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Russian/Soviet Imperialism as Seen from across the Pacific

Rosyjski/sowiecki imperializm widziany zza Pacyfiku

Abstract: Russian and Soviet imperialism thrived in Asia using camouflage and deception, a sophisticated tactic now known as “reflexive control”. Pitting imperialist powers against each other (Japan and the United States in particular), the Communist power in Moscow came to control first Mongolia and then China in the first half of the 20th century. However, China rebelled against the Red Empire in the 1960s. Much of the future of the post-imperial world will depend on the relationship formed between Russia and China, the two remaining imperialist powers – cooperative alliance or bitter competition.

Abstrakt: Rosyjski i sowiecki imperializm panoszył się w Azji dzięki kamuflażowi i podstępom stosowanych w ramach wyrafinowanej taktyki znanej dziś jako „kontrola refleksyjna”. Stawiając imperialistyczne potęgi przeciwko sobie (w szczególności Japonię i Stany Zjednoczone), komunistyczna władza w Moskwie zaczęła kontrolować najpierw Mongolię, a następnie Chiny w pierwszej połowie XX w. Chiny zbuntowały się przeciwko Imperium Sowieckiemu w latach sześćdziesiątych XX w. Przyszłość postimperialnego świata będzie w dużej mierze zależać od relacji między dwiema pozostałymi imperialistycznymi potęgami: Rosją a Chinami – czy będzie to sojusz oparty na współpracy, czy zacieklej rywalizacji.

Keywords: Russia, the Soviet Union, China, Japan, the United States, Iosif Stalin, Vladimir Putin, Fedor Dostoevskii, Red Imperialism, camouflage, reflexive control

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Związek Radziecki, Chiny, Japonia, Stany Zjednoczone, Josif Stalin, Władimir Putin, Fedor Dostojewski, czerwony imperializm, kamuflaż, kontrola refleksyjna

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of us who study the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Asia hoped that it marked the end of the age of imperialism. As it turned out, this was not the case. Angela Merkel, the then Chancellor of Germany, deplored Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014: “Who would've thought that 25 years after the fall of the wall, after the end of the Cold War, after the end of the division of Europe and the end of the

world being divided in two, something like this could happen right at the heart of Europe?”¹

With hindsight, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014 is not surprising. Before 2014, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, had long intimated that 1991 was an unmitigated geopolitical disaster, that Ukraine was an artificial creation and should not exist outside the Russian world, and the like. When he was not able to annex some of the former Soviet territory outright from now-independent states, he created and “froze” conflicts for future opportunities. His military invasion of Georgia in 2008 is merely one example. Cases of camouflaged operations against other independent states are less known but almost ubiquitous.

Now, in Europe, there are no imperialist powers left, with the exception of Russia, but in Asia, there are two active major imperialist powers: Russia and China. They are the only powers that seek to reconquer their former dominions. They are the destabilising and destructive forces in today’s post-imperial world.

The future of the world depends, to a considerable extent, on how these two imperialist and dictatorial powers behave and how the rest of the world deals with them. Although for now (in 2023), Russia’s imperialist actions are focused on Europe, Asia may face a more turbulent future in which the two imperialist powers vie for control or form an alliance against the democratic West.

Red Imperialism

It is noteworthy that both Russia and China have a history of Communist rule. Communism is the antithesis of capitalism, the highest stage of which, as the first dictator of the Soviet Union, Vladimir I. Lenin claimed, is imperialism.² The experiences of the Soviet Union and Communist China would seem to demonstrate that they used Communism’s internationalist ideology to justify their imperialist ambitions. It was the Soviet Union that helped to make China into an anti-Western, anti-democratic bastion to protect and spread Moscow’s interests in the Pacific.

¹ *Merkel Issues Rebuke to Russia, Setting Caution Aside*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/world/europe/russia-deports-german-polish-diplomats-retaliation.html> (accessed: 22 Dec. 2022).

² He published a book, *Империализм, как высшая стадия капитализма* in 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution.

As far as Russia/the Soviet Union is concerned, this justification has deep historical roots. The Russian writer Fedor Dostoevskii wrote in 1881: "In Europe we were toadies, but in Asia, we'll become masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we are Europeans".³ For Dostoevskii, Asia was to become what the Americas were for Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries: "In the future, Asia will be our way out. There is our wealth, there we have the ocean."⁴ Dostoevskii had in mind not only Central Asia but the Pacific Ocean. Russia acquired the Chinese city of Haishenwai in 1858 and named it Vladivostok – 'Conquer the East' – which Japan viewed as blatant imperialism. Soviet Communism inherited and adopted Dostoevskii's vision of Asia as the saviour for the renewal of Russia. When Moscow's attempts to export revolution to Europe failed in the mid-1920s, Moscow's attention on Asia became the dominant theme of the Soviet imperial project.

