



NEWSNET

News of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

THE PERSISTENCE OF EMPIRE IN EURASIA

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The following Presidential Address was given on November 17, 2007 at the Awards Presentation ceremony during the 39th AAASS National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The theme of this year's AAASS convention has been "the persistence of empire," and it was a theme that I chose over a year ago with the hope that it might stimulate creative thinking and interdisciplinary discussion around one of the key aspects of the region of the world that we study. The idea was to focus attention on what Charles Tilly refers to as the big questions, large structures, and huge comparisons that our field naturally poses.¹ Let me explain what I had in mind.

One can understand the history of our region as a series of ironies (or, in the language of social science, research puzzles). One of these revolves around empire as a persistent practical category of politics in the region, despite the repeated collapse of empires. The Tsarist empire was of course a self-avowed empire, a polity that was self-consciously imperial, and one that (as one of our honorees tonight, Richard Wortman, documented so well)² strove to impress its imperial status upon its subjects and upon others through elaborate ritual. Russia's tsars openly sought to cultivate an imperial reputation as recognition of their rightful rule and propagated the greatness of their imperial enterprise as a foundation for domestic and international authority.

By contrast, the Soviet state sought precisely the opposite—to convince its citizens and the world that it was not imperial, despite behaviors that eventually gained it a widespread imperial reputation, both within its own population and abroad. The Soviet Union was outwardly born as a post-imperial form of power, a civic multinational state that aimed to modernize the societies it ruled and to transcend national divisions in the name of class solidarity. Soviet rulers vociferously rejected application of the term empire to their state, and indeed, as Terry Martin has noted, specifically designed Soviet ethnofederalism as a way of avoiding such analogies.³ Yet, as we know, the Soviet state ultimately died widely construed as an empire and is routinely referred to as such today. As Ron Suny has written, the Soviet Union did not begin as an empire; rather, it became one.⁴

But there is a second, more contemporary and related irony that underlies my choice of this theme. By some accounts, Russian empire is back. As anyone who follows the press today knows, in recent years Putin's Russia has become increasingly assertive of its power abroad, has sought to control international energy markets and to manipulate them toward geopolitical aims, has attempted to bully neighbors such as Georgia and Estonia, and has once again embraced centralizing (and in the case of Chechnya, extraordinarily violent) management of its minority affairs. These and other acts have elicited fears and accusa-

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tions of a revival of Russian imperialism and have led to concern in Europe and America over the growth of Russian economic and political power. Zbigniew Brzezinski has written about Russia's current "nostalgia for an imperial status."⁵ Ukraine's soon-to-be prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko has warned that "Russia's imperial ambitions did not end with the fall of the Soviet Union."⁶ Prize-winning journalist and author Anne Applebaum has written of what she sees as the widespread belief in Russia that it has "a right to an empire."⁷ Janusz Bugajski's *Cold Peace: Russia's New Imperialism*, published a few years ago, makes much the same argument.⁸ These perceptions are not just confined to scholars, journalists, and politicians. A 2005 BBC/Globescan poll, conducted in 30 countries of the world, found that only the United States and Iran had worse international reputations than Russia, with more people expressing a negative opinion of Russian influence in the world than a positive opinion in 16 out of 29 countries surveyed (the corresponding number for the United States was 18).⁹ The application of empire as an analytical term to contemporary Russia is of course controversial, and there are plenty of analysts—such as Andrei Tsygankov or Dmitri Trenin—who would reject it, seeing in it a case of conceptual stretching.¹⁰ On the other hand, there are scholars such as Emil Pain, Charles King, or George Schöpflin who have argued that empire is a relevant analytical category for interpreting contemporary Russia.¹¹ In this address, I will not seek to resolve this debate. I am less interested in the persistence of empire as an apt analytical model for the Soviet Union or contemporary Russia than in contemplating empire as a persisting practical category of politics in the region that we study. Some may be tempted to interpret the theme of the persistence of empire as Russophobia or a leftover from Cold War discourse intended to discredit Russia's pursuit of its legitimate geopolitical interests. Others are likely to see it as a rightful reflection of what they believe are Russia's inherent imperial impulses and reflexes. I simply note that, irrespective of whether one accepts or rejects empire as an apt analytical description of contemporary

Russia, and irrespective of how one wishes to read normative value into the persistence of empire as a practical category of politics in the Eurasian region, it is a social fact that fear of, aspirations to, memory of, and longing for empire are widespread throughout the region and continue to shape the region's culture and politics, begging for explanation.

