Politics and the Russian Army

Civil–Military Relations, 1689–2000

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Introduction

This book is about Russian soldiers and the tsars, Communist Party bosses, and presidents they have served. The historic exploits of the Russian and Soviet armies, which crushed Napoleon and Hitler, are well known. This book tells a different, lesser known story about Russian soldiers: the role they have played in domestic politics.

As the process of Russian democratization lurches along – one step forward, two steps back, as Lenin said – Russia has at least one advantage over most post-authoritarian states. Unlike many states in transition, Russia does not have a tradition of military intervention or rule: The last successful military coup took place in 1801.

The absence of a Russian man on horseback, however, does not imply that the army has played no role in politics. Given Russia's tumultuous twentieth century, it could hardly be otherwise. The Russian Revolution and civil war, the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, the Second World War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the current so-called democratic transition are only the most prominent examples of political turbulence. The military has weathered revolution, imperial collapse, and mass murder of the top ranks of the officer corps by the political leadership. Such a series of intense provocations would seem to provide more than adequate grounds for military intervention in politics. Except for a few half-hearted forays, however, the Russian armed forces have remained surprisingly aloof from high politics. Indeed, since the middle of the nineteenth century the army has endeavored to remain "outside politics."[1]

The central question of the book is, What role has the Russian army played in domestic political struggles, and why? The most fruitful way to approach the question is to think of military behavior as the product of a two-step process. Armies make political choices based on both the *opportunities*

[1] The phrase "outside politics" is in quotes because Russian officers often used these exact words to describe their role. See especially Chapters 3 and 7.

presented by political and organizational structure and *motives* derived from their normative commitments and material interests.[2] Both opportunities (structure) and motives (agency) matter, but not in the way the previous literature suggests.

The varying strength of the Russian state is the most fundamental aspect of political opportunity. A cursory appraisal of Russian twentieth-century history shows that the army has been most involved in domestic politics during the major political crises that marked the birth and death of the Soviet Union. Periods of state weakness led to military participation in internal politics. This argument, the dominant one in the civil–military relations literature, holds up well here. But there is an important caveat: State weakness does not lead to military coups, as is traditionally claimed. Rather, a political vacuum only makes it more likely that the army will have the opportunity to seize power; whether it has the desire or ability to do so is explained by other factors.

The opportunities available for military involvement in domestic politics are also shaped by structural factors internal to the armed forces. Cleavages inside the army, sometimes deliberately fostered by civilian rulers, can make political activity more difficult. Often this component merely reinforces domestic structure and state strength. However, in several cases, cleavages within the armed forces helped determine the stance of the army. These splits were rarely decisive, but they did play a role.

At times, such as during Stalin's rule, opportunities for military activity were so limited that the influence of officers' motives on behavior was limited. In most cases, however, military motives played an important and autonomous role. The two basic types of motives are rational and cultural, or corporate interest and organizational norms.[3] It is at the level of officers' motives that this book makes its most important contribution.

Officers' norms about their proper role in politics have played a fundamental role in shaping the Russian army's behavior. A norm of civilian supremacy has deep roots in the Russian armed forces. Even in cases when other factors were pointing strongly toward a military coup, organizational culture served to restrain concerted action. An organizational culture argument has not been widely or systematically applied to the study of military intervention. I demonstrate the utility of such an approach.

At the same time, an organizational culture approach cannot stand alone. When opportunities for military involvement in domestic politics are high, such as during the Russian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union

[2] Samuel Finer first used the categories of *opportunity* and *motive* in the study of civil–military relations, although I use them somewhat differently: S. E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975).

[3] Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

and the subsequent Russian transition, the military may be forced to play a role because other political actors will seek to use force to achieve their goals. The military can, almost quite literally, be dragged into politics. Normative commitments, however, tended to make army behavior weak, half-hearted, and consequently ineffective.