Indeed, already in the 1920s, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, people began to speak of "Red imperialism" regarding the Soviet Union. Indeed, this was the case in China. 'Outer Mongolia' ('Outer' from a Chinese perspective) technically remained a Chinese dominion, which Moscow acknowledged in a treaty with China in 1924. In fact, however, by the mid-1920s, Outer Mongolia had fallen under Soviet control, calling itself the Mongolian People's Republic. The foundation of a semi-colonial, semi-independent state sponsored by Soviet "red militarism" deeply offended the Chinese.⁵ In Manchuria, China's northeast region, the Soviet Union was nothing more than an imperialist overlord. Even though the Soviet government initially announced that it would renounce its interests in the China Eastern Railway (CER), it soon reneged on its promise. The Russian-built railway, completed in 1903, linked Chita and Vladivostok by cutting across Manchuria and thereby shortening the travel distance between the two Russian cities by almost 1000 km. It was a grand imperialist project carried out to exploit China and to forestall Japan's imperialist ambitions on the Asian continent. Moscow refused to hand this colonial legacy over to China.

Moscow retained its proprietorship of the CER for both economic and political reasons: it brought valuable foreign currency to the Soviet coffers, while at the same time, the railway and its Soviet employees and their

³ *Собрание сочинений Ф. Достоевского в 15 томах*, vol. 14, Санкт-Петербург 1995, p. 509.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 510. Russia's control had earlier reached the Pacific Ocean and colonised Alaska. In 1867, however, it sold Alaska to the United States, fearing that it would not be able to defend the land, so far from central Russia and so prohibitive climatically, in the event of war with its most formidable rival, the British Empire.

⁵ "Red militarism" was a term often used at the time to refer to the Soviet use of military force.

families, tens of thousands strong, helped to proliferate Soviet Communism in China. The Chinese clearly understood the political significance of the CER for Moscow, calling it the “Red Road.” Even though the CER was to be jointly managed with China after 1924, the Soviet Union ignored the Chinese and unilaterally maintained control. Once the nationalist (Guomindang) government gained control of much of China by the beginning of 1929, it sought to repossess the CER by arresting and expelling Soviet managers from the CER. This effort by the Chinese resulted in the brief war the Soviet Union staged against China in 1929. Mostly forgotten or dismissed by much of the world, this military conflict was nothing short of a war fought by Moscow to retain its colonial possession.⁶

The Soviet Red Army easily defeated the poorly equipped Chinese forces and quickly regained control of the CER. Moscow’s military aggression even alienated many Chinese supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), under attack by the Nationalist government, was dependent to a significant degree on the support of the Soviet Union for survival. In fighting against China in 1929, Moscow demanded that the CCP support the Soviet Union, the cradle of revolution and the bastion of Communism. Officially, the CCP obliged, but privately, many took issue with Moscow. Some, including Chen Duxiu, a CCP co-founder, were excommunicated from the CCP as “Trotskyites” for opposing Moscow. (Actually, Lev D. Trotskii, Stalin’s bitter political foe then in exile, supported Stalin’s imperialist war as “progressive” for the cause of revolution.)

Soon after this war ended with a Soviet victory, Stalin came to the conclusion that the CER was not so much a political and economic asset as a political liability for Moscow. Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the foundation of its puppet government, Manzhouguo the following year gave Stalin a convenient excuse for parting with this symbol of “Red imperialism” in China. (In fact, as the following section argues, Stalin induced Japan’s aggression into Manchuria as a long-term strategy to beat Japanese imperialism.) In 1935 Moscow sold the CER not to China but to Manzhouguo (and by implication to Japan), claiming that China did not control Manchuria. Stalin risked nothing in doing so, because he knew well that he was politically in a much stronger position than the Chinese.⁷ The Chinese, including both their Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek and their Communist leader,

⁶ The most recent works are Michael Walker, *The 1929 Sino-Soviet War*, Lawrence (KS) 2017; and В.М. Крюков, М.В. Крюков, *КВЖД 1929: взрыв и эхо*, Москва 2017.

