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Branching out or inwards? The logic of fractals in Russian studies

Tomila Lankina

Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay reflects upon the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine on the sub-field of Russian studies in political science. I argue that the war has exposed some blind spots in our knowledge. Notably, it has left us struggling to understand the historically deprived communities in Russia whose values, sentiments, and vulnerabilities may be indirect buttresses to both support for Putin and the war. I discuss two key issues in the sub-field: (1) the elite-centered approaches in research in mainstream work on Russia, not least due to data availability preoccupations; and (2) the paucity of inter-disciplinary perspectives, particularly the reluctance of mainstream studies to cast their nets into history and sociology. Disciplinary pressures – the credibility revolution – complicate a historically sensitive revision of long-internalized assumptions. I draw on my recent work on the historical underpinnings of social structure and its implications for civil society, protest, and support for democracy in Russia.

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Introduction

There is a *fractal* (Abbott 2001a) aspect to Russian studies.[1] This has not always been the case. Seventy years ago, the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (THPSSS) punctured many scholarly assumptions about the USSR (Alex and Bauer 1959).[2] It did so through the now-unfashionable Parsonian lens (Zafirovski 2006) on the spheres of society, politics, and economics as one integrated and an undivided whole. It went beyond the methodological individualism of mainstream sociological research and economics. It combined quantitative, survey, data – cutting edge by the standards at the time – with open-ended interviews and ethnographic observations. It showed a curiosity about all things Soviet that would be unimaginable in today's fractured new normal in Russian studies. It wanted to know what the Soviet medics did and what it is that made them tick and opt for this over another profession. It looked to understand social values. It wanted to dissect the humble lives of the schoolteacher. And it asked daring questions like – and I am paraphrasing – *do you consider, and indeed succeed, in living, just like you did before, before that is, the Revolution*? It went beyond the conventional categories in survey research such as "profession," "degree," "occupation," and "class," and let the people speak in their own words, including about the long-abolished and defunct Tzarist *sosloviya*-estates and the life histories of the aristocrat or the *meshchanka* navigating her new life in the USSR, life histories that were messy and non-linear, and that refused to fit neatly into conventional sociological categories. And these eclectic dimensions of inquiry spoke just as poignantly to questions of Big Politics as did the volumes written about the men in leathers and in suits in the Kremlin, the Politburo, and the Party apparat. For it was only through the study of society, the professions, the daily grind, the ordinary lives lived just like in the past, like *in*

CONTACT Tomila Lankina t.lankina@lse.ac.uk Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE UK

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before, that scholars could get to the in-built mechanisms of corrosion of the system, and, contrariwise, to what it is that ensures its solidity and durability.[3]

But innovative though it was, THPSSS only helped solidify what became known in the political science community – derogatively – as "area studies." With the demise of the communist project came the shattering of the walls between the Sovietology of "area studies" and political science. Exogenous shocks, as Vladimir Gel'man (2023) notes in his contribution to this special issue, invite introspection about the blind alleys of the past and spur us all to consider the directions of fresh starts in the future. Surveying Russian studies over the last two decades, Tim Frye (2017) correctly notes the outstanding scholarship of the new generation(s) of Russianists that came of age after a period of reflection in the 1990s (also see Smyth 2023 in this special issue). Not only is the field thriving but it has made significant contributions to the wider political science discipline. And, following the disciplinary tremors of communism's collapse, it has done well to steer us towards far more rigorous analysis of Russian politics than did Sovietological scholarship that carried the stigma of detachment from the big disciplinary debates, contributions, and methodological concerns.

The self-rebranding from area experts into political scientists, however, spurred on new disciplinary pressures, carrots and sticks, new rules of gatekeeping and exclusion, creating deeper fissures between cognate fields of history, ethnographic inquiry, sociology, and political science; a greater reliance on some methods to the relative neglect of others (see La Lova 2023 in this issue); and relatedly, the study of particular social groups and actors over others. The war against Ukraine and the deepening of Russia's autocracy have brought home the urgency of re-thinking how we study Russia. Our community of scholars has shown a strong ability to learn lessons from the past blind spots, and, like Regina Smyth in this issue, I am confident that it will meet the challenge admirably now, just as it has done in the past.

In this essay, I address two key issues in the sub-field: (1) the elite-centered approaches and urban biases in research in mainstream political science work on Russia, not least due to methodological and data availability preoccupations; and (2) the paucity of inter-disciplinary perspectives, particularly the reluctance of mainstream studies to cast their nets into history and sociology. In making this call, I draw on my recent work on the historical underpinnings of social structure and its implications for civil society, protest, and support for democracy in Russia. I elaborate that insufficient historical grounding leads us to overlook path dependencies that have a bearing on social divisions; these are in turn important for understanding the big political processes at the national level. Many of our assumptions about Russian society derive from secondary historical scholarship and past ideologies that have been long discredited; we have not done very well in scrutinizing concepts, assumptions, and expectations that derive from these past literatures. Disciplinary pressures – the credibility revolution – make it hard for us to engage in a historically sensitive revision of long-internalized assumptions and concepts. And while other work, especially that of Russia-based researchers – as indeed new findings in history – have the potential to help us fill the blind spots, we do not engage with this research very much.

Marginality in mainstream scholarship: the reality, how we got there, and ways to address the omissions

Not long ago, as Russia's offensive against Ukraine raged, the social anthropologist Jeremy Morris prompted academics to think about the neglected and forgotten people in Russian society.[4] Earlier, I had written a blog post about marginality and how without a deep knowledge of the predicament of socially vulnerable groups we would fail to understand the institutional architecture of support for the Putin regime.[5] I agreed with Jeremy's point.[6] There is of course an important empirical rationale to focus on the urban communities when we study the sources of autocratic regime challenges or stability. As Beissinger (2022) writes, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, revolutions and uprisings evolved from being a rural to largely an urban phenomenon (Beissinger 2022). But while

city environments are conducive to rebellion, we also ought to pay attention to the nature of the urban communities, their employment patterns, restrictions on social mobility, and continued social links to the rural milieus – sociological dimensions of potential motivations and incentives to rebel or to comply.