In this address I seek to probe the questions of what makes people understand power as imperial in a world in which empires formally no longer exist, what types of acts do authorities engage in that become labeled as imperial, and how have these changed over time? Given the broad array of Russian regimes over the last century that have come, to one extent or another, to be marked as "imperial" (some openly seeking the label for themselves, while others rejecting it), these questions make a great deal of sense. And essentially I'll be arguing several things. First, as a practical concept of politics empire has been a rapidly moving target over the twentieth century, altering in meaning as a result of the resistances it encountered and the rise of anti-imperial norms of sovereignty and self-determination, so that the practices of power that people ascribe to empire today and the politics surrounding empire are no longer the same as those associated with empire a century ago. Rather, empire has been transformed into a form of illegitimate power and a form of bad reputation—a status that states seek to avoid but are sometimes, nonetheless, tagged with. Second, I'll argue that we need to think through how it is that different objects and different types of actions get placed under the same imperial label. In a recent *Slavic Review* article, I referred to empire as a family resemblance concept in the Wittgensteinian sense (that is, a set of objects that do not share all characteristics, but share enough in common to be placed under the same label and which are related to each other in different ways).¹² Empire in Eurasia across the twentieth century constitutes a family resemblance in this sense. By the persistence of empire, I do not have in mind a continuity in empire. If anything, there have been discontinuities, ruptures, and breaks. Moreover, Soviet empire was a distinct

phenomenon from Tsarist empire, just as post-Soviet Russia's recent assertions of power do not represent any mere replication of Soviet imperialism. Yet, there are ways in which these phenomena and the politics surrounding them are related to each other, and we need to contemplate what connects these different phenomena across distinct political regimes. Indeed, I will outline four mechanisms that might link the politics of empire across these regimes and that, to varying degrees, might help account for the persistence of empire as a practical category in the politics of Eurasia: 1) what I refer to as the "stickiness" of imperial reputation as a form of bad reputation; 2) the inertia of mass aspirations for hierarchical status and the opportunities this presents to leaders for building legitimacy through assertions of national power both internally and externally; 3) continuity in the interests, ideologies, and modes of behavior of political and bureaucratic elites across regimes; and 4) repeated structural disproportions in power that push behaviors in broadly similar directions.

Let me start with why I chose this topic as this year's convention theme and for my presidential address. It is, of course, a topic on which I have written and about which I thought I might have something to say. But it is also the case that the topic bears a particular significance for us as an interdisciplinary association of scholars. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, AAASS has been plagued by the question of what unites us as an organization. The unreflective answer, of course, is that we all have an interest in the same region. But that begs the questions of what is a world region and what are the purposes of interdisciplinary conversation—the big questions of who we are and why we show up at this convention year after year. One answer is that we like to see our old friends. And that is surely a worthy purpose. But a scholarly association should strive to be more than simply a venue for reunions. Another answer is that AAASS provides us with a venue to discover the latest scholarship on the region in our particular discipline. And that too is a worthy reason. But there has always been a danger in our association that we are an association of separate ta-

bles, of disciplinary groups that rarely interact with one another. This is not a problem solely of AAASS; it is a problem of all scholarly organizations, and especially of interdisciplinary associations.¹³ Any healthy interdisciplinary association needs to foster an interdisciplinary intellectual space—an arena in which we can usefully learn from one another across disciplinary boundaries. Empire is one issue around which a limited interdisciplinary intellectual space has already emerged in our association. There already is a significant group of historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and literary and cultural specialists who engage these issues—as the extraordinary number of panels that were organized at this convention in response to the larger convention theme suggests. But it is the case that many of us are still sitting at separate tables even while we are discussing related issues—that scholars are rarely talking to each other across disciplinary and period divides. And so my hope has been that, in highlighting this theme and in framing it in a way that engages the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of empire, it might help to stimulate interdisciplinary conversation and an expansion of interdisciplinary intellectual space in our association.

