

Beyond Weimar-Russia: The Putin-Medvedev Duumvirate as
Imperial Revanchist

Thesis

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Abstract

Throughout the 1990s, many scholars were compelled to draw parallels between the newly founded Russian Federation and the failed democratic institutions of interwar Germany. Scholars worried that a lethal combination of social, economic, and geopolitical turmoil would propel the Russian government to the same tragic fate as their Weimar counterparts. Unwilling to forget the horrifying results of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and subsequent rise of the Third Reich, intellectuals recognized the analogy as a valuable tool for determining when, why, and with what consequences young democracies fail. While Vladimir Putin's recent consolidation and verticalization of power has been well documented, the Weimar-Russia analogy has, since 1999, received comparatively little attention from academia or the media. The present exercise implements structural analogical reasoning to give historical perspective to the latest manifestations of the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate, ultimately suggesting that the country remains squarely on a Weimar trajectory.

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1. Introduction

The comparison between the Weimar Republic of interwar Germany and post-Soviet Russia gained quite a bit of notoriety in the mid-nineteen nineties. The subject of several books and scholarly articles, the analogy seemed to offer some impressive parallels between the two fledgling democracies and became quite a trendy study in its own right - and for good reason. The fall of the Weimar Republic of Germany was accompanied by the advent of the most vicious regime in modern history. Between 1939 and 1945, Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party prosecuted a war that carried a price tag of an estimated 50 million human lives.¹ If there were similarities between interwar Germany and post-Soviet Russia, they were certainly worth studying - if not for fear of the ascension to power of a new Russian Hitler, than simply to understand why young post-imperial democracies fail.

¹ Although estimates vary greatly, most historians agree that the number lies somewhere in the vicinity of 50 million.

The foundation of the Weimar-Russia analogy can be located across several dimensions. Most scholarly contributions to the study emphasize at least three parallels that are critical to the validity of the comparison. First, common to both Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia was the loss of an enormous empire and much of its territories. The legacies of the respective empires weighed heavily on the collective psyche of the new nations, making a clean break from the failures of the past difficult as, indeed, in both cases such a break (if one can call it that) was not fully achieved. Second, both young democracies encountered periods of deep economic turmoil, complete with catastrophic bouts of hyperinflation and declines in production that eventually lead to the pervasive loss of life-savings and widespread impoverisation. A third line of comparison can be found in the emergence within both the Weimar Republic and post-1991 Russia of an imperial revanchist movement. In the case of interwar Germany, the consequences of this movement to the right are known all too well, seared into the minds of modern observers with images of corpse-covered battlefields and concentration camps. The possible consequences of such

a movement in today's Russia are equally frightening, and are enhanced by the increased destructive powers of modern weaponry.

Chief among the fears of Weimar analogy observers in the 1990s was the disintegration of Russia's newfound democracy and an imperialist backslide that would once again threaten the stability of world peace. Unlike the Germany that Hitler inherited in the 1930s, the atmosphere in post-Soviet Russia has been charged with the existence of a nuclear arsenal capable of precipitating a global holocaust of utterly unfathomable proportions. The revanche so feared at the height of the Weimar-Russia analogy's popularity was expected to be precipitated by the downfall of the Yeltsin administration and the emergence of a new extreme Right or Left, lead by one of the many ultra-nationalist or neo-communist players of the mid-1990s. As was seen with Boris Yeltsin's resignation in 1999 and the appointment and subsequent election of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, such theories seemingly proved themselves to be unfounded. It is the central thesis of this paper, then, that although neither nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy nor communist Gennady Zyuganov were

ever elected to the presidency of the young Russian Federation, the ultimate fears of the Weimar-Russia analogists might still be realized.

2. Note on the Use of Arguments by Analogy

Arguments by analogy are generally considered by the formal logician to be unacceptable and are often dismissed out of pocket as useless or misleading. Since, it is argued, analogies appeal more to emotion than they do to reason, the use of an argument by analogy is sometimes said to be intellectually dishonest.² This narrow interpretation, however, largely ignores the manifest benefits of the responsible usage of analogical argumentation. Observers critical of arguments by analogy will often attempt to poke holes in the logical integrity of foreign policy analogies. The Weimar-Russia scenario is certainly no exception, with one notable scholar recently complaining that Western thinking on Russia has "too often substituted analogy for analysis."³ While I make no attempt to argue that issues as major as those generated by the recent military and economic resurgence of Russia can be understood without proper analysis, the argument by analogy

² Wilson, P.R. "On the Argument by Analogy." *Philosophy of Science*. Vol. 31 No. 1 (1964) 34.

³ King, Charles. "The Five-Day War." *Foreign Affairs*. November/December, 2008. p 11.

provides a useful way of understanding what decisions a similarly-positioned great power has taken in the past as well as the matrix of outcomes that can be expected from similar decisions taken today. Thus, before examining the foundations of the Weimar-Russia analogy, it is worthwhile here to give a brief explanation of how analogy will be used in this paper.

