

Analysing the Changing Foreign and Domestic Politics of the Former USSR

For the past few years, history seems to have been switched from "normal" speed to "Fast forward." Vast transformations have been occurring in what once appeared to be immutable aspects of Soviet foreign and domestic politics as well as in international relations generally. Nor have these transformations necessarily come to an end. Others may yet be in store.

How should questions about the foreign and domestic politics of the former Soviet Union be analysed during this period of rapid change? The question is an important one since the methodology or approach scholars employ can in large measure determine the answers to the questions they ask.

I will argue here that traditional Sovietology, or an analysis of domestic and foreign policy issues from the perspective of Russian and Soviet history, is not the most fruitful method for studying a situation in which rapid change is occurring. A more productive approach, in my view, is what will be called here comparative historical analysis—an approach which seeks to relate questions regarding the foreign and domestic politics of the former USSR to similar situations which have occurred elsewhere. No claim is being made that this method will yield definitive answers. What it can do, though, is bring to light a range of answers or possibilities that traditional Sovietology, by examining questions solely in terms of the Russian/Soviet historical experience, does not.

In this paper, I will first examine traditional Sovietology and consider why it is no longer as useful a methodology as it once was. I will then outline comparative historical analysis and discuss why it might be a more appropriate methodology for analysing the current situation. Finally, I will discuss two examples of the very different results which different methodologies might yield when applied to the same question.

Sovietology

The Soviet Union was a country whose domestic and foreign policies could not be analysed using the social science and historiographical methodologies which could be applied to more open societies. The highly limited access that Western scholars had to the Soviet Union from the 1917 revolution until well into the Gorbachev era prevented this. However, the importance of the Soviet Union and the threatening nature of its policies, especially after World War II, made studying this country imperative.

What Sovietology set out to accomplish was an analysis of the domestic and foreign policies of this enigmatic but extraordinarily important country on the basis of what little evidence there was available. The most abundant sources of information about the USSR were (1) statements appearing in the official Soviet media, and (2) Soviet actions—detailed information about which more often came from Western governments than from Moscow.

The analytical method employed by Sovietology was clear and simple: previous Soviet statements and actions were the best (really, the only) guide to future Soviet behavior. There was, of course, frequent debate among scholars and policy analysts concerning how the Soviets might behave under various sets of circumstances. What these debates often centered on was the determination of what set of previous Soviet statements and actions were most relevant to understanding how the Soviets would behave in an ongoing or anticipated situation.

Such a debate about the analysis of past Soviet behavior was evident during the 1991 Senate confirmation hearings of Robert Gates as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The sharply differing statements made by Melvin Goodman and Graham Fuller were as much about how to undertake Sovietological analysis as they were about the nominee. One of their disagreements centered around the Central Intelligence Agency's analysis of Soviet relations with Iran in the mid-1980s. At the time, Fuller argued that the USSR might invade Iran. Part of his argument was based on the precedent Moscow had already set by invading Afghanistan, another non-Warsaw Pact member state neighboring Iran. At the same time, Goodman argued that the Soviets were not likely to invade Iran since nothing in Soviet statements or actions indicated that they would.

At the hearings, Fuller acknowledged that his analysis had been mistaken. But he offered an insightful criticism of the methodology employed by Goodman and his colleagues in the CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA) when he said, "No SOVA analysis would have been likely to tell you, until the troops were lined up and ready to go, that the USSR would ever send the Red Army into Afghanistan, because the Soviet Union had no history and no background of doing that."

Each man was accusing the other of practicing a straight-line analysis (future Soviet actions could be predicted on previous Soviet actions and statements) that refused to account for other possibilities. In fact, both of them were engaging in straight-line analysis, but were employing different data sets on which to base their analysts. This debate is only one of many possible examples within Sovietology concerning the possible future behavior of the USSR. Thus, even when the USSR was generally regarded as an ideologically-inspired imperial state, Sovietology could not predict its behavior with any certainty.

