

Intimate Autocracy: Russian society between resentment and resistance

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This book proposes a close ethnographic examination of people's everyday practices to answer the complex question of why there seems to be so much 'resentment' at work in Russian society. I recast the debate in terms of power and domination to show how political subjectivity is shaped by a long-term sense of displacement and hurt. This produces an intimate feeling for the loss of structuring meaning in people's lives.

What does it mean to say there is mass support in Russia for the invasion of Ukraine? Even before the war, scholars assumed elite narratives and opinion polling were largely in lockstep. But this gave a distorted picture focused on imperial revanchism and societal preference for authoritarianism. My book challenges some of the core assumptions made by political scientists and others about Russia. So many flimsy knowledge claims have been made since the invasion on the little available evidence. By contrast, I propose the first, long overdue, political anthropology of contemporary Russia: I take seriously how 'everyday politics' dramatizes people's social desires, their political agonism, and their struggles. The book is based on my decades-long participant observation with diverse people in Russia – from security service officers to factory workers, from young men avoiding military mobilization to citizen journalists and antiwar activists. While my claims are based on immersion over many years, the book focusses on the period since 2014 and Russia's first invasion of Ukraine.

The question of why Russia has become so authoritarian is, in many ways, Arendtian. And like Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, this book uses a wide array of information and ideas to build a powerful explanatory mechanism. Based on the idea of an epoch's 'structure of feeling', I argue that most relevant today are the traces of socialist-era 'commonality'. Throughout the book I use ethnographic encounters to return to this paradox: that people do not mourn the passing of the Soviet political or geopolitical project, but they do continuously feel an absent presence – its social ordering and sense of belonging. This is a 'haunting' that even young people may experience. I map my ethnography onto contemporary social and political theories. Among others, I dialogue with Keti Chukhrov on the idea of the 'good' in the socialist project and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova on the traces of the Soviet person. From anthropology, I engage with Michael Lambek, Didier Fassin, Cheryl Mattingly, and other researchers who are interested in how morality and ethics are mobilized in everyday life. I show that moral economies have an encompassing power stronger than elite political ideologies. This is revealed in the quiet and not-so-quiet political content of ordinary lives.

The first part of the book (Absent Presences) dramatizes this literal tug of war between elites who propose geopolitical revanchism and ordinary people who sense the social loss of the USSR. In the first two chapters I address people's immediate response to the war in Ukraine and find much more deep content of disquiet and regret than resentment and enthusiasm. In the middle part of the book (Lines of Control), I use ethnography to create a vivid portrait of the unhappy political-economic deal of Putinism. Here I draw on the work of feminist anthropologists and others to examine the problem of social reproduction. The Russian elites see human beings as little more than a new oil – to lubricate the workings of elite enrichment. Ensuring the 'good life' of the next generation and even making ends meet is a daily challenge for ordinary people. One chapter of this second section looks at socio-economic relations through the prism of authoritarian neoliberalism. This is both an enforced and internalized ideology where "man (and woman) is wolf to man". Another chapter examines the state's paradoxical role. The state enforces ideas of individuals as atomized and having to fend for themselves. But at the same time, state withdrawal is incomplete. Socialist-era notions of paternal care for the citizen never fully disappear. Using ethnography, I show that state capacity is built, often with the informal involvement of ordinary citizens, from the ground up. It involves moral judgements and negotiations around the idea of a duty of care. Here I build a political anthropology and draw on feminist

and global south theories of state-making and stategraphy, proposed by scholars such as Tatiana Thelen and Ananya Roy.

In the final part of the book (*Lines of Flight*), I make a theoretical and empirical shift to talk about desiring 'nomads'. This is the red thread to theorize desiring drives for social connectiveness as freedom, which links different parts of the book. Loss of social project leads to nomadic searches for a new socius. This is largely frustrated by the regime's drive to atomize people. Despite this, the micropolitical attempts arise to recreate connection and the 'good' life in sometimes unlikely places. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze's micropolitical theories which find their origin in Spinoza's ethics, I look ethnographically at the movements of people and the importance of places and practices that resist capture and control by the state, even in the wartime present. The last three chapters all describe ordinary, and not so ordinary forms of resistance. I describe the everyday philosophy of mobility-as-resistance that is widely shared – made visible in the metaphor of the garage spaces. Then I turn to the mundane and ordinary practices of craft and salvage which I find have political content. Finally, I talk to the politically active citizens in their struggle to continue to resist and make their world better – in labour politics, environmentalism, and antiwar activism.

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Detailed Chapter Plan

The book is divided into three parts, the first focussing on the immediate context of the war, the second on long term dispossession, neoliberal authoritarianism and the incoherent state. The third part features three distinct yet interrelated approaches to micropolitics and resistance, each illustrated with different case studies of involvement and engagement.

Introduction: an accessible discursive chapter setting out the main themes and arguments and illustrated with vivid ethnographic vignettes.

