

## IS RUSSIA AN IMPERIALIST POWER? III. CONTINUITIES, RECONSTITUTIONS AND RUPTURES

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Russia is often referred to as an imperialism in reconstitution. Some views use this concept to underline the incomplete and embryonic character of its imperial emergence (Testa, 2020). But others use the same formulation to highlight expansive behaviour since ancient times. These views postulate analogies with the tsarist decline, similarities with the USSR and the primacy of internal colonial dynamics. These interpretations are hotly debated.

### CONTRASTS AND SIMILARITIES WITH THE PAST

Approaches that register long-standing continuities see Putin as an heir to the old territorial captures. They point to three historical stages of the same imperial sequence with feudal, bureaucratic or capitalist foundations, but invariably based on border expansion (Kowalewski 2014a).

Such kinship needs to be carefully defined. It is true that Russia's past is marked by four centuries of tsarist expansion. All monarchs expanded the radius of the country, in order to increase tax collection and reinforce serfdom over a vast territory. The conquered regions paid tribute to Moscow and became intertwined with the centre through the settlement of Russian migrants.

This internal colonial modality differed from the typical British, French or Spanish scheme of capturing external regions. The number of appropriated areas was gigantic and formed a single, continuous geographical zone, highly divergent from the maritime empires of Western Europe. Russia was a land power with little gravitas on the seas. It articulated a model that compensated for economic fragility with military coercion through a monumental empire of the periphery. Lenin characterised this structure as a military-feudal imperialism, which imprisoned countless peoples. He stressed the pre-capitalist character of a configuration based on the exploitation of the serfs. The analogies that can be drawn with that past must take into account the qualitative differences with that social regime.

There is no continuity between the feudal structures managed by Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great and the capitalist system commanded by Putin. This point is important in the face of so many essentialist views that denounce the intrinsic imperial nature of the Eurasian giant. It is with this prejudice that the Western establishment built all its Cold War legends (Lipatti, 2017). Comparisons that avoid this simplification make it possible to note the distance that has always separated Russia from central capitalism. That gap persisted in the cycles of modernisation introduced by tsarism with military reinforcements, further plundering of the peasants and different variants of serfdom. The stifling taxation of that regime fuelled a profligacy of consumerist elites, which contrasted with the norms of competition and accumulation prevailing in advanced capitalism (Williams, 2014). This fracture was subsequently recreated and tends to reappear in very different forms today.

Another sphere of affinities can be seen in the country's international insertion as a semi-periphery. This location has a long history, in a power that did not reach the heights of the dominant empires, but managed to escape colonial subordination. One scholar of this category

traces the intermediate status to Russia's marginalisation from the empires that preceded the modern era (Byzantium, Persia, China). This divorce continued during the shaping of the global economic system. This network was structured around a geographical axis of the Atlantic, with modes of labour distanced from the servility that prevailed in the universe of the tsars (Wallerstein; Derluguian, 2014).

Russia expanded internally, turning its back on this intertwining and forged its empire with the internal subjugation (and forced conscription) of the peasants. By staying in this external arena, it avoided the fragility of its neighbours and the regression suffered by declining powers (such as Spain). But it did not participate in the rising process of the Netherlands and England. It protected its environment, acting outside the main contests for world domination (Wallerstein, 1979: 426-502).

The tsarist dynasty never managed to gestate the efficient bureaucracy and modern agriculture that drove industrialisation in other economies. This obstruction blocked the economic leap that Germany and the United States achieved (Kagarlitsky, 2017: 11-14). Russia's imperial dynamics always maintained a sustained gap with the advanced economies, which is again emerging in the twenty-first century.

## CONTRASTS WITH 1914-18

Some theorists of imperialism in reconstitution locate similarities with late tsarism in Russia's involvement in the First World War (Pröbsting, 2012). They draw parallels between the declining actors of the past (Britain and France) and their current exponents (the United States) and between the challenging powers of that era (Germany and Japan) and their contemporary emulators (Russia and China) (Project, 2019).

