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Eurasian Geography and Economics.

'Book Review Essay: Soft power, public diplomacy, and modernity in China and Russia.'

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There is now an extensive literature on the related concepts of soft power and modernity. The former is sometimes known as cultural or public diplomacy and is an international relations factor in what is now called hybrid conflict or even war. As is well-known, Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, coined the term "soft-power" in the early 20th Century. This was useful, but its theory and practice have a pedigree that begins at least with Sun Tzu and in modern history with Niccolò Machiavelli and Carl von Clausewitz. It is essentially how states and multi-state organizations present their values and policy aims as benign or even beneficial to others. The goal is a simple one: to make friends and influence foreign public opinion through a complex of indirect appeals in which intellectual cooperation, and cultural, educational, and economic exchanges form key components. It was a major activity of the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies during the Cold War.

At the risk of tautology, modernity may be defined simply as the economic, political, and cultural characteristics of modern societies. It implies a distinction from pre-modern societies, with modernization being the process by which a transition is made. This does not necessarily bring with it improvements in individual or collective welfare. It is also argued that some societies have now become post-modern in character. Routes to modernity and modernization were matters of an ideological dispute during the Cold War era, with the post-colonial, nonaligned, and economically underdeveloped states seen as potential testing sites by the rival blocs. In this way, soft power, cultural, and public diplomacy became and have continued in the 21st Century to be key elements in the theory and practice of contemporary international relations theory and practice.

Maria Repnikova is the William C. Pate Chair in Strategic Communication, at Georgia State University, Atlanta, U.S.A. *Chinese Soft Power* is published in the new *Elements in Global China* series by Cambridge University Press. It is necessarily a slim volume but is an excellent example of a concise introduction to an important and complex topic. Despite occasional lapses into jargon, it is accessible both to students and the general reader interested in Chinese foreign policy and the broader field of soft power internationally. It comprises six chapters: "Rethinking Soft Power: The Views from China," "The Controversies of Confucius Institutes," "China's Quest for Global Media Power," "China as the Education Hub," "Performing Public Diplomacy Spectacles," and "Conclusions and Future Directions." There is no "Index," which is not a problem in a book of this length. There is a comprehensive eighteen-page "Bibliography" that will be of considerable help to beginning researchers.

Repnikova observes that while Chinese academic and policy commentators echo Joseph Nye's work in its essentials, unsurprisingly they "... tend to converge with and reinforce Xi's ideas, especially when it comes to a mix of the domestic and external orientation of soft power, the importance of socialist

values and ideology as part of Chinese culture” (Repnikova 2022, 10) and China competing with the West. In considering the influence of the controversial Confucius Institutes, she points out the difference between their Chinese language role in advanced countries and their potential ideological attraction elsewhere. These are, she says, “... worth exploring in future studies” (ibid, 21). A related point is that: “In the Global South, China’s technology, while it is accessible, is also often associated with low quality and therefore deemed as less desirable. Yet, the potential for Chinese soft power to be channeled through the ‘hardware’ of communication technology is arguably still more significant than via the ‘software’ of its media content” (ibid, 30–31).

Again, after about two decades of internationalizing China’s education system by learning from Japan and the West, “... the official objective has shifted toward establishing China as a major center of knowledge production and as an attractive international destination for education and training.” (Repnikova 2022, 31). The Global South and Africa in particular are targeted. Its achievement has been limited because of the mixed quality of what is offered and significantly by student experience of racism. In terms of soft power, it is suggested organizing short-term visits that allow foreigners to “... experience Chinese hospitality and modernity is more effective than telling the story of China via official channels.” (Ibid, 39).

Yet again, the Chinese party-state continues its enthusiasm for cultural spectacles such as the Beijing Olympics (2008), the Shanghai World Expo (2010), and the Winter Olympics (2022), and for hosting diplomatic summits. However, this is not necessarily matched by local communities affected by such displays, and risks attracting “... global attention to political tightening across China’s civil society space” (ibid, 50) For example, the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the Chinese government’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan which became a global pandemic. Nevertheless, as Repnikova says: “These widely mediatized public diplomacy spectacles stoke the fire of the growing domestic nationalism under Xi Jinping.” (Ibid, 51).

