

Counterinsurgency in a Non-Democratic State: the Russian Example

YURI M. ZHUKOV

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The influence of regime type on the outbreak, conduct and resolution of low intensity conflict has been the subject of considerable debate. Democracies and non-democracies face different levels of conflict risk and confront different types of challenges from non-state opponents. They employ different instruments and strategies in fighting their enemies and may have different track records of victory and defeat. Democratic skeptics argue that these differences favor closed regimes, which face fewer constraints on the use of coercion and have a higher tolerance for sustaining the human and material costs of war.¹ Democratic optimists maintain that democracies are less likely to provoke violent opposition in the first place and, by emphasizing legitimacy over intimidation, are better able to secure the peace.²

Both sides have drawn on evidence from a limited number of well-documented West European and American cases. The optimistic argument is derived largely from the best practices of the British in Malaya, and the less spectacular performance of the French in Algeria and the U.S. in Vietnam.³ The skeptical argument cites the British and U.S. experiences in Kenya and the Philippines as examples in which harsher methods – like mass relocation and pseudo-gangs – helped achieve mission goals.⁴

The bulk of modern counterinsurgency expertise, however, resides in countries with less democratic political systems. Since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Rus-

¹ See Mack (1975), Chalk (1992), Inbar (2003), Merom (2003), Li (2005), Luttwak (2007), Peters (2007).

² See Derrado (1985), Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000), Regan and Henderson (2002), Elkins (2005), Sambanis and Zinn (2005), Abrahms (2007).

³ See Galula (1963), Thompson (1966), Kitson (1971), Aylwin-Foster (2005), Nagl (2005), Smith (2008) and Kilcullen (2009).

⁴ See Cline (2005), Peters (2007), but also Elkins (2005).

sia has confronted two dozen insurgent movements and large-scale insurrections.⁵ Its responses to these challenges present a counterinsurgency model diametrically opposed to the “hearts and minds” approach espoused by the British school and the most recent U.S. Army Field Manual on Counterinsurgency.⁶ Despite serious setbacks in Afghanistan and the first Chechen War, Russia has one of the most successful track records of any modern counterinsurgent.

The Russian experience challenges our understanding of regime type and counterinsurgency. It highlights the need to distinguish between different types of non-democracies and the threats they face, different types of coercion and when each is used, different definitions of success and the role of repression in attaining them. Yet apart from several notable studies of the Soviet-Afghan War and the ongoing conflict in the North Caucasus, the authoritarian model of counterinsurgency has largely eluded systematic empirical investigation.⁷

This chapter reviews our current knowledge of regime type and counterinsurgency, with an emphasis on three areas of inquiry: the emergence, conduct and outcome of low intensity conflict in countries with different political systems. Throughout, the Russian example is presented as an illustration of how such conflicts have been brought about, fought, and resolved in a non-democratic state. The chapter concludes with summary remarks and a few thoughts on future research.

REGIME TYPE AND INSURGENCY ONSET

A substantial body of research argues that democracies are relatively peaceful actors at home and internationally, while autocratic and transitional regimes are

⁵ These include Nestor Makhno and the Black Army (1918-1921), the Zainsk Uprising (1920), the Tambov Uprising (1920-1921), the post-Civil War insurgency in Chechnya and Dagestan (1920-1932), the Chapan Revolt (1921), the West Siberian Revolt (1921-1922), Volga Revolts (1921), the Kronstadt Uprising (1921), insurrections by Ural Kulaks (1921), an uprising in Karelia (1921-1922), the Basmachi Rebellion (1922-1931), Khassan Israilov’s insurgency in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR (1940-1944), post-World War II nationalist insurgencies in Western Ukraine (1944-1954), Western Belarus (1944-1947), Latvia (1944-1947), Estonia (1944-1948) and Lithuania (1944-1948), the occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), the First Chechen War (1994-1996), the Islamist insurrection in the Kadar Gorge of Dagestan (1999), the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), and low-intensity violence in Dagestan (2002-present) and Ingushetia (2004-present).

⁶ “Hearts and minds” is defined as a strategic emphasis on the protection of civilians, economic assistance and government legitimacy. See paragraphs 1-3, 1-108 and 1-113 in FM 3-24.

