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Mistaken Identity: Why Realism Fails and Constructivism Succeeds in Understanding Russia

1. Introduction

Located on the outskirts of Europe both geographically and culturally, Russia has traditionally been enigmatic at best for Western nations. Its complexity has been a substantial problem for other countries that attempt to understand both its domestic and international policies, resulting in misguided assumptions. Numerous international relations theories have been proposed by scholars in order to understand the motivations of foreign states on the world stage and foster better working relations between nations. This knowledge allows the real interests of countries to be used when bargaining: instead of working with inflexible policy positions, the true motivations that prompted a given decision can be addressed by other nations, resulting in stronger diplomatic ties, increased cooperation, and a safer world. However, in order for these benefits to be utilized, the correct theory must first be chosen. Western experts have consistently failed to do this with regard to Russia. While numerous theories exist, three dominate today’s international relations (IR) field: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Each theory offers a unique explanation of events in world politics and provides insights into the past as well as patterns that are likely to repeat in the future. This paper will evaluate and compare the merits of realism and constructivism, the two analytical lenses that are most commonly applied to understanding Russia in the academic study of international relations. In order to assess the advantages and disadvantages of each theory, I apply them in my analysis of foreign policy decisions made during key events in Russian history.

Western nations have traditionally applied the realist perspective in analyzing Russia. This was especially true during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was considered an ever-
increasing threat intent on countering global US hegemony. Realism presupposes an anarchic international system and explains how nations should approach the instability of a world without a global authority keeping states in line. Unlike states, which have their own laws and governing bodies to carry out punishments when necessary, the world has the United Nations, which only rarely manages to implement sanctions and enforce global law. States can solve this problem collectively by establishing a balance of power, where “no actor is overly dissatisfied with the division of power in the system and no one has complete superiority over the other,” allowing for stability since war would result in a stalemate. ¹ Realism can thus be defined as the struggle between self-interested nations who must defend themselves for lack of an international guarantor of law and order. This theory was espoused in the twentieth century by thinkers such as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski who saw the world as chaotic and in need of strong powers to preserve relative peace. They considered the Soviet Union a threat to the global order as its strength challenged US hegemony, consequently leading to conflict. The realist IR scholar Stephen Walt elaborates on the enduring popularity of realism among US policymakers during the Cold War:

Realism dominated in the Cold War years because it provided simple but powerful explanations for war, alliances, imperialism, obstacles to cooperation, and other international phenomena, and because its emphasis on competition was consistent with the central features of the American-Soviet rivalry. ²

Consequently, the United States and the West were intent on maintaining this approach when developing their foreign policy with regard to Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They have since not only preserved NATO, but expanded it eastward to include former socialist bloc states despite the absence of any present threat, damaging relations with Russia. The West ultimately failed to integrate Russia into its community in the immediate post-Cold

¹ Leichtova, 22.
² Walt, 31.
War years despite Boris Yeltsin’s willingness to transform his country into a liberal democracy. Western foreign policy has thus incorrectly assessed the situation and cultivated mutual mistrust. The realist lens is therefore smudged and scratched when focused on Russia, allowing the beholder to see only an incomplete picture based on the theory’s limitations. Russia is deemed guilty before even receiving a fair trial, creating problems that the clearer lens of constructivism avoids.

Constructivism first appeared within the IR community in 1989. However, it was not until 1992, when Alexander Wendt published his article “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” that the theory gained traction within the international relations community. In recent years, scholars such as Andrei Tsygankov and Magda Leichtova have also disputed the application of the realist lens, arguing that it does not reveal Russia’s actual intentions, and that Russia should instead be viewed through the lens of constructivism in order to correctly identify its priorities and interests. Constructivism presupposes that “the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world.”

Every nation has its own unique history which has developed and influenced the culture of its citizens. It is only by knowing key political identities and prevalent forms of political thought unique to each country that last for generations that a state and its leaders can be fully understood. A Western foreign policy approach toward post-Soviet Russia informed by constructivism would have understood President Yeltsin’s efforts to depart from communism and embrace the West within the context of liberal trends in traditional Russian political thought. This would have enabled the implementation of less hostile policies that would have provided a basis for better relations between Russia and the West. In contrast,

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3 Zehfuss, 11.
4 Adler, 322.
Western statesmen pushed Yeltsin away using realist policies due to the mistrust of a fellow great power in a world controlled by fear. The constructivist lens allows a better understanding of the complexity of Russian foreign policy than any explanation realism can offer.