There are also a number of substantive reasons why AAASS members should be paying particular attention to the persisting politics of empire in our region. For one thing, empire has played a major role—perhaps even the major role—in shaping the region’s history, politics, and culture. Moreover, aspirations to, fear of, memory of, and longing for empire continue to shape the culture, literature, and international and domestic politics of the region. It is empire that is the main justification for the current post-Soviet state system; it is embedded in the very rationale for independent states. When Russian President Vladimir Putin pronounced the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” and “a genuine tragedy” for the Russian people,¹⁴ he left unspoken the assumption embedded in this statement that the persistence of Soviet empire would have been preferable to East European democracies or to the current fifteen

states that now cover former Soviet space.

Just as important, empire is closely bound up with the very definition of our selves. It is not a secret that the enterprise of area studies and the delineation of world regions have been profoundly influenced by imperial projects and imperial experiences. Probably more than any other region of the world, the area we study has been defined by the experience of empire. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, the boundaries of the region have become extraordinarily fluid precisely because our imperial mooring came loose, and some have come to question whether there is any region of the world that unites members of this organization at all. My answer to this question has always been an unqualified “it depends”: it depends on the question being asked. Some questions may be more fruitfully studied through a comparison with Europe, the Middle East, or some other region, or studied within the confines of a single discipline rather than through interdisciplinary dialogue. But some questions

naturally engage the panoply of states and societies that fall into our purview and form the natural interdisciplinary intellectual space that is central to the vitality of our area enterprise.

Empire—in its multiple manifestations and legacies, old and new—is one such issue. There is of course enormous interest today in the phenomenon of empire—not only in rethinking the historical record of empire and its reflections in culture and society, but also revolving around American society’s continuing engagement with empire. The interdisciplinary study of empire in our region has had and will continue to have a great deal to contribute to these debates, for the simple reason that, since the end of European colonialism, there are only two countries in the world that have been widely construed as empires—the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. One of the distinctive features of Russia—a feature that it shares with the United States—is the fact that empire as a term of reference for Russian power has lasted much longer and is

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much more widespread than is true of most other states—even in a world in which empires formally are no longer supposed to exist. One of the reasons for this may be the fact that both Russia and the United States reconfigured themselves in the first part of the twentieth century as post-imperial forms of power, eschewing formal empire at the same time as seeking out alternative ways by which to extend their influence and control in a world of sovereignties and self-determinations—a transition that colonial powers and most overland empires proved incapable of managing. The Cold War—the critical period of Soviet and American ascendancy—was the very moment when global colonial empires collapsed and anti-colonial norms became a fixture of world politics. In these respects, Russia may provide for us a mirror in which our own reflection, however distorted, may well be visible.

For my own purposes I define empire analytically as a large-scale system of alien domination, but I am interested above all in understanding the changing matter that people place into the particular boxes of “alien” and “domination.” Domination involves hierarchy and control—what political scientists such as Michael Doyle, Alex Motyl, or David Lake consider to be the core structural feature of empire as an analytical concept.¹⁵ But empire in practice almost always involves more than this; it involves a subjective dimension as well. Hierarchy is characteristic of all political orders, and indeed no society can live without it. For the most part, people accept hierarchy in their lives as tolerable (and sometimes even desirable), either out of a belief that it provides public goods, in exchange for selective benefits for themselves, out of an inability to alter hierarchy, or from socialization to its underlying conditions. In this sense, it is not hierarchy in itself which has injected empire with the heavy negative connotation that it so naturally bears in our contemporary world. Rather, it is two additional features which empire usually involves: a sense of the alien or foreign character of power (even if this cultural boundary is not always ethnic in nature); and the arbitrary, willful, self-interested exercise of power (or as my colleague Philip Pettit describes it,

the sense of “having to live at the mercy of another”).¹⁶ By engaging these additional dimensions of the politics of empire, we can begin to probe the contested terrain between multinational states and multinational empires and between international hegemons and international empires—the main alternative forms of hierarchy to empire in our contemporary world, and the critical counter-factuals for understanding the politics of empire in Eurasia over the last century.