⁷ For Afghanistan, see Grau (1998), Grau and Gress (2002), Lyakhovskiy (1995), Varennikov (2002), Gareev (1999). For Chechnya, see Toft (2003), Kramer (2005), Lyall (2009, 2010b).

more conflict-prone (Krain and Myers 1997, 109-18; Benson and Kugler 1998; Gurr 2000; Henderson and Singer 2000, 275-99; Hegre et. al. 2001, 33-48; Mansfield and Snyder 2005; Davenport 2007a). Many theories have been proposed to support this claim: democracies are richer and more capable of providing security and controlling territory (e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2003); dissidents in democracies have more nonviolent channels for expressing dissent (e.g. Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000; Regan and Henderson 2002, 121-122); the pluralism of democratic politics necessitates nonviolent debate, negotiation and conflict resolution (e.g. Madison 1787; Rummel 1995, 4); electorally vulnerable leaders tend to initiate only those wars in which they expect a high probability of success (e.g. Bueno De Mesquita and Siverson 1995, 841-855; Reiter and Stam 1998, 378; Fearon 1994, 577-578, 585-586). Although the causal mechanism behind democratic pacifism remains a subject of debate, the theory's central empirical claim is consistent with the historical record. Fewer than 30 percent of the governments involved in major counterinsurgency campaigns since 1808 – and 26.6 percent since World War I – have been institutionally mature democracies.⁸

States with different political systems are also expected to face different types of opponents. Autocracies are considered more likely to view domestic dissent as threatening to the regime, thereby escalating anti-government activity into the realm of violence (Davenport 1995). Democracies encounter relatively few domestic threats and are more likely to fight insurgents outside their own borders (Lyll 2010b, 179-180). Historically, 53 percent of democratic counterinsurgent campaigns took place during foreign wars of occupation, compared to 31 percent for non-democracies.⁹ This difference stems in part from the superior material resources of democratic states.¹⁰ However, even powerful non-democracies have often had their hands full with domestic opponents, avoiding overseas adventures while more pressing and proximate challenges persist.

⁸ 91 of the 307 cases of insurgency included in Lyall and Wilson's (2009) dataset involve a democratic incumbent, defined as a country with a Polity2 score greater than 6, where -10 represents full autocracy and 10 represents full democracy.

⁹ Conditional probabilities of occupation by incumbent regime calculated from Lyall and Wilson's (2009) dataset.

¹⁰ Expeditionary operations entail heavy costs and logistical burdens, requiring high readiness, sustainable force generation, protection of extended and vulnerable lines of communication, and a capability to sustain operations in austere environments where host nation support may be deficient or unavailable. Few countries beyond the great powers of North America and Western Europe have been able to field such capabilities. See Gongora (2004), Fry (2005), Deverell (2002).

The Russian example

The Russian experience supports the view that “most violence is in the middle” of the spectrum of political regimes, with institutionally weak transitional governments at greater risk of conflict than consolidated autocracies (Hegre et al 2001; Regan and Henderson 2002).

Russia has never been a liberal democracy. Of the 93 years since the Bolshevik Revolution, the country spent six as a fledgling semi-autocracy (1917-1922), almost seven decades as a totalitarian dictatorship (1923-1988), and the remainder meandering between semi-autocratic and semi-democratic forms of government (1989-present).¹¹ During those 93 years, Moscow encountered 24 significant insurgencies and rebellions, shown in Figure 1.¹² These conflicts erupted in three waves: the first in multiple regions of European and Asian Russia during and immediately following the Civil War, the second in the USSR’s western borderlands after World War II, and the third in the North Caucasus following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The first wave consisted mostly of peasant uprisings, large-scale mutinies and two ethno-nationalist insurrections in the wake of the Bolsheviks’ victory over Wrangel’s White Army in the Civil War. The second wave primarily involved nationalist insurgencies in territories newly acquired by the USSR. The third wave started with the first Chechen War in late 1994 and later expanded to other southern Russian regions.

Seventeen of the 24 conflicts originated during times of regime transition (pre-1923 and post-1989), and five of the remaining seven emerged in regions only recently introduced to Soviet rule (West Ukraine, West Belarus and the three Baltic states). All three waves of insurgencies occurred at times of economic devastation, weak central authority and varying degrees of military demobilization. Periods of strong central authority – such as the 1930’s and much of the Cold War era – were almost entirely devoid of new insurgent movements. Periods of transition were violent without exception.

¹¹ Russia had a Polity2 score of -1 in 1917-1922, -7.7 on average in 1923-1988, and 3.6 on average in 1989-2009.

¹² These cases were selected on the following criteria: they involved the use of political violence by non-state actors against the central government, involved mostly irregular warfare, and resulted in at least 100 government fatalities. This definition excludes conventional warfare against non-state adversaries like the White Army during the Russian Civil War, as well incidents of one-sided government repression, such as the forcible resettlement of ethnic Koreans to Central Asia in 1937.

