
Book Reviews

Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), xix+317 pp.

This carefully reasoned and comprehensively researched study does an excellent job elucidating Russia's power and purpose, its capabilities and motivations, in world politics. Through the retrospective prism of Russia's massive, brutal invasion of Ukraine, the book is particularly valuable in understanding not only the drivers of Russia's global strategy but also our own analytic shortcomings in assessing its implications for peace and security. Stoner makes three fundamental contributions.

First, she conclusively disavows the long-standing interpretation of Russia as merely "a regional power" acting out of weakness—a perspective famously articulated by former U.S. President, Barack Obama in late March 2014, following Russia's militarized annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. She also convincingly shows that Russia under Putin hardly evolved as "a normal country." The evidence is impressive. In terms of purchasing power parity, Russia's military expenditure from 2005 through 2019 is shown to be about three times higher than conventional estimates (p. 193). And considering the recentralization of Russia's political power and the Kremlin's dictate over the economy, even that metric probably underestimated Moscow's actual military buildup. Critically, Russia boosted both conventional capabilities to occupy neighboring territories and nuclear capability to threaten others into inaction. With the world's largest arsenal of strategic nuclear warheads (1,461 compared to 1,361 of the U.S.), Russia also boasted 1,820 tactical nuclear weapons— "a very serious nuclear advantage over the United States or any other country on the planet." (p. 207). This is indicative of Russia's overall power buildup. Like aggressive expansionist challengers to international order of the past, from Genghis Khan to Hitler, Moscow didn't attempt to match the U.S.-led coalition in every aspect of military and economic capabilities but amassed enough of them to mount challenges at select locations, from the neighboring states to the Central African Republic and Venezuela, leveraging geography, economic interests, understandings among autocrats, local power cleavages, and cultural affinities (Chapter 3 has a comprehensive overview). We also learn how the New Look military reform; new missile systems (the Sarmat "Son of Satan," Kinzhal, Kalibr, Iskander, and S-400); as well as global market dominance in natural resources (oil, gas, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, raw aluminum); macro-economic prowess (low external debt-to-GNI, low unemployment, low inflation, substantial foreign currency reserves, and a sovereign wealth fund); soft power (the Russian Orthodox Church, education exchanges, hosting of the Olympics and the World Cup Soccer); and "non-linear" information warfare (the Internet Research Agency, RT, Sputnik, "public diplomacy") compensated for shortcomings in globally deployed naval/air power capabilities and in the innovative high-tech sectors and gave the Kremlin confidence in achieving its expansionist ambitions. Importantly, Stoner concludes that instead of being a relatively weak power that played its hand well, Russia has been a strong power that could have played its hand better but failed. If President Biden considered this argument, he might not have offered Ukraine's President Zelensky to flee his country shortly before the Russian invasion in February 2022, but provided military assistance.

Second, the book does an excellent job identifying the Kremlin's primary purpose in international affairs: "The assertive exercise of Russian power abroad has become a

new element of the regime's legitimacy and survival" (p. 24). Chapter 8 has a rigorous assessment of this argument against alternatives, making a powerful case that attributing Russia's aggressive stance to the Western hostility, such as the expansion of NATO and the EU, is invalid for lack of confirming causal evidence, availability of significant evidence to the contrary and, most importantly, for the analytical failure to recognize the agency of states other than the great powers (pp. 238–244). The latter point is forcefully driven home at present with the unprecedented resilience of the Ukrainian society and the armed forces in the face of Russia's invasion. At the heart of the matter is Russia's "patronal autocracy" — a conceptualization derived from exhaustive comparative analysis of post-Soviet regimes since the Soviet Union's collapse by Henry Hale, a political scientist. In this system, the national interest is wedded to the interests of the ruler (patron) and crucially depends on the expectations of his clients that the regime cannot be challenged — meaning it is not military and economic power of other states as much as civil society and democratic ideas that present the most lethal challenge to such a regime. Stoner shows that a different regime type would have defined and pursued Russia's national interests differently and in a way that could have integrated Russia benignly with the collective West. This implies that Russia's current war against Ukraine was not pre-ordained and that it could end fast if Russia's patronal autocracy tumbles.

Third, the book teaches us something valuable by omission: the importance of considering the regime's willingness to use indiscriminate violence against civilians on a mass scale. The reader is spared the description of lungs sucked out of the corpses lining the streets of Grozny swept with vacuum bombs in early 2000; of the screaming of children in the rubble of 2015 Aleppo as Russia provided air support to keep Bashar Assad in power; or of the killing fields of 2014 Donbas in the wake of Russia's use of thermobaric munitions, the kind that the U.S. stopped using after 1991 as inhumane. While this willingness to use force makes Putin's Russia distinct from other patronal autocracies, the book mentions only in passing "a scorched-earth policy that ended in the flattening of Grozny" (p. 183). A separate chapter addressing this issue in detail and assessing its role alongside other factors would have been helpful, if not critical in forecasting Russian foreign policy. Indicatively, the author doesn't discuss Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine even as a possibility, arguing that Putin would "maintain the status quo in Ukraine" (p. 49) with continued occupation, meaning no further expansion. Indeed, without factoring in the role of mass violence in Putin's rise to and hold on power, the reader back in 2021 would have found it hard to envision the horrors of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Bucha, Irpin', Mariupol, Severodonetsk, Izyum and many other cities and villages across Ukraine today.

The book's prose is lucid, the arguments are cogently laid out, the evidence is meticulously documented, and the tables and graphs are helpful in visualizing the wealth of military and socioeconomic indicators. My only factual correction of note (p. 44), worth making if the book goes into paperback or second edition, concerns the Crimea — the Russian Empire first took it over in 1783, not in 1654 (when it was under the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire). Overall, this is a must read for any serious student of international relations and Russian foreign policy and a valuable reference for Russia analysts.

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