In a final section, Repnikova offers both conclusions and suggestions for future research, drawing on her work on Ethiopia. Interestingly, she found that there “... the emphasis on ideology or political values is more apparent in the case of the United States than that of China, with China adopting a more depoliticized and pragmatic approach in attracting local publics.” (Repnikova 2022, 55). Repnikova has provided a helpful introduction to issues that are of particular interest to students. The soft-cover edition is well-produced and priced reasonably, while the online version is easy to use given the book’s length.

Published in the series *Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations, Russia’s Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice*, the collection edited by Anna A. Velikaya and Greg Simons is different both in scale and intention from Maria Repnikova’s *Elements in Global China* book. Although not published until 2020, the chapters were completed in practice by 2018. The editors are respectively at the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation, Russia, and at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden. The former is a think-tank founded in 2010 by Dmitry Medvedev, then President of the Russian Federation. The editors say the idea for the book was “... hatched at a conference held in Moscow at the Diplomatic Academy” (of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian Federation) (Velikaya and Simons Citation2020b, 1).

Its declared aim is to provide a collective account of the evolution and practice of Russia’s public diplomacy. The authors of the individual chapters are, except for Greg Simons, Russian academics from a

range of higher education and research institutions in the Russian Federation. They give detailed perspectives on the issues discussed that, given their provenance, may be considered close to those of the Russian government. The book, issued significantly by a major Western publisher, is important for that reason.

It comprises an "Introduction," thirteen individual topic chapters and a "Conclusion." The topics were chosen to provide comprehensive coverage of the issues: and are listed for information here. They are "Russian Public Diplomacy: Historical Aspects", 'Russian Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding', "Development Diplomacy of the Russian Federation" "Russia's Policy and International Cooperation: The Challenge and Opportunities of Soft Power", "Russian Digital Diplomacy: A Rising Cyber Soft Power", "Russian Public Diplomacy Through Higher Education", "Russian Science Diplomacy", "The Role of Civil Society in Russian Public Diplomacy", "Multiple Facets of Russian Public Diplomacy in International Organizations: A Case Study", "Russian Business Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", "The Baltic Sea Region: Cooperation in Human Dimension", "Strategic Communication of Russia in Latin America", and "Russia's Public Diplomacy in the Middle East."

The objective was to answer three questions: First, what is Russian public diplomacy exactly? Briefly, this is viewed in Russia "... as engaging foreign target audiences by fostering cooperation in political, economic and cultural spheres for promoting national interests of the own country (sic)" (Velikaya and Simons Citation2020a, 263). Secondly, what does Russian public diplomacy look like, historically and contemporarily? The answer here is that Russia lost its capacity with the end of the Cold War and that "... mechanisms of its participation in the engagement with foreign audiences and international development assistance have only been recently reestablished." (Ibid, 268).

Finally, just how effective are Russia's numerous public diplomacy programmes and efforts? The target audiences geographically are identified as "top priority" Eurasian partners, "difficult partners" in the Euro-Atlantic community, those "needing humanitarian aid," and those "interested in dialogue," BRICS, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Vietnam, and Singapore. According to the Johannesburg Declaration of the 10th BRICS Summit, 2018: "Russia promotes a message of support for multilateralism (not multipolar, as it may be only two poles, but polycentric world); the central role of the United Nations in international affairs with the role of safeguarding nation state's (sic) sovereignty, independence and national integrity.' (Ibid, 273). This was four years after the annexation of the Crimea from Ukraine.

The "Introduction" frames these questions according to what the editors see as "The Current State of International Relations," the concepts of "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 'Russian Communication as a Threat 'and "External Perceptions and Interpretations of Russian Public Diplomacy." The last claims that "In this informational conflict that is a result of the current New Cold War, there are two primary camps – those that project Russia as a security threat and those that dismiss the threat" (Velikaya and Simons Citation2020b, 13). It is concluded that: "Russia's ability to communicate with international audiences has improved considerably in recent years. Russian international communications and especially their public diplomacy are pragmatically based on specific interests and concrete goals." (Ibid, 18).

It is not possible here to consider in detail each of the chapters which are summarized in the "Introduction" and again in the "Conclusion." Their comprehensive nature and the academic pedigrees of the contributors raise expectations of scholarly detail and analytical thoroughness. However, as is often the case with edited collections, the individual chapters vary in quality. As perhaps may be

expected from authors writing in a foreign language, there are errors of grammar and style, and the use of jargon at the expense of clarity. The expected detail is usually, although not always there, while there is repetition both within and among chapters. These are chiefly descriptive and indeed tendentious rather than critically analytical. There is no separate bibliography, but such information is found in the references.

