A Counterfactual Theory of Counterfactuals

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Abstract

Jeremy M. Black has proposed criteria for determining whether a counterfactual is helpful. This article raises questions about how we can have a counterfactual if we cannot agree what a historical fact is. The conceptualization of any particular so-called historical fact differs in the mind of each historian, so this article asks how can we have a counterfactual to what are different conceptualizations, even if the words historians are using to label any given event are the same. But even if we take, as this article proposes, source testimony as our historical facts, we do not have agreement on the meaning of that source testimony. This article explores the issues of counterfactual statements in regard to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Muscovite and Lithuanian origin myths concerning the ancestry of their rulers and concludes that Black’s criteria for a helpful counterfactual cannot be met.

Keywords


The historian Jeremy M. Black, in his Introduction to Other Pasts, Different Presents, Alternative Futures (2015), a collection of counterfactual articles by various historians, proposes the counterfactual of what if a meteor had fallen in the English Channel during the D-Day Invasion. He then dismisses that counterfactual as “not very helpful” (p. 1) and further “not particularly helpful to discuss such possibilities as they were not considered by contemporaries, nor, indeed, were they at all probable” (p. 2).¹ In Black’s view, a counterfactual to be

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helpful must have been considered by contemporaries and the possibility of its happening must have some degree of probability attached to it. In the next paragraph, he adds a third criterion for it to be helpful: it must “illuminate” the “uncertainty” of the time. Thus, Black divides counterfactuals into those that are helpful and those that are not. His three criteria for determining whether a counterfactual is helpful are: contemporaries must have considered it, it must have some probability, and it must “illuminate” the “uncertainty” of the time.

Whether helpful or not, a counterfactual must also be in the hypothetical (“What if?”) mood. The hypothetical is a grammatical irrealis mood in that it refers to what is not necessarily real. It differs from the subjunctive, which is considered unlikely. It contrasts with the indicative, a realis mood, which indicates something that is a statement of fact. Determining these distinctions presumes, however, that we know and are agreed on the difference between what happened and what didn’t, and that we are agreed on what a historical fact is. In this article, I explore these issues in regard to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Muscovite and Lithuanian origin myths concerning the ancestry of their rulers.

Counterfactual history not only presents something that is counter to historical fact but also proposes that the meaning of that fact is different. It attempts to answer the “what if?” question. So, for example, it is one thing to posit a hypothetical non-occurrence of the Mongol conquest of Rus’ or of the marriage of Vasilii I and Sophia of Lithuania or of World War II; it is another to try to contemplate what would it mean if none of these entities ever existed or occurred. Perhaps this is what Black was alluding to as a “helpful” counterfactual – that is, one that provides a new meaning. The terms that presumably describe a historical occurrence such as “Mongol conquest of Rus’” or “marriage of Vasilii I and Sophia of Lithuania” or “World War II” each conjures up a different image in the mind of the person writing or saying them as well as in the minds of the people who are reading or hearing them. The mind image in one person might have nothing in common with the mind images of anyone else. The only point of commonality are the words themselves. But if the meaning of those words is understood differently by each individual, then what commonality does each of these “historical facts” have? How can we then propose counterfactuals? Counterfactual to what? What is in my mind, but not yours or your mind but not mine? To a degree the whole notion of counterfactuals is

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2 Other irrealis moods are: Conditional, Optative, Jussive, Potential, Imperative, Desiderative, Dubitative, Presumptive, Hortative, and Inferential.
predicated on the twin assumptions that not only is the past knowable but also that we already know it.

1 How Do We Know a Historical Fact When We See It?

In George Orwell’s 1984, Winston Smith, the novel’s protagonist, reflects:

to trace out the history of the whole period, to say who was fighting whom at any given moment, would have been utterly impossible, since no written record, and no spoken word, ever made mention of any other alignment than the existing one .... the frightening thing was that it might all be true. If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, IT NEVER HAPPENED .... The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed – if all records told the same tale – then the lie passed into history and became truth.³

For Winston Smith, the Party’s claim that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia was counter to fact, but it was not a counterfactual in the sense historians have been using it because the Party does not present that statement as hypothetical. Instead, the Party presents it as a historical fact. If someone were to propose “What if Oceania at some point had been in alliance with Eurasia?” then that could only be presented as a hypothetical. Yet for Winston Smith, it would not have been counter to fact, as he remembered it.