Russia entered the great conflagration of 1914 as an already capitalist power. Serfdom had been abolished, big industry was flourishing in modern factories and the proletariat was very important. But Moscow acted in that contest as a peculiar rival. It did not align itself with the United States, Germany or Japan among the rising empires, nor did it place itself with Britain and France among the declining dominators.

Tsarism remained entrenched in frontier territorial expansion and was pushed onto the battlefield by financial commitments to one of the contending sides. It also went to war to preserve its right to plunder the surrounding area, but faced a dramatic defeat, which accentuated the previous setback against the upstart Japanese empire.

Tsarism had achieved a survival that its counterparts on the Indian subcontinent or in the Near and Far East had not. It managed to maintain the autonomy and gravitas of its empire for several centuries, but it failed the test of modern warfare. It was overpowered by Britain and France in the Crimea, by Japan in Manchuria and by Germany in the trenches of Europe.

Many Western analysts suggest similarities between that failure and the current incursion into Ukraine. But there is as yet no data on that eventuality and assessments of the ongoing contest are premature. Moreover, parallels should take into account the radical difference that separates contemporary imperialism from its precedent.

In the 1914-18 war a plurality of powers clashed with comparable forces, in a scenario far removed from today's stratified Pentagon-led supremacy. Contemporary imperialism operates around a structure headed by the United States and supported by alter-imperial and co-imperial partners in Europe, Asia and Oceania. NATO articulates this conglomerate under Washington's orders in major conflicts with the non-hegemonic rivals of Moscow and Beijing. Neither of these

two powers is on the same plane as the dominant imperialism. The differences with the early 20th century scenario are stark.

In the last reign of the tsars, Russia maintained a contradictory relationship of participation and subordination with the protagonists of international warfare. Today, on the contrary, it is being severely harassed by these forces. Russia does not play the role of Belgium or Spain as a junior NATO partner. It shares with China the opposite role as the Pentagon's main target. A century on, the geopolitical context has changed dramatically.

Nor does the old 1914 competition for colonial spoils reappear today. Moscow and Washington are not competing with Paris, London, Berlin or Tokyo for the domination of dependent countries. This difference is omitted by the views (Rocca, 2020) that postulate Russia's equivalence with its Western peers in the rivalry for the resources of the periphery.

This misconception extends to the presentation of the Ukrainian war as an economic clash over the use of the country's resources. It is claimed that two powers of the same sign (Vernyk, 2022) aspire to share a territory with large reserves of iron ore, gas and wheat. This rivalry would pit the US and Russia against each other in a clash similar to the old inter-imperialist confrontations. This approach forgets that the Ukrainian conflict had no such economic origin. It was provoked by the United States, which asserted for itself the right to encircle Russia with missiles while it was negotiating Kiev's accession to NATO. Moscow sought to neutralise this harassment and Washington ignored its opponent's legitimate security claims.

The asymmetries between the two sides are obvious. NATO advanced against Russia, despite the withering away of the old Warsaw Pact. Ukraine was drawn closer to the Atlantic Alliance, with no Western European country negotiating such partnerships with Russia.

Nor did the Kremlin imagine setting up a synchronised bomb system against US cities in Canada or Mexico. It did not counterbalance the skein of military bases that its adversary has installed all along Russia's Eurasian borders. This asymmetry has been so naturalised that it is forgotten who is primarily responsible for imperial incursions.

Moreover, we have already set out the compelling evidence that illustrates how Russia fails to comply with the imperial economic pattern in its relations with the periphery. It makes no sense to place it on the same plane of rivalry with the world's leading power. An autarkic semi-periphery with limited integration into globalisation does not compete for markets with the gigantic companies of Western capitalism.

Economic interpretations of the current Russian intervention in Ukraine dilute the central issue. This incursion has defensive purposes against NATO, geopolitical objectives of controlling the post-Soviet space and Putin's internal political motivations. The Kremlin chief intends to divert attention from growing socio-economic problems, counter his electoral decline and ensure the prolongation of his mandate (Kagarlitsky, 2022). These goals are as distant from 1914-18 as they are from the contemporary imperial scenario.

