studies and mistaken assumptions about the political relevance of historical memory in Russia, the "getting Russia wrong" perspective suffers from two additional problems. In the first place, it amounts to a subtle assertion that the West has agency in determining policy towards Russia, whereas Russia can only respond. Indeed,

[2] "Putin and the elites who support him have seen themselves as correcting the errors of the 1990s and their consequences; by painting that decade in ever more dire terms, they foster their legitimacy as the stewards of a strong Russian state that guarantees order at home and secures Russian interests abroad" (Sarty 2024, 131).

[3] It scarcely bears mentioning today, but Medvedev's single term as Russian President was overshadowed by the ongoing presence of Putin as Prime Minister—a period that is sarcastically referred to as "tandemocracy" in reference to Putin and Medvedev as the ruling tandem. The changing of places between Putin and Medvedev in 2008 and 2012 is cynically referred to as a "castling" maneuver, to borrow from chess terminology.

Sarty presents Russia as eternally trapped by and reacting to the challenge of competing with a more powerful West from a position of relative weakness, which in turn is "the wellspring of Russian authoritarianism" (Sarty 2024, 127). If Russia's lack of agency resulted in autocracy in Russia and even war in Ukraine, then Sarty suggests this represents a "failure adequately to appreciate how Washington's universalist pretensions—aided and abetted by its NATO allies—have been perceived in Moscow" (Sarty 2024, 132). To support this interpretation, Sarty presents Putin's description of the terrorist attack on a school in Beslan in 2004 as an attempt by "international forces" (a dog whistle for the West) to grab a piece of Russia as evidence that Russia is only focused on its own survival.

While one might argue that Putin's rhetorical response to Beslan actually focused on domestic terror rather than foreign threats (Snetkov 2007), the policy responses clearly reflected the priority of consolidating power. These measures amounted to the shutting down of democratic institutions within Russia, including the elimination of gubernatorial elections, and imposing a range of restrictions on the State Duma that further strengthened the ruling party: eliminating single-member districts in parliamentary elections, which previously provided a path for independent representatives to win seats; raising the electoral barrier for parties to 7 percent, which was more than the combined vote of the two largest democratic opposition parties in the previous year; eliminating the category of "against all" from the ballot, which typically provided an outlet for protest voting; and eliminating minimum turnout requirements, which made it easier for the Kremlin's candidates to get elected without having to win voters.

The mismatch between rhetorical anti-Westernism and the policy steps towards consolidating domestic power is a common theme in the uses of cultural pre-emption—including rhetorical anti-Westernism—in the post-Soviet autocrat's toolkit and more broadly among "informational autocracies" (Guriev and Treisman 2022; Schatz 2009). The claim that the West is attacking and undermining Russia at every turn has been a staple of Putin's domestic politics for over two decades. The political uses of anti-Westernism became particularly evident following the diffusion of electoral revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe as well as former Soviet states in the early-2000s (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan) that became known as "color revolutions" (Beissinger 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Hale 2006). More recently, the Kremlin used the charge of Western meddling to demonize opposition protest movements, most notably the "For Fair Elections" movement in 2012 and Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption protests in 2017–2018. Today, Russia's war in Ukraine is further cast in anti-Western tropes, in which Ukraine is depicted as a puppet of the US and anti-war Russians are accused of doing the bidding of Russia's enemies. In short, we should be very careful about taking what Putin or his agents say at face value, without considering the political context—particularly when they appear to obscure Russia's agency.

Realists Also Get Russia Wrong

A second issue with the perspective offered in Sarty's essay is that it treats regime survival as synonymous with state survival. This is not "Realism 101" but a confirmation of the Kremlin's domestic propaganda that portrays Putin remaining in power (he is now in his sixth term of office) as necessary to safeguard the state from all threats, foreign and domestic. This conflation of personal political survival with state survival has been a constant problem throughout Russia's modern history, as it reinforces personalist and clientelist politics at the expense of institutional development or even liberalizing reform.

A prominent example is provided by Boris Yeltsin, who is often depicted as a victim of the West's inattention. Putin's predecessor was unwilling to risk democratization and instead treated his own political survival as essential for the survival of Russia at every critical juncture (Ostrow, Satarov, and Khakamada 2007). This association contributed directly to the constitutional crisis of 1992–1993 that was resolved by the forcible dissolution of Russia's parliament (which also sought to remove Yeltsin from power) and the unilateral imposition of a constitution that created super-presidential powers. In 1995, the fear of losing power contributed to Yeltsin's forming of a Faustian pact with prominent business leaders that led to the infamous "loans for shares" deal that auctioned off Russia's powerful strategic enterprises (i.e., those that could not be privatized without an act of government) at bargain-bin prices, effectively creating the oligarchs in exchange for their unyielding support for Yeltsin's re-election in 1996 (Freeland 2000; Treisman 2010). In 1999, Yeltsin's decision to leave office early and hand super-presidential powers to Putin was motivated, in part, by his desire to protect "the family" (the inner circle of Yeltsin's regime) rather than trust in the electoral process—once again ensuring that Russia would continue to drift towards autocracy.