As stated above, critics often complain that analogy is not a legitimate form of logical argumentation. This is merely a false accusation of fallacy! Although it may appear confusing at first, analogy can be shown definitively to maintain its own important and rightful place in inductive reasoning. The first accusation that the critical scholar will make is that no analogy (foreign policy or otherwise) is able to prove a hypothesis. While this is, as a matter of fact, absolutely true, it should be noted that although some experiments will objectively disprove a hypothesis, no single experiment can deductively prove correct a hypothesis either!⁴ Analogies can, however, increase a hypothesis' probability towards some limit value. This limit value is approached using analogy by narrowing the field of likely outcomes and represents some

⁴ Wilson, 34.

reasonably reliable expectation of the success of a given hypothesis (i.e. that historical examples might suggest that the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate is revanchist in nature). It should be mentioned here again that, due to the inductive nature of hypothesis, this limit value can never be attained (through the use of analogy or otherwise), but this fact should not detract from the overriding importance of using various forms of observations and tests to approach it statistically, thereby providing policy-makers with an informed platform from which to make decisions.

Before taking a look at how analogy is applied specifically to foreign policy decision-making, let us take a moment to illustrate a second principle that is central to any argument by analogy - the law of inverse probability. Let us assume that phenomenon *A* is a matter of historical fact and is known to us relatively well. Phenomenon *B*, on the other hand, is new and its properties are generally unknown. It is discovered that unknown phenomenon *B* begins to demonstrate several characteristics structurally similar to those of known phenomenon *A*. As more research is conducted, more and more characteristics are found to be in common between the two phenomena. As

the number of mutual observable characteristics of phenomena *A* and *B* increases, so too does the probability that an additional property of *A* might find an analog in a potentially unobserved property of *B*. Here again, we are moving toward a limit value that, if reached (statistically impossible), would give the definitive probability of 1 to the existence of a set of properties in phenomenon *B* structurally identical to those possessed by phenomenon *A*.

To clarify, let us assume that phenomenon *A* contains within it properties *w*, *x*, *y*, and *z* (*Awxyz*). If phenomenon *B* demonstrates only property *w* (*Bw*), then the probability of the discovery of property *Bz* is initially quite low. However, if phenomenon *B* is later discovered to demonstrate not only property *w*, but also properties *x* and *y* (*Bwxy*), then the probability of phenomenon *B*'s eventual demonstration of property *z* (*Bz*, *Bwxyz*) is drastically increased.

So too does the analogical model apply to the real world. In the case of the present exercise, we can apply the analogical model to deduce that, as more characteristics are found to be mutual between inter-War Germany (known phenomenon *A*) and post-Soviet Russia (lesser-known phenomenon *B*), the probability increases that

contemporary trends in the latter can be better understood with due reference to the former. In sets of foreign policy situations that share a relatively low number of structural similarities, the argument by analogy is weak and can be discarded (much to the enjoyment of its critics). As in deductive logic, however, pairs of foreign policy situations in which multiple layers of structural similarities are uncovered can be used to increase the probability of some hypotheses and decrease the probability of others. In this case, the accumulation historical structural similarities between the Weimar Republic and post-Soviet Russia suggest a structurally similar fate. Likewise, the lack of structural similarities between Russia and, say, the Incan Empire, indicates that any hypotheses suggesting a future invasion and subsequent colonization of Russia by foreigners are not worth investigating any further. It is in this way that analogies provide a type of litmus test that suggests which hypotheses are worth a second look and which are not.

Apart from the general intellectual skepticism of the validity of arguments by analogy, another way scholars attack analogy is by woefully proclaiming that the number of similarities between two analogous phenomena are, in

most cases, much fewer than are their mutual differences. The flaw in logic, however, is on their own behalf. Take for example the analogy that an electric battery is like a reservoir. The foolish observer may critically proclaim that batteries and reservoirs are drastically different in both contents and size and, thus, too different to provide any useful information about one another. While it is certainly true that most electric batteries are small and acid-containing, and that most reservoirs are much larger and generally contain water, our observer has overlooked the importance of the *structural* nature of analogy. This identification of *non-structural* dissimilarity between batteries and reservoirs does not weaken analogy's effectiveness in the least. Paradoxically, neither could we increase the effectiveness of the analogy by stating (even if it were the case) that batteries and reservoirs are both cylindrical. No, the critical *structural* similarity between batteries and reservoirs is that both are controllable containers by which potential energy can be collected, stored, and released. Despite the fact that most reservoirs differ from electric batteries in size and substance, the integrity of the analogy therefore remains

intact.⁵ Likewise, although one may find important differences between Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia (they are, after all, drastically different societies), the essence of the analogy should remain intact until the number of common structural similarities becomes drastically overwhelmed by structural dissimilarities (an occasion that does not appear altogether likely).

As shown above, analogy is well suited to increase the probability of a given hypothesis and, therefore, deserves a valid place in inductive logic. In the often complex and dynamic case of international relations and foreign policy, there are often nearly an infinite number of hypotheses from which to work when attempting to formulate possible outcomes of a particular situation. In the case of the Weimar-Russia scenario, far removed from the controlled laboratory environment, proving definitively a hypothesis is not only impossible (recall our discussion of limit values), but it is also unnecessary. Again, the value of analogy in this instance is in its ability to decrease the number of *ab initio* hypotheses to be tested. In this case, by using our knowledge of certain similarities between two like phenomena - one well known (base domain, Weimar

⁵ Gentner, Dedre. "Structure Mapping: A Theoretical Framework for Analogy." *Cognitive Science*. No. 7 (1983) 156.