Of course, Sovietology has not always sought to predict future Soviet behavior. Sovietologists have often focused their efforts on describing and explaining past Soviet behavior. According to Alexander Motyl, such Sovietology is characterized by ". . . the vigorous pursuit of data on the faulty rationale that, as only data can generate knowledge, more data must translate into more knowledge." These data were often analyzed without employing an explicitly articulated theory or concept. It is

1. "Excerpts from Senate Hearing on Nomination of CIA Chief," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1991, p. A11.

2. Alexander J. Motyl, *Sovietology, Rationality, Nationality: Coming to Grips with Nationalism in the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 3.

this type of Sovietology which Motyl dismissed as "... an awkward amalgam of data collection, policy analysis, and journalism that is as divorced from scholarship as sense impressions are from theory."³

Motyl's description may be somewhat unfair. For while an explicit theory for understanding Moscow's behavior was usually absent in Sovietological analysis, an implicit theory was necessarily present, as Motyl acknowledges. And for the period of the Cold War, Sovietologists could reasonably analyse Soviet domestic and foreign policies in light of what were a generally accepted and often unstated set of theories about the general thrust of Soviet behavior.

There was little debate, for example, about the proposition that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sought to maintain itself in power domestically through dictatorial means. Nor was there much debate about the proposition that the Soviet Union sought to retain control of Eastern Europe and to expand its influence over other countries. For most of the Soviet period, Sovietology did not challenge these and other seemingly immutable basic propositions about Soviet foreign and domestic policy, but devoted itself to analysing and debating more detailed issues. Furthermore, even though the data at its disposal were of relatively low quality, Sovietology could approach these more detailed issues about Soviet domestic and foreign policies with some degree of confidence precisely because there was relatively little debate about the general issues.

This intellectually comfortable situation no longer exists. The domestic and foreign politics of the former Soviet Union can no longer be understood in light of what once seemed to be the permanently valid theories about continuing communist party rule and Soviet expansionism which underpinned Sovietology. Yet while the old principles on which Soviet domestic and foreign policies were based have disappeared, what they will be replaced by in the former Soviet Union is far from certain, and may not be so for a considerable period of time.

In addition, there has been a fundamental change in the quantity and quality of research data available from, as well as Western access to, the former Soviet Union. Instead of being the voice of the governing authorities, the media in the former Soviet Union now represents a wide spectrum of viewpoints. Indeed, the spectrum of influential political movements is in many ways broader than that which exists in most Western countries. In addition, it is now possible for Western scholars to visit the former USSR much more easily than before and to talk freely with virtually anyone.

While this greater availability of data is welcome to Western scholars, it also makes more difficult our task of understanding the former USSR. Before, the Soviet press usually made extremely dull reading, but since all statements on policy issues were official, the Western scholar could be reasonably confident that they represented official policy, or at least a leadership point of view. By contrast, the press in the former Soviet Union is now far more interesting to read, but, just like the Western press, it does not represent official policy. Especially at a time when the government leaders of the various republics often issue statements contradicting ones made by other leaders or even themselves, it is far more difficult to determine government policy now than it was during the Soviet period.

Since the fundamental premises which Sovietology used to rely on have been swept away, and since the nature of the research data now emanating from the

former USSR is qualitatively and quantitatively much richer than that which was previously available, Sovietology simply cannot proceed in the same manner as it has in the past. There is no longer a firmly established political setting consisting of a small number of relatively like-minded decision-makers in the Kremlin. The decision-making process in Russia and the other republics now involves far more actors and is far more complicated. Understanding this more complex phenomenon requires a more complex methodology.

What Is To Be Done?