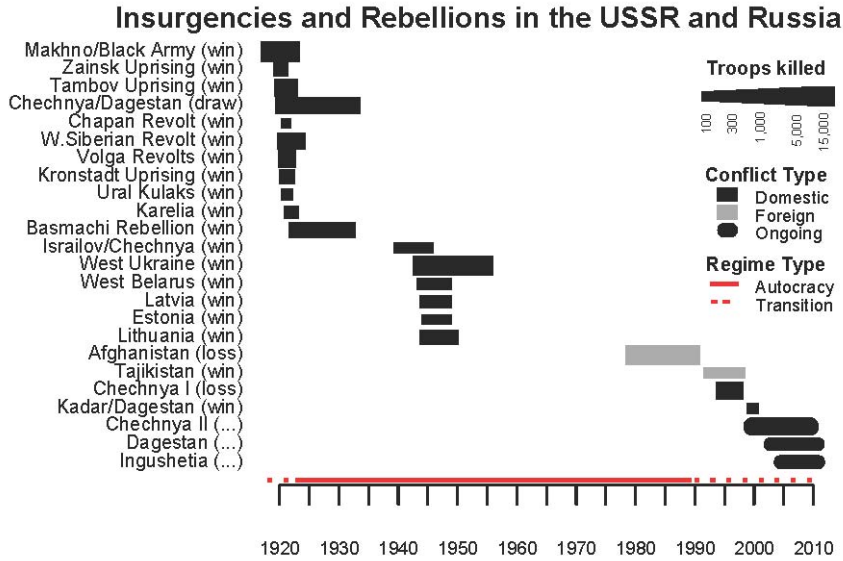


Figure 1: **Timeline of Insurgencies and Rebellions in Russia.**
 Outcomes, shown in parentheses, are coded from the perspective of the incumbent.
 Coding rules are described in the third section.

The Russian case further reinforces the image of autocratic counterinsurgency as a mostly domestic affair. Only two of the conflicts shown in Figure 1 were fought on foreign soil: the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and Russian peace operations in Tajikistan. Moscow embarked on the Afghan campaign at a time of relatively low domestic threat; over two decades had passed since the last incidents of insurgent violence in Western Ukraine. In the second case, Russia’s formal military role was initially limited to border security, humanitarian aid and the defense of critical infrastructure. Firefights with Tajik opposition groups and smugglers – while not uncommon – were more mission creep than mission.

REGIME TYPE AND THE CONDUCT OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

Given that different regimes face threats of different frequency and origin, are there systematic differences in how they confront these security challenges? It has become widely accepted that autocracies are more brutal counterinsurgents than democracies (Merom 2003; Abrahms 2007). Pressure from various domestic groups is expected to exert normative constraints on the strategic and tactical

choices of democratic governments.¹³ Under these constraints, democracies are less likely to engage in actions that risk unnecessary civilian deaths or otherwise violate international treaties and norms, particularly those concerning basic human rights (Neumayer 2005). Although intentional noncompliance may incur the risk of international sanctions and intervention, autocratic regimes have no comparable sources of domestic restraint on the use of coercion.

Empirical support for a negative relationship between democracy and brutality, however, has been mixed. Some studies have found highly authoritarian regimes more likely to resort to mass killing than highly democratic ones, but the substantive and statistical significance of this difference is comparatively weak (Poe and Tate 1994; Valentino et al. 2004, 402). Indeed, coercion is more widespread in mixed and transitional regimes than at either of the two extremes (Fein 1995; Regan and Henderson 2002).¹⁴

One distinction that has received less attention in the literature is that between two varieties of brutality: indiscriminate force, as in the case of civilian deaths resulting from kinetic operations, and collective punishment, as in the case of mass repression, where coercion is administered to group, rather than individual targets.¹⁵

While it is plausible that democratic regimes are more constrained in entertaining overtly repressive policies, their ability to prevent indiscriminate killing is largely a function of capabilities – the local balance of power, the quality of intelligence, and the accuracy of weapons systems (Kalyvas 2006; Kocher et al. 2008). High collateral damage from mass firepower can be a sign of weakness as much as callousness.

¹³ Nongovernmental organizations, political parties and policy activists facilitate the adoption of norms through agenda setting, electoral challenges and the reform of institutional procedures (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

¹⁴ In this view, decisions to coerce are driven primarily by the perceived level of threat emanating from insurgents. Where the threat to regime survival is high and the government's capacity to monitor and regulate the threat is low, coercion is expected to be more likely (Davenport 1995, 708; Regan and Henderson, 2002). Transitional regimes are expected to be most repressive because their reins of power are highly contested, security services are weak and fractured, and adherence to non-coercive norms is not institutionalized.