Germany) and one lesser known (target domain, post-Soviet Russia), we may deduce that there exists a certain set of hypotheses that are statistically more likely to come to fruition than others and, therefore, are more worthy of finding their way into real-world policy planning and implementation.

Regardless of whether or not a scholar is prepared to accept arguments by analogy in general, he would be remiss not to concede that they are an absolutely critical element in cognitive psychology and, more specifically, in foreign policy decision-making. Analogy is, as a matter of fact, a tool used widely by top international decision-makers. As Robert Jervis puts it in his seminal work, "Previous international events provide the statesman with a range of imaginable situations and allow him to detect patterns and causal links that can help him understand his world."⁶ The 20th century is full of instances where diplomatic elites made official reference to their use of historical analogy in dealing with novel foreign policy circumstances.

According to Yuen Foong Khong, since World War I there have been an overwhelming number of such instances, weaving the elite usage of historical analogy tightly into the timeline

⁶ Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1976.

of recent history's most important events.⁷ The examples run the analogical gamut from Woodrow Wilson's absurd fear that his common alma mater with James Madison (Princeton University) could somehow bring about renewed trans-Atlantic tensions similar to those of the War of 1812; to Kennedy's rejection of a strike option in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis, fearing a repeat of the mistakes of 1914 as well as a sort of "Pearl Harbor in reverse."⁸ Other important examples include the evocation of the appeasement of Hitler at Munich in the decision-making of the Korean War, Vietnam War, and Iran-Contra affair (in the case of the Contras, the counter-analogy of choice was ironically Vietnam itself). One might even point to Deng Xioaping's 1989 suppression of China's pro-democracy movement as a decision taken according to historical analogy with the Cultural Revolution.⁹

The point here is not to suggest whether historical analogies are or have been used rightly or wrongly, but rather simply to indicate that such arguments very often play a significant role in aiding policy-makers charged with making important decisions. While in retrospect, it

⁷ Yuen Foong Khong. *Analogies at War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 71-208.

⁸ Yuen Foong Khong, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

is probably a good thing that Kennedy's fear of a reverse-Pearl Harbor kept him from ordering a military strike in 1962, and Wilson's ludicrous fears of renewed Anglo-American tensions were almost certainly unfounded, what is of interest to the present exercise is the fact that analogies served as cognitive devices that assisted policy-makers in evaluating novel situations. According to Khong, the ways in which these analogies help decision-makers are six-fold: they

1. help define the nature of the situation confronting the policy-maker;
2. help assess what might be at stake;
3. provide prescriptions for action;
4. help to predict the various alternatives' chances for success;
5. help evaluate the moral rightness of the alternatives; and
6. warn of any known dangers associated with the alternatives.¹⁰

That humans use this sort of framework in order to make sense of their world gives credence to the case made earlier that arguments by analogy are a valid means by which to think logically about new situations. The very criticality of schemas and analogies to human comprehension and the systematic biases associated with them indicate

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

that they have been born out of a multimillennial process of internal experimentation.¹¹ Thus, the argument by analogy should be understood not as a convenient framework for lazy-minded thinking, but rather as a useful tool that can assist responsible decision-makers in unraveling and making sense of new and complex foreign policy situations. The current situation in Russia is certainly complex, and its analogy with the Weimar Republic of Germany deserves the full attention of those scholars and decision-makers not intellectually frightened by the thought of its use.

¹¹ For much deeper analysis of schematic processing see Khong and Markus and Zajonc, *The Cognitive Perspective*. Handbook of Social Psychology: Theory and Method. 1985.

3. The Roots of the Weimar-Russia Analogy

In 1995, the former Soviet dissident Alexander Yanov published a book that would galvanize amongst several of his contemporaries a concern that the fledgling democratic institutions of post-Soviet Russia were following a path similar to that which was taken some 70 years earlier in the Weimar Republic of Germany. In his book *Posle Yeltsina: Veimarskaya Rossiya* [After Yeltsin: Weimar Russia], Yanov outlines the many forces of imperial revanche at work in his native fatherland. Several books and scholarly articles dedicated to the topic would follow; in one way or another, critics and supporters alike found Yanov's analogy to be exciting. Each subsequent article seemed to offer a new analog between the two countries. Indeed, if one were to combine within a single book the myriad levels upon which a Weimar Russia comparison could be drawn, such a volume would rather resemble an encyclopedia (at least in size). For the purposes of this paper, only the three most common comparisons will be

examined, with the third serving both as a function and result of the first two.

Perhaps the most obvious comparison between interwar Germany and post-1991 Russia lies in that fact that they were both born of cataclysmic imperial collapse.¹² In the case of the Weimar Republic, Germany's defeat in World War I was not only characterized by a loss of much of its territory, population, and resources, but also by a supreme national sense of embarrassment. For a culture that had lived for some time within a "cult of victory", such a defeat was a mortifying shame, and left in its wake a legacy that would prove to be catastrophic to the development of ensuing democratic institutions.¹³ Thomas Mann warned of such a legacy in 1922:

The State has become our business; a situation profoundly hated by considerable sections of citizens and young people who will simply have none of it because, forsooth, it did not come to birth in triumph and the exercise of free choice, but in defeat and collapse, making it seem bound up forever with weakness, shame, and foreign domination.¹⁴