It is not that we do not talk about "the other" of the silent, often marginal, communities, who do not openly rebel – we do, when we discuss electoral fraud, apathy – or even outright hostility towards the groups whom we are more prone to research. More often, though, we look to understand the motivations of those with whom we identify, not those who are left out and left behind – the latter remain just that, "the other" – implicitly derided and chastised for abrogating their right to build Russia's democratic future. We study those who are engaged, and not the silent disengaged.

But I stood corrected when in a Twitter post another fellow Russianist, Sam Greene, reminded us that it is not that people do not write about these marginal people and marginal topics, it is that mainstream Western political science does not.[7] This is, of course, not unique to Russian studies. Similar "fractals" are common across the various regional specialisms, whether in works on East Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The reality is that top journals such as the *American Political Science Review* (APSR), the *American Journal of Political Science* (AJPS), the *Journal of Politics* (JOP), and similar – though much less so the more niche top-tier "area studies" outlets such as *Post-Soviet Affairs* (PSA) or *Problems of Post-Communism* (PPC) – dis-incentivize resort to cross-disciplinary practices and relatedly, to methods – and to citations to works the discipline itself has methodically and systematically marginalized – that would enable conversations across the divides.

Sam is right. In my own book, I cite outstanding publications from Russian studies in urban social demography, ethnography, sociology, and history, often written by Russians, and often regional scholars, in Russian. Teaching our Ph.D. students about accessing and engaging with these works should be an important part of their training. The reality, however, is that mainstream political science research on Russia seldom cites this literature.[8] To give some concrete examples, the French scholar of Russian origin Sofya Tchuikina and her collaborators have written about the perpetuation of deep social divisions in Soviet Leningrad. Tchuikina's work is not well known to British or American scholars, not least because she publishes in French and Russian. But her insights on Russian society are important. Her research makes it clear that social divisions in Soviet Leningrad derive from Tsarist times when aristocrats colonized central districts of the city; they continued to do so discreetly in the Soviet period, while the unprestigious Soviet suburbs, the *mikrorayony*, remained plebeian and overwhelmingly concentrated factory workers of peasant origin, mirroring the predicament of the peasant *otkhodniki* in Tsarist times (Gerasimova and Tchuikina 2000; Tchuikina 2006).

Several strands of inquiry supply empirical evidence linking Russia's social structure and inequalities to the institutional, societal, and cognitive structures of support for Putin's autocracy. Together, these sources illustrate the potential of *inter-generational life histories* and *historical genealogies* of families, communities, and social groups to help us make sense of the social drivers of support for, or challenge to, the present-day regime. I deploy a multi-disciplinary and multi-method genealogical approach in my book on the reproduction of social structure from Tsarist times to the present, tracing the legacies of the institution of *soslovie* (estate) (Lankina 2022).

Hoffmann's classic historical account of the peasant exodus into large cities, specifically, Moscow, in the 1920s–1930s, underlines the rapid peasantification of Russia's urban society in the first decade and a half of Soviet history (Hoffmann 1994). Hoffmann's book covers the moment in Soviet history when collectivization exacerbated the catastrophic consequences of the Revolution and civil strife – such as famine, epidemics, disruption in basic public services – forcing peasants to flee into cities. Although in Tsarist Russia, the movement of peasants to seek a better life in cities accelerated after serf emancipation of the 1860s, the *soslovie* institution along with the urban corporations (*soslovnye obshchestva*) that managed peasant entry into towns, had not been abolished when serfs were emancipated (Lankina 2022). The estate institution continued to place severe restrictions on peasant urban mobility and assimilation. Peasant settlement in cities was slow and gradual – it sometimes took several generations for an urban resident of peasant origin to acquire the status of *meshchanin*,

merchant, or honorary citizen. The pace of urbanization changed with the cataclysmic perturbations of the Bolshevik Revolution. On the one hand, the country experienced a mass influx of peasants into towns in the 1920s–1930s, exacerbating the historical cleavage between the cultivated urban intelligentsia and illiterate or semi-literate peasant masses. On the other, to curb peasant entry, the Bolsheviks passed restrictive laws essentially trapping those who did not manage to escape, in collective farms and in farm occupations until the 1960s; this too consolidated the historical wedge between the Europeanized intelligentsia largely of aristocratic, merchant, and clergy stock, and the peasant masses, the *narod*. The 1950s–1960s ushered in another wave of rural exodus into towns, but the new rural entrants faced severe barriers to social mobility.

Vishnevskiy discusses how even on the eve of USSR's disintegration, a large chunk of population in large cities were urbanites in the first and second generations (Vishnevskiy 2010). In turn, we have socio-ethnographic accounts of the challenges of adaptation of the new peasant entrants into Russia's urban society. Similar to the peasant *otkhodniki* in Tsarist times, the new peasant entrants into cities joined the rapidly expanding industrial sector *en masse* as blue-collar employees (Gerasimova and Tchuikina 2000; Lankina 2022). Many, as I can corroborate with interviews with rural residents of Samara that my collaborators and I conducted in the 2000s, and with other documentary evidence, kept ties to their native villages (Lankina 2022). The Soviet state erected institutional barriers to the integration of rural society into prestigious large cities in the form of the *prospiska* system of residential registration that severely restricted settlement. It also denied peasants the right to leave their collective farms until the 1950s–1960s. Those who managed to escape often congregated in unprestigious micro-raions on the outskirts of large cities in sprawling bedroom communities. Like Gerasimova and Tchuikina (2000), these communities re-created their own rural microcosms, insulated from the cultural influences of the wider urban milieus in their new home, the metropolis of Moscow or Leningrad.

Because of institutional barriers to urban integration, and the cultural-cognitive differences inherent in the *soslovie* institution, these latter-day rural folks – the vast majority of the population – faced severe barriers to social mobility when they moved to cities. As I write in *Estate Origins*, it is the descendants of the aristocracy, wealthy merchants, clergy, and *meshchane*, who were best positioned to ascend into the Soviet professions that carried not only prestige but also a degree of autonomy and insulation from state pressures to conform ideologically. Interviews with deprived communities in the Bezymyanka industrial suburb of Samara city corroborate that for the younger generation living through the hardships of the 1990s, low-level clerical positions in the public sector were not atypical (Lankina 2022).

