

## Is Russia an imperialist power? Part III: Continuities, reconstructions and ruptures

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*Abstract: Many differences separate modern-day Russia from the tsarist era. Russia's convergence with Western powers has been replaced by serious clashes. This confrontation has established 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 resurfaced, but it does not define imperial status, nor does it determine the nature of national movements in the post-Soviet sphere.*

*[Note by LINKS: This is the third in a four-part series of articles by Argentine Marxist Claudio Katz looking at the issue of Russia's imperial status. Read [Part I](#), [Part II](#) and [Part IV](#). Translation by Federico Fuentes. Original in Spanish [here](#).]*

<http://links.org.au/is-russia-an-imperialist-power-continuities-reconstructions-ruptures>

Russia is often referred to as an imperialism in reconstruction.

Some use this concept to emphasise the incomplete and embryonic nature of its imperial emergence (Testa, 2020). But others resort to the same phrase to highlight expansive behaviours dating back a long time. These visions posit analogies with tsarist decline, similarities with the USSR and the primacy of internal colonial dynamics. These interpretations give rise to intense debates.

### **Contrasts and similarities with the past**

Approaches that note longstanding continuities view Putin as an heir of past territorial conquests. They highlight three historical stages of a single imperial sequence, with feudal, bureaucratic or capitalist foundations but invariably based on border expansion (Kowalewski, 2014a).

These likenesses should be treated with caution. 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 strengthen serfdom across a vast territory. The conquered regions paid tribute to Moscow and became intertwined with the centre through the settlement of Russian migrants.

This modality of internal colonialism differed from the typical British, French or Spanish schemes of capturing external regions. The size of the appropriated zones was gigantic and formed a unique and continuous geographical area, which differed greatly from the maritime empires of Western Europe. Russia was a land power with reduced weight on

the seas. It cohered a model that used military coercion to compensate for economic fragility via a monumental empire of the periphery.

Lenin characterised this structure as a feudal-military imperialism that imprisoned countless peoples. He emphasised the pre-capitalist character of this configuration based on the exploitation of serfs. Any analogies that can be established with that past must take into account the qualitative differences that exist 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. Relying on those prejudices, the Western establishment built all its Cold War legends (Lipatti, 2017).

Comparisons that avoid that simplification allow us to notice the distance that has always separated Russia from the centres of capitalism. That gap persisted through the cycles of modernisation introduced by tsarism via military reinforcements, deepening exploitation of peasants and different variants of serfdom. The regime's stifling taxation system fuelled a profligacy of consumerist elites, which contrasted with the prevailing norms of competition and accumulation in advanced capitalism (Williams, 2014). That fracture was subsequently recreated and tends to reappear today, though under very different modalities.

Another sphere of affinity is registered in the country's international insertion within the semi-periphery. This positioning has a long history in a power that never reached the peak of dominant empires, but managed to escape colonial subordination. One scholar of this category traces Russia's intermediate status to its marginalisation from the empires that preceded the modern era (Byzantium, Persia, China). This divorce continued during the formation of the world economic system. This framework was structured around the geographical axis of the Atlantic, with modalities of work distant from the prevailing servility in the universe of the tsars (Wallerstein; Derluguian, 2014). Russia expanded internally, turning its back on this intertwining and forged its empire through internal subjugation (and forced conscription) of peasants. By remaining outside that framework, it avoided the fragility of its neighbours and the regression suffered by declining powers (such as Spain). But it did not participate in the ascending process led by the Netherlands and England. It protected its surroundings and operated outside the main disputes 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. That obstruction blocked Russia from being able to take the same economic leap that Germany and the United States achieved (Kagarlitsky, 2017: 11-14). Russia's imperial dynamics always maintained a distant gap with advanced economies, which continues on in the 21st century.

### **Contrasts with 1914-18**

Some theorists of imperialism in reconstruction posit similarities with the last empire of tsarism and Russia's participation during World War I (Pröbsting, 2012). They draw parallels between the declining actors of the past (Britain and France) and present times

(the United States) and between the rising powers of that era (Germany and Japan) and their contemporary emulators (Russia and China) (Proyect, 2019).

Russia intervened in the great conflagration of 1914 as an existing capitalist power. Serfdom had been abolished, large industry was emerging in the form of modern factories and the weight of proletariat was very important. But Moscow acted in that conflict as a very peculiar rival. It did not align itself with the emerging empires of the United States, Germany or Japan, nor did it take the side of declining powers such as England and France.

Tsarism continued to settle for territorial expansion along its borders and was pushed onto the battlefield by the financial commitments it had with one of the contending sides. It also went to war to preserve its right to plunder its immediate surroundings, but faced a dramatic defeat which accentuated its previous setback against the upstart Japanese empire.