The problem for Winston Smith was that, as Jonathan Meiburg wrote: “The trouble with the past is that it keeps changing.”⁴ Some people in the Soviet Union may have felt that way when they repeated the joke: “The future is certain; only the past is unpredictable.” But that presumes that the past was ever certain. It is natural for people to seek certainty, and the history they were taught in school with its exact names and dates provides that certainty. Any challenge to that certainty is treated with apprehension. Yet James Banner, Jr.,

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has argued in his recent book The Ever-Changing Past that “all history is revisionist history” as the subtitle claims. If so, then there is no non-revisionist history to draw upon. All of it has been revised.

That leads to the question, what if the history that we have been told never happened? What if what has been presented to us is based on non-hypothetical counterfactuals? Our answer depends in part upon what one understands to be a historical “fact” and “factual”. My case study is the received interpretation regarding the rise of Moscow. Yet, the rise of Moscow has not changed. So, would any challenge to it be by definition “counterfactual”? Or might the received interpretation itself be “counterfactual” in relation to the source evidence? I have in mind here the distinction between thin interpretation and thick interpretation. I define the former as an “interpretation [that] tries to stay close to the source testimony, risking the loss of coherence,” and I define that latter as “interpretation tries to fill in the gaps in this historical record, risking loss of relevance.” Indeed, what is the “factual” part of “counterfactual”? Is it the thin interpretation or the thick interpretation?

Let us start with Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), who in 1824 defined an objectivist position toward the past with his statement wie es eigentlich gewesen. It implies that past events are more or less directly knowable. Ranke makes this explicitly clear when he wrote: “There is an exalted ideal for them [historians]: that is the event itself in its human comprehensibility, its unity, its fullness; it could be reached. I know how far I have remained removed from it.” The problem with Ranke’s formulation in subsequent practice was not so much that historians fell short of “the exalted ideal,” but that they did not know whether or not they were falling short or how far they were falling short. If the facts are to be presented undistorted, then the historian must ascertain what the events/facts really are. Were historians describing events “as they really happened” or not? Had they ascertained the facts? if so, how could it be verified that they had done so?

Carl L. Becker (1873–1945), like Ranke, was an idealist in his view of what a historical fact is, but differed from Ranke on two significant points: (1) the

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8 Ranke, Geschichten, viii.
historical fact is a statement about the event, not the event itself, and (2) “the historical fact is a symbol that enables us to recreate it [the event] imaginatively.” Becker distinguished between two kinds of historical facts: dead ones and live ones: “The historical facts lying dead in the records can do nothing good or evil in the world. They become historical facts, capable of doing work, of making a difference, only when someone, you or I, brings them alive in our minds by means of pictures, images, or ideas of the actual occurrence.” Becker was influenced by Benedetto Croce’s idea that “real history” exists only when a historian thinks about it and only as long as they do so. If so, then if no historian is thinking about history, then any counterfactual proposal that were to begin, “What if real history exists ...” would fail immediately because the historian making the proposal is already thinking about it.

For Becker, a historical fact must not only be raised from the dead by the historian, but it must also have an impact on the world. Becker, like Ranke, assumed that the source testimony, for the most part, represents the past. Becker was aware of the need for “correcting the common image of the past by bringing it to the test of reliable information.” But he saw that kind of research as being a refining, a making more exact, what is already known, and it clearly gives way in import to “social influence.”