The expansion of the public sector under Putin's autocracy offered many individuals from the marginalized communities a chance to obtain the dignity and status that comes with a stable white-collar or other type of service job – including in the police and national guard (*Rosgvardiya*) forces. I have yet to see a systematic study of the social life histories of individuals joining the *Rosgvardiya* or the police in Putin's Russia. By contrast, we can easily access the biographies of, for instance, the brilliant presenters of TV Rain, the independent news outlet that Putin's autocracy has branded a foreign agent and whose journalists are now broadcasting information about Russia's war against Ukraine from their places of exile. Let us examine the social background of the pre-Revolutionary ancestors of TV Rain's Editor-in-Chief Tikhon Dzyadko. His Wikipedia page provides some indication of pre-Revolutionary social ancestry, notably information on the great-grandfather Grigory Friedland (born in 1897).[9] Although as is typical for Soviet-era biographies, Friedland is listed as having working-class origins, in 1913 he attended the juridical faculty of a higher educational institution in Petrograd, in the Soviet period becoming the first dean of the History Faculty of Moscow State University, essentially joining the cultural aristocracy of the new Bolshevik state. Tikhon's grandfather was a prominent Soviet dissident, as was Tikhon's father, the artist and programmer Viktor Mikhaylovich Dzyadko. Tikhon's mother is the prominent human rights activist Zoya Tsvetova. The family suffered repressions under Stalin. Anna Mongait, another prominent journalist working for TV Rain, is the daughter of the journalist Viktor Loshak, former Chief Editor of the phenomenally popular

mass circulation Soviet magazine *Ogonyok*; he also worked for *Moscow News*, and then *Kommersant*; Viktor in turn comes from a family of journalists and technical intelligentsia.[10] As I discuss in my book *Estate Origins*, the probability of a peasant *otkhodnik* ascending into the prestigious and autonomous *Soviet* professions with the pedigree of Dzyadko or Mongait's family was extremely low, something that I also systematically corroborate in another paper with Alexander Libman (Lankina and Libman 2021).

As Alexander Libman (2023) writes in this special issue, biographies, even if providing us with a rather small *n*, can be extremely illuminating of the pathways into particular sectors of the Soviet and then post-Soviet Russian labor force. We can see from the illustrative cases of Dzyad'ko and Mongait that the pathway to becoming a Soviet dissident and post-Soviet Russian public intellectual openly challenging Russia's war against Ukraine does not lie via the peasant route to social mobility. My interviews with rural Samara residents moving to the city suggest that the tendency was for marginal rural communities to join the urban less prestigious and less autonomous public-sector occupations like nurse or schoolteacher (Lankina 2022).

Although not coming from the *genealogical* perspective on Russian society, several research studies in political science are pivotal to linking the historical patterns that I uncover in my work to the institutional architecture of support for the Putin regime. One is the study by Frye and colleagues on "workplace dependencies," which discusses the mechanisms of how enterprise dependencies translate into electoral support for incumbent or incumbent-supporting parties during elections (Frye, John Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014). The second body of research is Rosenfeld's work on the state dependent middle class (Rosenfeld 2021, 2017). Rosenfeld demonstrates how socialization within the public sector of autocratic regimes stimulates pro-regime orientations. But these insights beg the question of what it is that makes it possible for individuals like Mogait and Dzyadko to avoid or eschew work in the state-dependent enterprises or public sector, in the first place, and instead become articulate, slick, and savvy journalists on a prominent independent TV news outlet, one small oppositional island in the sea of autocratic support.

The reality is that the Soviet social mobility project never fully obliterated the chasm that separated the overwhelming mass of Imperial Russian peasant *soslovie* from the habitually high-human-capital clergy, aristocracy, and the ascendant new money of urban groups who joined autonomous professions already before the Revolution and colonized the autonomous spheres thereafter, while the rural mass enjoyed social mobility in the form of factory enterprise work and clerical public-sector-dependent employment.

Inductively oriented research on Russia's social divisions like this would highlight the importance of historical embedding of the inquiry in ways that may lead us to link social marginality – and social privilege – to bigger outcomes in the political realm. For instance, a careful reading of findings about the legacies of Tsarist social divisions would help make better sense of the anger and resentment of one Vova Putin. Behind Putin's lashing out against a new liberal Russia and the Western-oriented intelligentsia we may well then see the generations of accumulated marginality that began with his peasant ancestors and ended in the St Petersburg *kommunalka*. Like scores of others of his group, Putin would never wash off the stigma of the downtrodden in Russian Imperial and then Soviet society. For, as my book *Estate Origins* (Lankina 2022) makes clear, it is the descendants of aristocrats, merchants, clergymen, and *meshchane* with a sprinkling from the peasant estate – the core of the so-called *Soviet* middle class – who tended to colonize the elite professions, the media, and the arts. Meanwhile, the likes of Vova Putin had to bury their resentments in the backstreets of his shabby dwelling. But the historical underpinnings of the construction of classes and cleavages steering democratic support or opposition to it have seldom featured in analyses of Russian politics. Instead, to explain pockets of liberalism or autocratic backsliding, we ascribe primacy to immediate pocket-book situations, to institutions and policies involving governors, the new business oligarchs, and old Communist Party bosses, or to personal traumas that derive from the Soviet period and circumstances of the country's collapse.

Within the broader realm of social science inquiry, scholars have begun increasingly to reap the rewards of a more holistic, historically attuned, approach to research. As the London School of Economics (LSE) sociologist Savage (2021, 10–11) writes, a new stream of work on social injustices has encouraged scholars to take a "big-picture" view of politics, economics, and society. This shift, of which Piketty's work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2014) is a prime example, effected a fusion not only of the previously distinct disciplinary concerns but also research methods, whereby normative and interpretive sensibilities and deep-narrative historical and qualitative work fused with quantitative methods that had been dominant in economics and are now predominant in political science as well (Piketty 2014; Savage 2021, 10–11).

