

A Comprehensive Analysis of the Political Situation in Russia from the Perspectives of Thucydides, Max Weber, and Michel Foucault

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Abstract. With the current situation in Europe regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the political situation of Russia has generated high interest. The research topic of this paper is the political situation of Russia. To understand the current political situation, the historical situation of the Russian Federation must be explored first. Both historical and modern situations were explored from the three key aspects of authority, motive, and surveillance. Max Weber's theory on authority and domination was used to analyze the historical authorities within Russia leading up to the 1905 Revolution as well as in the 1917 Civil war and eventually the USSR. Thucydides' account of the Speech of the Athenians was used to explore the true motive behind Russia's various advancements in Europe. Lastly, surveillance throughout Russia's lengthy history was studied with references to Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. The study found that throughout the history of the Russian Empire, ambition has been the main motivator behind its numerous advancements. Mass and extreme surveillance has also been a persistent trend in the nation as well as during the USSR. This may indicate that the modern political situation in Russia mirrors its past situations.

Keywords: Russia's Invasion; Liberalism; Disciplinary Power; Authority.

1. Introduction

Especially due to the Cold War, and now, the war with Ukraine, Russia has increasingly become the center of media attention. The significance of the political situation of Russia lies as the nation is economically and politically powerful in terms of its ability to shift the global scheme. For instance, the Russo-Ukrainian war caused fluctuations in the European and American economies because Russia supplied crude oil and natural gas. The United States and the EU are both facing rising price levels and inflation as a consequence of Russia severing its supply to the West. As a result, it is evident that Russia possesses a significant level of power on an international scale.

Scholars have long explored the nation and its politics. Liberal scholars often explored Russia's privatization, whilst realist scholars explored its lack of democracy and institutional changes. The latter may argue that Russia is a disenfranchised power as the international influence waned after the Soviet Union was dissolved. Hence, realistic scholars argue that Russian politics is influenced by the will to regain the preeminent position it had. On the other hand, liberal scholars argue that Russia has been pushing to be incorporated into the globalizing mechanism. Their arguments may surround the idea that Russia is not liberal enough, that there were pathways for Russia to insert itself into the international system, but realist ambitions have diminished the validity of the country. As a result, Russia's power and empire in the east have been well explored by scholars. However, one area that lacks exploration is how the historical political situation of Russia connects with the nation's current situation. This paper will explore the historical political situations in terms of authority and domination during Revolutionary Russia. The motive of the Russo-Ukrainian war will be reduced by analyzing the nation's geo-political advancements in the last two decades. The surveillance in Russia will be explored from all three time periods:

2. Russian Politics in the Last Century

Russia had operated under feudal and serfdom rule led by the Romanov family under the Tsarist ("Tsar" is Russian for "King" and derived from the Latin word for "Caesar") regime for centuries. In

the late nineteenth century, Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs, however, under one condition, the serfs would have to pay their previous lords for the lost free labor for the next 49 years [1]. Therefore, though Tsar Alexander II was a reformist, his actions caused little to no change in Russian living standards. Next in line was Tsar Alexander III, notorious for Russification and oppressing ethnic minorities through the Okhrana (Russian for “secret police”). His ideology condemned the influence of Western culture, ideas, and liberalist reforms. Alexander III idealized a nation operating under one language, one religion, and one form of administration. As a result, he imposed Russian language and Russian schooling forcibly on his German, Polish, and non-Russian subjects.

Pre-Soviet Russia encountered two revolutions: the 1905 revolution which began on international women’s day, and the 1917 February revolution. The former was triggered by Bloody Sunday on January 22nd, 1905. Father Gapon, a local priest, had led his followers in a peaceful protest outside the Winter Palace in hopes of Tsar Nicholas II signing a petition promising more freedom and better working conditions [2]. Instead of reaching a peaceful agreement, the Imperial soldiers opened fire, causing up to a thousand deaths. The outcomes of this first revolution were not particularly successful – it had aimed to abdicate the Tsar, but that only happened almost a decade after the first revolution. One major change was the establishment of the Duma, a legislative parliament, which would ideally approve of the Tsar’s laws and actions.