In **Chapter 1**, I address Russia’s war on Ukraine directly. Summarising the immediate impact on ordinary Russians and their responses to it I propose ‘defensive consolidation’ as a working definition of the majority response. The reaction is defensive, because it is characterized by lack of enthusiasm, fearfulness and practical ways of fending off the effects: material, psychological and moral of the invasion of Ukraine. Consolidating, because it entails cleaving to both national and local forms of authority and identity. Far from rally round the flag and jingoism, these responses find their roots in broad feelings of *ressentiment* about the last thirty years – feelings that are not mainly geopolitical in nature, but about the political-economic compact in Russia itself. My approach is partly inspired by Ketj Chukhrov’s (2020) theorization of Soviet modernity as offering a template of profoundly ‘dealienating’ political economy. Soviet people inevitably had to confront such a template, alongside, and in some cases as part of, their sense of self. While the actual Soviet project recedes further from view into the past, all people in Russia, I argue, remain in some senses ‘Sovietized’ through contact with family, through the political institutions and forms of organization which still strongly retain the stamp of paternalistic and ‘socializing’ identity. Drawing on Didier Fassin’s

distinction between anthropological *ressentiment* and ideological resentment (2013) I disaggregate reactions among Russians to the war.

In **Chapter 2**, to contextualize the conceptual discussion of resentment, I turn to the many self-conscious ‘losers’ of today’s Russia – composite portraits of men and women in Kaluga region. Vanya is one such portrait. A man growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, and whose search for meaning, connection is fraught. Here, I begin to show the importance of intergenerational stories and experiences of loss and trauma. Proposing a phenomenological frame, I explore how suffering emerges as an object in and for itself that permeates the social like a phantom limb experienced as real historical absence (the loss of the social, and the social state). It results, in Simon Charlesworth’s term, in an experience of ‘absurd inhabitation’ in the present (2000). I contrast such experience with a more vitalist response among people who, despite suffering, feel the imperative to connect as social and political subjects. Tamara, the focus here, becomes town mayor to resist the predations of the Moscow-based capital-elite nexus which threatens to expand the local oil refinery and cause environmental disaster to Tamara’s community. At the end of the chapter, I return to a dialogue with Chukhrov and argue that hiding in plain sight in Russian society today is a hard-to-express desire for a return to ineffable commonality, a utopian but also dangerous longing.

In, **Part 2, Chapter 3**, I contextualize the long-term structural and discursive violence inflicted on Russian (and all Eastern European) societies since 1989/1991. To set up the later discussion of portentous terms like ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘state capitalism’, we need to make the case for a critical scholarly framing that gives back explanatory power to experiences of dispossession. My overall framing of social reproduction against the backdrop of multigenerational structural violence is mapped on to recent feminist marxian scholarship, such as that by Juanita Elias and Lena Rethel who propose Everyday Political Economy as a concept to help foster an ambitious interdisciplinary conversation – something I also wish to do. Temporal and spatial forms of dispossession in Russia need to be understood as variants of global processes even if they are largely ‘slow’ forms of violence. In this chapter I set up some of the terms operationalized in this part of the book – social Darwinism, neoliberalism, capitalist realism, and micropolitical struggle.

In **Chapter 4**, I propose Russia as ‘ahead of the curve’ – i.e. neither periphery nor political retrograde, but instead at the forefront of the production of ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher 2009). Capitalist realism is the ideological projection of relations characterised by the reinforcement of exploitation and despair as inevitable and inescapable. If capitalism is, at the present conjunction, sustained by an increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism underpinned by the spectre of the state, then we should look to regimes like those in Russia as at the vanguard. I focus on aspects of neoliberal thinking that are less ‘disguised’ in the authoritarian context. These include the relegation of social welfare, extreme naturalisation of market logic leading to a lock-in of public sector austerity – the leanest fiscal regime possible. This is also facilitated by the absence of a public sphere or possibilities for open political mobilisation, the security state and an exhausted population. Here I argue that Russia is a perfect example of the success of the rhetorics of capitalism in ‘making themselves true’ in the words of Bourdieu, not as exogenous form of thinking, but as domesticated forms. This section therefore ethnographically explores the domestication of such a dismal ideology, and shows how ordinary people over the course of 30 years have internalised forms of social Darwinism that are extreme by any standards.

In **Chapter 5**, I turn to theories of state and society, and the grounded interactions of Russian citizens with bureaucrats, welfare, and the increasingly militarized, techno-policing state. My innovation here in proposing an ‘incoherent state’, is to draw attention to how distant actual experience is from two dominant narratives: firstly, that Russia is a strong state in terms of coercive capacity, and secondly, the neo-institutionalist model characterized by a deficiency thesis summarised as ‘state withdrawal’ (Thelen 2011). Inspired by Tatjana Thelen, a leading anthropologist of the state, I build my own theory of state incoherence: the experience of encountering over-determining, overlapping jurisdictionally-competing bureaucratic rules. At the same time, as a polity typified by patrimonial network politics, bureaucracies sit within an uncomfortable Hobbesian state ecology of ‘man is wolf to man’. After a genuine period of low state capacity in the 1990s, the state returns as regulatory or network bodies. These are entrepreneurial state forms and circulating discourses of regulation, seeking citizens to absorb in what Deleuze calls ‘antiproduction’, where the state operates to

constrict and stifle emerging social forms (Robinson 2010). The ‘incoherence’ of the state is a processes of negotiated settlement – of a degree of deregulation, ‘devolution’ of governance in constant flux, and most importantly, led from below in a dramaturgical encounter of two socially embedded persons, the supplicant and the clerk. In a number of ethnographic sketches the reader observes how they co-create the incoherent state. Thus, a multi-scalar analysis of ‘the state’ is restored, seeing it neither as reified homogenous ‘form’, nor as merely the sum of competing ideologies of order, but as ‘built’ from below.