But this shift has not yet percolated into mainstream studies of politics in Russia. We have continued to concern ourselves with institutions, actors, and processes that are related to power and contestation in the political realm – traditional turf domains of political science. Sharafutdinova (2023) writes in this special issue that the war made "institutionalist" aspects of Russian politics largely irrelevant in the face of the "increasingly de-institutionalized realities on the ground." More broadly, in neglecting to explore the depths of society – as embedded in layers and layers of history, in distinct shades of meaning that have been in turn engendered, forged, and mutated in the social, religious, and political realities of the bygones – we deprive ourselves of the chance to listen to the stories, tragedies, and vulnerabilities of the vulnerable, low-status, forgotten people, in their own words, and to then link them to Big Politics. And Big Politics they affect. Big time.

The war in Ukraine, ontological concerns, interdisciplinarity, and research methods

Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine brought home the reality of a fractured pool of expertise that has in some ways thrown the baby of the richness of holistic knowledge of a region, a country, with the bathwater of Cold War area studies baggage. That there are pockets of missing knowledge became clear when policymakers and lay audience alike found themselves struggling to fathom the depth of support for the war among ordinary Russian people. While scholars like Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2020), Greene and Robertson (2019), and others have been for some time urging us to consider the reality and drivers of Russians' genuine popular rallying behind *autocracy*, it would be a whole new leap for us to reckon with the apparent endorsement by those same people of *atrocity*. Then came the news that Russian soldiers fighting and dying in droves and committing war crimes in Bucha, Mariupol, and Donbas are from Russia's socio-economically deprived regions, often fighting not as conscripts who did not know where they were going and why, but technically on voluntary contract. I have no doubt that the war will stimulate systematic empirical work – whether survey, interview driven, or ethnographic – into the motivations, values, and social backgrounds of conscripts. Our community of Russian studies scholars has the rich knowledge – and the methodological skills – to do so. For instance, approaches to survey analysis are already evolving in response to the realities of studying public opinion in an autocracy, as Rosenfeld (2023) and Reisinger, Zaloznaya, and Woo (2023) write in this volume. We should also embrace the ethnographic work of the kind that Morris (2023) discusses in his contribution. It would be worthwhile to pool insights from a methodologically eclectic set of works to study these mechanisms.

But even now, it is clear – and as the discussion of the genealogical angle on social structural continuities above illustrates – social inequalities in Russia run deep. Many rural and marginal urban communities have no choice but to enter into a contract with the state and agree to fight in Ukraine. Many do not have the means to emigrate or relocate as do Mongait and Dzyadko and indeed this author whose background of growing up in an intelligentsia family provided her with the skills to leave Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and Moscow and study for an MA degree at Tufts University at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy on a full fellowship in the 1990s. It would be inconceivable for a person from a marginalized community to establish a prominent independent TV channel in Moscow without the connections that came with an inter-generational pedigree of belonging to the cultural aristocracy of Soviet Russia and educated middle-class society in pre-Soviet times. Even if an

individual espouses opposition sentiments, they would lack the opportunities to act upon them absent the resources, human capital, and connections that come with belonging to the Dzyadko or Mongait-type status elite Soviet and educated pre-Soviet families.

The causal mechanisms of conformity and compliance with conscription are likely to be similar to those uncovered in the workplace dependency studies from before the war. A web of dependencies on managers and the state makes rebellion and non-compliance costly. But there is also the violent dimension of compliance that warrants serious study. To what extent are resentments – cultural when it comes to non-Slavic minority communities – or social as would be applicable to socially marginalized groups more generally – acted out in the war zone? As Yusupova (2023) rightly notes in her contribution to this special issue, far more work is needed to uncover the underlying resentments of non-Russian minority groups with subordinate status, something that remains concealed beneath the superficial expressions of loyalty by their Kremlin-supported national elites. And Sharafutdinova (2023) in this issue demonstrates the utility of bridging political science with social psychology. Here again, we urgently need cross-disciplinary insights that would bridge our awareness of the institutional structure of the Russian coercive apparatus and its military with the study of social-structural, cultural, and psychological dimensions of expression of grievances in a war scenario.

Practical reasons for urban and elite bias

It is clear that what we are missing is a nuanced sociological picture of Russia, more anchored in social inequalities and chasms. While we have some insightful research into the coping mechanisms of vulnerable people in Russian society (Morris and Polese 2016; Morris 2019), these communities have been sorely under-represented in mainstream work on Russia and in top political science journals. There are practical reasons for the relative neglect to date of social exploitation, vulnerabilities, and marginality and their significance for regime stability.

Even policy practitioners call marginal groups "hard to reach." I came across this designation when conducting a study of urban regeneration in the UK, in the deprived part of Leicester City in the East Midlands called Braunstone (Lankina 2014). The challenges of studying "hard to reach" communities are not limited to survey researchers and indeed policymakers seeking to effect positive social change also confront them. "Hard to reach" means researchers or state bureaucrats seldom trespass into these areas. They may not just get the door slammed in their face, but it may be dangerous to venture there as well. Or it is a safe place, but people refuse to talk because they are afraid or do not see the point of elite folks from the city using them for something called a survey, an interview, or a focus group discussion. So we avoid them. Meanwhile, the "credibility revolution" has placed a strong emphasis on data-driven work, disincentivizing inquiry that may take long and patient attempts to approach specific communities and engender their trust, but that does not show a clear pathway to generating large volumes of measurable data.

Another reason for the reluctance to venture into marginal communities is that they are – apparently – as remote from political power as Vova Putin's *kommunalka* from the Kremlin. And disciplinary convention tells us that the study of politics is about political power, economics about choice, and ethnography is defined largely in relation to the method that researchers practice.[11] Meanwhile, if we were to turn our gaze towards social processes and relations, we would be doing sociology, not politics (Savage 2021, 9). The flipside of this neat partitioning – a variant of Almond's (1988, 828) metaphor of scholars sitting at different tables in a restaurant and not talking to each other – is that we do not reap the rewards of engaging with research that generates deep, historically grounded insights based on careful ethnographies of a setting or a place but produced by authors outside of the disciplinary mainstream.