This paper will analyze World War I, World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Ukrainian crisis in order to demonstrate how constructivism provides stronger explanations for the motivations behind Russian foreign policy decisions than those offered by realism. These major events of the twentieth century reveal the consistency of Russian political thought and are highly significant in terms of the relationship between Russia and the West. In comparison to the limited realist paradigm, constructivism provides Western states with a better understanding of motivations from the past to the present, supplies a more accurate method for analyzing the nation’s interstate actions, and ultimately aids in the implementation of a finely tailored foreign policy that will realize greater diplomatic progress with Russia.

2. Realism and Constructivism Examined

Realism asserts that states have a common fear of one another for lack of a worldwide judicial ruler to enforce peace and stability:

When no authority exists that can enforce agreements—“anarchy”—then any state can resort to force to get what it wants. Even if a state can be fairly sure that no other state will take up arms today, there is no guarantee against the possibility that one might do so tomorrow. Because no state can rule out this prospect, states tend to arm themselves against this contingency … The signature realist argument is therefore that anarchy renders states’ security problematic and potentially conflictual, and is a key underlying cause of war.⁵

Strategic alliances and regional superpowers prevail and are a state’s best guarantee of safety. There are multiple underlying ideas that make up this theory: groupism, which stresses forced cooperation for survival; egoism, which says that states act in their self-interest; anarchy, which is an absence of an international government; and geopolitics, which prompts the pursuit

⁵ Wohlfforth, 135.
of power. While there are some variances within the theory, realism always deals with state security. Realism downplays the role of individuals and non-governmental organizations and instead focuses on states. It is a one-size-fits-all strategy which assumes the complete rationality of all involved.

However, by viewing Russia only from this perspective, analysts refuse to acknowledge factors other than power. Realists “typically overlook and wrongfully interpret some far-reaching changes in Russia’s foreign policy that are potent for cooperation with Western nations,” such as “ideas and cultural beliefs.” While Russian foreign policy decisions may at times appear to reflect self-interested behavior, realism tends to obscure other possible motivations in insisting upon a singular narrative. Realists have a difficult time explaining why Russia expresses interest in post-Soviet regions such as Central Asia while seemingly ignoring other nearby regions such as East Asia that are considered to be of greater strategic importance. In applying strict universal rationality, realists fail to identify the cultural motivations behind Russian foreign policy decisions and thus mistakenly view them as irrational and arbitrary.

Constructivism, in contrast, holds that states are shaped primarily by history, culture and individual actions, therefore taking each country’s differences into account. Constructivism examines IR theories and categories as phenomena “constructed by social processes and interactions,” beginning with the assumption that

How people and states think and behave in world politics is premised on their understanding of the world around them, which includes their own beliefs about the world, the identities they hold about themselves and others, and the shared understandings and practices in which they participate.

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6 Ibid, 133.
7 Tsygankov, 11.
8 Checkel, 325–326.
9 Hurd, 312–313.
Unlike realism, constructivism holds that the actors involved are not bound to the strict logic of rationality and instead can act in ways that appear to be irrational at first glance. For constructivists, perspective determines everything. A state will act according to what it believes is rational based on its leaders’ unique personalities, which have been shaped by experiences and social norms. The constructivist framework acknowledges the key role played by leaders, who can change the course of foreign policy in drastic ways based on their individual worldviews. Constructivism will therefore provide different explanations in each case to which it is applied, accounting for each state’s unique cultural identity and sociopolitical circumstances.

Working within the constructivist paradigm, the IR scholar Andrei Tsygankov has identified “three distinct traditions, or schools, of foreign policy thinking” exhibited by Russian leaders over the centuries: Westernism, civilizationism, and statism. Each of these sub-constructivist traditions can be traced throughout Russian history through the actions of its leaders. Westernism can be defined as Russia’s tendency to embrace liberal policies. Its proponents have traditionally emphasized “Russia’s similarity with the West and viewed the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in the world.” In Russian foreign policy, this primarily means increased diplomatic cooperation with and possible integration into Western organizations such as the European Union and NATO. A tradition that can be traced back to Peter I’s military and cultural reforms, Westernism helps account for such recent trends in Russian politics as Gorbachev’s arms control and his policy of humanitarian socialism, Yeltsin’s “strategic partnership with the West,” and Medvedev’s advocacy of “greater openness in economic and political systems.” Westernism is the noted tendency of Russian political leaders
to continue reaching out to the West so that they can create a new, more liberal version of Russia.