A frequent assumption is the existence of a New Cold War, although the question of whether responsibility for this is mutual or one-sided is usually begged in favor of Russia. The Index is completely inadequate for a book of such length and complexity. For example, US-Russia relations are a single entry, China is mentioned only under the BRICs heading. There are three brief entries on what is described as the "Ukrainian crisis." The first is a querulous complaint about the Western lack of empathy for Russian policy (Bubnova Citation2020, 80–81); the second states simply: "The political crisis in Ukraine and the relinquishment of Crimea to Russia formed a message about a strong Russia that defended the Russian World' (Tsvetkova Citation2020, 110); the third, referring to the Baltic Sea region, says only: "Political tensions in Russia's relations with Western countries, starting in 2012 and deepening in the spring of 2014 due to the crisis in Ukraine and the referendum in Crimea, brought times of severe endurance for people to people relationships' (Akuhtina Citation2020, 215). That may be agreed, at least!

The Handbook of Russian International Relations Studies the collection edited by Maria Lagutina, Alexander Sergunin, and Natalia Tsvetkova is published in the well-established Routledge *Handbook* series. It provides a comprehensive account of the field of international relations in the Russian academy, considering historical, theoretical and conceptual, institutional, and comparative international aspects. The editors are respected senior academics at St Petersburg State University, while the other contributors are representative of a diverse range of Russian higher education and research institutions. Thirty-six in total with only two located outside Russia (in the United States and Finland), they illustrate collectively the development of Russian perspectives on global issues and their interpretation by practitioners in the field of International Relations Studies during the post-Soviet period. Its recent publication by a major Western publisher is most welcome, although, unsurprisingly, there is some overlap with the Palgrave Macmillan book noted above.

It is explained that in the early post-Soviet period Russian International Relations Studies concentrated on acquiring knowledge and understanding of Western concepts and theories and assessing their potential for meeting Russian policy needs. Later, International Relations theories, such as Neo-Eurasianism and the concept of Russian exceptionalism, emerged which drew more directly on cultural and political traditions. This includes advocacy of a "special path" for Russia in terms of its domestic socio-economic and political model as well as its international alignments. It is claimed that: "On the one hand, Russian international studies scholarship feels itself an integral part of the world international studies community, rather than an isolated school, as was the case in the Cold War era. However, on the other hand, Russia's international studies thinkers understand that the country's new role in the present-day world should be better explained by the home-born theories, and its foreign policy should be supported by Russia's own concepts and doctrines" (Lagutina, Sergunin, and Tsvetkova. Citation2022, 2).

The *Handbook* is comprised of four parts: 1) Basics of Russian International Studies. 2) Russia's International Relations Paradigms. 3) Area Studies in Russia. 4) Russia's International Research Agenda.

These are developed in an Introduction and twenty-eight further chapters. There are also twenty-one Tables and an Index, the entire book running to nearly five hundred pages. It is a major and comprehensive attempt to present Russian perspectives on International Relations Studies, which is to be welcomed. The editors state: "The authors of this handbook want to demonstrate the continuity and change in Russia's international policy course over the past three decades. What foreign analysts sometimes perceived as Moscow's unpredictable, improvised, and chaotic foreign policy moves in reality turned out to be a logical product of a rather lengthy process influenced by both domestic and international dynamics" (ibid, 3–4).

Again, expectations of scholarly detail and analytical thoroughness are raised. It is not possible to consider the individual chapters here, but each provides a detailed description of the topic with some comments. However, the quality of the individual chapters again varies considerably. They are often descriptive, even mechanical in structure and presentation, rather than critical and analytical as one would have hoped. There are errors in grammar and style, with frequent lapses into jargon, always a danger in a lengthy edited book, written in what for the editors and contributors is a foreign language. However, it remains accessible, informative, and generally useful to the academic reader of English.

