

BOOK REVIEW

The Post-Soviet as Post-Colonial: A New Paradigm for Understanding Constitutional Dynamics in the Former Soviet Empire, by William Partlett and Herbert Küpper, Edward Elgar, 2022, 281 pp., \$135.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781802209433, \$40.00 (electronic), ISBN 9781802209440.

Had Shakespeare's Malvolio witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, he might have said, "Be not afraid of statehood: Some are born independent, some achieve independence, and some have independence thrust upon them."¹ After reading this book, he would have gained some keen insights about how to sort the newly independent states of central and eastern Europe, the former constituent republics of the Soviet Union, as well as Mongolia, into different categories of states whose independence was sometimes eagerly regained and sometimes "thrust upon them." Even more, he would have gained a way of understanding how those different circumstances influenced (and were influenced by) their constitution-drafting and state-building efforts. In short, William Partlett and Herbert Küpper have written a book that offers new insights and perspectives that deserve close and considered attention. Their monograph will be highly valued by graduate students as well as upper-level undergraduates, who will also find their time well spent with it.

The central premise of this book – as the title suggests – is that there is value to analyzing the post-Soviet and post-Warsaw Pact spaces as locales of post-colonial state construction. This perspective is an interesting one and the authors persuasively establish its theoretical and explanatory worth as a contribution to the comparative study of constitutions. There certainly is value to this approach and the authors ably provide it. Chapter 1 ("Post-Colonialism and Post-Socialist Constitutional Change") is a rich, thoughtful, and concise introduction to the theoretical understandings that the authors deploy. Chapter 2 ("Russian Constitution-Making: Convergence or Continued Exceptionalism in the Former Imperial Centre") powerfully presents one of the authors' central insights: Russia as a colonial power was as affected by its colonies as much as the other way around. This is no less true for the process of decolonialization (another way of describing the collapse of the Soviet empire) and the post-colonial period that has followed it.

So (as a small aside), it is hard to understand why the authors felt the need to set up a straw man alternative to their theoretical framework: a "post-authoritarian approach [that] assumes that the end of the Cold War would begin a progressive transition in which the former socialist world would discard the institutions (and constitutions) of socialist, dictatorial rule and inevitably adopt constitutions that converged with Western democratic constitutional government" (1). They cite none other than Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" article from 1989 as "best summ[ing] up" this argument. That is an odd move for a book published in 2022, when it is hard to find leading scholars who still argue that there is "no longer an alternative to liberal democratic constitutionalism" (1) or who support a theory that "universally expects, after the end of a repressive system, a move towards constitutional democracy" (12). The so-called transitologists of the 1990s had their day and contributed much to our early understanding.² Why claim that such a linear, simplistic approach continues to lay claim to our thinking on what the past three decades have shown to be anything but linear or simple?

This claim can be soon forgotten, as their initial representation of post-authoritarian approaches need not be accepted to independently appreciate the value of the authors' work. The authors note mergers or "overlap" between the two perspectives in some cases (117–118; 139; 187–190), a mature recognition by scholars that alternative approaches add new facets of understanding. Indeed, it would have been much better had the authors begun with their outstanding final chapter, noting

“the post-Soviet space has mostly been interpreted as post-authoritarian or post-dictatorial,” but there is value added to recognizing as well the fact that the USSR “was Europe’s last empire, and its demise can justifiably be interpreted as a process of decolonisation” (238).

Focusing their post-colonial lens, the authors divide the former “colonies” under study into two groups: the “inner empire” (twelve of the fifteen former Soviet republics) and the “outer empire” (the three Baltic republics plus Mongolia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and East Germany (although this last one is dropped as a “special case” of reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany [116])). While the authors tend to emphasize recent Soviet imperial history over Tsarist-era imperialism, which sometimes clouds their vision, this is an understandable emphasis in a 270-page monograph that, generally speaking, makes careful and reasonable choices in its reliance on history. Still, in light of current events, it is hard to read the *ipse dixit* asserting that Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are “countries that issued from the constructs of Soviet ethnopolitics” (5), as if nothing before 1922 might be relevant to experiences of continued Russian attempts at domination, including a war of aggression based on the false claim that Ukraine is not a real country.