## DIFFERENCES WITH SUB-IMPERIALISM

Similarities with the last tsarist empire are sometimes conceptualised with the notion of sub-imperialism. This term is used to describe the weak or lesser variant of imperial status, which the Russian government today would share with its early 20th century predecessors. Moscow is seen as having the traits of a great power, but acting in the lower league of dominators (Presumey, 2015).

The same notion highlights similarities with secondary imperialisms of the past, such as Japan, and extends this similarity to Putin's leadership with Tojo (the Japanese emperor's minister) (Proyekt, 2014). Russia is placed in the same pigeonhole of secondary empires, which in the past linked tsarism to the Ottoman rulers or the Austro-Hungarian royalty.

Certainly, the country has a long and dense imperial history. But this inherited element only has significance today, when old tendencies reappear in new contexts. The addition "sub" does not clarify this scenario.

Contemporary imperialism has lost affinities with its nineteenth-century predecessor, and these differences are found in all cases. Turkey does not reconstruct the Ottoman framework, Austria does not harbour Habsburg traces, and Moscow does not resurrect Romanov politics. Moreover, the three countries are located in very different places in the contemporary global order.

In all the above-mentioned meanings, the sub-empire is seen as an inferior variant of dominant imperialism. It can either abandon or serve that main force, but is defined by its subordinate role. But this view ignores the fact that Russia does not currently participate in the dominant imperial apparatus commanded by the United States. It is emphasised that it acts as a subordinate, minor or complementary power, but without specifying in what sphere this action takes place.

This omission prevents us from noticing the differences with the past. Moscow does not participate as a secondary empire within NATO, but rather clashes with the body that embodies 21st century imperialism.

Russia is also positioned as a sub-empire by authors (Ishchenko; Yurchenko, 2019) who refer to this concept in its initial formulation. This meaning was developed by Latin American Marxist theorists of dependency. But in that tradition, sub-imperialism is not a minor modality of a major prototype.

Marini used the concept in the 1960s to illustrate the status of Brazil and not to clarify the role of Spain, the Netherlands or Belgium. He sought to highlight the former country's contradictory relationship of partnership and subordination to the American dominator.

The Brazilian thinker pointed out that the dictatorship in Brasilia was aligned with Pentagon strategy, but acted with great regional autonomy and conceived of adventures without Washington's support. A similar policy is currently being pursued by Erdogan in Turkey (Katz, 2021).

This dependency-based application of sub-imperialism does not apply today to Russia, which is constantly hostile to the United States. Moscow does not share the ambiguities of the relationship that Brasilia or Pretoria had with Washington several decades ago. Nor does it exhibit the half-measures of today's connection with Ankara. Russia is strategically harassed by the Pentagon, and this absence of elements of partnership with the United States excludes it from the sub-imperial platoon.

## THERE WAS NO SOVIET IMPERIALISM

Another 20th century comparison presents Putin as a reconstructor of Soviet imperialism. This Cold War term is more suggested than used in Marxist analyses. In these cases, the external oppression exercised by the USSR is taken for granted. Some authors point out that this system participated in the division of the world through external incursions and annexations of territories (Batou, 2015).

But this view misjudges a trajectory that emerged from the socialist revolution, which introduced a principle of eradicating capitalism, rejecting inter-imperialist war and expropriating the big

landowners. This anti-capitalist dynamic was drastically affected by the long night of Stalinism, which introduced ruthless forms of repression and the dismantling of the Bolshevik leadership. This regime consolidated the power of a bureaucracy, which managed with mechanisms opposed to the ideals of socialism.