Proponents of civilizationism, in contrast, consider “Russian values as different from those of the West, and they have always attempted to spread Russian values abroad, outside the West.” Civilizationism can be traced back to Ivan III’s “gathering of Russian lands” in order to establish Moscow as the “third Rome”; it was later strengthened by cultural ties such as Orthodox Christianity and appeals to a common Slavic identity. In the Soviet era, it appeared in Lenin’s support for a global communist revolution and later justified “foreign policy expansionism” to counter the “Western capitalist civilization” during the Cold War. Throughout Russian history, civilizationist leaders have based their foreign policy decisions on the need to preserve what they consider Russia’s unique cultural identity and way of life.

Statism, the last of the three Russian foreign policy traditions, explicitly preferences the “values of power, stability, and sovereignty over those of freedom and democracy.” Of the three sub-categories of constructivism discussed by Tsygankov, statism has the deepest roots in Russian history. Constant warfare and “the two-centuries-long conquest by the Mongols … developed a psychological complex of insecurity” and a need for the sovereign to provide the order that was lacking because of continual strife. Joseph Stalin outlined this idea in a speech delivered at the First All-Union Conference of Leading Personnel of Socialist Industry in 1931:

The history of the old Russia was the continual beating she suffered because of her backwardness. She was beaten by the Mongol khans. She was beaten by the Turkish beys. She was beaten by the Swedish feudal lords. She was beaten by the Polish and Lithuanian gentry. She was beaten by the English and French

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14 Ibid, 8.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 6.
17 Ibid.
capitalists. She was beaten by the Japanese barons. All beat her—for her backwardness.\textsuperscript{18}

This constant “beating” was a source of anxiety for the nation. Warfare required the need for a powerful state to combat its enemies. In his speech, Stalin used these defeats as a call to arms in order to motivate workers to achieve victory in the future through their efforts. Russian leaders who have stressed the need for military strength and stability are seen as reflecting the statist mindset. Examples include Peter I’s emphasis on military competitiveness, Stalin’s focus on state security, and Putin’s recent efforts toward “pragmatic cooperation.”\textsuperscript{19} Statism is the result of deeply ingrained historical fears brought on by the security dilemma, reminding Russian leaders of the possibilities that weak governance and a lack of power can create.

3. Civilizationist Impact: the World War I Era

Prior to the start of World War I, Russia experienced hostile relations with Austria-Hungary due to the latter nation’s need to dominate adjacent Balkan countries.\textsuperscript{20} The underlying reason for this hostility was the strong sense of Slavic unity arising in the Balkans at this time which was being suppressed by Austria-Hungary’s refusal to grant the nationalists state autonomy.\textsuperscript{21} Russia entered the war due to its alliance with Serbia (against whom Austria-Hungary declared war on July 28, 1914, in retaliation for Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination) and soon became entangled in brutal fighting in the east against the armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary.\textsuperscript{22}

Tsarist Russia’s provocation of the great power Austria-Hungary through its alliance with Serbia can be explained by civilizationism. Realists would argue that creating an alliance against

\textsuperscript{18} Stalin, 41.
\textsuperscript{19} Tsygankov, 6–9.
\textsuperscript{20} Stone, 20–21.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 26–27.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 29–30.
a strong nearby competitor would, in theory, help create a balance of power. However, rather than bolstering its security, Russia’s alliance with Serbia only further antagonized Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. A constructivist would argue that the “strong racial and religious ties” between Russia and the Slavic and Orthodox nations in the Balkans were more important than any political gains made by appeasing Austro-Hungarian expansion. Realism thus fails to adequately explain Russian actions regarding an alliance with Serbia. Civilizationism succeeds because it highlights the ostensible unity among the two Slavic nations and the actual reasons for the alliance itself.

World War I’s devastation contributed to the February Revolution in 1917, during which the tsar was replaced with a provisional government that continued to fight in the war. Shortly after, the Bolsheviks staged the October Revolution in the same year and took control of the state. On March 3, 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed and war was finally over. Lenin had agreed to yield claims on the Baltic states and pay a substantial fine in reparations to the Germans. His decision to sign the treaty does not follow realist thinking because the massive loss of territory and titanic sum of reparations threatened to destroy the stability of the country, especially after the chaotic transitions of the revolutions. While peace would be guaranteed by the treaty, the internal instability it caused would drastically damage the country more than it would aid it. A constructivist perspective would reveal that a new Soviet identity had replaced the old civilizationist emphasis on ethnic and religious ties, causing a swift reorientation in foreign policy priorities and decisions. This new orientation quickly brought Soviet Russia into a new conflict in February 1919 that would become the Polish-Soviet War.