As the Russian economy slowly improved, Russia saw a short-lived period of relative peace – until the breakout of the First World War which unveiled the true inefficiency of the traditional authority. Soldiers were short of arms, with every three soldiers sharing one gun. Tsar Nicholas II going to the front lines combined with distrust against the Tsarina from the public due to her German blood caused public unrest. Peasants were short of food as all products were sent to the front lines. All in all, Russia was fighting a war they could not afford. Eventually, with protests and the rising Marxists, Nicholas abdicated as he had lost his strongest support – the military. This marked the end of the Romanov rule on March 15th, 1917. Briefly after the abdication, the Provisional Government, formally known as the Duma, became the official government [3]. With Vladimir Lenin as the leader, the Council for People’s Commissars held elections among the public in an attempt to achieve true communism. The Bolsheviks were not the dominating power, and so they lost the election to the Social Revolutionaries inevitably. Instead of granting the Social Revolutionaries power to rule, Lenin and Leon Trotsky had aspirations to establish a true communist state under the Bolsheviks.

In November 1917, the Russian Civil War began. One of the main factions was the socialist Red Army (the Bolshevik revolutionaries) who wanted to consolidate the revolution and re-establish control over the vast empire. The Bolsheviks gained most of their support from industrial centers like Petrograd and Moscow. Much of the population, however, was against the Bolsheviks, due to War Communism and the Red Terror. The former is by which the Bolsheviks would insist on food being prioritized for the Red Army, and the latter is by which Lenin imposed War Communism forcibly [4]. The most significant counterrevolutionaries were the White Army, which was a military-nationalist movement, with most of its members from the old imperial army. The areas controlled by the Whites were remote and barely industrial, which made it hard for them to raise and equip armies. The Whites also engaged in White Terror, executing and torturing those who were suspected of Red sympathies. One detail of the civil war was the Polish and Ukrainian alliance in hopes to reunite the Ukrainian state which was under Bolshevik control. The Ukrainian army initially captured Kyiv but was driven down by the Bolsheviks. Poland then made a separate peace with the Bolsheviks which guaranteed that their independence would be recognized but meant that Ukraine and Belarus would remain under Bolshevik control.

In late 1920, the White Army began to flee en masse. In August 1921, the surrender of the Black Army, marked by their leader Nestor Makhno’s fleeing, allowed the Bolsheviks to invade the far east after the Japanese withdrawal from Siberia. This symbolized the end of the Russian civil war in October 1922. Right after the war formed the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which then came to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic after the 1922 treaty between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia (which is modern-day Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) [5].

The USSR's history (1922-1991) can be marked by two events: the Second World War, and the Cold War. After Lenin's death, Joseph Stalin ruled from 1929 to 1953. Under Stalin, gulags were established. These were concentration camps where millions of political prisoners worked intensely in Siberia. Stalin instituted radical reforms which aimed to transform Russia into an industrial power. This rapid ambition for industrialization led to a man-made famine in Ukraine, southern Russia, and Kazakhstan around 1932. Members of the Communist Party, Red Army, and oligarchs were all executed under Stalin's rule in the Great Purge. After forming an alliance with Adolf Hitler which divided Europe between their spheres of influence, the two invaded Poland in 1939. This began the first major event faced by the USSR – the Second World War.

Free from French and British interference, (because their treaty with Poland only targeted German aggression), the USSR invaded Finland and the Baltic States in Moldova. In 1941, the Nazis betrayed their Soviet ally and invaded the USSR. As a result, Soviet citizens were starved, communist officials were deported, and Jews were captured in concentration camps. Similar to the First World War, Russia was fighting a war they were unprepared for. Tanks were sent to frontlines half-built; soldiers went into battle with unloaded rifles. Despite this, the Soviets managed to capture Stalingrad and rapidly forced back the Wehrmacht back to Berlin.