¹⁵ Definition of mass repression from Polyan (2001, 12). Examples of repression include "scorched earth" policies of crop, livestock, and infrastructure destruction, forcible resettlement and deportation, detention in concentration camps, systematic use of cordon-and-search and comparably invasive activities. For alternative definitions, which appeal to intent and tactics rather than the scope of the repressed targets, see Davenport et al. (2008, 9), Davenport (1995, 685; 2007b, 2), Besley and Persson (2009, 1), and Regan and Henderson (2002, 3)

By the same logic, unconstrained decision-making is not sufficient for collective punishment to be employed. Unlike an artillery strike, which could be planned and executed on the initiative of a Soviet battalion commander, repression typically requires political authorization, extensive material resources and joint execution by a multitude of centrally and locally based units and administrative offices. Its effective use requires not simply a non-democratic state, but a strong state.

The Russian example

The Russian case illustrates how capabilities and regime type interact in the use of coercion. Collective punishment – typically in the form of mass repression – was most common under autocratic governments with strong local capabilities, and indiscriminate killing – typically a result of mass firepower – was more common when Russia was a transitional regime with weak local capabilities.

Artillery, the main mechanism of indiscriminate violence, has long played a dominant role in Soviet and Russian ground combat power. Its primacy in counterinsurgency was driven in part by a desire to substitute firepower for infantry, avoid close combat and save soldiers' lives (Grau 1997). During the Tambov Uprising of 1920-21, Mikhail Tukhachevsky employed high-intensity artillery barrages to completely flatten the villages of Koptevo, Khitrovo and Verkhnespasskoye, and clear forested areas with chemical weapons.¹⁶ Such indiscriminate use of firepower emerged from the difficulty of executing alternative combined arms tactics in rugged areas where civilian support was overwhelmingly on the side of the insurgents. Raids and ambushes claimed heavy casualties among the infantry, driving military leaders to rely increasingly on indirect fire (Sennikov 2004).

Russia's reliance on indiscriminate firepower where local superiority is elusive has endured in more recent cases. In Herat, a city overrun by urban guerillas since before the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, three quarters of the urban center were shelled into rubble (Elkhamri et al. 2005, 21-22; Gareev 1999; Grau 1996, 51-52). In the most recent Chechen War, mass firepower was similarly used in lieu of manpower (Oliker 2001, xii). Still shaken by the disastrous 1994 Battle for Grozny, Russian forces sought to avoid urban combat as much as possible. They employed conventional and thermobaric explosives to destroy large sections of the city and clear guerilla positions in bunkers and heavily fortified emplacements (Grau and Smith 2000; Maksakov 2000).

¹⁶ In the words of Tukhachevsky's Chief of Staff, Nikolay Kakurin, the latter approach was used "to ensure that the cloud of asphyxiating gases is completely dispersed across the entire forest, killing everything that hides within" (Sennikov 2004).

If indiscriminate force was often used where Soviet and Russian forces were weak, collective punishment was used where they were strong. Reflecting on the lessons of the Tambov Uprising, Tukhachevsky wrote, “The struggle must be waged not primarily with the rebel bands, but with the entire local population.”¹⁷ Rather than separating civilians from insurgents by catching the “fish swimming in the sea,” Tukhachevsky’s approach was to drain the sea in which the fish swim. He instituted a pilot program of this sort in the Tambov province, where concentration camps were established for families and associates of known insurgents. Yet the scale of these early efforts did not approach the levels of the 1930s and 40s, after Stalin’s regime had solidified and the Great Purge ushered in a new era of mass government repression.

Forcible resettlement was one of the most extreme forms of repression used in Russian counterinsurgency. In a practice inherited from Czarist times, the NKVD and its successor agencies gave thousands of civilians only hours to collect their belongings, boarded them onto freight cars, and relocated them for a decade or more to Central Asia, the Far East or another remote part of the country.¹⁸ The intent was to deny insurgents their flows of provisions, intelligence and new recruits by applying punishment collectively, to combatants as well as their potential supporters (Vladimirtsev and Kokurin 2008, 6). A secondary objective was to deter the remaining local population from supporting insurgents in the future. The scope of these operations ranged from relatively selective – targeting the immediate family and close associates of known insurgents, as in the cases of Ukraine and the Baltic States after 1944 – to expansive – targeting all persons belonging to an ethnic group or class, as in the cases of Chechens and Kulaks.