Perhaps more important than what explains Russian military behavior is what does not. Over the last 200 years the Russian military has never intervened in politics to protect its own bureaucratic interests. The Russian/Soviet military has endured severe threats to its corporate interests, such as the Stalinist purges, during which thousands of officers were murdered, and recent massive budget and force cuts that have left thousands of officers homeless and without pay for months, but these blows have not precipitated a military coup. The poor performance of the corporate interest approach is especially noteworthy given its prominence both in the comparative politics literature on military intervention and in the literature on Soviet civil–military relations. Roman Kolkowicz and Timothy Colton, the authors of the two most important books on Soviet civil–military relations, both adopted this approach.[4] Although this argument may perform better for other countries, the Russian case clearly demonstrates its limitations when employed without reference to other factors.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the rest of the book by providing a typology of the multiple approaches to the study of military intervention in politics. The prevalence of military coups in the 1960s and 1970s worldwide spawned an impressive body of research, with a wide range of hypotheses. I survey and systematize this literature and draw from it the four perspectives mentioned above: domestic structure, organizational structure, corporate interest, and organizational culture. Several other approaches are set aside as not relevant to the Russian cases. Chapter 8 summarizes the conclusions, and it pursues some important theoretical and policy-relevant themes brought out by the rest of the book.

The empirical chapters, Chapters 2–7, represent the heart of the book. I investigate 19 cases of actual or potential military involvement in high politics. These events run from Peter the Great to Boris Yeltsin, a period of over 300 years. The result is the only survey of Russian military behavior in sovereign power issues that covers the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods.

[4] Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Timothy J. Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Not all of these chapters are created equal. Chapters 2, 4, and 5 cover large swathes of history, bringing together cases from different time periods. Chapter 2 looks at the imperial period from Peter the Great to World War I, Chapter 4 covers the period from the end of the Russian Civil War until World War II, and Chapter 5 runs from World War II to Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985. More detailed case analysis is presented in Chapters 3, 6, and 7. Chapter 3 focuses on the Russian Revolution, Chapter 6 deals with the Gorbachev period and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Chapter 7 examines the post-Soviet transition under Boris Yeltsin. These periods merit special attention not only because of their intrinsic historical interest, but also because the open politics of these times provide a wealth of source material. I believe the new material presented in these chapters justifies the lengthier treatment. Additionally, the comparisons between the different theories are sharpest in these cases.

Three basic comparisons form the foundation of the analysis. First, the comparison to other states is explicit in the first and last chapters and is implicit throughout. Second, I compare Russia to itself in a historical (diachronic) manner. Finally, I compare different types of military behavior to each other. The goal of these comparisons is both to explain the conduct of the Russian armed forces and to draw conclusions about when different explanations for military intervention are likely to be the strongest.

I use a wide range of sources for the empirical sections of the book. In a project of this size, some use of the Russian and English-language secondary literature is inevitable.[5] When using secondary historical accounts, I have tried to distill the dominant viewpoint from the available sources and be explicit when I am taking sides in a debate.[6] A substantial chunk of the case studies is based almost entirely on primary source research, including extensive archival research and interviews. I found it necessary to consult the available primary sources either because the secondary literature did not speak directly to the questions that I am studying or because there were specific debates in the existing historiography that additional primary research could help resolve.

The book is meant to be useful to a variety of readers. Social scientists will be interested in the assessment of competing explanations for military intervention. Historians will note the new evidence on some significant events from Russian history, such as the revolution, the Stalinist purges, and the

[5] Theda Skocpol, "Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies," in Theda Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 382–383.

[6] For an excellent discussion, see Ian S. Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *American Political Science Review*, 90 (1996), 605–618.

collapse of the Soviet Union. Policy makers may focus on (a) lessons for understanding the conditions that contribute to military coups and (b) what the story implies for the future of Russian democracy. In sum, the book seeks to contribute to our theoretical understanding, our historical knowledge, and our practical political judgment.