¹² Hanson & Kopstein, "The Weimar/Russia Comparison," *Post-Soviet Affairs*. No. 13, Issue 3. 252-283.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 256

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 256

It was this perception of foreign influences in domestic decision-making that would precipitate *Dolchstoßlegende*¹⁵ (the stab in the back myth), which "offered an explanation of the unacceptable and conveniently tied together the external enemy, who for the moment was unassailable, with the internal enemy, revolution, Marxism, Jewry, the republic, fulfillment."¹⁶ It is such an abrupt, unexpected, and - most importantly - incomplete fracture with a great imperial past that links the Weimar Republic with post-Soviet Russia.¹⁷

During the second half of the 20th century, the Soviet Union had (at substantial domestic expense) developed itself into a nuclear superpower whose empire stretched across the globe from East Germany to the Pacific Ocean and from the Arctic Sea to the Tajik border with Afghanistan. Throughout the decline and eventual collapse of the Soviet empire, the formerly subservient republics began to break away. Just as had happened to many Germans after World War I, millions of ethnic Russians were now stranded in the "near abroad." Living in the same homes and apartments but in new countries, these recasted foreigners were at the

¹⁵ For a more penetrating look at *Dolchstoßlegende's* role in Weimar history, see Feuchtwanger, "From Weimar to Hitler." 9, 25, 108-109.

¹⁶ Feuchtwanger, "From Weimar to Hitler," 109

¹⁷ Fink, "The Weimar Republic as Imperial Interregnum," 264

mercy of citizenship laws that "limited their political influence vis-à-vis titular ethnic populations of the Newly Independent States."¹⁸ Domestically, the tragic results of Gorbachev and Yeltsin's political and market reforms engendered great dissatisfaction amongst the general Russian population. Eerily reminiscent of Weimar's *Dolchstosslegende*, many Russians believed an *anschluss* of Western financiers and domestic traitors had betrayed Russian national interests.

A second evocative parallel between Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia can be drawn on the economic level. In interwar Germany, the first major blow to the economy was the paralyzing wave of strikes that ran across the country - an effect largely precipitated by German military capitulation.¹⁹ This was followed by a five year period of extreme depreciation and, subsequently, staggering inflation. Much of this turmoil was the result of German "organized" capitalism (read: protectionism), in which "significant portions of the industrial economy were not subject to internal competition or were otherwise protected from external markets with extensive cartelization and high

¹⁸ Hanson & Kopstein, "The Weimar/Russia Comparison," 266

¹⁹ Ferguson & Granville, "Weimar on the Volga," p. 1063

tariffs."²⁰ These subsidies were not balanced by an adequate system of taxation, not only driving the economy into the red, but also serving to conceal what was becoming massive, statewide unemployment. Subsequently, the Reichsbank monetized government bonds, treasury bills, and state loan bank notes, increasing sevenfold the actual amount of circulating currency by November 1918.²¹ At its peak, Weimar's currency in circulation was increasing by nearly 80% every month.²² Germany's economic situation had become so dire that, in 1922, the country defaulted on its obligation to pay its World War I reparations. Only after a complete collapse of the paper mark and a sober political-economic regime-change two years later did inflation finally cease. After a short period of economic stability, the worldwide recession of the Great Depression hit the internationally dependant Weimar Republic extremely hard, in large part precipitating the rise of Hitler's revisionist National Socialist German Worker's Party. It was only under this regime that, through a series of public works programs and vast military build-up, the German economy saw a great resurgence.

²⁰ Hanson & Kopstein, "The Weimar/Russia Comparison," p. 258

²¹ See Ferguson & Granville, 1064.

²² Ibid., 1064.

In the mid-1990's, at the height of the Weimar-Russia analogy's popularity, the economic situation in Russia seemed to display many characteristics tragically similar to those of interwar Germany. The Center for Strategic and International Studies outlined the following problems in their 1999 edition of the annual Net Assessment of the Russian Economy:

The gross domestic product (GDP) of the Russian Federation has declined each year since 1989, apart from a 0.8 percent increase in 1997. The current GDP is about 55 percent of the 1989 level. After a drop of 4.6 percent in 1998, a further decline of 5-6 percent is anticipated for 1999.

On February 5 [1999], the state Duma passed the 1999 budget as its fourth reading by 305 votes to 58. It provides for revenues of 474 billion rubles (\$20.6 billion), expenditure of 575 billion rubles (\$25 billion), leaving a deficit of 101 billion rubles, or 2.5 percent of GDP. It is predicated on an annual inflation rate of 30 percent and an exchange rate of 21.5 rubles to the dollar. Both [assumptions are] considered unrealistic.

Inflation in 1998 amounted to 84.4 percent. In the month of January 1999, retail prices rose by 8.5 percent. Real disposable income fell by 16 percent in 1998. In December 1998, 39.8 million Russians had incomes lower than the subsistence level of 717 rubles (about \$31) a month.

Standard & Poor's has cut its rating for Russian long-term debt in foreign exchange to CCC-, the lowest rated sovereign debt in the world. The central bank of Russia plans to close about 720 of the nations 1,500 banks.²³

²³ Center of Strategic and International Studies, Russian and Eurasian Program, "Net Assessment of the Russian Economy."