Polyan (2001) identified 79 major resettlement operations in Russia between 1920 and 1952, 70 percent of which took place in the decade 1935-45.¹⁹ Most were cases of one-sided government coercion, but a sizable share (19 of 79) consisted of responses to ongoing or recent insurgent activities. Resettlement efforts during armed conflicts relocated almost twice as many people as operations undertaken in peacetime: 124,632 versus 64,228 persons per operation, on average.

These activities required tremendous organizational capacity to execute. Following a five-month planning period, it took 119,000 NKVD personnel three days in

¹⁷ Cited in Kantor (2005, 257).

¹⁸ The typical sentence was 5-8 years in a hard labor camp, followed by 20 years of residence in a remote resettlement location, where family members would already be waiting. All the family’s private property would be confiscated upon arrest (Polyan 2001, 99).

¹⁹ These include only large-scale resettlement efforts (over 1,000 relocated per operation).

February 1944 to load 387,229 Chechens and 91,250 Ingush onto the trains. In April 1949, 76,000 interior ministry troops took three days to arrest and relocate 29,687 families (89,874 individuals) from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (Polyan 2001, 122, 139). The terrifying efficiency of the Soviet secret police made such operations difficult to replicate. Only at the height of Soviet power was it possible to accomplish the logistical feat of rapidly deploying multiple divisions across extended lines of communication, maintain the secrecy and deception required to prevent mass flight or acts of sabotage, identify and locate tens of thousands of targets, and closely monitor them upon arrival to destination. The operational challenge of physically rounding up entire villages, districts and even republics was enormous. It is not surprising that massive resettlement has only been used where the government already enjoyed some combination of local military superiority, territorial control and low levels of armed resistance. Where this has not been the case – in Afghanistan, in the latest Chechen Wars, in the early 1920's, even in Western Ukraine and the Baltics immediately following the German retreat – this form of repression was not an option.

Even in the assertive, semi-autocratic Russia of the Putin era, collective punishment has proven surprisingly difficult to implement. Democratization is one plausible explanation for the trend away from repressive counterinsurgency in Russia, but an incomplete one. During the first Chechen War, when a pervasive media presence publicized the most egregious uses of force to the electoral benefit of Yeltsin's political opponents, many of the hallmarks of repressive counterinsurgency, like resettlements and sweeps, were not seriously considered. In contrast, the Afghan and second Chechen conflicts were both conducted in controlled media environments. Even so, the state's repressive impulses were largely unfulfilled or ineffective.²⁰

²⁰ An example of this difficulty is the recent use of cordon-and-search, colloquially called *zachistka* (mop-up) in Russian. A defining feature of NKVD's post-WWII campaign against Ukrainian nationalists (Zhukov 2007, 447-48), cordon-and-search operations have far fewer moving pieces than mass resettlement, but still call for significant resources and depend on surprise (to prevent early detection), extensive planning (to avoid rushing into position), robust intelligence (to identify and locate targets), overwhelming numbers (to maximize coverage of escape routes), territorial control (at least of roads leading to the village), and significant combined arms capabilities (to synchronize arrival and provide artillery support). Unlike the post-WWII cases, which were carried out only after the NKVD and SMERSH ("Death to Spies") had assembled extensive rosters of suspected insurgents and their whereabouts, the Chechen mop-ups were – at least initially – implemented hastily and with inadequate intelligence preparation. In the absence of preliminary data on insurgents' identities and whereabouts, interrogations often be-

This is not to say that Russia's most recent wars were not brutal. But indiscriminate firepower and deliberate repression are not the same thing – one compensates for local asymmetries favoring the insurgent, the other is an exploitation of much greater asymmetries that favor the incumbent. The Russian case suggests that a reliance on collective punishment is a function not simply of regime type, but of an interaction between regime type and capabilities.

REGIME TYPE AND COUNTERINSURGENCY SUCCESS

Given differences in the threats they face and how they fight, are democracies and non-democracies differentially likely to achieve success? Theoretical arguments fall into three camps: “democracy hurts,” “democracy helps” and “democracy doesn't matter.” The first, skeptical view maintains that democracies are cost-sensitive and reluctant to escalate the use of force. Because they are unable to get their hands dirty and commit sufficient resources to avoid defeat, democratic regimes experience a disadvantage in low-intensity conflict (Merom 2003, 19, 21–24, 46–47; Inbar 2003, ix; Mack 1975, 184; Li 2005, 283; Reiter and Stam 2002, 164–192, 347, 349, 363; Chalk 1992, 35; Peters 2007; Luttwak 2007). This view has not gone unchallenged. As several scholars have pointed out, the costliest campaigns, like the foreign internal defense missions favored by democracies, are generally more difficult from the outset (Edelstein 2008, 5; Lyall 2010b, 178). Indiscriminate violence and repression, moreover, do not always ensure victory: repression can inflame, suppress or have no effect on future insurgent violence (Lichbach 1987; Moore 1998; Davenport 2007b).