The fact of the matter is that empire today is no longer what it used to be. Empire has been a rapidly changing category of politics over the twentieth century, evolving in the face of the growing resistance that empire has encountered and the rise of anti-imperial norms of sovereignty and self-determination. Today we live in a world that is normatively post-imperial. As a result of the demise of colonial empires and the rise of international norms of sovereignty and self-determination, empire has predominantly become a political pathology. No state today would openly admit to being an empire or claim to be pursuing imperial ends. I believe that the implications of this global normative shift for the evolution of imperialism are profound, though they continue to be poorly appreciated in most academic studies of empire.

For one thing, the practices associated with empire have altered radically. Conquest—long the core practice identified with empire in the past—has been rendered almost entirely obsolete; since World War II conquest has practically disappeared from international politics due to the consolidation of sovereignty norms. Rather, international norms of sovereignty and self-determination that emerged as ways of containing the dysfunctions of empire have established certain standards and expectations of behavior for the powerful which, in their violation, have come to assume the label of “imperial.” I have in mind here such standards as: no formal colonies; the use of force only in self-defense or with the explicit approval of the “society of nations”; respect for the sovereignty of states, both in the sense of recognizing state boundaries as mutable only with a state’s consent and recognizing the

organization of the state as the arbiter of last resort on its territory, within the limits of international law; the exercise of hegemonic power for the provision of public goods rather than mere self-aggrandizement or private ends; and the presence of minimal resistance to instances of military occupation or foreign rule when they must occur. In this respect, what has been meant by the term “Soviet empire” is significantly different from what empire meant with reference to Tsarist rule. Even as it sought to expand its power and control externally, for the most part the Soviet Union did not practice territorial expansion “as a permanent and supreme aim of politics,”¹⁷ as Hannah Arendt once characterized the goals of European imperialism. Certainly, the Red Army used force to keep the lands of the former Russian Empire under Soviet control, though whether this constituted “conquest” in the traditional sense of the term is unclear, simply because these territories were seeking to secede from the Russian state, and nationalist movements vying for power at the time were notoriously weak and often enjoyed little legitimacy within their target populations.¹⁸ Rather, for these groups what cast the Soviet Union into the category of empire was not their treatment during the Russian Civil War, but the arbitrary and violent manner in which power was subsequently exercised, the sense of cultural hierarchy and unequal treatment that eventually emerged in Soviet policies, and the gradual consolidation and growth of national consciousness within these groups. The Molotov-Ribbentrop acquisitions in 1940 represented the most unambiguous cases of conquest in Soviet history, and indeed, it is no accident that these territories became the base for the spread of anti-imperial separatist nationalism almost a half-century later when the Soviet Union collapsed. But these acquisitions preceded the full consolidation of sovereignty norms after World War II, and even here it was really only the Balts who focused their complaints in the *glasnost*’ period around Soviet conquest and “occupation.” In terms of Eastern Europe, it was not conquest that made the “captive nations” captive. Rather, it was the lack of respect for sovereignty norms in the sense of

states as arbiters of last resort on their own territories. As a result of the consolidation of sovereignty norms, today the issue of conquest is almost entirely associated with internal empire as opposed to external empire, revolving around the legacies of historical conquests of the past. But the consolidation of sovereignty norms after World War II also rendered it much harder for internal empire to gain widespread recognition than external empire. The imperial quality of the Soviet state, for instance, was recognized much earlier in the international sphere than it was in the domestic sphere, which to some extent occurred only as the Soviet Union was coming undone and after it collapsed. Moreover, the conquests referred to in the Soviet case were often quite distant in time from the present—occurring fifty, seventy-five, and sometimes as much as five hundred years earlier—whereas prevailing norms of state sovereignty encourage us to take the existing boundaries of states as given, even if they were formed at one time in the past by force. In this way, the politics of culture and of historical memory play a more important role in the making of empire in a world of sovereignty than was true of empires in the past.