Stalinism consummated a great Thermidor in a country devastated by the war, with a decimated proletariat, demolished factories and stagnant agriculture. In this scenario, the advance towards an egalitarian society was halted. But this setback did not lead to the restoration of capitalism. The USSR did not see the emergence of a property-owning class based on the accumulation of surplus value and subject to the rules of market competition. A model of compulsive planning prevailed, with rules of surplus and surplus labour management moulded to the privileges of the bureaucracy (Katz, 2004: 59-67).

This lack of a capitalist foundation prevented the emergence of a Soviet imperialism comparable to its Western peers. The new oppressive elite never had the supports provided by capitalism to the ruling classes. It had to manage a hybrid social formation that industrialised the country, standardised its culture and maintained for decades a great tension with the collective imperialism of the West.

The erroneous Soviet imperialism thesis is related to the characterisation of the USSR as a state capitalist regime (Weiniger, 2015), in conflict with the US over the dispossession of the periphery. Such an equating registers the social inequalities and political oppression in the USSR, but omits the absence of ownership of enterprises and the consequent right to exploit wage labour, with the typical rules of accumulation.

Ignorance of these fundamentals feeds the erroneous comparisons of the Putin era with Stalin, Brezhnev or Khrushchev. They fail to register the prolonged interruption of capitalism in Russia. Rather, they assume that some variety of that system persisted in the USSR and therefore emphasise the presence of an uninterrupted imperial sequence.

They forget that the foreign policy of the USSR did not reproduce the usual behaviours of that domination. After abandoning the principles of internationalism, the Kremlin avoided expansionism and only sought to achieve some kind of status quo with the United States.

This diplomacy expressed an oppressive but not imperialist tone. The dominant stratum of the USSR exercised clear supremacy over its partners, through military (Warsaw Pact) and economic (COMECON) devices. It negotiated rules of coexistence with Washington and demanded the subordination of all members of the so-called socialist bloc.

This forced patronage led to shocking ruptures with governments that resisted subjugation (Yugoslavia under Tito and China under Mao). In neither of these two cases did the Kremlin succeed in altering the autonomous course of the regimes that were trying out different paths from big brother.

A more brutal response was adopted by Moscow to the attempted rebellion in Czechoslovakia to implement a model of socialist renewal. In that case, Russia sent tanks and gendarmes to crush the protest.

What happened in Yugoslavia, China and Czechoslovakia confirms that the Moscow bureaucracy was asserting its power demands. But this action was not in keeping with the rules of imperialism, which only came to the fore after thirty years of capitalism. A non-hegemonic empire was beginning to emerge in Russia, which did not continue the ghostly Soviet empire.

## ASSESSMENTS OF INTERNAL COLONIALISM

Some authors underline the impact of internal colonialism on Russia's imperial dynamics (Kowalewski, 2014b). They recall that the collapse of the USSR led to the separation of 14 republics, along with the maintenance of 21 other non-Russian conglomerates in Moscow's orbit. These minorities occupy 30 per cent of the territory and are home to one fifth of the population in adverse economic and social conditions. These disadvantages are reflected in the exploitation of natural resources that the Kremlin manages in its favour. The central administration captures, for example, a large part of the oil revenues from Western Siberia and the Far East. The new supranational entities of recent decades have validated this inequality between regions. This is why the relations of the Eurasian Economic Community (2000) and the Customs Union (2007) with partners Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been so conflictual.

These asymmetries present, in turn, a double face of a Russian colonising presence in the surrounding areas and emigration from the periphery to the centres to supply the cheap labour demanded in the big cities. This oppressive dynamic is another effect of capitalist restoration. But some authors relativise this process, recalling that the heritage of the USSR is not synonymous with the mere domination of the Russian majority. They stress that the prevailing language operated as a lingua franca, which did not obstruct the flourishing of other cultures. They consider that this diversified localism allowed the gestation of an autonomous body of administrators, which in recent decades divorced itself with great ease from Moscow (Anderson, 2015).

Internal colonisation has also coexisted with a multi-ethnic composition that limited Russia's national identity. Russia emerged more as a multi-ethnic empire than as a nation defined by common citizenship.