In explaining how democracy can be an asset in counterinsurgency, democratic optimists have turned many of the skeptics' arguments on their head. Because democracies are risk-averse, optimists expect them to become involved in only those conflicts where victory is relatively easily attainable (Bueno De Mesquita and Siverson 1995, 841–855; Reiter and Stam 1998, 378; Fearon 1994, 577–578, 585–586). Because they face constraints on the use of excessive force, democracies are expected to avoid escalating a conflict by inflaming and provoking dissidents (Dernado 1985, 188, 209; Sambanis and Zinn 2005; Abrahms 2007, 242–246).

The third position is that – after adjusting for other potential sources of variation – regime type has no discernible impact on success. Lyall (2010, 183) and Getmansky (2010) argue that the success-regime type relationship is spurious, and

came sole sources of evidence, resulting in indiscriminate arrests, disappearances and forced confessions (Souleimanov 2007, 173–5).

that earlier findings were compromised by no-variance research designs and failure to account for differential selection into conflict by regime type.

Empirically, social scientists and policy analysts have had a surprisingly difficult time finding common ground. Quantitative analyses have largely failed to find a strong and consistent relationship between regime type and counterinsurgency success (Zhukov 2008; Lyall 2010; Getmansky 2010), although some research on counterterrorism has supported the more optimistic view (Abrahms 2007). In general, social scientists have been wary of treating victory and defeat as subjects of direct study. Most academic research has focused instead on more easily quantifiable measures of conflict cessation, like basic numerical thresholds of war-related casualties (say, 1,000 or 100 battle deaths per year), and conflict duration. To policy analysts, such metrics are neither satisfying nor informative as measures of success.²¹ Recently, social scientists have begun to consider the impact of democracy on ordinal and categorical measures of victory, like “win-lose-draw” (Lyall and Wilson 2009, 71; Lyall 2010a) or “strong” and “lenient” definitions of success (Zhukov 2008, 7; Getmansky 2010, 13, 44). These measures combine criteria for pacification and insurgent military defeat with changes in the political status quo, potentially conveying more policy-relevant information.

If future empirical studies of counterinsurgency are to inform strategic design and policymakers’ evaluation of past performance, the continued conceptual refinement of victory and defeat warrants priority attention. Few studies, for instance, have embraced the intersubjectivity of the “success” concept, or potential divergences in its meaning across different types of regime.²² The current U.S. government is unlikely to deem an outcome successful if it were achieved largely through a massive program of forcible resettlement; if we lose sight of our basic norms and principles, one might say, we have lost the war. The same could not be said of Stalin’s Soviet Union, or even Andrew Jackson’s United States.

The Russian example

By the Lyall and Wilson (2009) definition of success, Russia has “won” almost every counterinsurgency campaign it has fought (Figure 1).²³ With the outcomes of

²¹ Violence levels may drop as a result of the establishment of incumbent or insurgent territorial control (Kalyvas 2006), stalemate, third-party intervention or a host of other factors, irrespective of whom the resulting status quo may favor.

²² I thank Jeff Friedman for this insight.

²³ As defined by Lyall and Wilson (2009, 71-72), “a win occurs when the insurgency is militarily defeated and its organization destroyed, or the war ends without any political concessions granted

three conflicts still uncertain and one case coded as a draw, Russia's overall success rate is 18 in 21, or 85.7 percent.²⁴ Afghanistan and the first Chechen War are the only cases of outright defeat since 1917. By contrast, the cross-national historical average for the same time period is 35.1 percent, including 29.7 percent for democracies, 32.8 percent for transitional regimes and 42.8 for autocracies.²⁵

The cost of Russia's participation in these conflicts has been considerable: excluding the ongoing cases, mean duration was 4.01 years, with a median of 3.38 years and an average of 3,583 security service personnel killed per conflict.²⁶ Casualty rates were slightly greater in conflicts initiated under transitional regimes – 3,902 on average, compared with 2,786 under the Soviet Union – contrary to claims that autocracies are highly cost-acceptant.²⁷

Given the conventional wisdom that autocracies are willing to fight longer wars (Reiter and Stam 2002), Russia's campaigns may seem surprisingly short. Indeed, their duration has been less than half the historical average from the same time period (8.27 years).²⁸ Half of the eighteen successful Russian cases were terminated in less than 2.5 years, and ninety percent in less than 6.2, compared to 4.5 and 20.4 years for successful counterinsurgencies worldwide. On this metric, Russia has been far closer to her democratic rivals (fifty percent of cases won under 2 years

to insurgent forces. ... A draw occurs when an incumbent is forced to concede to some, but not all, insurgent demands, and neither side obtains its maximal aims. ... [A] loss [is] a situation in which the incumbent unilaterally concedes to all, or nearly all, insurgent demands."