Tsarism had achieved a form of survival that its counterparts in the Indian subcontinent or the Near and Far East did not. It had managed to maintain its autonomy and the presence of its empire for several centuries, but failed the test of modern warfare. It was defeated 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 evidence of that eventuality and any evaluation of the unfolding conflict is premature. Moreover, parallels should take into account the radical difference that separates contemporary imperialism from its predecessor.

In the 1914-18 war, a plurality of powers with comparable forces clashed in a scenario far removed from the current stratified supremacy exercised by the Pentagon.

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 its non-hegemonic rivals in Moscow and Beijing. Neither of these two powers are on the same level as the dominant imperialism. Differences with the situation at the beginning of the 20th century are large.

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

Nor has the old 1914 competition for the appropriation of colonial spoils reappeared today. Moscow and Washington do not compete with Paris, London, Berlin or Tokyo for domination over dependent countries. This difference is omitted in those views (Rocca, 2020) that posit an equivalence between Russia and its peers in the West in the rivalry over 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 equal powers (Vernyk, 2022) aspire to carve out their share of a territory with large reserves of iron

ore, gas and wheat. This rivalry pits the United States and Russia against each other in a clash similar to old inter-imperialist confrontations.

This approach forgets that the Ukrainian conflict did not have an economic origin. It was provoked by the US, which assigned itself the right to encircle Russia with missiles while negotiating Kyiv's accession to NATO. Moscow sought to neutralise this harassment and Washington ignored the legitimate security claims of its opponent. The asymmetries between the two sides are obvious. NATO advanced against Russia, despite the withering away of the old Warsaw Pact. Ukraine was brought closer to the Atlantic alliance, without any Western European country negotiating such partnerships with Russia.

Nor has the Kremlin imagined mounting missile launching systems in Canada or Mexico to target US cities. 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 often forgotten who is primarily responsible for imperial incursions.

We have already outlined the compelling evidence that illustrates how Russia fails to meet the characteristics of imperial economic relations with the periphery. It makes no sense to place it on the same plane of rivalry as the largest power in the world. An autarkic semi-periphery country with limited integration into globalisation cannot challenge for markets against the gigantic companies of Western capitalism. Economic readings of the current Russian intervention in Ukraine dilute the central issue. This incursion is motivated by defensive aims against NATO, geopolitical objectives of control over the post-Soviet sphere and Putin's internal political motivations. The Kremlin chief intends to divert attention from growing socio-economic problems, counteract his electoral decline and ensure the prolongation of his mandate (Kagarlitsky, 2022). Those goals are as distant from 1914-18 as they are from the contemporary imperial scenario.

### **Differences with sub-imperialism**

Similarities with the last empire of the tsars are sometimes conceptualised using the concept of sub-imperialism. The term is used to describe a weak or smaller variant of imperial status, which the Russian government today shares with its early 20th century predecessor. Moscow is considered to have the traits of a great power but one that acts in the lower league of dominators (Presumey, 2015).

Using the same concept, similarities are drawn with secondary imperialisms of the past, such as Japan, and extended to note similarities between Putin's leadership with Tojo (prime minister of the Japanese empire) (Proyekt, 2014). Russia is placed in the same category of secondary empires, which in the past was used to draw comparison between tsarism and the Ottoman rulers or the Austro-Hungarian royalty.

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

Contemporary imperialism has lost affinities with its 19th century predecessor and these differences can be verified in all cases. Turkey has not reconstructed the Ottoman empire, Austria does not maintain remnants of the Habsburgs, and Moscow has not

resurrected the Romanov's policy. Moreover, these three countries occupy very different places in the contemporary global order.

In all the above-mentioned meanings, the sub-empire is seen as an inferior variant of the dominant imperialism. It can abandon or serve this main force, but it 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 relegated, minor or complementary power without specifying in what sphere this action is taking place.

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

Russia is also situated as a sub-imperialist power by authors (Ishchenko; Yurchenko, 2019) who use the concept as it was originally conceived. That 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 explain Brazil's status and not to clarify the role played by Spain, Holland or Belgium. He sought to highlight the contradictory relationship of association and subordination between Brazil and the US dominator. The Brazilian thinker pointed out that the Brasilia dictatorship aligned itself with the Pentagon's strategy but operated with a large level of 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 is not valid for Russia today, which is permanently harassed by the United States. Moscow does not share the ambiguities of the relationship that Brasilia or Pretoria maintained with Washington several decades ago. Neither does it exhibit the half-measures of the current 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 group of sub-imperialist powers.