After the Second World War, Soviet power remained in Iran despite British power pulling away. This led to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and other Western European nations. The goal of NATO was the secure sovereignty against the Soviet Union. On March 12th, 1947, the Cold War began – a restrictive economic battle between the capitalistic Western bloc and the communist Eastern bloc. In 1955, (the USSR was now under Nikita Khrushchev) when West Germany was allowed to join NATO, tensions in the cold war worsened as Khrushchev established the Warsaw Pact which strengthened military ties between the USSR and its satellite states in the Eastern bloc.

As the conflict heightened when Russia had its missiles in Cuba (a socialist state) and the US threatened to invade Cuba, World War Three was on the horizon as both powers had developed hydrogen bombs. Fortunately, J.F Kennedy agreed to remove missiles from Turkey and Khrushchev then removed Russian missiles from Cuba. This led to the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963, as well as Khrushchev being replaced by Leonid Brezhnev. Due to fear of large-scale nuclear wars between the superpowers, the parties began engaging in proxy wars.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came into power, reforming the Soviet Union as his philosophy differed from previous leaders. He believed that the Soviet population needed to be able to speak freely and find joy for the economy to be revived. Within the first years of his regime, he began political movements of Glasnost and Perestroika (openness and restructuring of economic and political systems). The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, signed in 1987, eliminated all intermediate-range missiles as Gorbachev aimed to stop the arms race to stop military spending from draining the economy. Gorbachev granting of freedom of demonstration and multi-party elections eventually became a factor in the dissolution of the USSR. The Iron Curtain in the West had fallen with the removal of the Berlin Wall. Boris Yeltsin also made agreements with the then Republics of Ukraine and Belorussia to dissolve the Soviet Union. Eventually, the Soviet Union was dissolved, and the Russian Federation was set up on December 26th, 1991.

3. Changing Forms of Authority

In Max Weber's *Economy and Society*, the sociologist and political economist defined domination as the probability that citizens will willingly follow one's rule [6]. Hence, he illustrated three categories of authority: traditional authority, charismatic authority, and legal-rational authority. Traditional authority is by which the power is legitimized by respect for established patterns or traditions. For instance, the rule of a monarch would rarely be questioned since it would be socially accepted for power to be passed down via blood lineage.

The Romanov family embodies traditional authority as the family was considered to be "god chosen" and therefore, those in power would only be those with Romanov blood. Weber classified illegitimate domination as the case of people involuntarily obeying power. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that although the Okhrana had power supported by the Tsars, their domination would not be considered legitimate. This is because people respected the Okhrana from a place of fear and coercion, rather than coming from a place of respect for the Tsars. The Romanov rule also exemplifies Weber's theory of decaying traditional authority. During Romanov rule, charismatic leaders rose – like Father Gapon, who was respected for his relationship with God, and Vladimir Lenin, who was praised for his communist ideologies. In 1905, the first legal-rational representation of authority began sharing power with Tsar Nicholas II known as the Duma. The last Tsar's abdication along with the Duma and provisional government taking authority exemplifies the decay of traditional authority in Russia.

Charismatic authority is domination that is legitimized by the "superhuman abilities" of the leader, causing people to voluntarily obey and devote themselves to them [7]. Father Gapon, for instance, is a legitimate charismatic leader since his followers all believed in the same Catholic ideologies. They willingly obeyed him as he was considered to be "closer to God" than the ordinary Catholic. Lenin, on the other hand, was a charismatic leader, but not completely legitimate. He had ordered another secret police force that would execute any traitors of his power – much like the Okhrana – which questions the legitimacy of his authority, and whether people were following Lenin from a sense of threat and fear. As a result, it could be argued that the leaders of the Red and White Armies embodied illegitimate power due to the Red and White Terrors imposed. During the Soviet Union, the NKVD was another form of illegitimate power as it secured the Soviet grip on power, executing those suspected of being anti-revolutionaries.