Concluding that traditional Sovietology is no longer the most appropriate methodology for understanding the domestic and foreign policies of the former USSR is one thing. Identifying what is an appropriate methodology for understanding this phenomenon is another. There are a wide variety of social science and historiographical methodologies to choose from. Of the existing methodologies, it may turn out that different ones will be appropriate for understanding different questions. New methodologies altogether, or variations on the existing ones, may have to be developed. Thus, in addition to choosing what issues to study, scholars will have to choose which methodology to study them with. Where the choice of methodology is not obvious (and I would argue that during this time of rapid and fundamental change both in the former USSR and world politics generally, the choice of methodology is far from obvious), how should the scholar decide which methodology or methodologies to apply to a particular problem? This is a crucial issue since, as was stated earlier, the method used to address a question may in large part determine the answer or conclusion which is reached.

What type of methodology would be useful for analysing the complexity of the internal and external politics of the former Soviet republics in an era when even the basic nature of their political systems is evolving is uncertain. As also is what such a methodology must explain.

An analogy from mathematics may be useful in addressing these questions. Algebra can be used to analyse straight lines. But not all lines are straight; some are curved. To analyse curved lines, a more complex form of mathematics is required: calculus. This analogy is particularly apt with respect to traditional Sovietology and what might replace it. Although algebra cannot explain the more complex problems which calculus addresses, calculus does not reject algebra as a false science. Similarly, just because traditional Sovietology does not explain the present more complex situation, the methodology that can explain it need not—indeed, should not—reject what has been previously learned through traditional Sovietology, but should incorporate it when appropriate.

What sort of methodology does this? It is possible that several may do so, and this is an issue that needs to be explored. It is also possible, of course, that certain methodologies, even sophisticated ones that can be successfully applied to the study of politics in America or other Western states, may not transplant easily to studying the politics of the former Soviet Union. Although this is a subject that deserves fuller treatment, it does appear that many quantitatively-oriented social science methodologies might not be useful for analysing the former Soviet Union, at least at present. Like traditional Sovietology, many of these quantitative methodologies are applied to the study of politics in countries where the basic foundations of the political system are well

established. Their analyses and predictions are made about detailed issues within a firmly established political structure. Since the political structure of the former Soviet republics as well as their relations with one another and with third countries have not yet been firmly established and may not be so for some time, these quantitative methodologies would suffer from some of the same problems that traditional Sovietology does in attempting to analyse the current situation. For like traditional Sovietology, many quantitative social science methodologies draw upon past experience to predict future behavior—a form of straight-line analysis.

But this is an era when any form of straight-line analysis about the former USSR, whether it is traditional Sovietology or quantitative social science, will probably not be useful since there can be no assurance that past trends will be a useful guide to the region's future. This may change in time if Russia and the other republics establish a track record of holding regular elections, so that quantitative analyses can be made of voting patterns, among other issues. Repeated elections under relatively stable conditions, though, need to occur before such analyses will have the necessary data to draw confident conclusions—and this, of course, has not yet happened.

One form of quantitative social science which has sprung up and flourished in many of the former Soviet republics during the past few years is public opinion polling. This, however, is still an inexact science even in the West where it has been practised for many years. Since its practitioners in Moscow and elsewhere do not always seem to employ it in a scientifically rigorous fashion, their conclusions cannot be accepted with full confidence.⁴ In addition, in rapidly changing circumstances, public opinion can also change rapidly: what the public thinks today is not necessarily a useful guide to what it will think next year, next month, or even next week. Therefore, what the polls reveal about public opinion at present cannot necessarily be accepted as possessing much validity for the future.

What is needed is a methodology which specifically provides a framework of analysis for understanding grand historical transitions such as the one occurring now in the former Soviet Union—a calculus which explains the curving lines of politics and international relations. Does such a methodology exist?

Comparative Historical Analysis

Such an approach does exist, though it needs to be further developed. A fundamental premise of this approach, which can be called comparative historical analysis, is that while each nation's history is distinctive, there are also similarities across nations. This approach differs from Sovietology, which emphasizes the unique nature of Russia and the (former) Soviet Union.