23 Nicolson, 79.
24 Ibid, 278.
26 Ibid, 175.
27 Stone, 308.
Lenin wanted to take advantage of the newly-independent East European states in order to accomplish his vision of a global communist revolution.\textsuperscript{28} This conflict was motivated by a “cardinal dogma in Bolshevik policy” at the time: “the Revolution could not survive in backward Russia unless it spread to the more advanced industrial countries of Europe.”\textsuperscript{29} However, Russian ambitions were ultimately quelled with a Polish military victory in March 1921 that divided up disputed lands between the two nations.

The dominant position that Bolshevik ideology played in the decision-making of the Soviet leadership suggests that the new foreign policy was the product of civilizationist thought. The goal of global revolution was not only entertained as a hypothetical situation but informed concrete policy decisions once war was declared. Realists would argue that the Soviets wanted to expand to ultimately acquire more lands to increase access to resources and buffer zones against other powers. While this would be true if one only evaluated Soviet expansion itself, it discounts the entire purpose behind the act—sparking the global revolution. It was only after the defeat by Poland that Lenin changed his position of spreading the revolution across the world and decided to build up his own nation instead. This choice had to be made to prevent the collapse of the Soviet state and preserve the possibility of realizing Lenin’s vision in the future. Soviet expansion as seen in the Polish-Soviet War demonstrated support for revolutions in other countries and was only halted due to necessity, fitting the civilizationism model.

\textbf{4. Statist Impact: World War II Era}

Prior to their hostilities, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939.\textsuperscript{30} Officially a non-aggression treaty, it divided Eastern

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{28} Davies, 54.
\bibitem{29} Ibid, 56.
\bibitem{30} Roberts, 91.
\end{thebibliography}
Europe between the two powers. \textsuperscript{31} “Hitler had allowed Stalin to occupy Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the areas of Poland, Romania, and Finland that had been part of the old czarist empire” as a result. \textsuperscript{32} This kept the Soviets out of an alliance with Western powers and allowed Hitler to start World War II with the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. The Soviets followed suit and invaded on September 17. \textsuperscript{33} As a positive gesture to the Axis powers, Stalin agreed to the signing of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, another non-aggression treaty, on April 13, 1941. However, this gesture was not enough to assuage Hitler’s fear of the Soviet Union as a potential adversary; a preemptive strike was felt to be necessary while the situation still favored Germany. Stalin received reports indicating the likelihood of an attack but decided to continue on his set course of preparing his forces for a later day “to acquire even more of Eastern Europe and join it to the Red empire.” \textsuperscript{34}

World War II caused a shift in foreign policy away from the civilizationism of cultural unity and Lenin’s utopian vision toward one dominated by the statism of Stalin, who had now become the dominant figure in Soviet politics. Stalin’s decision to enter into these non-aggression treaties was designed to create a balance of power that would preserve his state until it was finally ready for war. Realists would argue that this falls perfectly in line with their perspective, as the balance of power preserved state security. However, as the war continued, the ostensibly realist motivations for Stalin’s actions would soon prove to be more representative of the statist tradition in Russian political thought. The tentative peace ended with the start of Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. \textsuperscript{35} At the outbreak of war, many key decisions were made by the Soviet government to aid in their victory

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 92.
\textsuperscript{32} Pleshakov, 3.
\textsuperscript{33} Roberts, 99.
\textsuperscript{34} Pleshakov, 1.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 146.
over the Axis Powers and to secure their war aims once peace was acquired. Once the war was well under way and an Allied victory seemed imminent, the big three leaders—Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill—met for a series of conferences to determine the postwar world. The Yalta Conference (February 1945) is particularly important in this regard as it satisfied Soviet desires of occupying Eastern Europe and extending its sphere of influence. Soon after the war’s end, the Soviet Union imposed communist regimes in the form of people’s republics in the newly-occupied lands of East-Central Europe, claiming this would create a needed buffer zone for security measures while also improving the lives of all those living there.

