

Focus: The War in Ukraine and Russia's Future Course (Summary)

Essay: What Does History Mean for Understanding the Current War?

Nobuaki Shiokawa (Professor Emeritus, The University of Tokyo)

There are many discussions of the Russia-Ukraine War (Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war of defense by Ukraine) that examine its historical background and find analogies with various historical precedents. It is easy to find precedents analogous to today's events, whether they involve the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, but arguing from a standpoint that "the nature of Russia/the Soviet Union is why they do what they do (invade and expand)" could lead to a facile fatalism. It is regularly noted in historian circles that the historical precedents often employed in comparisons are in fact not the same as the events unfolding at present, giving rise to frequent warnings against the danger of making use of superficial analogies to explain current affairs. The past and the present are not directly connected, so one cannot hastily explain present circumstances from past events. However, a careful look at history makes it possible to understand the present situation in a more precise and multifaceted manner. This is the significance of historical research.

1 Low-mobilization Wartime Regime: Putin's Regime during the Russia-Ukraine War

Atsushi Ogushi (Professor, Faculty of Law, Keio University)

This paper examines what kind of wartime regime has been formed in Russia. After confirming that Putin's current regime remains stable, it argues that this regime, against a background of security phobia, took on such characteristics as nepotistic personnel policies, deinstitutionalization that ossifies institutions, and "low-grade mobilization" that does not significantly mobilize society's resources. These characteristics were then carried over into the current wartime regime. The mobilization machine used during elections in the ethnic republics and elsewhere was repurposed for the mobilization of soldiers, but there has been no large-scale mobilization in urban areas. Control of the media has been tightened, but there are many loopholes. Despite massive economic sanctions, public life has remained virtually unchanged. Thus has formed what might be called a "low-mobilization wartime regime".

2 Will Military Keynesianism Save the Russian Economy?

Michitaka Hattori (Professor, Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University)

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, countries – most of them developed economies – formed a sanctions coalition against Russia. While the sanctions have dealt a blow to Russia, they have not paralyzed the Russian economy or caused the Putin regime to lose its ability and will to continue the war. The most recent performance of the Russian economy and public finances show a seemingly not bad set of figures.

The recently passed Russian federal budget for 2024–2026 includes a controversial increase in defense spending. While it is becoming clearer that defense spending is putting pressure on Russian public finances, a picture is also emerging in which spending on war in fact supports the Russian economy. Commentators such as Prokopenko focus on the phenomenon of "military Keynesianism" in the Russian economy.

However, such a state of the Russian economy has its limits and will also have its downsides.

There is already a serious shortage of human resources, and the budget deficit caused by military spending is crowding out the private sector's vitality. There are also concerns that military Keynesianism will become the norm and that the country will become a nation in constant need of war.

3 A Slight Change under Conformity: Do the Russian People Support “Putin’s War”?

Yukiko Hama (Associate Professor, University of Shizuoka)

Do the Russian people support the “special military operation”? Public opinion polls taken during wartime have certain limits but, when the genuine level of support is explored using surveys conducted by independent and private institutions, it can nonetheless be inferred that the majority are passive supporters, given the high rate of refusal to answer and the fact that many respondents are regime-compliant, implying that they would support the president in whatever he decides to do, even when faced with contradictory options. The public's passivity is also the result of a mix of carrot and stick policies the Putin regime has pursued over the past 20 years.

There are two groups most difficult to decipher. (1) Why the active supporters still want to fight? The survey indicates that the hardliners have internalized the war aim of “de-Nazifying Ukraine” declared by the government. (2) low-income earners indicated higher disapproval than the more well-to-do but were also more willing to participate in the war. This suggests that for the lower social classes military service could be a chance to overcome their economic hardships and to rise in esteem and respect.

Approval rating for “the special military operation” itself has hardly changed since it began, but a Russian Field survey in October 2023 found that, for the first time, those in favor of a transition to peace talks outnumbered those in favor of continuing the operation. A Levada Center survey also shows the disparity between the two groups to be at its widest. These results indicate that more and more people think that a ceasefire should take place, even if the underlying tone is reluctant support.

4 Russia’s Approach to Central Asia after the Start of the War in Ukraine: The Changing Role and Resources of the Former “Suzerain State”

Takeshi Yuasa (Professor, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia University)

Russia has been promoting the construction of a regional order under its own leadership, utilizing regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, the member countries have diverse agendas, and it cannot be said that they have maintained a hierarchical order, with Russia at the top, in a post-Soviet bloc. The war in Ukraine has accelerated this trend. The resources that the CSTO can exert are limited, while China's growing presence within the SCO and the increase in the number of member states have led to marked conflicts of interest. Russia has relied on the geographic concept of “Eurasia” to construct a regional identity favorable to itself that is increasingly far removed from the regionalist blueprint that the Putin administration laid out for Russia in the first half of the 2010s. Central Asian countries are becoming more independent in accordance with their own capabilities, which could lead to more conflicts of interest being manifested in border disputes and economic corridors.

5 Is Russia on the Verge of Subordination to China?

Emi Mifune (Professor, Faculty of Law, Komazawa University)

As Russia, exhausted by the war in Ukraine, accelerates its dependence on China, some say that Russia has begun to fall subordinate to China. Others see China's restoration of its right to use the port of Vladivostok for the first time in 163 years as a sign of a weakening Russia. Is the war in Ukraine changing the relationship between China and Russia? This paper distinguishes between subordination and dependence. Section 1 outlines China's role in supporting the Russian economy. Section 2 takes an overview of the Sino-Russian relationship, in which China has been showing solidarity with Russia in the realms of technology and diplomacy. Section 3 discusses how China does not view the war in Ukraine as a bilateral war but has instead strategically positioned Russia in the context of great-power competition with the US and accordingly deepened Sino-Russian relations. Based on the above analysis, this paper argues that, while Russia is deepening its dependence on China due to the war in Ukraine, the Chinese side also needs close ties with Russia for its long-term strategy toward the US.

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