The need for cross-fertilization with history and other fields to understand social divisions

Let me return to the soldiers coming from marginal and understudied communities and why they matter for big questions like support for democracy/autocracy and the war. Even if those administering a survey manage to speak to someone from a "hard-to-reach" community, and even if they get honest responses, the survey may capture the sentiments of these groups only imperfectly. Thus, explaining the motivations of army volunteers in economic terms would only tell part of the story. My own research tells me that there is the weight of the resentments that have been accumulating across generations and that transcend even the Soviet project. These resentments encourage citizens to align their preferences with those who are against the "Westernized liberal elites"; Russia's propaganda machine plays to these sentiments and amplifies them. Factors such as income, occupational position, or education are important, of course. However, categories of "education" or "white collar" are often unreliable predictors of citizens' political preferences, predictions that we may have derived from conventional modernization accounts, as Bryn Rosenfeld shows in her masterful book (Rosenfeld 2021; see also Remington 2011). If anything, education statistics may mask unprestigious degrees. And hidden behind the dry figures on tertiary education may be the subtle structures of marginalization – as I found out when hearing about the phenomenon of young women from Samara's collective farms escaping to the cities to study at nursing and teacher training colleges when the Soviet state finally allowed them to have passports in the 1950s–1960s.

The patterns of historically constructed and reproduced social identities are not unique to Russia. But we would only get to the bottom of their Russian variants if we combine survey inquiry with historical-ethnographic work, as did the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who began his prolific career as a scholar of the reproduction of social power, culture, class, and inequality by conducting an ethnographic study of the Berbers in Algiers. As Bourdieu writes, "cram" and "crash" type of learning – I would contend precisely of the kind that characterized the Soviet social mobility project – is distinct from slowly accumulated knowledge and cultural capital that is intrinsic to, say, aristocratic lifestyles. Counterintuitively, such policies reproduce structures of inequality and domination because of the "stigmata of 'catching up'" among target or beneficiary groups (Bourdieu 2014, 55). A college degree is just a data point for researchers working with large-n data. But for the Russian village women, in addition to the promise of escape from the dreaded *kolkhoz*, it also means lifelong self-awareness of being distinct from those with other kinds of education, usually intelligentsia who derive from the pre-Revolutionary estates of aristocracy, clergy, or the urban merchants and *meshchane*. In the USSR, descendants of the latter groups often pursued advanced degrees – in physics, neuroscience, or, like my parents did, Oriental studies. But how to capture these nuances without plunging into the ethnography of Russian class?

Or consider another example, discussed in Lankina, Libman, and Tertytchnaya (2022). This is a statement from a woman captured in the notes of a THPSSS researcher:

> Schooling [in the past] presented no difficulties for her. Her father was well off. He was able to pay for her education without any strain on his resources. Respondent thought that her educational opportunities were above the average because her father lived above the average. [But] The respondent seems to have been so beaten by her life since 1919, that education as a weapon for advancement has lost any particular significance for her. All she wants to do is live. (Schedule A., Vol. 7, Case 100, SH, 15)

This sentiment, widespread among the "former people" (Alexopoulos 2003), encapsulates how immediately after the Revolution some members of privileged groups abandoned higher education because of frustration with the violence of class policies, because it was not safe, or because of discrimination. But does that mean that simultaneously other kinds of "stocks" such as cultural capital or conviction that education matters, even if for the next generation, when it became safe to pursue it again, disappeared? Or that people ceased to discreetly transmit these values in their home? Of course not. In fact, as I write in my book on the Russian estates, the fallen bourgeoisie and aristocracy engaged in domestic schooling, home tutoring in French and other European languages, gave piano lessons, and read books with cultivated grandmother who went to an elite school for

noble ladies in Tsarist times, with renewed zeal – the kinds of things that one Vova Putin missed out on when he was growing up.

Of course, linking the complex baggage of marginality or social stigma – and, conversely, privilege and various not easily measurable "stocks" like cultural or social capital – to political choices in post-communist Russia presents formidable challenges, not least because one would have to dissect non-linear trajectories of the fortunes of the different social groups in different time periods. But how do we convince the zealot of the credibility revolution reviewing our paper for a top political science journal that only narrative history assembled from eclectic and unsystematic collages of materials can allow us to get to the bottom of inter-generational resilience in the deep social inequalities that were never obliterated with the advent of the bright new revolutionary dawn? And how can we persuade the sceptics that only a deep forensic historical-interpretive cut through Russian society, across centuries, *in the past and across distinct epochs*, would help us make sense of how different social groups come to support and others challenge the autocracy *now*? But that is a tough call, so we drop this topic altogether, and study something else, more solidly anchored in the present. With more data.

One refreshing initiative aimed at bridging the disciplinary divides has been Scott Gehlbach, Tracy Dennison, Amanda Gregg, Volha Charnysh, Steven Nafziger and other colleagues bringing together historians and political scientists for a series of summer workshops. Here, scholars jointly brainstorm a new historical political economy that is open to cross-fertilization across the known divides. But this very welcome development has also not been immune to Abbott's logic of fractals, for I am getting a sense that we are witnessing the birth of a new, distinct, sub-field in Russian studies. The calls for interdisciplinarity, as Abbott reminds us, have been with us for a long time, as have retreats into the comforts of the silos and divides, not least because disciplinary homes provide us with contours of what it is safe not to know and the books safe not to have read lest we become overwhelmed (Abbott 2001a, 130, 131). So the hesitancy to engage in a more robust conversation with mainstream studies that are not as historically attuned may be understandable. But as I have hoped to impress upon the reader in the essay, history – whether studied with large-n data or eclectic ranges of materials that are not easily quantifiable – should in fact infuse everything we write about in Russian politics. This is because we cannot understand Russian society by only looking at individual attributes or immediate life situations without anchoring them in the long historical processes of construction of social divisions, social possibilities, and social identities.