This points to yet another way in which the notion of empire has evolved from how it was routinely construed in the past. In contrast to the past, empire today is defined in part by the national resistance that it encounters—reflective of the fact that empire as a category of practice has become as much a claim as a structure. Empire has come to be conceived of as form of usurpation of the nation, and nationalism and nationalist mobilization have come to play important roles in the making of empire. It was not the presence of nationalist opposition that made Tsarist Russia an empire. By contrast, in the Soviet case it was precisely the presence of strong nationalist opposition that gave Soviet power its imperial reputation, both within Eastern Europe and internally. Without this opposition, the Soviet Union would not have been an empire, but simply a powerful multinational state. The very notion of Soviet empire involved claims about nationhood. In the Soviet case, the sharper the national resistance to Soviet

power, the more the Soviet Union's imperial reputation multiplied. Thus, any attempt to explain the persistence of empire in a world of sovereignties and self-determinations must engage the roles of identity formation and mobilization, not only in terms of how nationalist entrepreneurs mobilize target populations against empire, but also in terms of the specific conditions and policies that make states vulnerable to becoming the object of anti-imperial opposition.

A third effect of the rise of international norms of sovereignty and self-determination on the politics of empire has been to render the reputational dimension of empire increasingly salient. Empire became a negative status ascribed to states by others rather than a positive reputation that states themselves consciously sought to foster—in other words, a form of bad reputation. The Soviet Union's imperial reputation varied considerably over time and space and was something that was unevenly shared within and across populations. Indeed, it was only in the process of coming undone

that its imperial reputation came to be fully consolidated—even though many of the practices that helped it to earn this reputation occurred many decades before. In this respect, I would argue that the dynamics of bad reputation differ in fundamental respects from those of good reputation. Good reputations are fragile; even one act can be enough to change a good reputation to a bad reputation and to undermine the capacity to trust. By contrast, bad reputations, once established, are “sticky.” People expect the worst from someone with a bad reputation, and it can take a long chain of actions to prove that the character of the agent has changed before people are willing to trust an agent with a bad reputation. This stickiness of bad reputation is precisely what Dominique Lieven had in mind when he referred to “the historical stigma of empire”¹⁹—that is, the difficulty that others have in trusting post-imperial successor states. As Terry Martin has put it with regard to the Soviet Union, “India and Indonesia had the benefit of the doubt; they

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would have to prove to their subjects and the world that they were empires; the Soviet Union would have to prove the opposite.”²⁰

The stickiness of bad reputation is one of the critical mechanisms that connects the politics of empire in Eurasia across three very different political regimes over the last century. As the successor state to the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia inherited the “historical stigma of empire” attached to Soviet state. This imperial reputation has proven to be quite “sticky,” transcending regime-change and coloring the ways in which post-Soviet Russia’s actions are interpreted—particularly in the so-called near-abroad, in Eastern Europe, and in the West—those areas that most directly experienced Soviet empire. As former Polish Defense Minister Bronislaw Komorowski has put it, “Our past experiences show us that we have every reason to fear Moscow.”²¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin himself has recognized this power of the imperial past to shape perceptions of contemporary Russian actions. As he has stated, “The main problem, in my view, is Russia’s heavy imperial heritage. Everybody thinks for some reason that Russia remains an empire and still treat it as an empire.”²² In some of my recent research, I have examined several hundred articles from the world press that characterize contemporary Russia as an empire or as imperial. Over half of these view contemporary Russian imperialism as a revival of something “old.” Moreover, almost 80 percent of these articles identify Russian ambitions, pretensions, and aspirations as the main feature associated with Russian imperialism—far beyond any other feature mentioned. In other words, accusations of empire with respect to contemporary Russia are rooted as much in the fear of a revival of Russian domination as much as in anything Russia has concretely done. That, however, is the burden of Russia’s “historical stigma of empire.” Precisely because it is the successor state to the Soviet Union, contemporary Russia is in some ways held to a higher standard than otherwise might be the case. It must prove to others that it does not harbor imperial intent—that it does not seek domination over others, that it treats states on the basis of

norms of reciprocity, that it does not exercise power in an arbitrary way, that it resorts to force only in self-defense or with the approval of the international community, and that it will use its hegemonic power for the provision of public goods rather than for mere self-aggrandizement or private gain.