⁷ Moscow’s remarkably disingenuous sophistry about the sale is discussed in: В.М. Крюков, М.В. Крюков, *КВЖД 1929...*, pp. 552–559.

Mao Zedong, would not forget Moscow's repeated slights. China considered the Soviet Union colonialist and imperialist, and this tension would haunt Sino-Soviet relations until finally exploding in an open split between the two Communist states in the 1960s.

Moscow cleverly covered its expansionist ambitions. It established both Tannu Tuva and (Outer) Mongolia and called them "people's republics" and their form of government "people's democracy." Moscow used the same covert formula to justify its takeover of Eastern Europe after the Second World War, prohibiting these countries from referring to themselves as "Communist" states.⁸ Needless to say, it was merely a camouflage for Soviet rule. Tannu Tuva, a small nominally independent country in the Asian hinterland between Russia and Mongolia, was quietly incorporated into Russia and the Soviet Union in 1944 during the Second World War when the attention of the world was focused elsewhere. Moscow did not incorporate Mongolia into Russia, fearing irreparably alienating China. Instead, after the war and before the CCP's takeover of China, Stalin forced Chiang, China's leader, to accept Mongolia's independence from China, thus securing Moscow's control over the Mongolian People's Republic.

During the 1930s, taking advantage of China's division, Moscow took control of Xinjiang ("Chinese Turkestan" bordering Soviet Central Asia), virtually colonising it. (Xinjiang was an attractive colony for its rich natural resources, including uranium.)⁹ Later, during the Second World War, when the Soviet Union was desperately fighting against Nazi Germany to the west, Sheng Shicai, Xinjiang's governor and a Communist sympathiser, turned against Moscow. Moscow's furious attempts both then and after the Second World War to reconquer Xinjiang did not succeed. Sheng and others who had sought the future of China in Communism ultimately understood the imperialist and colonialist nature of Soviet Communism and turned against Moscow.¹⁰

Moscow's goal to export revolution to China and bring it under its control was part of a more grandiose plan to weaken and eventually defeat all competing imperialist powers. Asia and the Pacific region in general and China in particular were the most significant part of the world for Moscow at the time because it was there that almost all the important imperialist powers (including two upstart non-European powers, namely Japan and the United

⁸ See Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Przebudowa społeczna w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej po II wojnie światowej w planach Józefa Stalina*, in: "Rewolucja społeczna" czy "dzika przebudowa?": Społeczne skutki przekształceń własnościowych w Polsce (1944–1956), ed. T. Osiński, Lublin 2016, pp. 115–126.

⁹ See В. Обухов, *Схватка шести империй: Битва за Синьцзян*, Москва 2007.

¹⁰ See A.S. Whiting, General Sheng Shih-ts'ai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?*, East Lansing 1958.

States) had placed their stakes and were competing against one another. Moscow's goal was to expel all imperial powers from China and to take their place instead. In this process, Moscow carefully camouflaged itself, hiding behind other powers while pitting one power against another. Ultimately, Moscow achieved its goal.

Imperialism in Camouflage

Publicly, the Red Empire disowned its predecessor, the Russian Empire, and stood decisively against capitalists and imperialists across the globe. Although it could not always hide its own imperialist ambitions, it did its best to conceal them. In Europe, which held the attention of the world, Moscow managed to camouflage its true colours for some time. In 1939, however, Moscow struck a secret deal with Nazi Germany, according to which Moscow and Berlin partitioned Central and Eastern Europe into their respective spheres of influence in a classic imperialist scheme. The Soviet signer, Viacheslav M. Molotov, as a proud Communist, was so embarrassed by his participation that he refused to acknowledge until the end of his life even the existence of such an agreement with Nazi Germany. His denial makes an interesting contrast with his willing admission that at the time of the Great Terror in 1937–1938 he signed the execution warrants for untold numbers of Soviet citizens.¹¹ Very soon after the deal with Berlin, Moscow stopped hiding its imperialist scheme, invading Poland and destroying it in coordination with Nazi Germany. Moscow followed this with an attack on Finland where it grabbed a chunk of territory, and the annexation by force of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as well as Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina.¹²

These events are well known. The case in Asia is much less so. Asia was the ideal place for Stalin to realize his Red imperialist schemes covertly. At the time the world still looked on Asia as an object of imperialist expansion. This allowed Stalin to hide his hand as he played off one imperialist power against another. Stalin was so adept at disseminating propaganda that even today the world accepts the Stalinist account as true.