Chapters 3 and 5 broadly analyze the experience of states emerging from these “inner” and “outer” empires, respectively, while the interspersed chapters 4 and 6 provide more detailed case studies from each set of categorized experiences. Applying post-colonial theories that distinguish between “revolutionary” (i.e. violent) and “negotiated” scenarios for achieving independence, the authors note elements of the negotiated path in the inner empire, while the outer empire was effectively decolonized/regained its true independence “by lack of a colonial power” (111). In both cases, however, there are also *sui generis* elements, leading the authors to propose a third, “implosion” scenario (30) as part of their contribution.

One would expect a certain parallelism in the organization of these chapters to facilitate the work of comparing and contrasting. But the reader is forced to work harder than one would expect. Chapter 3 (the “inner empire” chapter) is one-third the size of chapter 5, despite nominally including more states in that category. The headings and subheadings in each of these ostensibly cross-comparative chapters are sometimes, but not always, in sync. And the absence of a single chart, table, or other visual display of information (after a very small one on page 3 used to define some terms) makes comparative work harder, too. The case-study chapters 4 and 6 are roughly similar in size and depth of treatment.

Chapter 4 presents three case studies from the “inner empire”: Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The brief, 17-page chapter provides descriptions of recent constitutional changes in these three countries. But it does not provide much analysis to explain the similarities and differences in the trajectories of these post-colonial constitution-building experiences. Chapter 6, presenting the “outer empire” case studies, is 25-pages long, providing a deep dive into the Hungarian case and its exploitation of post-colonial arguments in ways that have fostered its re-descent into authoritarianism.

What this book does, it does very well. What this book doesn’t do (especially given the skill of its authors) leaves the reader wishing that it did. The omission I regret is the near-total absence of substantive discussion of the twenty-one, non-Russian ethnic republics contained within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union, the so-called Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs). These could be said to constitute Russia’s “inner, inner empire” and would have made for a fascinating comparison to the cases the authors do set out to study. Yet, aside from a few off-hand references (including occasionally erroneous ones, such as reference to a declaration of independence by Tatarstan [26] that never happened), the authors are mostly silent. Only in the final pages of the book is there brief discussion of the possibility of exploring this *Binnenkolonialismus* (German for inland colonialism) that the authors assert “can be best explained by a post-colonial interpretation” that adds to other understandings (245).

That the authors made no real effort to do so is a missed opportunity for a fascinating comparison by two scholars clearly skilled in making them. At the very least, Tatarstan, Sakha,

and Chechnya present very interesting and diverse cases of the colonies that *did not* get away. As the authors note, “although the collapse of the Soviet Union represented the collapse of one Russian empire, it did not end empire within the territorial borders of the newly independent Russian Federation (as independence movements in Chechnya and Tatarstan showed)” (56). Yet, there is no mention in this book of the famous exhortation in 1990 by Boris Yeltsin to “take all the sovereignty you can swallow,” setting off a parade of sovereignties that contributed to Soviet collapse. Surely that is relevant to a book about colonial refocus and the aftermath of Yeltsin’s rash invitation. Why did the inner empire escape but not this “inner inner” one? What leads some units of a federal façade (the authors’ choice of words and the title of a book that I wrote on the subject)³ to seek to retain but improve the substance of a federation (as we now know, in vain) instead of seeking “the dismemberment of the federation” (65) as the inner empire did? What, if anything, could Chechnya have done (a former ASSR about which the authors have virtually nothing to say) to wind up more like Moldova or Georgia, whose vision of independence it shared?

These questions are all left unanswered. Given how well the authors execute their project of applying the insights of post-colonial theoretical approaches to the two empires they dissect in their very fine book, one can only hope that a follow-up monograph might be in the works for the colonies one could say were left behind in Russia’s remaining empire.

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Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act III, Scene 4, lines 36–40.
- 2 The very best of these early contributions is absent from Partlett’s and Küpper’s bibliography: Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Johns Hopkins, 1996).
- 3 Jeffrey Kahn, *Federalism, Democratization, and the Rule of Law in Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2002).