The formation of the “Iron Curtain” highlighted Stalin’s need for a stable and secure Soviet Union. Obtaining these areas allowed for the strengthening of the Soviet Union and a buffer zone between it and potential threats. These foreign policy decisions followed some of the tenets of realism, such as the security dilemma and geopolitical outlook on the world, but they were also statist. A seemingly perpetual state of war as well as border skirmishes over the centuries left a deeply-embedded fear of outside attack in Russian political thought. Because it is part of the Russian political identity, this fear can manifest itself even when there is no apparent crisis, defying the logic of realism. In this case, the explanations offered by realism and statist partially overlap, but only constructivism takes into account the historical context of Stalin’s foreign policy decisions.

5. Westernist Impact: Late Soviet/Early Post-Soviet Era

The final years of the Cold War ushered in a new era and brought Russia closer to the West than it had been for the preceding several decades. This was initiated when Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. From the start, Gorbachev

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36 LaFeber, 6–7.
wanted to move away from cold war and focus more on improving the daunting domestic situation that his country faced—the economic and societal deterioration of the Soviet Union. The primary way that he did this was through the New Thinking policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost*’ (openness) in 1985. These policies were ultimately “broadened to include democratization of the country” in order to bring about change on the domestic and international stages. This new opening in Soviet politics had an immediate impact on the Cold War.37 “In February 1987, [Gorbachev] made the first of several significant concessions on the … Intermediate Nuclear Force … issue” with the US, resulting in the elimination of intermediate-range weapons.38 This was a large step forward for both countries as the Soviet Union now began to show its willingness to cooperate even at increased personal cost. Former enemies were now making progress toward building a positive relationship.

Realism provides unconvincing explanations for Gorbachev’s motives in instituting New Thinking. Realists would argue that his policies did not matter because they were primarily focused on the domestic level and thus should not influence any international actions. Constructivists acknowledge the importance of domestic developments in determining the shape of a state’s foreign policy. Gorbachev’s liberal domestic reforms borrowed from Western society showcase his political ideology as a leader. His policies effectively unleashed the repressed desires of a subjugated people to the unexpected detriment of the Soviet Union. Even though *perestroika* and *glasnost*’ were unprecedented and potentially dangerous to the Soviet system, he would have ended them if he did not feel that their long-term benefits outweighed the short-term harm. While his policies contributed to the end of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev refused to adopt Stalinist measures and silence the resulting outcry for democratic reform and later regime

37 Donaldson and Nogee, 100.
38 Ibid, 97.
change. His actions also represented a move away from the Cold War into a more diplomacy-focused regime. Gorbachev knew that he had to concede to the West (through the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty) in order to build trust and end the conflict peacefully as opposed to open war, especially since the Soviet Union was undergoing interior distress. It was only Gorbachev’s unshakable belief in the liberal values of the West that allowed him to place trust in mutual cooperation instead of mutual destruction. Gorbachev’s actions near the end of the Cold War directly contradict realist thought and are best explained as examples of Westernism.

On December 25, 1991, “Gorbachev resign[ed] as Soviet president” after an attempted coup, and the next day the “Russian government [took] over offices of USSR in Russia.” Boris Yeltsin was now the new leader of the Russian Federation. Like his predecessor, Yeltsin wanted to continue democratizing the country and “began his administration with a genuine attempt to build a partnership with the United States.” Yeltsin “insisted that the Soviet Union could not be reformed and that Russia needed to adopt a Western capitalist model,” a clear reversal of Soviet policy. To accomplish this goal, Russia would utilize “the so-called shock therapy, so that Russia’s transition to a Western-style system would be both fast and irreversible.” In an address to the UN Security Council in January 1992, Yeltsin publicly declared his desire for increased partnership and even friendship with his former rivals in the West: “In the near future Russia intends to adopt legislation that will reflect the highest international standards in the field of the protection of human freedom, honour and dignity.” He would go on to cooperate with the US in voting “with the majority to impose unprecedented, strict sanctions against