Different disciplines and disciplinary preoccupations also carry assumptions that we may need to revise and situate within the contexts in which they originated and became fashionable

Underpinning these challenges of crossing the disciplinary divides are the tensions in assumptions about, on the one hand, economic rationality that have dominated the study of politics in recent years, and, on the other, the value aspects of social action (see discussion in Zafirovski 2006). As the anthropologist David Gellner (2001) writes, a more holistic perspective, for instance, one anchored in the work of the German sociologist and historian Max Weber, would fuse materialism with a deep sensitivity to values and meanings structuring human action and relationships. At the same time, such an angle would shy away from the "totalizing" evolutionist and teleological assumptions of nineteenth-century thought that gave predominant templates for theoretical paradigm building in the twentieth (Gellner 2001, 7). The two perspectives of materialism and ideals, such as those that stem from religion or cultural practice – whether forward or backward looking – in other words, need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, they help us perceive institutions that we may study from the angle of bureaucratic functionality or turf incentives, simultaneously as repositories of layers of social values.

In my own work, I discern how different *Tsarist* social groups have colonized particular *Soviet* institutions. I also show how even within one occupation such as medicine, professional hierarchies

have mirrored social hierarchies and how these are in turn best understood with reference to *pre*-Soviet, not Soviet society. I therefore highlighted the need to carefully dissect the distinct worldviews and values and impulses animating the various institutions and sub-institutions and in ways that are sensitive to historical evolution of Russia's social cleavages. It is thus that we begin to understand how even in totalizing states like the USSR and like Putin's Russia now, specific institutional settings to which we tend to attach political science labels such as "civil society" or "media" are aggregators of particular social groups with distinct sets of aspirations, ambitions, ethics, and principles; these are in turn intergenerationally reproduced and sustained within the safe havens and behind the secure cloaks of the museum, the archive, or the art gallery, or indeed the *kolkhoz*, which too in myriads of unseen and hidden ways conserved the social values, divisions, and even religious cleavages from the past.

But how to meaningfully conduct a *political science* study of civic and political action – as anchored in social structure – without venturing into the *sociology* of the Russian class? This is where it gets tricky because doing so would involve familiarizing oneself with the intellectual history of debates within sociology – and historiography – the many fads and assumptions that have come and gone, and the paradigms that have been discarded as the disciplines have moved on. Such an exercise would make it clear that understandings of the Russian class fell victim to the same modernist paradigms that animated social science thinking for much of the twentieth century. As Savage writes,

> The Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which proved the platform for further communist advances during the middle decades of the twentieth century, was not aberrant compared to other models that prevailed in Western Europe and North America. They all shared a similar template of acting in the present to remedy the ills of the past and create a more advanced social order. (Savage 2021, 312)

We are now of course moving away from such forms of thinking, bowing to the growing realization that the brutal forces of history continue to bear their fangs and that – contrary to the teleological schemata of utopian Marxist or modernization thinkers – tradition, old lineages, the seemingly long-dead patterns of pre-modern social stratification are in fact still alive, "no longer simply puddles that will eventually evaporate in the scorching light of the modern sun" (Savage 2021, 313).

But because of a plethora of works sympathetic to the Soviet class project, subsequent generations of political scientists never questioned the once set-in-stone assumptions about Soviet "class" and as rooted in Marxist social understandings. That proletarians remained peasants well into the 1980s and that the bourgeoisie and aristocrats never disappeared but in fact reincarnated in the form of the shadow black market speculator, the Orientalist, or the rocket scientist remained obscured behind the discourse couched in terms that fit awkwardly in Russian society. These assumptions clouded a nuanced understanding of the vast gulf that continued to separate the 20% or so of the groups that Alexander Libman and I (Lankina and Libman 2021) have conceptualized as the "educated estates," including a slice of relatively free and literate rural folk, from the large mass of manorial peasants or latter-day peasants. The latter majority will come to constitute the bulk of entrants into the factory shop floor or the "white collar" precariat of street-level police clerks, social workers, and provincial teachers.

The political and geopolitical realities of the time, of course, shaped how scholars approached Russian society and an evaluation of any work ought to be with an eye to these realities.[12] Many Western intellectuals embraced communism; some, like E. H. Carr, notoriously looked the other way despite knowledge of show trials and slave labor.[13] Access to sources was of course back then also much more limited. Furthermore, scholars writing in the 1960–70s were influenced by demons back home, the anti-establishment movements that upended Cold War dogma about the health of Western capitalist countries. Ideological biases inevitably crept into assumptions about Soviet social mobility, even when scholars enjoyed some access to data and archives. The entrepreneurial groups ceased to feature in works on the USSR. Meanwhile, where they did appear, categories more appropriately studied on their own terms and as anchored in their distinct values and worldviews –

like the merchants, many of whom were Old Believers who brought particular religious sensibilities to their enterprise – were again couched in Marxist terms, "overshadowed by a political and ideological preconcern with the bourgeoisie as it played its appointed role on the Russian road to socialism" (Blackwell 1983, 15).

But something similar happened in the post-Soviet period, except the focus went into reverse gear. The study of working masses became less prevalent in mainstream scholarship than did that of the bourgeoisie and propertied educated middle class. For classic modernist and new economic thought considered these groups as pivotal to democratic impulses in feudal and modernizing societies and, by extension, in post-communist liberalizing countries.[14] Many of us are studying the 10 and at best 30% of the pro-democracy, active, engaged, or simply informed democratic constituencies in Russia. And this author, who has worked with an outstanding new generation of scholars to assemble data on Russian protest, is a prime example of this trend! (Lankina and Tertytchnaya 2020). But we – and I am counting myself – have forgotten about what it is that animates the less privileged 70–90%, in the villages, in small towns, in the periphery, and in the big towns where they run the market stalls, teach in suburban schools, man the police stations, or work as National Guard forces.