The last form of authority change the Russian empire saw was the routinization of charisma. This, in Weber's words, meant that with the death of the charismatic leader, followers either abandoned the movement or it became one of the other two types of authority [8]. This could be exemplified by the destalinization of the USSR [9]. When in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev eliminated all of Stalin's loyalists by taking down statues of Stalin, renaming Stalingrad Volgograd, and ending mass forced labor as he freed the majority of political prisoners from the Gulags. Ultimately, he promised greater freedom in the Soviet Union as he declared Stalin's rule against Soviet ideals. This embodied plebiscitary leadership as Khrushchev attempted to keep Soviet ideals under his legal-rational authority.

4. Surveillance in Russia

Michel Foucault argues that there is a distinction between sovereign power and disciplinary power. The former is defined as a repressive power that is possessed as a commodity, has punishment rights, and can initiate laws. The latter is the power that all people in a disciplinary society possess; it is beneath the law as the feeling of surveillance makes people docile bodies. Disciplinary power is not repressive but is coerced.

Foucault also describes a panopticon in his work *Discipline and Punish* to illustrate surveillance. A panopticon as per Jeremy Bentham is an observation tower in the middle of a circle of prison cells. The tower functions so that the few people (or even a single person) in the panopticon can observe all prison cells. Although those in the prison cells may see the panopticon, they do not see those in the tower. Foucault argues that power is reduced to its ideal form in the panopticon, by increasing the number of controlled (subjects) and decreasing the number in power [10].

From the Romanov rule in pre-revolutionary Russia to the USSR period and modern-day Russia, surveillance is not at all a foreign concept. For instance, during the Romanov rule, the Tsars authorized the Okhrana to secretly monitor the citizens and execute any who were against the Tsarist Regime. The consequence of said surveillance was public execution by hanging, this punishment was later named "Stolypin's Necktie" after Pyotr Stolypin who had executed thousands of opposers under the favor of Tsar Nicholas II.

Similarly, during the Soviet Union, the NKVD (another form of the secret police) and the KGB embodied the panopticon. The KGB was the chief government intelligence and security agency and operated in most of the fifteen republics. Though it was advertised as an intelligence agency, it was also a form of the secret police, ensuring citizens followed Soviet ideals [11]. That being said, political dissidence was dealt with fatally. This differed from dealing with dissidence in pre-revolutionary Russia as removing violators of Soviet ideals became discreet.

In modern-day Russia, surveillance exists in the form of data retention laws concerning the anonymity of internet usage. For instance, the “Bloggers law” of 2014 prohibits online bloggers with over 3,000 daily readers to remain anonymous [Human Rights Watch] – though the true anonymity of all online Russians can be disputed as public Wi-Fi hotspots like cafes and libraries are legally required to collect personal details of all users, including their using passports identification [12]. Furthermore, any VPN software that doesn’t implement Russia’s internet blacklist has also been banned as of 2017 [13]. In 2016, Putin signed the Yarovaya law which required metadata to be stored for at least 6 months and up to 3 years [14]. Internet and telecom companies are also required to disclose said data to authorities upon request and without a court order. Consequently, messaging services which use encrypted data are also required to permit the Federal Security Service to access and read encrypted messages without a court order [15].

With COVID-19, the nation has also seen increased usage of facial recognition. According to Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, the facial recognition system was fully implemented in Moscow starting in January 2020 and then expanded to over a dozen other Russian cities. Sobyenin says it is now “used in over 70% of criminal investigations”. As per the Washington Post, “Moscow now has more than 189,000 cameras with facial recognition capabilities, as well as more than 12,300 on subway cars in Moscow’s Metro” [16]. This form of surveillance is also being used increasingly against protesters and activists.

5. The Motives of War

In Thucydides’ account of the Speech of the Athenians, three motivations for empire were outlined in the context of the Peloponnesian war: fear, advantage (taking advantage of the situation for the empire), and ambition (acting in pursuit of glory).