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39 “Soviet Union Timeline.” BBC.
41 Tsygankov, 60.
42 Ibid, 63.
Yugoslavia” and in forfeiting “billions of dollars in arms sales by cooperating with UN sanctions against Libya, Iraq, and Yugoslavia.” 44 With the agreement of START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) II in June 1993, “Russia abandoned the heart of its strategic arsenals, while the United States preserved its own … sacrificing strategic parity.” 45 These actions were a clear sign for the international community that Yeltsin’s Russia sought cooperation rather than conflict with the West. However, “the Westernist course began to lose its momentum toward the end of 1992” once Western aid ceased being delivered in the amounts that the Russians expected. 46 After all of Yeltsin’s attempts to gain trust, “the West continued to play power politics and did not seem to care to reciprocate.” 47 At this point Russia slowly backed away from dependence on the West toward self-reliance. Yeltsin still wanted to continue his liberal transition, but not at the cost of being the weaker player in an unequal partnership. Unfortunately, this self-reliance was never fully realized due to massive domestic problems caused by “shock therapy.” Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin proved to be defined by their lack of realist thinking and the Westernist optimism that they championed during their time in office, transitioning the era of Cold War into a new world with a new Russia.

As with Gorbachev, Yeltsin’s actions immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union are difficult to explain with realist theory. His goal to move the Russian Federation away from communism and toward the West was a matter of ideology and thus outside the scope of realist theory. Yeltsin’s continual concessions to the West directly contradict realist thinking on the actions a former hegemonic power should take. His policy of nuclear disarmament further demonstrated the trust he placed with the West. He sided with the West when passing harsh

44 Donaldson and Nogee, 223–224.
45 Tsygankov, 76.
46 Ibid, 71.
sanctions on historical ally Serbia, repudiating the cultural ties that had prompted Russia’s involvement in World War I. This easy acceptance of US dominance is difficult to explain for realists because they believe that power is the only true security in an anarchic international realm. The realist argument that a temporary alliance with the West would bolster security by avoiding war is unconvincing considering that the Russian Federation actively decreased its nuclear arsenal. It was Westernist ideology that informed Yeltsin’s decisions; “rational interests came in a distant second and reemerged as a key foreign policy motivation only at a later state” due to a lack of reciprocation.48 Yeltsin was not following realist doctrine, but rather the trend of Westernism that has been in Russia since Peter I.

6. Civilizationist and Statist Impact: the Ukrainian Crisis

The Ukrainian crisis is the most recent large-scale example of Russia’s activity in the international realm. The crisis began on November 21, 2013, when “President Yanukovych’s cabinet [abandoned] an agreement on closer trade ties with EU, instead seeking closer cooperation with Russia.”49 This in turn generated waves of dissent among the pro-Western population and major unrest soon followed. In an effort to sustain his ally, “Vladimir Putin [threw] President Yanukovych an economic lifeline, agreeing to buy $15 billion of Ukrainian debt and reduce the price of Russian gas supplies by about a third.”50 While this action was intended to stabilize Ukraine, it only further escalated the situation, and the ensuing protests resulted in mass incarcerations and deaths. On February 22, “protesters [took] control of presidential administration buildings and parliament vote[d] to remove President [Yanukovych] from power with elections set for 25 May.”51 This created a power vacuum which allowed for

48 Ibid, 73.
49 “Ukraine Crisis: Timeline” BBC.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
anti-Russian policies to be instituted. One such example was in late February when the Ukrainian “Parliament [voted] to ban Russian as the second official language, causing a wave of anger in Russian-speaking regions.”52 This political action made it clear that Ukraine was moving toward the West and set in motion Russia’s active involvement.

On February 27–28, “pro-Russian gunmen [seized] key buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol [and] unidentified gunmen in combat uniforms [appeared] outside Crimea’s main airports.”53 The next day, President Putin received authorization from parliament to use military force in Ukraine and protect Russian interests. Events quickly escalated: “[On 16 March] Crimea’s secession referendum on joining Russia [was] backed by 97% of voters [and on 18 March] President Putin sign[ed] a bill to absorb Crimea into the Russian Federation.”54 Now that Crimea was under control, attention could be shifted to the next target—Eastern Ukraine. On 15 April, “protesters [occupied] government buildings in the east Ukrainian cities of Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv, calling for a referendum on independence, [however] Ukrainian authorities regain[ed] control of Kharkiv government buildings the next day.”55 The following months saw violent conflict erupt as pro-Russian rebels battled Ukrainian forces for control over eastern Ukraine. On August 26, “Ukraine release[d] videos of captured Russian paratroopers” and the following day “rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko [said] there [were] 3–4,000 Russian civilians in rebel ranks as the separatists open up a front on the Sea of Azov and capture Novoazovsk.”56 Both incidents highlighted the strong Russian involvement at the federal and the grassroots level, ultimately demonstrating the mass support most Russians felt toward the separatists. As the fighting dragged on, each side looked to put a temporary end to the violence.