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the conflation of regime and state survival also informs the most recent version of "getting Russia wrong" associated with Realist accounts of the war in international relations. The most visible proponents of this version include famous international relations scholars like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. Mearsheimer not only argued that Russia's occupation of Crimea was a defensive response (Mearsheimer 2014) but today confirms the Kremlin's narrative that NATO somehow provoked Russia into its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Mearsheimer 2022). Such takes display a surprising naiveté in accepting at face value Putin's claims that Russia was forced into action by the West—once again obscuring Russia's agency, this time in its invasion of Ukraine. It is further disheartening that these arguments would be taken up by those who argue for appreciating Russian history and area knowledge, given that Mearsheimer and Walt are not experts on Russia (or Ukraine, for that matter) and lack in-depth knowledge of the region's politics.[4]

Conclusion: Asking the Right Questions

Contrary to the "getting Russia wrong" perspective, I would suggest that scholars of Russia have struggled to ensure that Russia's history and contextual knowledge are taken into account and that area experts are accessible to policy-makers. Along with Sarty, Cohen, Cockburn, and others writing in this tradition, most would accept the principle that appreciation for a country's history and knowledge of the area are prerequisites for making effective policy. However, this knowledge does not reserve agency to those making policy in the West, meaning that one needs to take seriously the likelihood that Russian history and anti-Westernism are subordinated to the Kremlin's domestic political and economic agendas and that these agendas concern regime survival rather than Russian history and geography.

Looking at Russia's recent history, it is unclear what might have turned out differently or, indeed, what concretely is being proposed by such a perspective, today. Given the vast amount of historical and social science research produced on the breakup of the Soviet Union, does it make sense to accept the Kremlin's narrative of 1991 as something that happened to Russia rather than as an

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[4] It is worth noting that Mearsheimer's approach is criticized even among international relations scholars for its reliance on untestable theoretical propositions and lack of empirical evidence (Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023; Polianskii 2024).

outcome that was accelerated, say, by competition between Gorbachev and Yeltsin? With regard to the 1990s, does it make sense to suggest that the West forced market reform upon Russia, or perhaps the West made excuses for corrupt and increasingly autocratic behaviour precisely because it treated Russia as exceptional? Since 2014, does such a perspective mean indulging Russian nationalists' complaints about the West's "lack of respect," excusing Russia's ongoing attempts to re-imperialize, and interpreting conflicts primarily from Russia's perspective (Koval et al. 2022)? And today, does it mean that the West should accept Russia's claim that it is responsible for Russia's invasion, including the crimes and destruction that it has committed?

These questions serve to illustrate that the "getting Russia wrong" approach is fatalistic rather than constructive. Instead, there are more useful and pressing questions that require analysis by scholars and experts with career experience in studying Russia: for starters, what remains of our pre-war paradigms for understanding the drivers of Russian politics, and what are the realistic scenarios for a post-Putin Russia? How can Russia de-imperialize after the war's end? How deep and enduring is the Russian public's support for Putin's regime, if one can even peer beyond the effects of wartime censorship and repression? How can we research and support anti-war activists in Russia without also exposing the networks that support them? How has the war enabled alternative national projects to rival the regime's brand of militarized patriotism?

To these questions, one might further add a range of practical questions that will shape research agendas for those who study Russia for years to come: what are the best practices for collaborating with Russian scholars to avoid exposing them to risk while also avoiding extractive relationships? How should we respond to calls for decolonizing research on Russia, including greater attention to minority ethnicities and inequalities and promotion of subaltern voices within Russia, especially under conditions where external funding and research collaborations cannot reach local scholars? And to ensure that we do not lose a generation's worth of expertise, how should academic departments and academic publishers recalibrate their expectations, training, and standards with regard to data collection and reporting, given the lack of access to Russia for graduate students and emerging scholars, especially coming on the heels of the pandemic?

There is a regular cadence to the West's hand-wringing about "getting Russia wrong," which is typically followed by finger-pointing over "who lost Russia" and then, inevitably, the alarmist "where have all the Russia experts gone?" In fact, the Russia experts are still here, and their ranks are swelling with scholars and experts who opposed the war in Ukraine and fled Russia after February 2022. For anyone still worried about "getting Russia wrong," the way forward is to learn from this new generation of experts who have exacting and personal knowledge of Putin's Russia. Rather than seeking to claim responsibility for the Kremlin's actions, worrying about paths not taken in the 1990s, or revealing Russia's fate in its geography, they are focused on the kinds of questions raised above, and they are starting to lead the way with methodological innovations that lay bare the regime's political, economic, cultural, and informational underpinnings.

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