Andrei P. Tsygankov

Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations.

Andrei Tsygankov provides a useful corrective to traditional power-centered interpretations of Russia’s foreign policy over the past two centuries. The author uses a constructivist approach to incorporate Russian visions of honor into the analysis in order to deepen our understanding of Russia’s behavior.

Tsygankov defines honor as a reflection of a state’s concern with the regard of Western states for Russia’s values and interests at a particular time, with the expectations and strength of its domestic scene, as well as with the need to look after cultural allies beyond its borders, be these Christian Orthodox abroad or cultural Russians caught outside the borders of post-Soviet Russia. From this, Tsygankov develops a paradigm of three modes of behavior that enshrine Russian choices. First, when the West treats Russia as a partner and when its leadership is well supported at home, it behaves cooperatively. Second, when the West is unsympathetic and when the domestic scene requires rebuilding or retrenchment, a defensive posture results. Third, when the West disregards and even humiliates Russia, when Russian leadership perceives it has domestic strength, and when it might be concerned with cultural allies abroad, it takes an assertive stance.

To show the interpretive power of this approach, Tsygankov offers ten case studies drawn from the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, based on a wide reading of English- and Russian-language history and political science works plus news sources. He first treats cooperative behavior, studying the nineteenth-century Holy Alliance, the Triple Entente before and during World War I, the period of Collective Security in the 1930s, and Russia’s participation in the war on terror from 2001 to 2005. He then uses the cases of Gorchakov’s recueillement after the Crimean defeat, the period of Peaceful Coexistence from 1921 to 1939, and the attempt to contain NATO expansion in the late 1990s to show patterns of defensive behavior. Lastly, he explains Russian assertiveness with examinations of the Crimean War, the early Cold-War period, and the Russia-Georgia War of 2008. He concludes with some forward looking observations based on this approach, suggesting that Russia will behave cooperatively or assertively in the future depending on its leadership and Western behavior.

Altogether, Tsygankov makes a strong case for considering factors like honor when accounting for and trying to predict future behavior. In each case, after reviewing the historical events, the author shows how these cultural elements informed Russia’s thinking, and how realists’ attempts to explain the policies without reference to the broader cultural context are flawed.
It must be said, however, that Tsygankov does not make this case strongly enough. First, he barely connects with the extensive historical literature on honor as a function of masculinity within a gendered world. At times the understanding of honor seems mechanical, divorced from its broader cultural context. After the introductory discussion in which he explains his methodology, his treatment of honor in the case studies feels superficial. While he does provide some sense of a shift from religion-oriented to ideology-oriented systems, the changing meaning of honor as cultures radically change in the modern era is not well grasped.

Typos and inaccuracies speckle the text, undermining a reader’s confidence in the thesis and in one case leaving a point unclear. Among the former, several times before getting to the chapter on the Triple Entente he refers to that group as the Triple Alliance. Also rankling for historians are inaccuracies like saying that Catherine II ended Russia’s involvement in the Seven Years War (rather than Peter III), that Vyshegradskii was Witte’s successor as Minister of Finance (rather than the reverse), and confusing Evgenii for Grigorii Trubetskoi when explaining Russia’s Entente policy. More confusingly, in making a point about Imperial Russia’s balancing among the European powers, he refers to William I of Austria, leaving one unsure whether the author means to make a point about Prussia or the Danubian monarchy.

More substantively, this reviewer has concerns with three particular cases. First, Tsygankov argues that Russia’s posture was defensive in the decades after the Crimean War, but in doing so, he neglects to consider Russia’s significant Asian expansion during this time. Even while Gorchakov was not the mastermind behind all of the territorial acquisition as he was of the quiescent European policy, it was an important part of Alexander II’s record.

Second, the case of the Triple Entente is more complicated than Tsygankov allows. Where he posits a cooperative relationship with Western states that got out of hand when Russia’s honor was challenged in the Balkans, one might argue otherwise. Stolypin (rather than Izvolskii as the author suggests), Kokovtsov, and even Sazonov in 1910–1913 found ways to work with the Germans, making deals at times that worried Paris, thus a defensive, balancing policy. One could argue that greater optimism about domestic strength by 1913 then allowed for an assertive Russian response to a perceived Austro-German challenge. Moreover, within this case, his desire to see the Entente as an alliance changes the meaning of honor. By 1914, the Russians wanted the Triple Entente to become a new Tripline with all of its requisite commitments, but the British refused. Thus describing the Triple Entente as an “emergent triple alliance” (p. 80) is overstating Russia’s connection to its partners.

Finally, poorly explained is how 1933–1939 can be seen as a period of cooperation while 1921–1939, including the period of Collective Security, can later