Nations sometimes go through similar experiences, such as war, revolution, civil war, expansion, retrenchment, dictatorship, democratization, prosperity, depression, and so on. There is no inevitable law that says all nations will experience all

4. In order to obtain an accurate portrayal of public opinion, a poll should give the person being surveyed the entire spectrum of possible responses, and the responses available should be mutually exclusive. However, in a 1990 poll conducted by the All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion about Soviet citizens' preferences for a future social system, communism was not offered as a choice. The three choices offered besides "uncertain" were "democratic socialism, Swedish socialism," and "capitalism." Swedish socialism, of course, is democratic socialism. Lev Gudkov, "Russians Outside Russia," *Moscow News*, No. 41, October 21-28, 1990, p. 7. It is unclear what steps, if any, pollsters in the former USSR take to ensure that their survey sample is representative of the larger society.

these events, or that they will experience them in any particular order even if they do. But since these events do occur in different nations at different times, knowledge of how such events or trends unfolded in the past can inform an analysis of similar events or trends in other countries. Indeed, where particularly traumatic events are occurring in one country, an understanding of similar events in another country could provide a better framework for understanding these events than the past history of the country where they are currently occurring.

The task of the analyst using this methodology is to select an appropriate historical analogy' to explain current developments, to justify the choice of one or more analogies as opposed to others, to compare the elements of the two (or more) situations in order to gain a sense of whether a similar or different outcome may occur at present, and to discuss how the outcome may or may not vary if there are important changes in the elements of the current situation. In other words, the task of the analyst is to find one or more curved lines from the past which can help explain the curving line of the present.

What makes this methodology a more useful tool than Sovietology is that comparative historical analysis acknowledges that the Russian and Soviet historical experiences may not serve as the best guide to understanding how the foreign and domestic politics of the former Soviet Union are evolving. Another advantage of comparative historical analysis is that it focuses the debate on the larger questions about foreign and domestic politics and not on the details. This is especially important when the larger questions are unsettled and may remain so for some time. One analyst may interpret current events in Russian politics as being analogous to events in Portugal in the mid-1970s when a poor country shed its empire and successfully democratized, while another may interpret them as being analogous to events in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s when an attempted transition to democracy in the midst of economic depression failed. In the debate between them, each is forced to argue why current developments in Russia resembles the paradigm each analyst chose, and why they do not resemble the paradigm the other one chose. History never repeats itself exactly, but this form of analysis can help clarify whether current developments may be moving in one direction or in another. More importantly, comparative historical analysis may help elucidate what needs to be done to prevent undesirable forms of political evolution, such as the demise of democracy.

Comparative historical analysis is not an unknown methodology. A particularly fine example of it is Graham Fuller's recent book on Iranian foreign policy.' Fuller set out to analyse the evolution of Iranian foreign policy interests in the post-Khomeini era. To do this, he examined Iran's relations with each of its neighbors and with other important countries in different eras. He then attempted to define an Iranian foreign policy "norm" toward other countries, noting how this norm might vary depending on possible changes both in Iran and in other countries. Some of these changes, including democratization, were ones that Iran and some of the neighboring countries had not fully (or even partially in some cases) experienced, but which could not be ruled out in the Middle East, given the expansion of democracy in other regions of the world. Fuller did not conclude with just one prediction

5. Graham R. Fuller, *The "Center of the Universe": The Revolution of Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1971).

about the future thrust of Iranian foreign policy, but with a range of predictions which might occur under certain circumstances.

Some scholars will dismiss this approach as being policy-oriented, future-oriented, speculative, and, hence, unscholarly. It is true, of course, that statements about the present and future course of politics cannot be analysed with the same degree of certainty which hindsight allows us in examining the past. On the other hand, valuable lessons can be learned from failed predictions. At the very least, failed predictions invite—perhaps force—scholars to reformulate their conceptual framework to account either for why what they thought would happen did not happen, or for why what they thought would not happen did.