Like Becker, E.H. Carr (1892–1982) distinguished between two kinds of facts: “facts about the past” and “historical facts.” But Carr’s “unhistorical fact” is not the same as Becker’s dead historical fact. Carr did not distinguish between events and facts: “The fact that you arrived in this building half an hour ago on foot, or on a bicycle, or in a car, is just as much a fact about the past as the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon.” A historical fact is created, instead, not by re-thinking or re-creation, but by historians’ using a fact about the past in their work, not just once or twice but only after “twenty or thirty years” when it has appeared in footnotes, articles, and books. For Carr, the facts are there “like

10 Becker, “What Are Historical Facts?” 332.
fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean.” What facts about the past the historian catches depend on their interests and methods, but “by and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.” For Carr, history “is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts.”

Carr’s formulation has been questioned. Leon Goldstein criticized Carr for making the distinction between facts about the past and historical facts because he says Carr is using success as a criterion of that distinction: it “is intended to serve the purposes of a tendentious conception of history according to which only those are historical facts which lead to what he takes the outcome of history to be.” John Lukacs accused Carr of “circling the circle by speaking of two kinds of facts, historical ones and nonhistorical ones,” that there are no criteria by which to distinguish the two, and that “the problem which we face is what is a fact, not merely what is a historical fact ....” A few historical theorists, like Jack Meiland and Leon J. Goldstein, have risked the ridicule of their colleagues by taking a skeptical position toward realist professings of historical knowledge. In their view, historians, instead, construct a version of the past. In consequence, the view of these theorists is called the “constructionist” position in that all of what passes for historical knowledge is theoretical construct. In sum, as this brief survey suggests, there is no agreement among theorists as to what a “historical fact” is. Or, as Henri Lévy-Bruhl wrote in 1936: “Une notion confuse: Le fait historique.”

Certain “facts,” such as that Jane Stanford, the co-founder of Stanford University, died in 1905, are accepted passively as they appear in the source testimony because we have no other way to account for that testimony. Other “facts,” such that she was poisoned, are actively created by inference and analysis of the source testimony, since the official version provided by Stanford University for over a hundred years has been that she died of natural causes. Yet, the coroner’s report, based on the autopsy and testimony of those present,
including the attending physicians, stated that she was poisoned with strychnine. Stanford University professor Richard White recently published a meticulously researched examination of the source testimony and concluded that she was murdered with strychnine that was placed in her Poland Springs water. Nonetheless, some Amazon reviewers, like C.M. Godfrey, reasserted that “the fact remains that the record says that Jane Stanford died a natural death” (June 16, 2022). Yes, but which record? The record of the University says natural death, but the coroner’s report says strychnine poison.

The evolution of the Wikipedia website on Jane Stanford is instructive in this regard. The earliest versions said she died in 1905 with no mention of poisoning. By 2018, Wikipedia said she died “under mysterious circumstances.” By 2020, it said she was poisoned, and in 2022, it stated she died from strychnine poisoning. If we take Wikipedia as an indicator for what the historical facts are, then any counterfactual proposition would have depended on when it was asserted. Before 2020 the counterfactual would have been, what if Jane Stanford had been poisoned? After 2020, it would have been, what if Jane Stanford had died of natural causes? The factual and the counterfactual would have swapped places.

Aviezer Tucker agreed with Goldstein that “one of the shared mistakes of the partisans in the covering law model dispute was the assumption that historical facts are given and historians merely debate how to explain them.” Tucker goes on to add that “Ruben (1990) and other noted correctly that we do not explain events, but their descriptions, and the descriptions of the same event may differ.” For the record, Ruben (1990) does not actually say this; instead he wrote: “Any token event has an indefinitely large number of descriptions true of it. Suppose some token event is both the F and the D. Under some descriptions (‘the F’), it may be explanatory, but under others (‘the D’) it may not be. If so, it is not the token event tout court that explains, but the event qua an event of type F.” But, as I pointed out above, Becker does have the notion that a historical fact is a description of an event, not the event itself. As a result, then Meiburg’s statement about the past always changing (quoted above) would have to be

24 Tucker, Our Knowledge of the Past, 192.
modified to “The problem with the past is that descriptions of it are always changing.”

