

*Chasing Greatness: On Russia's Discursive Interaction with the West over the Past Millennium.* Anatoly Reshetnikov. University of Michigan Press, 2024. 272 pp. #34.95. Open Access ISBN: 9780472904389. Paperback ISBN: 9780472056699.

Anatoly Reshetnikov's *Chasing Greatness* is a politic-historical analysis that succinctly explains why Russia got entrapped in the idea of its greatness. Reshetnikov writes, "the internalized standard of civilization, as the main benchmark, coupled with (1) yet another crisis of recognition, (2) the refusal to accept a second-class status, (3) the willingness to utilize the traditional (and outdated) engines of Russia's political evolution, and (4) the weakening of moral restraint caused by limited and encumbered socialization—created a discursive mix that proved explosive." (218) His book combines constructivist and postcolonial approaches to trace how and why Russia sought to become a "proper" great power by using "improper" means and how Russia self-referentially legitimized that process by presenting those means as foundations of its political "greatpowerhood" (234).

Reshetnikov effectively explains the nature of Russia's historical discursive entrapment in its greatness by engaging with Russian historical sources and intellectual traditions. He widely applies international relations theories (from English school to modern poststructuralism) to his analysis and is clear about his remain self-conscious of his epistemological and methodological positionalities. Reshetnikov's work provides historical material in constant dialogue with modern affairs which creates multiple thought-provoking analogies with the contemporary Russian rally for international recognition. Ultimately, this allows him to better understand the complicated historical and cultural roots of current Russian foreign policy including the invasion into Ukraine.

Reshetnikov begins through a linguistic contextualization of Russia's greatness (*velikaya derzhava*) from the eleventh century to the present. He identifies four hegemonic discourses in Russian intellectual history and four distinct historical ruptures: 1670's, 1812, 1905, and 1980's. Each chapter of the book explores one of four modes of greatness in Russia and its predecessor policies: "absolute greatness" (rendered through the sovereign as a concrete instantiation of the divine), "theatrical greatness" (validated through spectacle and action), "civilizational greatness" (based on civilizational worth and scoring high on the universalist scale), and "international socialist greatness" (inspired by Marxist economic internationalism). The book's conclusion explains why the Russian regime now utilises all these modes of greatness.

Reshetnikov suggests most observers of Russian politics overlook "the fact that Russia *never* managed to weaken its enduring attachment to the great power identity, even in the early 1990s" (219). Having a great power status operates discursively in the Russian political space largely as something unbreakably connected to the health and survival of Russia's domestic regime (225). Reshetnikov thus connects Russia's perceived greatness globally with domestic politics, and he explains how Russia managed to both internalize the progressive understanding of world history and apply it self-referentially. Russia reinterpreted its greatness as a fruit of its political history and the only viable means to overcome its perceived underdevelopment (225).

One of the important questions, the book answers is why Russia sticks to its greatness identity even when doing so clearly damages its international and economic standing. Russia often insists on being a great power to the detriment of its prosperity and well-being because, in the Russian symbolic universe, greatpowerhood is a mobilizational ideology. One of the secrets of using greatness-based ideology is its power to support domestic mobilization. This was activated

by Russia in the 1930s and 1940s, and today it is used to legitimize the current regime's effort to mobilize the population for collective action and sacrifice "to protect the dignity of our motherland" (167).

There are a few avenues not taken by the Reshetnikov, that could be considered for future work. When Reshetnikov implies how Russia's greatpowerhood started to be presented as historically predetermined, yet always unfulfilled and threatened by other actors (141), a larger discussion of the book's overlap with modern ontological security theory research on Russia would have helped. Reshetnikov describes a "great power chauvinism" (180), and it would have been helpful for an explanation using gender studies here. Secondly, historians might question numerous omissions from the book including: why so little focus on the Novgorod and Pskov republican traditions? why was there little discussion of the 1860's "Great Reforms" of Alexander II? why consider philosopher Peter Struve and not, for example, Nicolas Berdyaev or Ivan Ilyin? why was there no analysis of heterogeneous schools of Russian medieval icon painting or the role of the Mighty Handful prominent composers who influenced the rise of Russian national ideology in the nineteenth century?

Another critique is that *Chasing Greatness* might create an impression that the Russian imperial geopolitics can be excused because it was predestined result of Russia being trapped in the discursive prison of the semi-periphery. Reshetnikov insightfully shows Russia's combination of claiming the leading role among the world's civilizational champions and its painful realization of underdevelopment, but readers may question whether there were alternative historical scenarios besides an obsession with greatness. Which "turning points" in Russia's intellectual history were downplayed, but could still be important in its future? One such scenario could be the republican tradition suppressed by Ivan the Terrible, the strengthening of Russia's representative power in the seventeenth century, or the late 1980's decentralization and federalization with more explicit focus on regional identities and cultural ties in Europe. It would be useful to better understand more about the transnational discursive interaction with the West (East?) on the level of selected Russian regional centers.

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