²⁴ Afghanistan and the first Chechen War are coded "loss." The 1920-1932 counterinsurgency in Chechnya and Dagestan – which succeeded in temporarily stemming the violence, but did not prevent its recurrence less than a decade later – is coded "draw." All other completed cases are coded "win." The Lyall-Wilson dataset includes 9 of the 24 Russian and Soviet cases, although it does not include casualty statistics and uses different names for some conflicts. Among the duplicates, outcome codings given here agree with those provided by Lyall and Wilson.

²⁵ Success rates calculated with Lyall and Wilson (2009) data. The success rate for Russia and the Soviet Union is 6 in 8 completed cases, or 75 percent, in the Lyall-Wilson dataset.

²⁶ The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) of 1944-1956 and the Chechnya-Dagestan insurgency of 1920-32 share the position of longest case. The bloodiest cases were Afghanistan in 1979-89, which claimed 15,051 military casualties, closely followed by campaigns against Nestor Makhno's Black Army in 1921-22 (14,935 troops killed) and the UPA (14,128).

²⁷ Casualty figures for the conflicts in Figure 1 are taken from multiple sources, primarily Krivosheyev (2001) and the "Isroricheskaya Pamyat' [Historical Memory]" Foundation's casualties database (<http://lists.historyfoundation.ru/>).

²⁸ Of 188 post-1917 counterinsurgencies worldwide, duration has been 8.27 years on average, with 9.27 years for democracies, 8.74 for autocracies, and 7.82 for transitional regimes. The respective median durations have been 5 years overall, 4.88 for democracies, 8 for autocracies and 4.46 for transitional regimes. Data from Lyall and Wilson (2009).

and ninety percent under 5.42) than to her non-democratic peers (4.08 and 14.83 years for autocracies, 4.25 and 11.5 years for transitional regimes). Russia's victories have been unusually swift and decisive.²⁹

One may ask whether – outlier or not – Russia's track record is one to hold in high esteem. After all, Russian counterinsurgency has traditionally been the domain of coercion, much of it crude and indiscriminate. It is not immediately clear whether Russia's successes have been achieved due to this systematic brutality, or in spite of it. On this point, the main insight from the Russian example might be, "repression works, but not in moderation."

Of the 79 major episodes of forcible resettlement since 1917, 11 either failed to suppress an insurgency or could not prevent its recurrence. The risk of inflammation was particularly high in cases where these operations were implemented in response to insurgent activity. Five of the 19 wartime resettlements (26.3 percent) were followed by new or continued conflict within the next decade, compared to six out of 60 peacetime resettlements (10 percent).³⁰

Under what conditions, then, has mass repression succeeded in suppressing insurgency? There has been little regional variation – both suppressive and inflammatory resettlement operations were conducted in the North Caucasus, the Baltic States, and the Western borderlands of Ukraine and Belarus. The target groups have also been similar: active members of "counterrevolutionary" movements and their families, pre-Soviet intellectual and military elites, "criminals", wealthy landowners and peasants (Vladimirtsev and Kokurin 2008, 36).

The clearest distinction between "successful" and "failed" resettlement operations appears to have been their scale.³¹ The average number of people relocated in operations that failed to suppress violence was 43,131, compared to 86,838 for the successful cases. Among the 19 wartime operations, this difference was 73,600 to 142,857. This contrast is even starker within the separate regions. In the Baltic States, the total number of people relocated in failed versus successful cases was

²⁹ The causal arrow, of course, may conceivably point in either direction – protracted counterinsurgencies are more difficult to win, but difficult counterinsurgencies are also likely to become protracted.

³⁰ Cross-tabulations calculated with data from Polyan (2001).

³¹ A "successful" resettlement operation is understood as one followed by pacification and no resumption of insurgent violence within the following decade (suppressive). A "failed" operation is one followed by either an increase in insurgent violence (inflammatory), no change (ineffective), or a recurrence of violence within the following decade.