Let us take Tucker’s understanding of what Ruben wrote as well as Becker’s formulation and consider them a bit further. Historians are usually (unless they are primary sources themselves for an event) using descriptions of the event not the event itself. But are they using primary source descriptions or historiographical descriptions? It would appear at first that a clean distinction can be made between the two, but in pre-modern historical study the cases where we have a primary source (an eyewitness, a document) are few. Instead, we rely largely on secondary sources, which themselves spill over into the earliest historiographical descriptions (e.g., chronicles, tales, saints lives, and so forth). So we should keep in mind that we are dealing with descriptions of events that may or may not have occurred. Since there is no way to check the source testimony against the event itself, we cannot definitively say whether it is accurate or inaccurate in relation to the event being described. In other words, each of our assessments of the source testimony involves a “what if?”. What if the source testimony is accurate? What if it is inaccurate? Yet that is not a “counterfactual” in the sense that Black and others are using it because although in the subjunctive grammatically, it is not presented in the hypothetical mood, that is with an acknowledgement that it didn’t happen.

The noted skeptic Michael Shermer defines a “fact” as: “A conclusion confirmed to such an extent that it would be reasonable to offer provisional agreement.” But what if some scholars think it would be reasonable to offer provisional agreement and other scholars think it wouldn’t be reasonable? The legal concept of a “reasonable person” cannot be invoked here because both sets, those who think it reasonable to give provisional agreement and those who don’t think it reasonable to do so, may be made up of scholars who are “reasonable”. One of the ways scholars try to escape from this bind is for one set of scholars to make it appear that the other set of scholars are unreasonable people, and that there is only one reasonable way to view what the “facts” are – that is, their own way. In regard to the authorship of the Shakespearean corpus, for example, the Stratfordians (those who think William Shakspere [the name on the parish record of baptism] of Stratford-on-Avon wrote the corpus) have been adept at dismissing their opponents as unreasonable kooks for centuries.26

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26 Donald Ostrowski, “Attribution Gleanings: With Focus on the Authorship Controversies regarding William Shakespeare and Andrei Kurbskii as Discussed in Who Wrote That?” Canadian American Slavic Studies (forthcoming) More recently, some of the Anti-Stratfordians have been treating the Stratfordians in kind.
Shermer defines a “hypothesis” as: “A testable statement accounting for a set of observations.” For historical study, we would have to add “descriptions and artifacts” or perhaps specify “observations of descriptions and artifacts”. Shermer defines a “theory” as: “A well-supported and well-tested hypothesis or set of hypotheses.” Yet how does one test a hypothesis in historical study if we cannot observe the historical event itself? I will try to answer that question below. He goes on to define a “construct” as: “a nontestable statement to account for a set of observations.”27 Again we would have to add “descriptions and artifacts” to this definition for it to be workable in historical study.

If there is disagreement over a particular historical fact, then what does that do for the application of counterfactuals? Who has to disagree for something that some people consider to be a historical fact to not be considered a historical fact? Is it “the majority of historians”? If so, who polled them? Is it “the consensus of the field”? But what percentage of historians have to be in agreement for there to be a consensus? And even if there is general agreement on the description of a historical fact, there may be a difference, sometimes substantial, on the meaning of that fact. There has been and continues to be substantial disagreement over the meaning of the war fought in 1973 between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other. Both sides agree that a war occurred, but both sides claim victory. They even differ on what to call the war – Yom Kippur War in Israel; October War in Egypt and Syria. When one goes to Cairo, for example, one can cross the Nile River via the 6th October Bridge, celebrating the victory. Thus, a counterfactual in Egypt would have to be worded “What if Israel had won the October War?” whereas in Israel it would have to be worded “What if Egypt and Syria had won the Yom Kippur War?”