## **There was no Soviet imperialism**

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

But this view misjudges a trajectory arising from the socialist revolution that introduced a principle of eradication of capitalism, rejection of inter-imperialist war and expropriation of large landowners. That anti-capitalist dynamic was drastically affected by the long night of Stalinism, which introduced ruthless forms of repression and decapitated the Bolshevik leadership. That regime consolidated the power of a bureaucracy, which ruled through the use of 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 that scenario, the advance towards an egalitarian society was halted. But this setback did not lead to

the restoration of capitalism. In the USSR, an owner class based on the accumulation of surplus value and subject to the rules of mercantile competitiveness did not burst into the scene. A model of compulsive planning prevailed, with norms for managing surplus value and surplus labour moulded to the privileges of the bureaucracy (Katz, 2004: 59-67).

The non-existence of capitalist foundations prevented the emergence of a Soviet imperialism comparable to its Western peers. The new oppressive elite never had the support that capitalism provides 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 Western imperialism as a whole.

The erroneous thesis of Soviet imperialism is tied to the characterisation of the USSR as a state capitalist regime (Weiniger, 2015), in conflict with the United States over the dispossession of the periphery. Such equating takes note of the social inequalities and political oppression present in the USSR, but omits the absence of private ownership of enterprises and the resulting right to exploit wage labour within the typical rules of accumulation.

Ignorance of these fundamentals feeds erroneous comparisons between the Putin era and Stalin, Brezhnev or Khrushchev. They fail to register the prolonged interruption of capitalism in Russia. Instead, 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 strove 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 a clear supremacy over its partners, through military (Warsaw Pact) and economic (COMECON) devices. It negotiated with Washington the rules of co-existence and demanded subordination from all members of the so-called Socialist Bloc.

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

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

The events in Yugoslavia, China and Czechoslovakia confirm that the Moscow bureaucracy exercised its power to assert its demands. But these actions were not inscribed within the rules of imperialism, which only came to the surface after thirty years of capitalism. A non-hegemonic empire has begun to emerge in Russia, but it is not the continuation of a ghostly Soviet empire.

## **Assessments of internal colonialism**

Some authors highlight the impact of internal colonialism on Russia's imperial dynamics (Kowalewski, 2014b). They recall that the collapse of the USSR led to its separation into 14 republics, along with the maintenance of 21 other non-Russian conglomerates within Moscow's orbit.

These minorities occupy 30% of the territory and represent one fifth of the population. They live in adverse economic and social conditions. These disadvantages are verified in the exploitation of natural resources that the Kremlin carries out for its own advantage. 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 reinforced this inequality between regions. This is why relations in the Eurasian Economic Community (2000) and the Customs Union (2007), with its partners in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have been so conflictive.

These asymmetries represent, in turn, the two sides of the Russian colonising presence in remote areas and emigration from the periphery to the centres in order to provide 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 a simple Russian majority domination. They emphasise that the prevailing language operated as a *lingua franca* that did not obstruct the flourishing of other cultures. They consider that this diversified localism allowed for the gestation of an autonomous body of administrators, which in the past decades has divorced itself with great ease from Moscow (Anderson, 2015).

Internal colonisation has co-existed, moreover, with a multi-ethnic composition that limited Russian national identity. That country emerged more as an empire composed of various peoples than as a nation defined by common citizenship.

It is true that during Stalinism there were clear privileges favouring Russians. Half of the population suffered the devastating consequences of forced collectivisation and compulsory relocations. A brutal territorial remodelling was consummated, with huge punishments metered out to Ukrainians, Tartars, Chechens and Volga Germans, who were displaced to areas far from their homeland.

Russians again occupied the best places in the administration and the myths of this nationalism were transformed into a patriotic ideal within the USSR. But these advantages were also neutralised by the mixture of emigrants and assimilation of the displaced that accompanied the unprecedented post-war growth.

This absorption did not erase previous atrocities, but it modified their consequences. In the prosperity that prevailed until the 1980s, the co-existence of nations attenuated Great Russian supremacy. The late colonialism that prevailed in South Africa and persists in Palestine was not registered in the USSR. The privileges of ethnic Russians did not imply racism or apartheid.

But whatever the evaluation of internal colonialism, it should be pointed out that this dimension is not a determinant of Russia's potential status as an imperialist power. That status is determined by the external action of a state. Internal oppressive dynamics only complement a defined role in the global system.

The subjugation of national minorities is present in countless medium-sized countries, which no one would place in the select club of empires. In the Middle East, Eastern

Europe, Africa and Asia, there are numerous examples of the suffering of 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.

### **The complexities of national tensions**

Approaches that highlight the oppressive gravitation of Russification also ponder the issue of resistance to that domination. On the one hand, they denounce the programmed resettlement of members of the main ethnic group to ensure privileges managed by the Kremlin. On the other hand, they emphasise the progressiveness of the national movements that confront Moscow's tyranny (Kowalewski, 2014c). But in these conflicts it is not just Russian pretensions of preserving supremacy in areas of influence that are registered. Also at play is the US aim of undermining the territorial integrity of its rival and the interest of local elites vying for a slice of the disputed resources (Stern, 2016).