52 Ibid. The action was, however, rescinded shortly thereafter.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
On September 5, “Ukraine and pro-Russian rebels [signed] a truce in Minsk.”\textsuperscript{57} This truce has been continually breached, however; the conflict continues to this day.

Russia’s actions during the Ukraine Crisis can be better explained by civilizationism and statism than by the interpretations that realism provides. Putin’s actions have invoked strong correlations to these constructivist sub-theories in the annexation of Crimea and the continued conflict in eastern Ukraine, offering specific insights into his goals. The Russian Federation was strongly opposed to losing its influence over Ukraine because “of the historical ties between the two Slavic states, [and] the large Russian population in eastern Ukraine.”\textsuperscript{58} Additionally, Putin felt that he had an obligation to defend his interests because “the [Crimean] population includes many ultra-loyal Russians, mostly holding Russian passports, who are wholly unreconciled to Ukrainian rule.”\textsuperscript{59} Putin explicitly articulated a civilizationist position in this matter in his address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in March 2014:

> Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea... We are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other.\textsuperscript{60}

Realists argue for a different narrative that holds that “the West’s triple package of policies—NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion—added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite.”\textsuperscript{61} Realists understand the West’s “triple package” as an encroachment into the

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Donaldson and Nogee, 375.
\textsuperscript{59} Lucas, 204.
\textsuperscript{60} Putin.
\textsuperscript{61} Mearsheimer, 82.
East that demanded Russia’s attention. From a strategic point of view, “great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory,” and “Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia.” Therefore, according to realist thought, Russia had no choice but to act and annex Crimea and become involved in Ukraine. However, this perspective ignores the possibility that “Russian foreign policy did not grow more aggressive in response to US policies” but rather “changed as a result of Russian internal political dynamics,” such as Putin’s heavily chastised 2012 election. “To sustain his legitimacy at home, Putin continued to need the United States as an adversary,” diverting attention away from home to a foreign enemy. Because Putin is a strong statist, he “reacted unilaterally in a way that he believed tilted the balance of power in his favor, annexing Crimea and supporting armed mercenaries in eastern Ukraine.” This has allowed him to gain popularity with Russian citizens by demonstrating a restored commitment to their heritage and by maintaining their great power status against perceived Western aggression.

To allow Ukraine to align with the West would undermine Russia’s sovereign strength in the area, especially if Russia lost the Black Sea naval base of Sevastopol, long considered an essential component for ensuring state security in the region. For Putin, the Ukrainian crisis was a combination of a geopolitical power struggle and a direct threat to historical territorial and cultural claims. While realism may seem to explain the reasoning behind some of Putin’s actions, statism and civilizationism offer better explanations for their emotional resonance and resulting domestic popularity.

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62 Ibid.
63 McFaul, Sestanovich and Mearsheimer, 170.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
7. Conclusion

In the realm of IR, accounting for multiple perspectives is essential for understanding the actions of a sovereign nation. This in turn allows for more productive and cooperative approaches when negotiating with others. If the wrong perspective is utilized, however, the opposite effect is also true. Therefore, for a state to maximize its effectiveness in the international realm, it must take time to correctly discern the identity and mindset of every country it deals with. Unfortunately, the US has consistently applied the realist perspective to Russia out of fear and mistrust, resulting in inferior relations and missed opportunities. The US should instead utilize the constructivist lens to accurately understand the Russian political identity and how it influences the actions of its leaders. The specific Russian trends of Westernism, civilizationism, and statism all have deep roots in Russian history and have determined the shape of Russian foreign policy over the last century. My analysis of Russian policy decisions in four major international events—World Wars I and II, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Ukraine crisis—suggests that they are all best explained by a constructivist approach. Although realism at times would seem to offer similar answers, constructivism not only explains why history happened the way it did, but pinpoints the unique historical trends that have shaped the mindset of Russian leaders.

If the US were to adopt a foreign policy approach toward Russia informed by constructivism, both nations would undoubtedly enjoy better international negotiations, cooperation and perhaps even long-term partnership. While the latter years of the Obama administration saw the deterioration of relations, the election of President Trump may allow the possibility of another reset in relations with Russia. Regardless of party politics, if the US
leadership wants a genuine change, they must fundamentally alter their approach when dealing with a reemerging Russia.

Works Cited


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