What do we do when we have such staunchly different interpretations? According to Richard Feynman (1918–1988): “Every theoretical physicist that is any good knows six or seven different theoretical representations for exactly the same physics ...”28 In other words, they keep each of these different explanations in mind while conducting further research and gathering more evidence. For the Shakespeare authorship controversy, one would have to know over 50 theoretical representations, not just six or seven, for the same evidence since there are 59 claimants who have been put forward in whole or in part as the author of the corpus.29

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A Counterfactual Proposal to Define a “Historical Fact”

What I am proposing is a definition of historical fact that I have been using (and that may provide us a way out of this conundrum); that is, I posit that a historical fact is the source testimony itself, not the mental construct based on that testimony. In this regard, we should not limit ourselves to descriptions but should include all kinds of source testimony. Let us not exclude non-descriptive source testimony, such as archaeological artifacts, tree rings, geological formations, river systems, proteins on manuscripts, and so forth. In addition, our source testimony is fragile. If for example, Big Brother or some other entity or combination of entities were to destroy all the source testimony and all the historiography, then whatever Big Brother or that other entity says is the case at the moment is then the historical fact. Stanisław Lem wrote a science fiction novel *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961) about a vast paper destroying blight – papyralysis – that obliterated much of the planet’s written history. Today, digitization of sources has made the total elimination of information from written sources less likely; yet what if one doesn’t have access to electricity? What if the entire electrical system of the globe were wiped out? Then those sources although preserved somewhere in digital form are inaccessible and thus of no help in constructing a plausible explanation for how the sources came to be the way they are. B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) famously said that if he could control all the inputs into a person, he could control the behavior of that person.30

In the meantime, existing physical source testimony is something we can check, whereas we cannot check the events of the past. For example, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Marguerite* was written during the last years of Bulgakov’s life, 1937–1940, but it was not published. Chromatographic analysis by Gleb Zilberstein and his team of the protein traces found on ten of the manuscript pages that Bulgakov presumably worked on during the last years of his life indicates not only the renal disease that he was known to have died from but also morphine, which it was not known that he was taking at the time as a possible pain killer.31 Whether or not one agrees with the Zilberstein’s team

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31 Gleb Zilberstein et al., “Unearthing Bulgakov's Trace Proteome from the Master i Margarita Manuscript,” *Journal of Proteomics* 152 (2017): 103 [102–108]; Gleb Zilberstein et al., “Maestro, Marguerite, Morphine: The Last Years in the Life of Mikhail Bulgakov,” *Journal of Proteomics* 131 (2016): [199–204]: “The various manuscript pages analysed (a total of 10, selected among the 127 sheets as written by Bulgakov) were obtained from the “Pashkov Home” at the Government’s Russian Library (Moscow) and from private collections before sales at the “Nikitsky Auction” that took place on 27 March 2014.”
conclusion, one can go back to the manuscript to test their results. One cannot go back to the late 1930s in Moscow to see if Bulgakov was indeed using morphine.

How is all this relevant to the topic at hand?

The author of the *Historia Brittonum* was the first, so far as we have evidence, to write down the idea that Brutus of Troy, a descendant of Aeneas, was the founder and first king of Britain.\(^\text{32}\) Likewise, it was, so far as we have evidence, Lithuanian churchmen who added to their descent myths Palemon (Polemon II of Pontus?). The myth of the Roman origins of the Lithuanian rulers first appeared in the mid-fifteenth century\(^\text{33}\) possibly as a way of counteracting the claims of the Polish nobility that they had civilized the Lithuanians. The counter claim was thus that the Lithuanians had been civilized since Roman times. By the early sixteenth century, the Lithuanian chronicles version tells of a Roman patrician Palemon, a kinsman of the Roman Emperor Nero, who fled with 500 families to Samogitia. The Gedyminids are described as descendants of these Palemonids.\(^\text{34}\)