Most of the breakaway republics from Muscovite tutelage have followed similar sequences of officialisation of the local language to the detriment of Russian speakers. This idiomatic renaissance underpins the practical and symbolic construction of the new nations, in the military, education and civic spheres.

The West tends to promote fractures that Moscow tries to counteract. This tension deepens the clash between minorities, which frequently live side-by-side. Rarely is the population consulted about its own destiny. The fanatical nationalism sponsored by local elites obstructs this democratic response.

The United States incentivises all tensions. First it sought the disintegration of Yugoslavia and erected a large military base in Kosova to monitor the surrounding areas. Then it encouraged Latvian independence, a short war in Moldova to encourage secession, and a failed assault by the Georgian president against Moscow (Hutin, 2021).

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

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

Nagorno-Karabakh offers another example of the same exacerbation of nationalism to entrench the power of elites. In an enclave of Armenian settlers who have co-existed for centuries with their neighbours in this Azerbaijani territory, two dominant groups have disputed ownership of the same territory. The Armenians obtained military victories (in 1991 and 1994), which were recently reversed by Azerbaijani triumphs. To ensure its custody of the area (and deter the growing presence of the United States, France and Turkey), Russia sponsored a negotiated settlement to the conflict (Jofré Leal, 2020).



Attributing the enormous diversity of national tensions to the mere dominant action of Russia is as one-sided as assigning an invariably progressive profile to the protagonists of these clashes. In many cases there are legitimate grievances, implemented in a regressive manner by local elites aligned with the Pentagon. The simplified impugning of Russian imperialism prevents registering these circumstances and complexities.

### **An unresolved status**

Many theorists who advocate the idea of an empire in reconstruction lose sight of the fact that Russia currently lacks the level of political cohesion required for such a rebuilding. The collapse of the USSR did not generate a unified program of the new oligarchy or of the bureaucracy managing the state. The trauma caused by this implosion has left behind a great number of disputes.

The imperialist project is effectively promoted by right-wing sectors that encourage external adventures to profit from profitable war business. That fraction has revived old beliefs of Great Russian nationalism and replaced traditional antisemitism with Islamophobic campaigns. It works together with the European right-wing to promote a “brown wave”, issuing demagogic diatribes against Brussels and Washington and focuses its attacks on immigrants.

But this segment, imbued with imperial yearnings, faces off against an internationalised liberal elite, which fanatical favours integration into the West. This group propagates Anglo-American values and aspires to achieve a place for the country in the transatlantic alliance.

The millionaires who make up this latter camp keep 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 just how devastating the consequences can be of any state management by these characters who are ashamed of their own national status (Kagarlitsky, 2015).

Navalny is the main exponent of that minority, deified by the US media. He challenges Putin with the unabashed support of the State Department, but faces the same adversities of his predecessors. The external support of Biden and the internal support of a sector of the new middle class does not erase the memory of the demolition perpetrated by Yeltsin.

The dispute between this liberal sector, dazzled by the West, and its nationalist rivals is unfolding in the broad field of economy, 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 for their contribution to Russia’s convergence with European civilisation or for their contribution to the national spirit. The liberal elite that despises its country clashes with a counter-elite that longs for tsarism. Both currents face serious limitations to consolidating their strategy.

The liberals were left discredited by the chaos introduced by Yeltsin. Putin’s prolonged administration relies on its contrast with that demolition. His leadership includes a certain re-composition of nationalist traditions amalgamated with the resurgence of the Orthodox Church. This institution has recovered properties and opulence through official aid for ceremonies and worship.

None of these pillars provided until now the support required to underpin more aggressive external actions. The invasion of Ukraine is the first great test of these foundations. The multi-ethnic make-up of the country 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 incursion into Kyiv he managed his foreign policy with caution, combining demonstrations of force with sustained negotiations. He sought recognition of the country as an international player, without endorsing the imperial reconstruction promoted by the nationalists. The continuity of this balance act is at stake in the battle for Ukraine.

Those who consider the reconstruction 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 has not inherited six centuries of feudalism, but rather three decades of convulsive capitalism.

The limited scale of Russia’s potential dominant course is registered with greatest accuracy by authors who explore different denominations (developing imperialism, peripheral imperialism) to allude to its embryonic status.

The search for a singular concept differentiated from dominant imperialism is the purpose of our inquiry. The category of non-hegemonic empire in formation proposes an approximation to this definition. But clarifying the issue requires continuing with a review of other approaches, which we will turn to in our next article.

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