So far post-Soviet Russia has not done a very good job of instilling trust in others that it has matured beyond empire—and it is this issue of trust that lies at the center of the politics of empire in the Eurasian region today. Under Yeltsin, Russia quickly went about trying to resuscitate its position at the center of an international hierarchy in the post-Soviet region through integration within the CIS. But by the late 1990s these efforts lay in ruins, in large part because of the weakness of the Russian state and the mistrust among Russia’s neighbors that these efforts instilled. Putin’s Russia by contrast has pursued a fundamentally different approach to Russia’s relations abroad. Fueled by the precipitous rise in energy prices and the enormous wealth this has produced, it has sought instead to utilize its economic power to assert Russian geo-strategic interests in the region. Certainly, if this is empire, it is completely different than anything that Russia or the world has experienced before. Yet it does reflect a broader drive, related to the past, to establish Russia at the center of an international hierarchy. Perhaps most importantly, the manner in which Putin has sought to renew its hierarchical position in the world has undermined trust in Russia’s intentions among many in Europe, North America, and the countries of the former Soviet empire. Energy prices were raised unilaterally and precipitously for countries whose policies were not pleasing to Moscow. Gas deliveries to Ukraine and Belarus were cut off when they balked at such steep price rises. Imports of Georgian and Moldovan wine were banned when these states began to move toward the United States and Europe. In retaliation for the uncovering of a Russian spy ring in Georgia, Russia’s relations with Georgia were completely cut off, anti-Georgian hysteria was whipped up in Russia, and several hundred Georgians were arbitrarily expelled from Moscow. Russia

cut off oil supplies to Estonia over the Estonian government’s decision to move a World War II memorial to Soviet soldiers. It engaged in behind-the-scenes efforts to manipulate electoral outcomes in Ukraine, Lithuania, and other states. And I could go on. As one German newspaper concluded: “What is one to make of a partner to whom it is apparently all the same whether it ruins its reputation simply to discipline or punish Georgia or Belarus?”²³

This brings us to a second mechanism linking the politics of empire across Russian regimes: the inertia of mass aspirations for hierarchical status and the opportunities and temptations this presents for leaders to build legitimacy through assertions of national power at home and abroad. In the Soviet case, for instance, we know that Russian settlers in Central Asia, Crimea, and the Northern Caucasus at the time of the Russian Civil War viewed this conflict through the lens of longstanding inter-ethnic relations and supported whatever authority would help preserve their local interests, providing Soviet power with opportunities for gaining local support in these regions.²⁴ We know also that some Russian intellectuals viewed the rise of Soviet power as a resuscitation of Russian empire and supported it out of a desire to see Russia play a significant role in world affairs. And we know that in the 1930s and 1940s Stalin drew on deeper cultural strains within Russian society when he reasserted the hierarchical superiority of things Russian or sought to establish the Soviet Union as a superpower after World War II. Asserting Russia’s role as an international power and the dominance of central Russian state interests over local ethnic aspirations have long been foundations on which successive Russian regimes have built their legitimacy within segments of the Russian population. In contemporary Russia there is, of course, a very deep nostalgia for things Soviet, some of which is rooted in the desire within certain sectors to reassert Russian status internally and externally. Public opinion surveys show that about a third of the Russian population agrees with the statement that the historical mission of Russia is to unite nations into a union which must become the

successor of the Russian Empire and the USSR.²⁵ Similar proportions have at various times reported that they believe it is natural for Russia to have an empire²⁶ and that Russia should aspire to be a world power.²⁷ Even though empire has generally become a pejorative around the world, positive references to contemporary Russia as an empire appear considerably more frequently in Russia than do positive references to the United States as an empire in the United States. All this has provided a strong temptation for contemporary Russian leaders to build legitimacy through assertions of Russian hierarchy at home and abroad, as we have seen with some of Putin's recent jingoist and nationalist behaviors. Nevertheless, we should be cautious in talking about Russian culture as if it were a homogenized whole or instinctively imperialist. If only a third of Russians believe Russia should be an empire, then what about the other two-thirds? As one Russian pollster has noted, imperial aspirations do not rank high on the list of priorities of the average Russian, being consistently trumped in public opinion polls by economic concerns.²⁸ Thus, we need to be careful when talking about the role of mass culture in explaining the persistence of empire in the region, for not only are aspirations for empire unevenly shared within the Russian population, but leaders also choose whether to pander to such attitudes.