It is true that under Stalinism there were clear privileges in favour of Russians. Half of the population suffered the devastating consequences of forced collectivisation and forced relocations. A brutal territorial remodelling took place, with massive punishment of Ukrainians, Tatars, Chechens or Volga Germans, who were displaced to areas far from their homeland. The Russians once again occupied the best places in the administration and the myths of this nationalism were transformed into a patriotic ideal of the USSR. But these advantages were also neutralised by the mixing of émigrés and the assimilation of displaced persons that accompanied the unprecedented post-war growth.

This absorption did not erase the previous atrocities, but it changed their consequences. In the prosperity that prevailed until the 1980s, the coexistence of nations attenuated Great Russian supremacy. The late colonialism that prevailed in South Africa and persists in Palestine did not occur in the USSR. The privileges of ethnic Russians did not imply racism or apartheid. But whatever the assessment of internal colonialism, it should be pointed out that this dimension is not a determinant of Russia's eventual role as an imperialist power. That status is determined by a state's external action. Internal oppressive dynamics only complement a defined role in the global concert.

The subjugation of national minorities is present in countless medium-sized countries that no one would place in the elite club of empires. In the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia there are numerous examples of the sufferings endured by minorities marginalised from power. The mistreatment of the Kurds does not, for example, make Syria or Iraq imperialist countries. That status is defined in the realm of foreign policy.

## COMPLEXITY OF NATIONAL TENSIONS

Approaches that highlight the oppressive gravitation of Russification also ponder the resistance to this domination. On the one hand, they denounce the programmed export of the main ethnic group in order to secure the privileges managed by the Kremlin. On the other hand, they highlight the progressiveness of national movements that confront Moscow's tyranny (Kowalewski, 2014c).

But it is not only Russia's claim to preserve supremacy in areas of influence that is at stake in these conflicts. Also at stake is the US's aim to undermine the territorial integrity of its rival and the interests of local elites vying for a slice of the disputed resources (Stern, 2016). Most of the republics that have broken away from Muscovite tutelage have followed similar sequences of officialisation of the local language to the detriment of Russian speakers. This language revival underpins the practical and symbolic construction of the new nations, in the military, educational and civic spheres.

The West often fosters the fractures that Moscow tries to counteract. This tension deepens the clash between minorities, who often cohabit in close proximity. The population is rarely consulted about its own destiny. The fanatical nationalism fostered by local elites obstructs such a democratic response.

The US fuels all tensions. First it propped up the disintegration of Yugoslavia and erected a large military base in Kosovo to monitor the surrounding radius. Then it encouraged Latvian independence, a short Moldovan war to encourage secession and a failed onslaught by its Georgian president against Moscow (Hutin, 2021).

Native dominant groups (which are conducive to the creation of new states) often revitalise old traditions or build such identities from scratch. In all five Central Asian countries, jihadism has played an important role in such strategies.

The recent case of Kazakhstan is highly illustrative of the current conflicts. An oligarchy of former USSR hierarchs appropriated energy resources there, in order to share profits with Western oil companies. It implemented rampant neoliberalism, suppressed labour rights and forged a new state by repatriating ethnic Kazakhs. In doing so, he empowered the local language and Islamic religion to isolate the Russian-speaking minority. He had succeeded in this operation until the recent crisis, which led to the dispatch of troops and the consequent restoration of Moscow's patronage (Karpatsky, 2022).

Nagorno-Karabakh offers another example of the same exacerbation of nationalism to entrench elite power. In an enclave of Armenian settlers who coexisted for centuries with their neighbours in Azeri territory, two dominant groups have disputed ownership of the same territory. The Armenians won military victories (in 1991 and 1994), which were recently reversed by Azeri triumphs. To secure its custody of the area (and deter the growing presence of the US, France and Turkey), Russia sponsors concerted exits from the conflict (Jofré Leal, 2020).

Attributing the enormous diversity of national tensions to Russia's dominant action alone is as one-sided as assigning an invariably progressive profile to the protagonists of these clashes. In many cases there are legitimate grievances, regressively instrumentalised by local elites in tune with the Pentagon. The simplified impugning of Russian imperialism fails to register these circumstances and complexities.