Moscow's strategy was to weaken the world's foremost empire, the British Empire, by breaking the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (which had ensured Russia's

¹¹ See Ф. Чуев, *Сто сорок бесед с Молотовым*, Москва 1991, pp. 439–440.

¹² In 1940, the Socialist Party of the USA and its youth section, the Young People's Socialist League, jointly published a book on "Red imperialism": L. Symes, *Communism – World Revolution to Red Imperialism*, Chicago (IL) 1940.

defeat in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War) and to use the United States to defeat the most dangerous imperialist power, Japan. For Moscow, Japan was dangerous, not only because it was an aggressive neighbour but because Japan was not a European power. Under the slogan "Asia for the Asians," Japan could rally other Asian nations against all Western powers, including the new Soviet government. Unlike Japan, the United States was generally regarded in Asia as an extension of Europe. In Lenin's view, the US was preferable to Japan. Washington stood against colonialism and expressed no aggressive desire for territorial expansion.¹³ The Bolsheviks were professional conspirators and masterful players in world politics. They were familiar with the Japan-US rivalry over the control of China and the Pacific that developed in the aftermath of Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 and made utmost conspiratorial use of the rivalry.

Almost immediately after the Bolsheviks grabbed power in Russia, they strove to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Washington. On 7 December 1917, exactly a month after the seizure of power, the Bolshevik government published a secret agreement signed by the Japanese and Russian Empires in 1916 that apparently was directed against their common enemy in the First World War: Germany. However, the sensational title of the publication alerted Washington and London: "The Secret Agreement of Russia and Japan Envisaging a Joint Military Action against America and England in the Far East No Later Than the Summer of 1921".¹⁴ Specialists disagree as to whether this Russo-Japanese secret agreement was actually directed against Germany (on paper, yes, it was) or whether it, in fact, served to camouflage its unspoken target, the United States (and possibly Britain). At any rate, the public announcement signalled the Soviet government's long-term strategy in Asia. Even though it had no trust in the "scoundrels in Washington",¹⁵ Moscow understood Washington's interests in Asia and used them to their own political advantage. True, both Japan and the United States, along with other Western powers, dispatched military forces to Siberia against the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War of 1918-1920. Yet Moscow knew well that Washington's intervention was more directed at thwarting Japan's ambitions in the Russian Far East than against the Bolsheviks themselves. According to an American historian, "the American forces to Siberia had made a calculated effort

¹³ See his speech in December 1920: *Собрание актива Московской организации РКП(б) 6 декабря 1920 г.*, in: В.И. Ленин, *Полное собрание сочинений в 55 томах*, vol. 42, Москва 1970, p. 43.

¹⁴ "Газета Временного Рабочего и Крестьянского правительства", 8 Dec. 1917, p. 2.

¹⁵ Trotsky's expression. See *The Trotsky Papers 1917-1922*, ed. J.M. Meijer, vol. 1: 1917-1919, The Hague 1964, p. 622.

to protect both Russian territory and Russian property during the [Japanese] occupation [of Siberia]”.¹⁶

Once the Civil War ended, Moscow scored a resounding initial victory in its grand strategy of thwarting Japanese imperialism in Asia. In an agreement with Washington, Moscow sent a delegation of the Far Eastern Republic to the Washington Naval Conference (1921–1922). The Republic was a Bolshevik front organisation created to convince the world, particularly Japan and the United States, that the Russian Far East was not a Bolshevik dictatorship, but a democratic republic. The delegation staged a charm offensive, flooding the United States with propaganda emphasizing that the Republic was a free and democratic republic just like the United States. Both Moscow and Washington achieved their goals: Washington managed to maintain its naval superiority over Japan, and Japan was forced to withdraw all its military forces from the Far East. This secret collaboration between the communist state and the democratic state is little known even today.¹⁷ The documents Stalin received from Georgii V. Chicherin, the Soviet commissar of foreign affairs, regarding this collaboration are still classified in Moscow. In fact, Moscow even denies their existence.

Furthermore, to Moscow’s and Washington’s great satisfaction, the conference abrogated the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Great Britain reluctantly ended the alliance both because it faced opposition to its continuation by its dominions (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which opposed the immigration of Japanese to their countries) and because it could not alienate Washington, a creditor of London’s finances during the First World War, to which London was still massively in debt. Japan took the outcome of the Washington Conference with a profound sense of humiliation and resentment. The Washington Naval Conference was the seed for the Pacific War from 1941 to 1945.