45,000 to 143,000. These figures were 345,000 to 864,600 in the North Caucasus, and 62,000 to 2,457,000 in the borderlands of Ukraine and Belarus.³²

In sum, the larger the scale of mass repression, the more likely it was to suppress fighting. Half-measures, if tens of thousands of deportees can be seen as such, were more likely to make things worse.³³ Repression is a resource-intensive activity. Even localized, small-scale actions like cordon-and-search can place heavy burdens on manpower, intelligence and logistics. While it is possible to employ repression effectively in counterinsurgency, the Soviet Union's "anti-hearts and minds" model is unlikely to offer a workable blueprint. The Soviets, it appears, were successful not simply because they repressed, but because – on most occasions – they had the capabilities to repress efficiently and on so large a scale that remaining insurgents were separated – literally, by thousands of miles – from major sources of popular support. Repression, as the Russian case suggests, is highly risky. The only way to reduce this risk is to go "all in," which – fortunately for civilians – is not an option most governments are capable of implementing.

CONCLUSION

The Russian experience yields several lessons for governments attempting to cope with domestic and expeditionary counterinsurgency. First, not all non-democracies are alike. Transitional, semi-autocratic regimes are at far greater risk of experiencing insurgent violence than consolidated dictatorships. They are also less efficient in the employment of coercive instruments of power. Second, coercion comes in different forms. Repression, of the sort employed during the massive resettlement operations of the 1930s and 40s, requires not simply a lack of normative constraints on the use of force, but also the capacity to mobilize significant manpower, intelligence and operational resources. Indiscriminate mass firepower, on the other hand, is more likely to be used where these requirements cannot be met. Third, a lack of restraints on coercion does not by itself ensure success. Repression is most likely to suppress insurgent violence if it is used on a massive scale. Small and even medium-scale repression is likely to be inflammatory or simply ineffective.

The Russian case also highlights a number of puzzles yet to be resolved. It remains unclear, for instance, why Russia has been an outlier in so many areas. It

³² Descriptive statistics calculated with data from Polyan (2001).

³³ This pattern is consistent with recent research by Friedman (2010, 20), who finds that small-scale repression can have disastrous consequences. It undermines both the perceived legitimacy of the government and the government's credibility in carrying out threats.

faced an average of one insurgency every four years, yet managed to defeat 85.7 percent of these opponents. Historically, it was expert in rapidly crushing insurrections, yet recently it has struggled to contain several protracted conflicts. Why has Russia been unable to replicate the “magic formula” of its Soviet past? Regime characteristics are likely insufficient as explanations for these peculiarities.

Many of the political factors that make the Russian case so intriguing also make empirical investigation difficult. The overclassification of primary sources on Soviet counterinsurgency has kept in-depth study of the subject off limits to all but a small circle of analysts within Russia’s intelligence services and interior ministry. Despite an extensive declassification of Soviet-era documents in the early 1990s and a 30-year secrecy limit imposed by the 1993 Law on State Secrets, much of the data remains in closed archives.³⁴

Despite these challenges, there is a growing volume of superb archival sources yet to be exploited by Western research.³⁵ Relatively little of the material has been translated into English, but those willing to parse it will find a wealth of historical data on the location and timing of insurgent attacks and government operations, detailed rosters of combatant and civilian casualties, and thousands of official memoranda, strategy papers and directives. These data can enable empirically rich micro-level study of civil conflict, repression and dissent.

There is an old, cynical Soviet joke: “Is there opposition in the USSR? If there *were* any, there would no longer *be* any.”³⁶ While not particularly funny, the punchline is faithful to the empirical pattern illustrated in this review. Rigorous investigation of why there has been so much violent opposition in Russia, and how so much of it came to be violently suppressed, can enrich our understanding of the emergence, conduct and outcome of low intensity conflict.

³⁴ This state of affairs can be explained by a lack of mechanisms to ensure archival compliance with new declassification requirements, as well as by official reluctance to publish tactics and procedures while Russia continues to be embroiled in armed conflict with several insurgent groups in the Caucasus.

³⁵ Primary source literature on Soviet-era counterinsurgency has been of three sorts: collections of insurgent documents published by pro-insurgent émigré groups (e.g. Mirchuk 1953), collections of declassified material from non-Russian post-Soviet archives (e.g. Bilas 1994, Anusauskas 1999, Serhiychuk 1998, Strods 1996, Adamushko 2004, Andreev and Shumov 2005), and collections from the much larger but more secretive Russian archives (e.g. Litvinov and Sedunov 2005, Samokhvalov and Marukov 2008). Because selection of documents for these volumes is to varying degrees partisan, researchers are advised to pursue data collection strategies that draw, with due caution, from all three categories of sources.

³⁶ In Russian: *Yest' li v SSSR oppozitsionery? Yesli by oni byli, ikh by uzhe ne bylo!*

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