Meanwhile, historians have moved on. Invoking history means following new and exciting work in that field beyond citation of a few landmark works from the more distant past. Over the last three decades, as hitherto closed archives opened, a new generation of historians have been giving us new insights into the workings of the Soviet system. These should prompt us to rethink how we view the Soviet project and the shadow of its legacies on the present political regime and social support for it. Take Gulag. This is a thriving research field in history. From new studies in the Gulag, we may discern, for instance, how social hierarchies of the realm outside the Gulag were being reproduced inside; and, from new memoir literature, we learn about the patterns of mutual support among the "former people."[15] Rather than regarding these new historical findings as irrelevant to the broader enterprise of political science work, we may consider how they challenge the assumptions that most of us have internalized about the Soviet social project and about the Bolshevik Revolution as ushering in a neat break between the pre-Soviet past and Soviet and then post-Soviet present.

New work that bridges sociological concerns about social divisions with the preoccupation of political science inquiry with political institutions, and that shows historical sensitivity to class construction, also begins to fill the gaps. One example is Bryn Rosenfeld's (2021) research on the autocratic middle class. Rosenfeld highlights the socializing and dependency effects of public sector employment and the resulting production of support for illiberal regimes among individuals in "budget" sectors or civil service. Together with other studies of post-Soviet "workplace dependencies," these findings push us to rethink assumptions about the middle class that derive from the modernist ontologies that Savage critiques, embedded as they are in the nuances of Russian/Soviet occupational and employment legacies and practices and in dialogue with sociologists from the region. Not only does such embedding allow us to stay abreast with the sociological debates about how best to study society and how best to capture its various divisions and gradations but to make better predictions about structures of authoritarian support and resilience.

But, as the example of the *kolkhoz* women escaping to the cities in the 1960s illustrates, just as important as problematizing assumptions about the motivations of individuals depending on their sectoral placement in the economy is the discovery of the meaning, the connotation, and the baggage that their social milestones, the starting and the end points, carry. Such work defines ethnography, but insights derived from ethnographic study often sit oddly with observational analysis where categories are simplified and compressed because of the very nature of survey or other large-n inquiry.

In the third generation, for instance, there may be on the face of it little of a distinction between one degree holder and another one with a similar degree and similar position on the income or wealth scale. But the *stigma* that comes from other traces of the origins in the *kolkhoz* – whether residence in an unprestigious micro-district, or the accent, or lack of cultural reference points shared

with descendants of pre-Revolutionary privileged groups – is not commonly captured in survey questions. Furthermore, it is this stigma and perception of relative lack of possibilities in the more elite autonomous professions that may push the descendant of the *kolkhoz* girl into public sector employment in the first place. In addition to regarding "budget" institutions from the perspective of their role in structuring employees' incentives vis-à-vis the state or regime, we may extend the inquiry to consider them as overlaying with the values that individuals from a specific social milieu bring with them. The occupational positioning may well capture the chasm between the people (in Russian *narod*) and the privileged elite, the chasm that progressive Russian intelligentsia wrote about in the nineteenth century, and that continues to live on, just in different and mutated forms.[16]

Discussion and conclusion

Writing about India, one notable Sanskritist was once chided for partitioning his magnum opus into the neat compartments of society, the state, religion, everyday life, and culture.[17] These, I concur, are based on an implausible presumption that a country as large and complex as India – or, as I would argue, Russia – could be dissected and its components neatly parceled out without examining the *interactionist* complexity of the features that are usually studied within the narrower confines of distinct disciplines, and as one complex whole (Abbott 2001b, 154). In the same way, many of us have internalized the calendric partition of epochs into the *before* the 1917 Revolution, the *after* the Revolution, and then the *after of the after* of communist collapse in 1991 and thereby assuming that happenings at the realm of political power also affect tectonic shifts in everything else.

Of course, no serious academic piece of writing on Russia assumes away the role of history, religion, or social structure in explaining processes in the realms of the public sphere, domestic politics, and international relations. But disciplinary expectations, conventions, pressures, and incentives have made it difficult to engage more seriously with scholarship in cognate fields. This in turn affects the knowledge that we as Russianists communicate to the other political scientists who are not specialists in this region. A case in point is the author of this essay, who was only able to produce a book that branches into different disciplines and epochs and relies on a rather eclectic range of sources after being made full professor. Prior to that, publishing in top journals required abandoning potentially multi-faceted inquiry on the altar of clinical precision where the peer review process becomes more focused on the suitability of the "weather shock" instrument while the intellectual pay-off from asking the bigger questions animating the project becomes lost in the process.

And so it is that we continue to implicitly restate assumptions from the secondary sources long internalized without considering the new discoveries of Russianists in the various disciplines and sub-fields. We anchor our explanatory frameworks in the variables that are "temporally proximate" (Pop-Eleches 2007) and do not ask about "the why of the why" (Kopstein and Reilly 1999) because we can get data for those. And we eschew structuralist explanations that would involve resort to narrative history and descriptive accounts of the big structures in society that are resilient to change; instead, we seek to encapsulate individual attributes, motivations, and attitudes. It is good that there are reviewers who care about the nitty gritty of the instrument. But more established scholars of my generation and career stage should strive to make it possible for younger researchers to feel like they do not have to completely abrogate their intellectual curiosity to scholars who through some accident of career placement ended up in a political science, not in a mathematics department.

As other contributions to this special issue note, 24 February 2022 has exacerbated the challenges that we all as researchers have been already facing in studying Russia, whether we engage in ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, or public opinion surveys. The new reality of diminished access to resources that we have come to rely on means fewer opportunities to plan a fieldwork trip or administer a survey. Even the airspace has been blocked for those of us who in the past could count on at least one research trip to Russia per year, or a long stretch of sabbatical every few years. Safety considerations mean that even if we do get access to the field, we may be putting at risk the

few bold interlocutors who agree to share their stories or fill in a survey questionnaire (see the discussion in Zavadskaya and Gerber 2023 in this special issue).