Similar instances of Moscow’s camouflaged operations are legion. So are covert military interventions in Asia. What has recently become known as Russia’s “hybrid war” in Ukraine is nothing new in Asia.¹⁸ It is simply not known generally, even to many specialists, a sign of extraordinarily effective Soviet propaganda and disinformation.

¹⁶ See R.P. Browder, *The Origins of Soviet American Diplomacy*, Princeton (NJ) 1953, p. 147.

¹⁷ A valuable exception is Svetlana Chervonnaya and Donald J. Evans, *Left behind: Boris E. Skvirsky and the Chita Delegation at the Washington Conference, 1921–22*, “Intelligence and National Security”, 2014, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 19–57. Interestingly, at about the same time, Britain also came to terms with the Soviet government, which Andrzej Nowak has called a “forgotten appeasement”; see his *Pierwsza zdrada Zachodu: 1920 – zapomniany appeasement*, Kraków 2015.

¹⁸ See Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin’s Great Terror and The Asian Nexus*, “Europe-Asia Studies”, 2014, vol. 66, no. 5, pp. 775–793.

A curious case in point is the 1928 assassination of Zhang Zuolin, the Manchurian warlord. Almost all books follow the old Stalinist account that the Japanese killed Zhang. Indeed, a shadowy Japanese intriguer even published confessions acknowledging his guilt. The recent Russian academic literature on this incident, however, tends to agree quietly that it was organised and carried out by the Soviet secret police (which disguised the murder as committed by Japanese assassins.) Evidence points to an operation designed by Soviet operatives and carried out jointly with Japanese assassins and Chinese collaborators (including Zhang's son, Zhang Xueliang). This collaboration was based on Moscow's meticulous strategic operations in Asia, making use of carefully selected Japanese radical nationalists who were opposed to imperialism and colonialism. Some Japanese radical nationalists found common ground with Soviet Communists in their opposition to the liberal-democratic world order controlled by Western powers, particularly the "Anglo-Saxons" (Britain and the United States). Likewise, Zhang Xueliang and other Chinese nationalists and Communists turned to the Soviet Union as a counterweight to Japan's influence in China. A "fanatic patriot" by his own admission, Zhang Xueliang later in his life intimated, wittingly or unwittingly, that he had had no choice if he were to save Manchuria from Japan other than to eliminate his own father, a rabid anti-Soviet whom Japan had cultivated so as to dominate Manchuria as its colony. At the time, in coordination with Soviet and Japanese conspirators, Zhang Xueliang blamed the Japanese for the murder of his father.¹⁹

Moscow deliberately fostered Chinese nationalism against the imperialist powers, leading to the unwanted result in 1929 of Moscow staging a war against Chinese nationalism for the control of the CER. Zhang Xueliang led China's fight against the Soviet Union. Even though Moscow easily beat the Chinese, this war forced Moscow to re-examine its own naked colonialism in China. It was during the 1929 war that Moscow authorised the Chinese to release a forged document, allegedly a master plan of Japan to conquer China and the world. The infamous "Tanaka Memorandum," as it was called, was a Soviet forgery designed for political consumption in China and the United States and akin to the equally infamous Russian forgery, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Significantly, Moscow first released the memorandum to Zhang Xueliang and his entourage (among whom were many secret Communists and Communist sympathisers), who then released it in English translation prepared in Moscow. It was an attempt to convince the Chinese

¹⁹ This episode and much of the remainder of the present section is based on my *Stalin, Japan, and the Struggle for Supremacy over China, 1894–1945*, London 2023 (the digital edition of which is available at <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003203353>).

that China's true enemy was not the Soviet Union but the imperialists, particularly Japan, which, the memorandum implied, harboured a secret design against China and the world. True, Japan had openly insisted that it retain "special interests" in China and that this was a privilege recognized universally. However, the views delineated in the memorandum reflected the most extreme fantasies of the right-wing Japanese radicals, and its advocacy of world conquest bordered on the absurd.