Novgorod and the Muscovite Churchmen, in turn, extended the genealogy of Muscovite rulers back to Volodimir Sviatoslavich initially in an apparent attempt to justify the claim that rulers of Moscow were the legitimate rulers of all Rus’. Then they extended the genealogy, which they felt they could base on the *Povest’ vremennykhy let (PVL)* and the Novgorod First Chronicle, to Riurik, which in turn led to the adding on of a connection with Prus, after whom Prussia supposedly had been named and who was a relative of Augustus Caesar. The Lithuanian and Muscovite descent myths were a way to manufacture a connection tracing back to antiquity to bolster the claim that their respective countries had a dynasty with ancient Roman origins. Notably neither the Palemon myth nor the Prus myth involve any connection with Constantinople, thereby skipping over the Eastern Roman Empire completely. Thus, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, an ancient Rome connection was presented as the factual history for both Lithuania and Russia. Then if anyone at the time

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\(^\text{33}\) Jan Długosz (1415–1480), *Historiae Polonicae*. Libri xii (1711).

had proposed, what if the Lithuanians and Russians were not descended from
the ancient Romans, that would have been the counterfactual.

So far as we have written records, the counterfactual genealogical connection with Riurik was not made before the mid-fifteenth century, and the counterfactual genealogical connection of Riurik with Prus (supposedly a kinsman of Augustus) was not made before the 1490s. The Commission copy of the Novgorod First Chronicle dates to the mid-fifteenth century, which is the earliest example of a genealogical list of rulers drawing a direct connection between the Moscow ruler and Riurik. This was the start of the Riurikid legend and the concept of a divinely ordained Riurikid dynasty. Before the mid-fifteenth century or so, there was no such concept (at least in our source testimony). The teleological blueprint, from Riurik to the rulers of Moscow, that appears in the Novgorodian list no. 1 was expanded upon in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries with three interrelated story-telling texts – the Chudov Tale (Povest′), the Story about the Vladimir kniazi (Skazanie o kniaziakh Vladimirskikh), and the Letter (Poslanie) of Spiridon-Savva). The authors of these texts attempted to connect the rulers of the Vladimir–Moscow polity with Riurik and through Riurik to a kinsman of Augustus Caesar named Prus. At the same time, they tried to enhance the prestige of the line by asserting that the twelfth-century ruler of Kyiv Volodimir Vsevolodich (to whose name was added the sobriquet “Monomakh”) was related through his mother to the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, and that the emperor had bestowed ruling regalia on him including the so-called “cap of Monomakh.” Then in


37 About this, Nancy Kollmann has written: “Art historians have determined that the cap was probably made in an urban center of the western realm of the Mongol Empire, such as Crimea or central Asia, sometime around the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century” and historians posit “that Grand Prince Ivan Kalita received it as a gift in the mid-fourteenth century during one of his regular visits to his Mongol overseers at Sarai ...."
the second half of the sixteenth century, the *Stepennaia kniga* expanded on this teleological construct. Thus, history was being rewritten to make it appear that the Daniilovich of Moscow were genealogically not just the worthiest but teleologically the only Russian family destined to rule Rus’. Historians have adopted this unlikely Riurikid teleological construct, while rejecting the equally unlikely Augustus Caesar, Prus, and Constantine IX Monomachos parts of it.

Nineteenth-century Russian historians (such as Sergei M. Solov’ev [1820–1879] and Vasilii O. Kliuchevskii [1841–1911]) and twentieth-century Russian historians (such as Boris A. Rybakov [1908–2001] and Nicholas V. Riasanovsky [1923–2011]) incorporated and coopted this counter-factual dynastic construct into their grand Great Russian nationalist imperialist narrative. In this narrative, Russians were there from the beginning when Riurik showed up and settled in Ladoga. Their modern nation was created by Volodimir Sviatoslavich when he converted the Russians to Christianity. The Russians then sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth century migrated to the northeast, where they founded a new home for their dynasty. This nationalist construction cannot be called “counterfactual” because it is not in a hypothetical mood. Instead, it is in an indicative mood as having really happened that way. It is used by present-day state leaders, who think they know what they are doing, to make befuddled decisions in regard to the country’s armed forces invading neighboring countries, which then have dire, cruel, and tragic consequences.