First, regarding the motive of the Russo-Ukrainian war in terms of Putin’s rhetoric and its rebuttals. According to Putin, the mobilization against Ukraine is motivated by the Eastward advancement of NATO being a threat to Russia [17]. Many also say that the war may be motivated by stopping Ukraine to join the EU. Therefore, it could be deduced that the motive in Putin’s rhetoric is “fear” according to the Athenians. There are some problems with this reasoning, though. For instance, Ukraine is not yet a NATO nation and is unlikely to become one in the short term. It is also far from being a part of the EU considering the level of corruption in the Ukrainian government, and the instability of its economy even before the Russian invasion.

Despite this, it may still be argued that the motive behind the invasion comes from fear. As mentioned above, Ukraine was long under Bolshevik rule and eventually became a Soviet republic. As Ukraine is showing interest in the NATO and EU, it can be argued that the post-soviet nation is democratizing. Consequently, the “fear” may come from a potentially democratic political horizon that threatens Putin’s authoritarian ideals.

Furthermore, the motive of “fear” may come from an angle of instigating fear in the enemy. For instance, during the Cold War, the USSR engaged in many proxy wars with the US in the Middle East. The USSR had also kept missiles in the US’ neighboring countries. These acts were widely regarded as threats against the US during the Cold War, with attempts to illustrate the Soviet power’s threats and potential to warn off a direct conflict between the superpowers.

The ambition of Putin is another convincing argument for the motive behind the war. The expansion of his empire has been evident since his first election in 1999. Russia engaged in the second war with Chechnya and regained control over the area between 1999 and 2009. He also falsely accused Georgia

of committing genocide in South Ossetia and launched a full-scale invasion in 2008 [18]. As a result, Russia occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2014, leading up to the current war, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea from Ukraine. Considering the historical ambitions of Putin and the fact that Russia is anticipating an upcoming presidential election, the Russo-Ukrainian war could be motivated by ambition [19].

6. Conclusion

To conclude, it is quite clear that Russia's previous leaders exemplify the deteriorating traditional authority with Tsar Nicholas II's abdication. It can also be concluded that the current political situation of Russia mirrors its past actions in terms of ambition and surveillance. For instance, throughout the history of the Russian Empire, ambition has been the main motivator behind its numerous advancements. Additionally, mass and extreme surveillance has also been a persistent trend in the nation (and previously in the USSR). At the biographic level, the three thinkers differ quite a bit. Thucydides seems to have been an aristocrat and former Athenian general who got exiled from his home state of Athens. Foucault was an activist, and Weber was a bourgeois who did work to set up the Weimar (liberal-democratic) constitution.

None of the 3 thinkers is a theorist of justice. Weber examines the various and opposite ways people feel their arrangements to be legitimate which is entirely different from defining what an objectively just society would look like. Thucydides isn't so skeptical about what justice entails but seems interested in how justice might not be possible. In any case, he is not spending time in his text trying to formulate a theory of justice. And Foucault explicitly avoids giving answers or solutions seems to suggest that there are many equally possible ways arrangements like punishment can be conducted, and in general seems more interested in challenging prevailing complacencies than providing theoretical answers to how the world's politics could be more justly arranged.

Weber is very interested in the concept of modernity (defined by instrumental rationality, disenchantment, bureaucracy, etc.) whereas this notion of course doesn't operate for Thucydides (who if anything thinks that his history will be relevant for all times so that he doesn't suggest any break in time the way the concept of modernity does) and Foucault, as much as he is interested in the emergence of modern societies in the 18th and 19th centuries, is less committed than Weber is to the idea that there are some stable, semi-permanent arrangements definitive of the contemporary era. Foucault might deconstruct the Weberian notions of disenchantment, rationality as mere instrumental rationality, and bureaucracy as allegedly value-neutral. For Foucault, everything is in flux and is possible, whereas Weber sees certain arrangements as more fixed.

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