But there are deeper underlying realities of studying a consolidated autocracy transcending the last few months. The most important question that we are all looking for answers to is as follows: what percentage of Russians actually support the war? But we have struggled to give answers, not least because the tools that we rely on, as numerous contributions to this special issue note, are not well suited to the kind of repressive country that Russia has become, especially over the last few months.

This is the right time for greater introspection and for a more robust conversation with scholars *within* the field of Russian studies. Working in the 1950s, the eclectic group of researchers on the Harvard project to study the Soviet "social system" made the best of the situation of the Iron Curtain that had descended. They did so by speaking in great depth to emigrés who found themselves in the West, as wartime refugees. They confronted many methodological issues and critiques from sceptics, not least that their "sample" was "not representative." But they provided us with a holistic window into the realities of Soviet society that remains unmatched, prophetic even. If you look at the project records that have now been digitized, you will see what perhaps even the researchers at the time could not fully grasp because so engrained had become the notion of 1917 as a break with the past. But what these records show us is that half-way through communism, Russia remained a mirror of Tsarist society. And it is these reflections we should be seeing as we look for answers to the big questions about support for the war or the future of the Russian political system. Now that the curtain has descended, like THPSS scholars, we may have to re-invent the more integrated area field, one where it would not be uncommon to see a historian attending a political science panel at APSA (and vice versa!) or an ethnographer-Russianist sharing findings from immersive inductive research in a top political science journal.

Notes

1. Abbott (2001a) highlights the propensity of fields and sub-fields of knowledge to divide along disciplinary, and even within each discipline, epistemological and other lines; "fractal" refers to self-replicability of broader disciplinary divisions within the sub-divisions, e.g. between positivists and non-positivists; Marxists, feminists, and others; etc. One example of self-replicating patterns is disciplinary division of mainstream history and sociology, which broadly follows the fault lines of narrative versus causal analysis. But within sociology too, there is a division into "mainstream" versus historical sociology (Abbott 2001a, 14).
2. For a discussion, see Prendergast (2017) and Lankina, Libman, and Tertytchnaya (2022). The THPSS project materials have now been digitized (see Brandenberger 2020).
3. There are many criticisms of the project, not least the ethical dimension (Prendergast 2017, 34): "Joseph Berliner met with a couple of the respondents for 'a little beer party.'"; "One interviewer recalled that 'only after a glass of beer did [the respondent] give colour to his answers and elaborate on them.'"; "[I]n the post-project report, Guide for Interviewing Soviet Escapees, Alice Bauer noted that 'cautious and judicious use' of vodka might 'aid rapport.'"
4. See blog posts in https://postsocialism.org/.
5. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationalrelations/2022/03/01/the-banality-of-complicity-the-social-origins-of-putins-war-and-repression/
6. When it comes to studying the challenges that autocrats face, we see an urban and elite bias in both the explorations of mass contention, and in those of how regimes maintain their own political stability. Research on protest and civil society – and that includes works by this humble author – has tended to study the liberal metropolitan intelligentsia (Greene 2014; Lankina and Voznaya 2015; Dollbaum 2020; Lankina and Tertytchnaya 2020; Katerina and Lankina 2020; Dollbaum, Lallouet, and Noble 2021). Simultaneously, we have the broader elite bias in the study of autocratic regime dynamics (Svolik 2012). As Svolik observes, the tradition goes all the way back to classic studies of totalitarianism where the emphasis was on the instruments that the twentieth century's repressive regimes used to manage and manipulate the masses. In present-day autocracies too, whether through rent-sharing, repression, co-optation, or coercion, autocrats are central to managing the challenges that come from within their own circle of ruling figures and the – often undifferentiated – "masses." Furthermore, successful instances of dislodging of autocrats are often consequential to rebellion from among the dictators' own inner circle of elites rather than to a mass uprising

(Svolik 2012, 3–5). Yet, landmark studies in historical sociology also highlight how the social origins of a dictatorship – notably the social-structural foundations for the emergence of specific regime types and institutions – are just as important for understanding political regimes as are abilities to manage the inner circle of the elite once the regime consolidates (Moore 1993). Furthermore, historical legacies of social development are important for understanding the durability of democratic regimes even when we have episodes of democratization, mass uprising, or elite dissent against particular rulers – a notable case is Hungary, which democratized in the 1980s–1990s but then regressed into an illiberal regime under Viktor Orbán (Janos 1982, 1989).

7. For a discussion, see https://postsocialism.org/2022/06/07/on-the-state-of-russian- anthropology-and-qualitative-sociology/.
8. See, for instance, Ilivitskaya (2012). A useful searchable platform for Russian scholarship that includes open access regional publications and journals associated with universities in Russia is cyberleninka.ru.
9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tikhon_Dzyadko; see also https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/world/zoya-svetova-russian-journalist.html.
10. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/; Mongait, Anna Viktorovna.
11. As Abbott (2001a, 11) remarks in writing about fractals, "people know only their near kin well" and there is a broad agreement about "common ancestors." On ethnography, see Gellner (2001, 4–5).
12. On *new social history* "propelled by radical democratic or Marxist concerns," see Jarausch and Hardy (1991, 6).
13. Carr came to write about the Soviet project in the vein of "a great achievement" despite early reservations in the context of Stalinist repressions (see Davies 2000, 102).
14. One typical finding, based a sample of respondents in Moscow Oblast in 1990 was that "The better educated, males, and the young tended to be more supportive of democratic institutions and processes. We take these findings as evidence that further efforts to democratize the Soviet Union will not meet resistance from Soviet political culture" (Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992, 329). For discussions of the modernization paradigm and its applicability to post-Soviet settings, see also Gibson (1996) and Gerber (2000).
15. See, for instance, Siddiqi (2015) and other papers in the special issue of *Kritika* on the Soviet Gulag, the discussion in Lankina (2022), and Golitsyn (2016).
16. See essays in Clowes, Kassow, and James (1991). This chasm has been characterized as a cultural conflict between the "people" and the "educated minority" (Mironov 2015, 844).
17. The book in question is Basham (1959). Also see the discussion in Gellner (2001, 41).

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ORCID

Tomila Lankina http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8303-1747

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