Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-first Century and the Shadow of the Past

Edited by Robert Legvold
Columbia University Press, 2007, 496 pp. $45.00

Analysts who generalized about Russia's foreign policy from the peculiar circumstances of the 1990s now look silly. Those currently writing about Russia's mighty resurgence based on the peculiar circumstances of the first years of this century can expect a similar fate. What about some history? Such is the exceptionally welcome proposition of this hefty collaborative volume, dedicated to the recently deceased diplomat and Russia hand Marshall Shulman. Several of the eight contributors lose sight of the difference between narration of historical detail (however expertly done) and the use of history to analyze current affairs. Overlapping coverage from essay to essay affords multiple angles on Russia, but there is little systematic comparison. Alfred Rieber furnishes the collection's centerpiece with a reprise of his brilliant 1993 article on the
"persistent factors" affecting Russian behavior: relative economic backwardness, vulnerable frontiers, a multinational composition, and alienation from the West (and the East). Celeste Wallander offers perhaps the freshest perspective, a romp through a thousand years of Russian responses to globalization. She illuminates the "long pedigree" of the country's foreign policy under Putin, which seeks to reap economic benefits from globalism while blocking out the political effects. For Wallander, that high-wire act must crash. But for David McDonald, Russia's revived absolutist state may be more adaptable than given credit. That would upset Legvold, the volume's editor, who argues that Russia poses a special challenge to Europe and the United States because it is undemocratic. Consider, though, that China seems to have productive relations with its many-neighbors and with the United States. Is what "plagues" Russia its history of autocracy and empire, which also characterize China? Or is it the refusal of Russia's ruling elites, unlike China's, to accept modern world history--namely, that great powers (free and unfree) that forge close working ties with the United States tend to prosper, while those that try to go it alone or go up against the United States lose out?

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