Further, scholars can avoid making statements about the future, due either to the conviction that it is impossible to do so or to the fear of being proven wrong, but policy-makers cannot. Policy-makers need to operate on the basis of some idea about the future course of politics in other nations in order to fashion their own foreign policy, and to understand how the foreign policy they formulate will affect the politics of other nations as well as international relations generally. If those who know the most about the domestic and foreign politics of the former USSR are unwilling to engage in figure-oriented analysis, then policy-makers will rely on those who may be more willing but less knowing.

Finally, Sovietologists should not decry the attempt to make predictions through comparative historical analysis since Sovietology also tried to make predictions. By adopting the broader approach of comparative historical analysis, scholars will acknowledge that the narrower basis upon which Sovietology made predictions (past Soviet statements and actions being a guide to future Soviet behavior) is no longer adequate.

Applying Comparative Historical Analysis

The following sections outline how comparative historical analysis might be used to conceptualize two aspects of the current politics of the former USSR.

Nationalism versus Economic Rationalism

Comparative historical analysis may shed light on which of two competing explanations about the strength of non-Russian nationalism is the more accurate.

During the Gorbachev era, many Western analysts argued that while non-Russian nationalism was rising, the non-Russian republics would not secede from the USSR, or remain outside of it for long, because independence was economically irrational. For better or worse, more than seven decades of Soviet central planning had closely tied together the economies of all the union republics. Since independence would rupture economic cooperation, economically rational people would not seek independence or if they did would not want to keep it long due to the economic disruption independence would cause.

"Even if the choice were freely offered," wrote Martha Brill Olcott in 1990, "the economic burdens of independence would lead few republics to choose this option."

This view was also reflected in US government policy. In his August, 1991, speech to the Ukrainian parliament in Kiev, US President George Bush stated: "The vast majority of trade conducted by Soviet companies, imports and exports, involves, as you know better than I, trade between republics. The Nine Plus One Agreement holds forth the hope that republics will combine greater autonomy with greater voluntary interaction—political, social, cultural, economic—rather than pursuing the hopeless course of isolation." At the time, President Bush evidently believed that the future economic prosperity of the non-Russian republics was clearly linked with the continued political integration of the USSR.

On the other hand, the argument that non-Russian nationalism would insist upon independence appeared dubious. Most of the non-Russians within the Russian Empire had been unable to sustain an independence movement in the past. This was not only due to Russian opposition but also to the fact that many non-Russian nationalities themselves were divided over the issue. The established pattern in Russian and Soviet history was that non-Russian nationalism was usually not strong enough to assert itself, and was usually not able to sustain it for long when it did. Non-Russians who asserted that the present situation was different appeared to many to be partisan advocates instead of objective analysts.

The strength of the economic rationalist argument against independence and the weakness of the nationalist argument in favor of it seemed clear to many Soviet specialists as well as to the Gorbachev leadership. The merits of the two arguments, however, appear quite different when compared to the experience of nationalism in other parts of the world.

Russia is, in many ways, the last great European colonial empire. During the 20th century, all the other European colonial empires—British, French, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, and Portuguese—were virtually eliminated. These, of course, were all overseas empires. But two other empires which had expanded over geographically contiguous areas—the Austrian and the Ottoman—were also eliminated early on in the century.

Some of these empires disappeared largely as a result of the imperial power being defeated in a war with another great power. But nationalist forces demanding independence also sprang up either when they sensed that the imperial power's grip was weakening, or even before that was evident. With very few exceptions—usually islands with very small populations—colonized and occupied nations overwhelmingly opted for independence as opposed to continued rule by the occupying power. And with only one exception—Newfoundland—no newly independent country has voluntarily accepted being ruled by the metropole once again."

What this shows is that the economic rationalist argument, that a country is better off remaining as a colony rather than becoming independent, has mainly been accepted in countries with very small populations. The fear of economic hardship did not deter the overwhelming majority of colonies from becoming independent. Indeed, in many of these former colonies, especially those in Africa, the population became, and remains, economically worse off than they were under

7. "Excerpts from Bush's Ukraine Speech: Working For the Good of Both of Us," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1991.