Moscow was pleasantly surprised by the forgery's reception in China and later in the US and beyond. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and quickly occupied it. The following year it created the puppet government of Manzhouguo. These events convinced the outside world that the Tanaka Memorandum was genuine until well after the end of the Second World War. Now scholars world over (except in China and Russia) generally agree that it was a forgery. In fact, Tokyo had no clear plan to occupy or annex Manchuria, even though it dreamed of virtually colonizing it, just as other imperial powers had done in other parts of China. When Japanese radicals staged an invasion of Manchuria, the Japanese government initially distanced itself from them. The military invasion, however, generated tremendous popular enthusiasm in Japan and the radicals pressed on with their fantasy of expanding the Japanese Empire to Manchuria. Presented with a *fait accompli*, Tokyo assented. The foundation of Manzhouguo was a sort of compromise between the radicals' dreams and the realists' concerns about the overwhelmingly negative international reaction to Japan's activities in Manchuria

Contrary to the picture of events generally accepted by the scholarly community, my detailed research suggests that Stalin secretly encouraged Japan's adventure into Manchuria. Using his agents, influencers, and collaborators in Japan and China, Stalin secretly and adroitly induced Japan into Manchuria. Stalin knew that Japan's aggression would kindle Chinese nationalism to an explosive state and that Japan would antagonise the entire world, particularly China, the direct victim, and the United States, which had long advocated the "Open Door" policy in China to secure its own position there. (Indeed, in 1933 in the face of almost universal condemnation, Japan angrily withdrew from the League of Nations.) Stalin also knew that Japan, a comparatively small and resource-poor country, would not have enough means and resources to subjugate to its will Manchuria, a vast area of China larger than France and Germany combined. In Stalin's strategic thinking, trapping Japan in Manchuria and China and then liquidating it was the only way to deal with Japan's imperialist claim of "special interests" in China in general and in Manchuria in particular, given that most powers, except for the United States, implicitly acknowledged Tokyo's special interests in Manchuria at least.

Curiously, Moscow refrained from the explicit condemnation of Japan's invasion while secretly rendering military aid to Chinese partisans. Not even Maksim M. Litvinov, the Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, was privy to Stalin's secret strategic thinking about Asia. Stalin silenced and reprimanded him and others who protested Moscow's "appeasement" of Japan. A few years later, in 1935, after lengthy negotiations, Stalin sold the CER to Manzhouguo. Japan and the world misunderstood it as a sign that the Soviet Union would withdraw from Manchuria.

Stalin's secret strategy worked brilliantly. In 1937, Stalin had the Chinese Communist Party provoke a small armed clash with the Japanese at the Marco Polo Bridge just outside Beijing, which, against the initial opposition of Tokyo, quickly gained momentum and soon expanded into an all-out war between Japan and China. Stalin, Mao, Chiang, and some Japanese strategists knew very well that Japan had absolutely no chance of conquering the vast land of China. Moreover, China was assisted by countries far bigger than Japan—the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States. Japan became bogged down in China, as Stalin had intended. To harass the now-trapped Japan, he provoked two major military conflicts with Japan in 1938 and 1939 (the Battles of Khalkhin Gol and Lake Khasan) on the Manchu-Soviet borders. Almost all existing literature on them, however, follows the Stalinist account and ascribes them to Japanese aggression against the Soviet Union.

Stalin successfully crushed the Japanese Empire by enlisting the forces of other countries. He was happy to see the Chinese fighting his game against Japan. He was also elated that the United States eagerly did his bidding in China. Embittered by Japan's actions in China, Washington opened diplomatic relations with Moscow in 1933 and maintained until the Cold War extraordinarily friendly relations with the Communist state as a counterweight to Japan.²⁰ In 1941, having understood that Japan presented no realistic threat, Stalin signed the Pact of Neutrality with Japan. Simultaneously, to further neutralise Japan, he secretly helped to manoeuvre Japan and the United States into fighting against each other. Only in 1945, when Japan was about to surrender, did Stalin break the pact and declare war on Japan. Stalin crushed the Japanese Empire with minimal cost to the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, Stalin brilliantly camouflaged his operations in Asia in the form of the verdict of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial (IMTFE) concerning Japan's aggression against the Soviet Union. Even though it was the Soviet Union that

²⁰ Tim Tzouliadis vividly discusses this in his *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia*, New York 2008. Unfortunately, Tzouliadis fails to understand the reasons for this puzzling amity between Moscow and Washington.

had declared war against Japan in 1945, it managed to secure a seat on the IMTFE. Furthermore, Moscow succeeded in having the court approve in toto the sentence, sixty-seven pages long, that was drafted entirely by the Soviet prosecutors. It established Tokyo's guilt for everything from Zhang Zuolin's murder in 1928, to the Battles of Khalkhin Gol and Lake Khasan, and to the war Moscow staged against Japan in 1945. Even now, almost a century after the fact, the true nature of these incidents is not understood. No one has been willing to question publicly the war crimes trial because Japan did commit numerous war crimes in China and elsewhere, and the verdict is almost universally regarded as just and appropriate. Thus, Moscow managed to hide its actions almost completely.