The report brings to light several of the most important factors contributing to the abysmal nature of the Russian economy throughout the first several years of the democratic Russian Federation. As was indicated earlier, the Yeltsin administration and its western-supported shock therapy program were largely blamed for the massive inflation and wholesale evaporation of life-savings. A new leader who could offer a stable economic future was sure to be well received. As in Weimar Germany, the stage in Russia was set for the emergence of a new regime ready to restore a sense of stability and confidence in the government's economic policies.

The third and perhaps most pressing parallel between the Weimar Republic and post-Soviet Russia is the emergence of a movement toward imperial revanche. Comparisons on this level, it must be noted, serve not only as an addition to the first two, but also as their function. After all, there must be some form of unrest or general dissatisfaction with the conduct of a particular regime before enough momentum can be generated to effect a power change. In the case of the young democracies examined in this study, the embarrassing loss of territory, ethnic cohorts, and power, coupled with several violent bouts of

economic despair were sufficient to breed an atmosphere conducive to revanchist ideology. With the "glory days" of their formerly great empire still fresh in their minds and struggling democracy's bitter taste in their mouths, citizens of Weimar Germany and Russia were ready for a new direction. Unfortunately, and with astounding consequences, the direction in which they ultimately moved was backwards.

The citizens of interwar Germany were no strangers to imperialism. By the time the National Socialist German Worker's Party began to gather and consolidate power, the Weimar democracy was just over a decade old. Not only were most Germans' memories of the Wilhemian era informed by a strong sense of pride, but the spread of *Dolchstosslegende* fostered a general mindset that their former status had been taken from them unjustly. This did not sit well with a German citizenry that was enveloped in severe economic turmoil. Adolf Hitler was a man poised to take advantage of the turbulent atmosphere created by the instability of the young Weimar democracy. His appeals to the people for recovery from the economic despair of the great depression and a restoration of German national pride were heard loud and clear. The growing inflation and unemployment bred a

type of disillusionment with the Weimar government that was irreconcilable. By the last free elections of March 1933, the country's fate was all but sealed:

There was a unique concentration in [Weimar] Germany of imperial nostalgia and national extremism that was grasped by Hitler and the Nazis. A generation of disappointed monarchists and disgruntled or indifferent citizens, who had been trained to revere the state over the individual, supported - or at least gave insufficient resistance to - the Nazi rise to power.²⁴

In mid-1933, the Weimar Republic - Germany's first democratic government - fell to Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party. The regime's murderous quest for European and world hegemony began without delay.

Although the various policy changes and manifestations of the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate will be covered in greater depth in the next section, it is necessary first briefly to complete the link between the political climate in Russia in the 1990's and that of interwar Germany. In the mid-1990's, Alexander Yanov and other Weimar analogy insiders took notice of what they believed could be a growing revanchist movement in Russia reminiscent of the one that precipitated Hitler's Nazi takeover. On both ends of the political spectrum they observed the emergence of leaders

²⁴ Fink, "The Weimar Republic as 'Imperial Interregnum'," 279.

disillusioned with Yeltsin's reforms. Personalities such as the Right-wing nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky and neo-communist Gennady Zyuganov were making convincing bids to succeed the current administration and ascend to the presidency of the Russian Federation. Both men, as did Adolf Hitler before them, sought to restore the glory of what was once a superpower in competition for the ideological and militaristic domination of the world. Albeit by different means, both Zhirinovsky and Zyuganov yearned for the restoration to greatness of their Russian motherland. Just as in Weimar Germany, the "glory days" of the Brezhnev administration in Russia evoked memories of a nation that played a leading role in virtually all aspects of the international arena. Additionally, the economically tumultuous nature of the 1990's gave the revanchists direct access to one of the most sensitive areas of the Russia psyche - the desire for stability. If either leader could shore up enough support to overthrow or otherwise succeed Boris Yeltsin, the stage would be set for the implementation of extremist policies and the ultimate completion of the Weimar Russia analogy. As Yanov himself put it, the rise to power of Zhirinovsky or Zyuganov would be "in fact, the most spectacular corroboration of the

Weimar scenario. If we are indeed facing a Weimar Russia, mustn't she then sooner or later acquire her own Hitler?"²⁵

²⁵ Yanov, "Weimar Russia," 112

4. Putin and Medvedev as Weimar Revanchists

If the credibility of the Weimar analogy relied upon Russia's eventual recognition of some extreme form of government, then the political realities of the late 20th and very early 21st centuries suggested that the comparison was necessarily illusory. Neither Zhirinovsky, Zyuganov, nor any of the other overtly anti-democratic players of the mid-1990s rose to power. Instead, a faceless and politically unimpressive individual won the day. Boris Yeltsin stepped down from the presidency on New Year's Eve 1999, leaving the country to his recently appointed Prime Minister, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Serving quietly on Yeltsin's Kremlin staff since 1996, Putin seemed interested neither in large-scale political restructuring nor adopting the anti-Western foreign policies that so engrossed the opposition parties. Indeed, after the attacks of 11 September 2001, US President George W. Bush saw in Putin and his anti-extremist rhetoric a great ally in America's newly initiated "War on Terror."