## AN UNRESOLVED STATUS

Many theorists of empire in reconstitution lose sight of the fact that Russia currently lacks the level of political cohesion required for such a reshaping. The collapse of the USSR did not generate a unified programme of the new oligarchy or state-run bureaucracy. The trauma of the implosion left a great sequence of disputes.

The imperialist project is effectively promoted by right-wing sectors, which promote external adventures to profit from the profitable war business. This faction revives the old beliefs of Great Russian nationalism and replaces traditional anti-Semitism with Islamophobic campaigns. It joins the European right wing in the brown wave, delivers demagogic diatribes against Brussels and Washington and focuses its darts on immigrants.

But this segment, imbued with imperial yearnings, clashes with the internationalised liberal elite, which favours a fanatical integration with the West. This group espouses Anglo-American values and aspires to a place for the country in the transatlantic alliance.

The millionaires in the latter camp shelter their money in tax havens, manage their accounts from London, educate their children at Harvard and accumulate property in Switzerland. The experience under Yeltsin illustrates how devastating are the consequences of any state management by such characters, who are ashamed of their own national status (Kagarlitsky, 2015).

Navalny is the main exponent of this minority deified by the US media. He challenges Putin with the blatant backing of the State Department, but faces the same adversities as his predecessors. Biden's external backing and the domestic support of a sector of the new middle class does not erase the memory of Yeltsin's demolition.

The dispute between this liberal sector, dazzled by the West, and its nationalist rivals is played out in a wide field of economics, culture and history. The great figures of the past have re-emerged as banners of both groups. Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Alexander II are evaluated by their contribution to Russia's convergence with European civilisation or by their contribution to the national spirit. The liberal elite that despises its country clashes with the counter-elite that yearns for tsarism. Both currents face serious limits in consolidating their strategy.

The liberals were discredited by the chaos introduced by Yeltsin. Putin's prolonged rule is based on the contrast with this demolition. His leadership includes some recomposition of nationalist traditions amalgamated with the resurgence of the Orthodox Church. This institution regained property and opulence with official support for ceremonies and worship.

None of these pillars has so far provided the sustenance required to underpin more aggressive external actions. The invasion of Ukraine is the great test of these foundations. The country's multi-ethnic make-up and the absence of a conventional nation-state conspire against such adventures.

Putin himself often declares his admiration for the old 'greatness of Russia', but until the Kiev incursion he managed foreign policy cautiously, combining acts of force with sustained negotiations. He sought the country's recognition as an international player, without endorsing the imperial reconstruction favoured by the nationalists. The continuity of this balance is at stake in the battle for Ukraine.

Those who consider the reconstitution of a Russian empire to be a *fait accompli* pay little attention to the fragile pillars of this structure of domination. They lose sight of the fact that Putin does not inherit six centuries of feudalism, but three decades of convulsive capitalism.



The limited scale of Russia's potential dominant course is more aptly registered by authors who explore different denominations (developing imperialism, peripheral imperialism) to allude to an embryonic status.

The search for a singular concept differentiated from dominant imperialism is the purpose of our enquiry. The category of non-hegemonic empire in formation proposes an approximation to such a definition. But the clarification of the subject requires the continuation of a review of other approaches, which we will evaluate in our next text.

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## SUMMARY

Many differences separate the current scenario from the tsarist antecedent. Russia's confluence with Western powers has been replaced by serious clashes. This confrontation determines expansive tendencies of a different kind. Comparisons with the USSR omit the absence of capitalism under that system. There were mechanisms of external oppression, but no Soviet imperialism.

Russia's secondary place in the imperialist hierarchy is not synonymous with sub-imperialism. Nor does an ambiguous relationship with the world's dominators prevail. Internal colonialism has re-emerged, but it does not define the imperial condition, nor does it determine the sign of national movements in the post-Soviet space.

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