How far does the descent of the Moscow rulers from Prus, a kinsman of Augustus Caesar, through Riurik go in fulfilling Black’s three criteria for a counterfactual to be helpful? It was considered by contemporaries to the Moscow rulers of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thus fulfilling the first criterion. It may have been considered probable at the time by contemporaries but since then historians have been unanimous in rejecting the descent from Prus, although some historians still think there was a connection to the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachos. And the prevailing view remains, even among those who doubt the descent from Riurik that there was a Riurikid dynasty. Yet, the notion of a Riurikid dynasty from the ninth century on could also be seen as improbable propaganda to justify the Moscow rulers’ claim to be the true inheritors of the Rus’ domain. What is lacking, however, is the hypothetical mood, as all of this was propagated in the indicative, as having really occurred.

Nowadays, a relevant counterfactual might be worded, what if the rulers of Moscow were descended from Prus, a kinsman of Augustus Caesar? and what if Volodimir Monomakh had been the grandson of Constantine IX Monomachos and had received his crown from the emperor? But if we accept Carr’s or Becker’s definition of a historical fact that it is the event or the description of the event, then the counterfactual in regard to the Riurikid Dynasty would be, what if there had been no Riurikid dynasty? Although we have no direct evidence that any Rus’ ruler saw himself as a part of that dynasty or any dynasty for that matter before Ivan III Vasil’evich in the late fifteenth century, the construct that the dynasty existed before then can be said to be based on two concepts – the technical definition of a dynasty as a line of related rulers and the supposition that Rus’ rulers must have seen themselves as part of the Riurikid dynasty. One could cite the fact that four Rus’ kniazi are named Riurik in our sources as evidence for such a self-awareness.38

The technical definition of dynasty, however, does not fit the way it was used by the propagandists of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to justify the Moscow rulers’ claim to be the one and only true rulers of Rus’ because of their direct descent from the ninth-century Riurik and through him to Prus, the kinsman of Augustus Caesar. That formulation has a decided teleological aspect to it that goes beyond just a line of related rulers. As for the supposition that Rus’ rulers must have seen themselves as part of a Riurikid dynasty, and the citing of four Rus’ kniazi as evidence, one can categorize it as thick interpretation. We have no direct evidence they saw themselves this way and we do not know why those particular kniazi were named Riurik. It is an interpretation that does not consider other possible interpretations and does not place their being named such within the naming conventions of Rus’ ruling families. For example, multiple Rus’ kniazi were named Volodimir, Iaropolk, Iziaslav, Iurii, Vsevolod, and so forth, which would seem to imply by the same logic that each of these Rus’ kniazi saw themselves as part of a Volodimirovich, Iaropolchich, Iziaslavich, Iur’evich, or Vsevolodovich dynasty, respectively, not a Riurikid dynasty. But such is not the case.

Thus, if one were to accept the definition of a historical fact as the source testimony itself, then a counterfactual might be worded, what if we had direct

38 Riurik Rostislavich is first mentioned s.a. 6665 (1156/7), and ruled in Kyiv intermittently six times between 1173 and 1210 (Dariusz Dąbrowski, Genealogia Mstislavichei: peryye pokoleniia (do nachala xiv v.), trans. K. Iu. Erusalimskii and O.A. Ostapchuk [St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2015], 433–443). The chronicles record three other kniazi named Riurik: an earlier Riurik Rostislavich appears s.a. 6594 [1085/6] in Peremyshl’ (pvl: An Interlinear Collation, 296,12–13); Riurik Mstislavich, first mentioned s.a. 6679 (1170/1) (psrl); and Riurik Ol’govich, mentioned s.a. 6704 (1195/6) (psrl).
evidence that the Rus' kniazi saw themselves as part of Riurikid dynasty? Such a formulation, however, would most likely fail Black's test for a helpful counterfactual – it was not considered by contemporaries in the source testimony we have; it was not probable, and it wouldn’t illuminate the uncertainty of the time. But it would certainly have meaning.