Nevertheless, reading Russia's Public Diplomacy and the Handbook of Russian International Relations Studies today is difficult given the toxic political theology of Alexander Dugin's *katechon* irrationalism and the cynical realpolitik inspired by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, which have influenced Russian policy, domestic and foreign, since Putin and his fellow *siloviki* came to power. Despite the detailed information provided and the arguments presented in the two books, one is left with the impression of authors and readers lost in a hall of distorting mirrors. One appreciates the difficulties as academics should seek to clarify such distortions rather than aggravate them.

Finally, there is Alexander Etkind's short book *Russia Against Modernity*. It is completely different from the two previous books in that it is a sophisticated and sustained critique of Putin's Russia. An historian, born and educated in St. Petersburg, an academic at Cambridge University, the European University Institute, and the University of Konstanz, Etkind is now a professor at the Central European University in Vienna. His book, a model of clarity, brevity, and simplicity, is an acute analysis of contemporary Russia in modernity; a polemic against Putin and Putinism's klepto-fascism that predicts the collapse of the Russian Federation.

It is, Etkind says "... a lean book about lean modernity and its pompous archaic enemies. It is a wartime book, and the reader will sense my impatience." However, he began its "... narrative long before the Russian war in Ukraine resumed in February 2022" (Etkind 2023, 1). It comprises eight succinct chapters on "Modernity in the Anthropocene," Russia as a "Petrostate," Russia's "Parasitic Governance" and "So-called Elite," "The Public Sphere," "Gender and Degeneration," "Putin's War," and, finally, "Defederating Russia." Drawing upon political economy, intellectual history, and international relations, Etkind writes in the past tense, in a style reminiscent of a dystopian novel that ends with the hope of human renewal. Etkind's optimism is indicated in the choice of the rural sociologist Alexander Chayanov (shot in the Gulag in 1937) and the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin among his favorite authors.

Etkind's argument is that: "Putin's war was a 'special operation' against the Ukrainian people, their statehood and culture. It was also a broader operation against the modern world of climate awareness, energy transition and digital labor." (Etkind 2023, 4). Etkind distinguishes between paleomodernity and gaiaomodernity. The former "... defined progress in terms of the expanding use of nature; the more

resources were used, and the more energy consumed, the higher was a civilization.” (Ibid, 4). The latter in that “... the further advancement of humanity requires less energy used and less matter consumed per every new unit of work and pleasure. The two types of modernity present opposite relations between nature and progress.” (Ibid, 4). Each chapter considers concisely the implications for Russian domestic and international politics, including the end of the Russian Federation, an empire manqué to which Putin intended to restore power and prestige. His aim was (and is) “... to restore the Soviet-style paleomodernity-the reign of oil, steel, and smoke, the majesty of military power, the coerced unity of the people” (ibid, 11).

Etkind concludes: “During three long post-Soviet decades, Russia had an excellent chance to reshape itself into a peaceful, law-abiding and hard-working country. But its massive security apparatus and corrupt, irrational bureaucracy mopped up the wealth produced from holes in the earth rather than by the work of the people. This greedy ‘elite’ drew almost all of its lifeblood from the sale of fossil fuels, rendering the population redundant for its purposes.” (Ibid, 22). The hubris this induced led to the Russian attack on Ukraine, “... one battle in the larger war of the Anthropocene Russian tanks and missiles were bringing an end not only to human lives but, potentially, to human life itself.” (Ibid, 23). But Etkind warns: “Explaining Putinism in terms of its Soviet heritage or as a resurgence of eternal Russia obscures the specific origins of the regime and absolves it of its crimes. Individuals and institutions rather than a national tradition were to blame for suppressing rallies, stealing trillions and launching the war.” (Ibid, 78).

It is a cogent argument, supported as it is by the tragic evidence of wasted opportunity and criminal exploitation in contemporary Russia. This bred cynicism, opportunities for corruption, greed, and the entrenchment of a political klepto-fascism. Most importantly, it explains the potential consequences for humanity itself when self-seeking authoritarians, of which Putin is a prime example, remain unchallenged. Etkind’s analysis applies also to the paleomodernity driven by Xi Jinping and the Party-State in China, as well as authoritarians elsewhere in the world. The response must be: first the intellectual defense of civilized human values, including the rejection of what Julien Benda described as “this imperialism of the species” (Benda Citation 1969, 202); and, when necessary, a morally justified physical defense of free peoples. Etkind has published an important essay that stimulates rational thinking about fundamental issues that affect us all.

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