This leads us to a third mechanism that may be involved in the persistence of empire across regimes: continuity in the interests, ideologies, and modes of behavior of political and bureaucratic elites across regimes. Francine Hirsch's work on Russian ethnographers demonstrates some of what I have in mind here. She shows how pre-revolutionary ethnographers were utilized in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia to help manage nationality affairs, and how they brought with them imperial technologies and ways of thinking characteristic of the old regime.²⁹ Adam Ulam noted that "November 1917 had not wiped the slate clean" in terms of Russian foreign policy, and that "underneath the new language, for all the new cult and the ruling class, there were some fundamental links with the imperial past"—deeper structures of

thought and of statist ideologies that persisted despite regime change.³⁰ As Nancy Condee argued at this year's AAASS presidential plenary panel, broad continuities in ways of relating to foreign societies and to culturally distinct others may indeed flow from the persistence of statist ideologies and of state-centered modes of development. In the rise of Soviet empire, there was a much greater discontinuity in elites than has been true in the contemporary post-Soviet transition. Indeed, much of the animus for the new assertiveness of Russia abroad today has emerged from Russian elites, not Russian masses. Public opinion polls among Russia's military officers, for instance, have found that 80 percent believe that Russia needs to restore its status as a Great Power in the world—far beyond the one-third who subscribe to this view within the Russian public.³¹ The hand of the *siloviki* in the current Russian assertion of power is obvious; it is hardly surprising that a Russian elite drawn disproportionately from the "sword and shield" of the former empire should seek to reproduce Russia's hierarchical status in the world or

would exercise its power in arbitrary ways both internally and externally. In this respect, Schumpeter likely holds more relevance for an explanation of the persistence of the politics of empire in Eurasia than Lenin, Gallagher and Robinson, or Hardt and Negri.

Finally, let me speculatively note a repeated structural situation in Eurasia that might render the recurring politics of empire in Eurasia interpretable through a rational choice or realist lens. As scientists now believe, birds fly in a V-formation not because of some pre-programmed genetic knowledge or because they consciously think about flying in formation. Rather, a confluence of the desire for proximity and the effect of physical forces render this an emergent behavior among birds—that is, they try to fly near to one another, but not too near as to be dangerous, at the same time as attempting to stay in a position where there is less wind resistance. It may also be that empire in Eurasia is a series of disparate emergent behaviors that are rooted in the fact that these societies are fated to live in proximity to one another, but

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they also must fly in the same wind: the persisting disproportionality in power between the Russian state and others. This not only pushes Russian behaviors into hierarchical and assertive patterns (or at least places few obstacles in their way). It also heightens the fears of Russia's neighbors about a resuscitation of empire and orients them toward interpreting changing Russian actions through an imperial frame. In short, the politics of empire may persist in Eurasia not because it is innate behavior, not because agents engage in a contemplative way toward imperial ends, and not because Russia has behaved in precisely the same ways as in the past, but rather because a repeating structural imbalance of power forces agents into playing certain broadly familiar roles.

To conclude, I have argued for the utility of thinking about empire in Eurasia as a practical category of politics that has evolved over time and about the mechanisms that underlie the persistence of the category, despite its disparate meanings, across three different Russian regimes over the last century. My aim in these comments, and in choosing the persistence of empire as this year's convention theme, has been to break down the separate tables at which we tend to sit, to think across disciplinary and period divides, to engage us in the big questions that our field naturally poses, and to nourish that interdisciplinary intellectual space that is so crucial to the success of our area-studies association. It is a great association, full of scholars doing exciting, interesting, and creative work. It has certainly been my great privilege to have had the opportunity to serve it over the past year as president.

Mark R. Beissinger, who served in 2007 as the AAASS President, is Professor of Politics at Princeton University.

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