8. Brian Hunter, ed., *The Statesman's Year-Book, 10/11-1/12* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 312; and John F. Burns, "Joseph R. Smallwood Dies at 90; Led Newfoundland into Canada," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1991.

colonial rule. Nevertheless, deteriorating economic conditions have not induced these countries to offer to surrender their independence to the former colonial power.

If in all but the very' smallest countries in the Third World economic rationalism did not deter nationalists from seeking independence, why should anyone expect that nationalists would demand anything less in the non-Russian republics of the former USSR? Far from seeing continued rule by Moscow as beneficial economically, non-Russians regard the Soviet experience as having damaged their economics. If the experience of nationalism in the Third World is a guide, the strength of non-Russian nationalism is not likely to be a short-term phenomenon, but is long-term and permanent despite the near certainty that the non-Russian republics will all endure economic hardship for many years.

Finally, the experience of other nations also shows that the economic rationalist argument against independence is inaccurate in another sense. The argument assumes that independent nations cannot cooperate effectively in the economic sphere. Yet despite many disagreements about economic matters, there is considerable economic cooperation among nations. Many regional economic groupings, including ones in the developing world, have come into existence. The experience of other nations, then, indicates that the former Soviet republics can cooperate economically through the Commonwealth of Independent States if they want to.

Russia: Nation or Empire?

Whether the non-Russians gain or retain independence, of course, is not a matter for them alone to decide. Whether Russia is willing to permit them to become or remain independent is and will be a crucial determinant in the ability of the non-Russians to do so. What will the Russian attitude be?

As late as September, 1991, the eminent Soviet specialist Stephen F. Cohen expressed extreme doubt that the USSR would break up into its constituent republics. He noted that "Russia has always been the 'center' of the empire and the union," and that one of the many factors operating to preserve the union was "historical tradition." Cohen envisioned as particularly likely Moscow working to preserve the Slavic core of the USSR: "It is hard to imagine, for example, the other Slav republics, the Ukraine [sic] and Byelorussia, as states apart from Russia, or that Moscow would actually let them go."

Cohen's analysis is noteworthy for two reasons. First, Cohen is not known for being a conservative who is inclined to see Moscow's behavior as threatening. Instead, he is known for being a liberal who has described past Soviet behavior as defensive. He has criticized American foreign policy for taking what he considered to be a counter-productively harsh approach toward the USSR. Cohen's portrayal of a Russia determined to preserve the union, then, would appear highly credible since he is not someone given to always seeing Russian policy as expansionist or imperial. But the second reason why Cohen's analysis is noteworthy, of course, is that it was wrong. By the end of 1991, Russia had recognized not only the independence of the three Baltic states, which the West especially supported, but also the independence of all the other union republics of the former USSR. Furthermore,

the Russian parliament appeared unwilling to use force to prevent secession from Russia by the autonomous non-Russian republics within it."

The point here is not to criticize Cohen for having made a forecast which was proven wrong so quickly after it was made. Indeed, his analysis as well as those of many others who made a similar one is highly sensible from the context of Russian history: the Russians have historically sought to control the borderlands around Russia; they have not ceded this territory voluntarily in the past; they have only done so under extreme duress (due to invasion or loss of control resulting from internal upheaval); and they have exerted themselves to recapture lost territory at the earliest opportunity. As a result of this legacy, it would seem only prudent to expect that Russia would act to retain control of the borderlands now, or would act to regain control over them in the near future.

Comparative historical analysis, however, allows one to question whether the Russian historical legacy is the best guide to Russia's behavior toward non-Russians of the former Soviet Union. Instead of regarding Russia as a completely unique nation unlike any other, Russia can be seen as an example of a European nation with a colonial empire. If all the other European powers gave up their colonial empires in the 20th century, it should not be seen as surprising that Russia would do so too.