Putin did, however, begin almost immediately to institute a variety of domestic policies that would

"streamline" the Russian political process.²⁶ In fact, Putin's well-known 2004 repeal of gubernatorial elections in the wake of the Beslan tragedy (during which more than three hundred civilians - mostly children - were killed) was preceded by several policy shifts aimed at bringing under state control all forms of Russian "civil society":

- Vladimir Putin reorganized the country's 89 oblasts into seven super-regions, overseen by presidential appointees hand-selected from the military and intelligence services;

- he removed regional governors from the upper house of the Federal Assembly, effectively depriving the leaders of any significant influence over national legislation;²⁷

- Putin progressively merged several of the country's strongest political parties into one mega-party, *Edinaya Rossiya* [United Russia], effectively fusing with his office the parliamentary majority;²⁸ and

- by 2004, Putin had organized the administration of the government so that 20 of the 61 ministries reported directly to his office. The remainder of the ministries were the responsibility of the Prime Minister (who Putin could dismiss at any time).²⁹

Putin's wholesale reorganization and consolidation of the Russian power structure provides just a few examples of late Weimar-like authoritarian backsliding. Perhaps even scarier is the proclivity to nationalism that has been growing steadily within the bosom of even the most moderate Russians throughout the Putin years. As one observer

²⁶ Lynch, "How Russia is not Ruled," 159

²⁷ Corwin, "Has a Year Without Yeltsin Been a Year Without Change?"

²⁸ see International Herald Tribune, "2-Party Merger Bolsters Putin"

²⁹ see Kryshtanovska & White, "Putin's Militocracy"

matter-of-factly put it, "For Putin the 'inevitability of nationalism' is not subjective but objective: its causes are linked to all political development of processes at home and abroad. We should have no illusions on this score."³⁰ Some of these causes have frightening implications for the West and provide powerful ammunition for observers who seek to liken the brand of nationalism under Putin to that which followed the collapse of Weimar Germany. At minimum, the following elements should be considered essential to the "contemporary Russian nationalist" ideology:

- patriotism that places the highest value on the prosperity of their motherland, Russia, rather than the "well-being of humanity as a whole";
- anti-Westernism, or hostility toward the West (especially the United States) and rejection of its culture and political values;
- imperialism, expressed in their desire to reunite Russia with the former Soviet republics (at least the Slavic ones);
- militarism, that is, a commitment to revive Russia as a "military superpower", rejection of the policy of disarmament, and a striving to restore the military-industrial complex;
- authoritarianism, which is understood as a rejection of liberal democracy, love of "strong authorities" and a "firm hand," a hope for a charismatic leader, and the intent "to establish order and discipline in the country";
- cultural monostylism or criticism of individualism and egotism, encouraging collective morality and censoring "immorality and dissipation" in the mass media;

³⁰ Poliannikov, "The Logic of Authoritarianism," 63

- xenophobia, which manifests itself specifically in distrust and suspicion of "aliens";
- economic *dirigisme*, meaning demands for widespread state interference in the economy, the nationalization of strategic branches, the protection of domestic manufacturers from foreign competition, and a paternalistic society; and
- demographic pessimism, expressed in overtly gloomy, even alarmist assessments of demographic trends and the fear that the Russian ethnic group will die out.³¹

The nationalist positions that have come to pass under Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, while unnerving in their own right, are downright scary when viewed in the context of the Weimar-Russia analogy. Indeed, a careless glance at the list above could yield a confused observer, unsure whether they were reading about Medvedev's Russia or Hitler's Germany. To say that the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate has succeeded in gaining support from Russia's nationalist Right would be a gross understatement. Speaking about Putin's federal reforms, the ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy declared: "This is exactly what the LDPR [Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia] and our faction in the State Duma have always demanded... we are pleased to state that the president's decrees confirm the correctness of our conclusions." The nationalist would later indicate of the LDPR:

³¹ Ibid., 58

"More and more frequently, we are seeing our policy line proven correct, our advice being heeded, and many processes in our country being developed in the ways we have proposed... we are happy to see our ideas and thoughts winning acceptance in society and by the new authorities."³²

It is just this type of exploitation of nationalist sentiments that was critical to Adolf Hitler's consolidation of power in the 1930's.

³² Ibid., 59

5. Revanchism Realized

As discussed in section II, arguments by analogy are often considered dubious, but may, however, be made stronger over time as more properties are found to be analogous between the two respective phenomena. In the case of the Weimar-Russia analogy, several structural similarities have been enumerated above, the most important of which are an incomplete break with an imperial past, a tumultuous economic environment, and the emergence of revanchist leadership. While it is hoped that these three analogous properties taken together offer a convincing argument (or at least a legitimate plea for the resumption of intensive research on the subject), the probability of the greater analogy's ultimate success can only be increased through the discovery of new properties in contemporary Russia that demonstrate structural similarities to those of Weimar and post-Weimar Germany. Or, cast in a different light, the analogy can only be said to be of any *practical* use if it continues to produce somewhat predictable results that aid the policy-maker by

serving as cognitive devices for evaluating novel foreign policy developments through analogy with those of the past. The questions, then, are such: Have the similarities between Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia ended? Is the analogy no longer of value in giving perspective to developments in Russia? My answer to these questions is a resounding no!