Stalin's strategy of camouflage, subversion, and disinformation succeeded splendidly because he knew exactly what would entice Japanese right-wing radicals to aggressive action against China and the Western liberal order. He also understood Washington's strategic interests in the Pacific and secretly and adroitly used his agents, influencers, and other political assets in the United States. Some of them were secret Soviet agents, some were witting collaborators, but others never understood that they were playing into Stalin's hands or doing his bidding.

The Red Empire's modus operandi, successfully tested in Asia, was subsequently refined and perfected. It came to be known as "reflexive control" (*refleksivnoe upravlenie*). As specialists of Moscow's secret strategy have noted, the objective of this modus operandi is "to force an enemy into making objective decisions that lead to his defeat by influencing or controlling his decision-making process."²¹

Conclusion

In invading Ukraine in 2014, Russia fully used its mastery of reflexive control. Modern technology and globalism underpinned by the ubiquitous Internet have facilitated the proliferation of Russian disinformation. At the same time, however, Putin's reflexive control did not work as well as he had expected. The connected world makes it easier to see through Russia's camouflage, subversion, and disinformation. It was also a mistake of Putin's to invade

²¹ T.L. Thomas, *Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military*, "Journal of Slavic Military Studies", 2004, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 243. See also M. Wojnowski, 'Zarządzanie refleksyjne' jako paradygmat rosyjskich operacji informacyjno-psychologicznych w XXI w., "Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego", 2015, no. 12, pp. 11–36.

a European state, where he has attracted the intense attention of the free and democratic world.

Had Putin taken a decisive move to annex Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kirgistan) instead of Ukraine in 2014, he might have gotten away with it. True, the West would have denounced it. Yet the West is unlikely to have marshalled its military and economic resources to help these former Soviet republics the way in which it has assisted Ukraine since February 2022. Moreover, the Central Asian states are unlikely to have had the resources and determination to resist Russia's invasion to begin with. By capturing Central Asia, however, Russia would have likely lost its most coveted friend, the anti-Western, anti-democratic, and economically far stronger China by usurping its vital interests in the region, as symbolised by its "One-Belt One-Road" initiative. More generally, China has never forgotten Moscow's colonialist attitude toward China over the years. In the 1960s China's resentment toward the Red Empire grew into open conflict, including a seven-month long military clash over territorial issues. There was reason for Putin to be careful in Asia.

By contrast, Putin apparently determined that the West was weak and divided. Given the relatively mild sanctions the West imposed on Russia for its annexation of Crimea and military occupation of parts of the Donbas in 2014, he took the calculated risk of staging an all-out war against Ukraine in 2022, believing that the West would recoil from Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling and bluster of threats to cut gas and oil to Europe. Before invading Ukraine, Putin visited China and conferred with China's dictator Xi Jinping, almost certainly securing Xi's implicit consent.

Obviously, Putin miscalculated. So did Xi. Beijing's distrust of Moscow notwithstanding, China, too, is an imperialist and colonialist nation, witness (Inner) Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. China's military adventure in Vietnam lasted from 1979 to 1989. It is widely believed that the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine will determine China's military stance in Asia, particularly toward Taiwan. Putin's and Xi's miscalculations have not signified the end of Russian and Chinese imperialism yet.

The danger remains that China might not learn a lesson from Russia's experience. Neither country seems to understand that the train of history has long since departed and the age of empire has ended. So the danger persists that China might lose patience and embark on a military adventure in Asia. Undoubtedly, Putin would welcome such a move on the part of China.

Does the West have the courage to stand up to China as it has to Russia? The West seems to have been successful in weening itself from dependence on Russia's energy supply, but can it free itself as well from its dependence

on China's manufacturing might? In April 2023, President of France, Emmanuel Macron, visited China and called for Europe to steer clear of a possible military conflict over Taiwan. If Europe follows his call, it will almost certainly lead to an anti-Western and anti-democratic grand coalition of the two remaining imperial powers on the Eurasian continent. It will be an unmitigated geopolitical disaster for the West.

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