There is, of course, no necessity for Russia to divest itself of its colonial empire just because other European nations did so. However, it is instructive to note the circumstances under which other European powers gained and lost their colonial empires. Before the 20th century, these empires were acquired either by non-democratic societies, or by democratic countries for which the acquisition process was relatively inexpensive in terms of lives and money—imperialism was often relatively popular when it was perceived to be relatively cheap.

Some European powers lost all or part of their empires as a result of defeat by other great powers (Spain in 1898; Germany and Turkey in 1918). In the 20th century, however, the bulk of decolonization occurred as a result of democratic societies becoming unwilling to pay the large cost in terms of blood and treasure to keep other nations as colonies when the latter asserted their desire for independence. For the most part, the decolonization process proceeded relatively peacefully. In those cases where the European government attempted to prevent decolonization by force, domestic politics in the colonizing country eventually forced it to withdraw. Indeed, it was the increasingly burdensome military effort to retain its African colonies undertaken by a dictatorial regime in Portugal that contributed to the popular uprising in that country which led both to democratization and decolonization.

The way in which Russia has now begun to resemble other European nations is that it has embarked on the path of democratization. There may be many Russians, like Gorbachev, who would have preferred to keep the USSR whole as a state dominated by the Russians. The government of Boris Yeltsin, however, recognized that this could not be done unless the Russians were prepared to keep the union together by force—a task which could not be accomplished cheaply or easily. Since it was impossible for Russia to hold the union together without force, and since in

10. The Russian parliament overruled Boris Yeltsin's declaration of a state of emergency in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic which had declared its independence. Eleanor Randolph, "Yeltsin Eases Stand on Enclave," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1991.

any case Russia was unwilling to do so, the only alternative for Russia was to recognize the independence of the non-Russian republics.

While Moscow's acquiescence to the loss of its empire appears to be an aberration in terms of Russian history, it appears to be very much in keeping with the established pattern of 20th century European decolonization. Should there be an end to Russian democratization, however, this may bring about a decreased tolerance for decolonization in Moscow.

Conclusion

These are just two examples of how comparative historical analysis and traditional Sovietology might differ in their conclusions about current politics in the former USSR. Although there are many other questions that comparative historical analysis can be applied to, it must be emphasized that this method of analysis will not necessarily yield definitive results. But then, traditional straight-line Sovietology cannot do so either when the Soviet past is not necessarily a reliable guide to the future. What comparative historical analysis can do more effectively than traditional Sovietology is to yield a wider range of possibilities about the direction which the foreign and domestic politics of the former USSR might take.

The success, or lack of it, of analyses using this comparative historical methodology will nevertheless depend on the accuracy of the historical analogies which analysis select to explain the present. Deciding which historical analogies appropriate to analysing the present will not be easy: Russia resembles a disintegrating colonial empire, a Third World country, and in certain respects a western democracy. Arguments about which historical analogy is most appropriate for explaining the present situation, however, are extremely important since they force scholars to explicitly state and defend their theories and assumptions about the fundamental elements of the former USSR's domestic and foreign policies. An examination of, for example, Moscow's domestic or foreign policy which avoids discussing the analyst's views of the basic nature of Russia's political evolution will inadequately account for how contingent on more fundamental trends a particular policy may be.

Finally, it must be recognized that just as with traditional Sovietology, there are probably limits to how useful comparative historical analysis will be for understanding the former Soviet Union. If, for example, Russia and/or the other republics develop into established, stable democracies, a methodology seeking to understand societies in the midst of fundamental political change will no longer be appropriate. Some of the sophisticated social science methodologies which are suitable for understanding the Western democracies may then be more useful for understanding the former USSR. At present, it seems unlikely that a stable pattern of politics in this area will emerge in the near future.

Fundamental transformations are occurring in the domestic and foreign politics of the former USSR. If Western scholars are to adequately understand these phenomena, a fundamental transformation is also needed in the methodology they employ in their analyses.