To support my argument that the Weimar-Russia analogy is still alive and well, I will highlight here one important structural similarity between Hitler's invasion of the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the recent invasion of the Georgian territory of South Ossetia by Russia. In uncovering this new analog, the goal is, again, not to sound the alarm that general war is imminent or even a remote possibility. It is worth reemphasizing that 1930s Germany and contemporary Russia are, in fact, extremely different places; however this does not weaken the analogy. In fact, the brilliance of analysis by analogy (stated at length in Section II) lies in its ability to compare heterogeneous phenomena separated by large amounts of space and time. Here again, the analogy points only to *structural* similarities, simply placing Russia on a Weimar

trajectory rather than on a collision course with events that in any existential way resemble those of World War II.

As a result of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the new state of Czechoslovakia came to include the ancient boundaries of the provinces of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia.³³ The hope of the victorious powers in this decision was to provide Czechoslovakia with an ostensibly more defensible border - a border which would be used to protect the nascent state from future German aggression and would reinforce Czechoslovakia, in the eyes of the French at least, as an important counterweight to the Reich's power in central Europe.³⁴ As is almost always the case in instances of border revisions, however, the problems that were created far outweighed those that were solved. Ironically, the new Czechoslovakian territory included along its western borderlands about 3.5 million ethnic Germans, the vast majority of which resented their subjugation to Prague from the start.³⁵

Although the 1920s in the Sudetenland was a period of relative calm, the Great Depression struck the highly industrial region heavily and the attendant economic

³³ Rich, Norman. "Hitler's War Aims: Ideology, the Nazi State and the Course of Expansion." (New York: WW Norton & Co.), 101.

³⁴ Rich, 106.

³⁵ Domarus, Max. "Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations, 1932-1945." Volume II. (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers) 1187.

hardships perturbed many previously dormant feelings of national vexation. With the rise to power in Germany of the Nazi party in 1933, many of the emerging German nationalist parties in the Sudetenland were clamped down upon by the Czechoslovakian government, leaving behind only those which functioned strictly within the letter of the law.³⁶ The Sudeten German party, led by Konrad Henlein, did just that, and by 1936 enjoyed not only the support of the majority of the previously factionalized German nationalists, but also that of Hitler himself.³⁷ Hitler took great interest in Henlein and the Sudeten German party, for it was through their proxy that the Reich would organize the eventual liberation of the Sudetenland and its majority German population from Czechoslovakian rule.

While militarily, Hitler's quest for "living space" (*lebensraum*) and for the return to the Reich of the Sudeten diaspora could have begun earlier than it did, the German military-industrial machine's relative advantage over Czechoslovakian defenses was only one of a great many strategic concerns. Czechoslovakia's alliance with Britain and France compelled Hitler to present a diplomatically acceptable justification for the eventual retaking of the

³⁶ Rich, 102.

³⁷ Ibid., 102.

Sudetenland - one which could help ameliorate such an overt violation of international norms. To this end, and in what will later be shown as highly analogous to the Russian situation in South Ossetia, Hitler chose the principle of self-determination.

In a letter to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain dated 23 September, 1938, Hitler had the following to say about the imminent invasion of the Sudetenland:

For nearly two decades the Germans, as well as the various other nationalities in Czechoslovakia, have been maltreated in the most unworthy manner, tortured, economically destroyed, and, above all, prevented from realizing for themselves also the right of the nations to self-determination... What interests me, Your Excellency, is not the recognition of the principle that this territory is to go to Germany, but solely the realization of this principle. I can only emphasize to Your Excellency that these Sudeten Germans are not coming back to the German Reich in virtue of the gracious or benevolent sympathy of other nations, but on the ground of their own will based on the right of self-determination of the nations.³⁸

What is interesting here is not only Hitler's insistence upon the "protection" of the ethnic Germans living in the Sudetenland, but also his supposed dedication to the very principle of national self-determination in general, as

³⁸ Domarus, 1174-1175.

outlined after World War I in Wilson's Fourteen Points. Referring to the national unrest in the Sudetenland created as a result of territorial reorganization following the Great War, Hitler continued:

[T]hey simply took three and a half million Germans in clear defiance of the rights and desires of the Germans for self-determination. It exists contrary to the clear desire and will of the nations thus raped and in clear defiance of their right to self-determination. For the first time, I demand clearly that, now twenty years after President Wilson's pledges, the right to self-determination must become a reality for these three and a half million as well.³⁹

Thus, Hitler was able to provide - one hesitates to use the phrase "ideologically sound" - justification for his invasion of Czechoslovakia. Although he made clear that the Sudetenland would be his "last territorial demand in Europe,"⁴⁰ history has proved otherwise and, in the process, proved that his use of the principle of national self-determination - although a brilliant tactic - was little more than a temporary exigency for the sake of implementing a revanchist ideology while minimizing the international backlash naturally precipitated by such a brazen provocation.

³⁹ Ibid., 1189.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1187.

Germany's use of the principle of national self-determination in the Sudetenland as a pretext for invasion of a sovereign nation can be seen as an analogical forbear to the Russian usage of that same principle during the invasion of South Ossetia. Consider the following statement made by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in an interview with CNN on 28 August, 2008:

For us to take this step was the only way we could... prevent further escalation of the conflict, and to prevent the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. The second reason is that every people has a right to self-determination. This is provided for in the provisions of the UN Charter, the relevant international conventions and the Helsinki Final Act.⁴¹

While the exact circumstances under which violence erupted in South Ossetia remain uncertain, it is well within the realm of possibility that Russia's invasion of Georgia did indeed prevent the bloodshed of civilian Russian nationals living there. It is not, however, possible to assume that the principle of self-determination was truly a motivating factor for the Kremlin. After its staunch opposition to the independence of Kosovo from Serbia earlier in 2008 (ironically citing fears of setting a precedent for future

⁴¹ Interview by the Russian President Dmitri Medvedev with CNN. Available from: <http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/warfare/statement260808en.htm> Accessed 28 May 2009.

separatist movements), any Russian claim of genuine support for national self-determination is dubious at best.⁴² Just as Germany's 1938 evocation of the principle of self-determination was used to gain some kind of diplomatic legitimacy, so too is Russia's application of the principle today.

The dubiousness of Hitler and Medvedev's evocation of the principle of national self-determination should not, however blur the structural similarities in their tactics. Both leaders were confronted with the tragedy of a drastically reduced territory with national cohorts living on the other side of newly-drawn borders. While for Hitler and Putin-Medvedev the principle of self-determination was clearly an exigency, their decisions to initiate military action within the boundaries of foreign states were not. As did Weimar Germany, Moscow yearned for the rehabilitation of its image as a global power, and used (quite successfully) military intervention as a vehicle to that end. Here, one might point out that Hitler's true motivation for the invasion of the Sudetenland was *lebensraum*, where Putin-Medvedev had no ostensible

⁴² "Russia reportedly rejects fourth draft resolution on Kosovo status." *SETimes.com*. Available from: http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/newsbriefs/setimes/newsbriefs/2007/06/29/nb-07 Accessed 18 April 2009.

territorial aspirations. While this is a valid and important difference in motivating factors, the underlying theme of revanchism is striking in both cases. Indeed, Hitler's territorial imperative and the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate's regional power imperative are structurally quite similar. For Hitler, not a great deal of *lebensraum* was to be found in the Sudetenland. For Putin and Medvedev, the power to be gained by invading a comparatively defenseless nation was similarly negligible. However, what is structurally important in both cases is the undeniably revanchist trend. As we know, contrary to Hitler's duplicitous 1938 letter to Neville Chamberlain, the Sudetenland was not the Reich's "last territorial demand in Europe." Likewise, the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate's claims that Russia's intervention in Georgia was necessary from a humanitarian standpoint notwithstanding, the reality of the invasion serves as yet another data point punctuating an increasingly revanchist trajectory.

6. Conclusions

After considering the parallel histories of post-Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany, a logically pressing question, then, might be "what is next for Russia?" If the processes of the Weimar-Russia scenario have yielded an authoritarian duumvirate with massive support from the general population (upwards of 80 percent by some estimates)⁴³, then what is to stop it from producing another global war similar to the one that followed the collapse of Weimar Germany? While all forecasts are necessarily speculative, it is certainly worthwhile to examine the possibilities. First, however - a slight digression and a word of admonition.

To put it simply - neither Vladimir Putin nor Dmitri Medvedev is Adolf Hitler. Their willingness to test the nationalist waters of Russian politics should not be confused with outright Fascism. Although from time to time Putin has been suspected of using force domestically to achieve political goals (such as was the case with the 1999

⁴³ For an in-depth study into various Russians' perceptions of Putin, see Sestopal et al.

apartment bombings, the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, or the poisoning of ex-KGB agent Andrei Litvenenko), there are, as of today, no Nazi-like Nuremburg Laws or concentration camps in the Russian Federation. Putin's consolidation of power and installation of a "managed democracy" might prove to be just that- management. Newcomers to the Weimar-Russia analogy are often predisposed to alarmist viewpoints, holding that Vladimir Putin is the 21st century's "Hitler Lite." Bearing in mind that history never exactly repeats itself and that those who study history are bound to make different mistakes, careless extrapolations of the Weimar comparison are roundly counterproductive. Measured and disciplined evaluation of the symptoms of the Weimar Syndrome can, however, reveal important benchmarks by which to judge a backsliding state.

To use the Weimar analogy responsibly and effectively in evaluating the likelihood of a resultant armed conflict requires another look at the two young democracies' roots. In the case of the Weimar Republic, it was born of German defeat in World War I. After several politically and economically tumultuous years, and with the advent of a revanchist leader prepared to capitalize on the sentiments

of the common people, the young republic slid directly back into the violent environment from which it had climbed. The result was total war. In post-Soviet Russia, however, the history is slightly different. The young Russian democracy is not the product of a hot war, but rather that of a cold one. Likewise, after the last several economically and politically turbulent years, coupled with the rise to power of revanchists Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, the analogy would suggest that another backslide is possible - albeit to a different end. If the ultimate product of Weimar Germany was World War II, then the analogy would *structurally* imply that Weimar Russia's final product should be a second Cold War.

It must be reiterated that drawing haphazard conclusions from the Weimar-Russia analogy is not advisable, especially considering the historical futility of the business of political forecasting. It is, however, extremely important to understand the potential consequences of continued anti-democratic trends in the Russian Federation. With Russia's increasingly anti-Western alignment in critical regions such as the Caucasus, the Middle-East, and Central Asia, and Dmitri Medvedev's recent drives for rearmament and support for the so-called

"rogue states" of Iran and North Korea, serious warning flags are beginning to appear. If the history of the Weimar Republic can tell us anything about the current situation in Russia, it is that those warning flags should be taken seriously.

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