Part 3 of this book begins with a theoretical discussion in **Chapter 6** of how to align the many approaches to ordinary or mundane resistance in critical geography and allied disciplines with the micro-political frame inherited and adapted from Deleuze and the various post-structuralist interventions on the ‘political’. Similarly, without the frame of household reproduction, proposed by feminist political economy which insists on the material basis of transformation, accounts of change risk being submerged by questionable evidence that is satisfied with prefigurative and discursive resistance alone. Are ‘quiet politics’ enough to do justice to a Deleuzian model of resistance stemming from desire? Once more, I map the insights from feminist emancipatory perspectives, such as Cindi Katz’s ‘minor theory’ (1996), onto the grounded reality of my research participants. Some of the most vulnerable and dispossessed of people are practical Deleuzians – nomadically resistant in relation to both the Russian state and neoliberal capital. This chapter homes in on the micro-scale and insidious forms of refusal which have cumulative scaling effects: the tens of millions of Russians working informally, and only partially visible and legible to the Russian state. Here too, I take seriously the networks of mutual aid and reciprocity which undermine efforts to ‘modernize’ and embed communities into the state-capital market matrix. The point here is not so much to underline the specificity of the Russian case; the small tricks in the everyday which people actively employ to make their lives fuller and less governed by the logic of capitalist realism are present in all societies. The Russian case highlights a broader point in resistance studies: how in the most difficult of circumstances, these tactics and strategies are possible and how they link fraught questions of social reproduction in both the global north and south.

In **Chapter 7**, I turn from the explicit resistant frame of the previous chapter to the material processes of households steeped in a gestalt of gleaning, craft and self-production. This means exploring moments of resistance in the most mundane and ‘stuck’ modes of living and socially reproducing in Russia today. It begins by connecting the feudalistic practice of gleaning – the right of the poor to take the harvest remainder – to a prefigurative politics of how to live well despite calamity. Gleaning and ‘making do’, has a long history in Russia (Cherkaev 2023, Golubev 2022, Morris 2013). The current crisis, even prior to Ukraine, sees the struggle for existence of more and more people resemble a form of gleaning. There are increasing hierarchies of plenty and want but enclosure and expulsion do not succeed in excluding the marginalized from gaining access to the ‘left-overs’ of production. Nor does dispossession mean that moral economies of the commons disappear (Palomera and Vetta 2016). The second part of the chapter introduces the provisioner as an emblematic figure in nomadic stuckness. New enclosures contain both meanings and materials, but waste and detritus from the destructive effects of change are available as resources. My argument is aware of autonomist cautions against romanticized views of resistance but nonetheless sees value in characterizing gleaning as a holistic practice worthy of consideration as political in nature. Because gleaning is seen as a highly specific practice, the chapter extends the meaning of provisioning to more diverse socio-economic contexts – we are all, whether we realise it or not, creative provisioners, and increasingly so.

Chapter 8 shifts focus to political subjectivity and everyday existence among people who self-identify as activists. Building on my previous theorization of activism as entailing ‘experiential entanglement’ (Morris 2023c), I deploy three case studies drawing on ‘expert’ testimony and observation to illustrate the broader context of politicized involvement, networking, and activism in the increasingly authoritarian domestic environment in Russia. While my frame is phenomenological, focussing on the intersubjective experiences of activists, these cases bring to light process tracing, histories of politicization, practical matters of organization, capacity building and migration between sites and causes of contention. The first case is based on my longstanding interactions with labour activists in the automotive industry. The second case examines recent socialist activists’ organization with workers in the gig economy among couriers, food deliverers and taxi-drivers. The third case examines environmental activism before and since the war, pointing to how

decentralized activism has the potential to ‘survive’ the harsh clampdown on activists since the invasion of Ukraine. This is a story of continually transformative activism: it is hard to define single causes or coherent groups. One week a group works together on flyers highlighting the illegal burial of rubbish in a national park. The next week a single activist ‘affiliated’ to the environmentalists undertakes covert anti-war vandalism. A month later, a smaller core funds legal advice for an elected politician to deny a planning license to a polluting plant. This nomadic and transverse activism demands a more serious look at the micro-political foundations of contentious politics.

In a **concluding Chapter 9** I draw together the materials, people and reflections of the book. Russia is a ‘crisis heterotopia’ – a disturbing time-space containing what look like the most dysfunctional elements of contemporary neoliberal capitalism and the authoritarian tendencies of the modern state. But Russia as heterotopia is merely one world within our world where the current crises are played out in greater relative dramaturgical intensity than in our own societies. Like crisis heterotopias elsewhere Russia’s is both banal, taken for granted, but also delimited – we can trace its edges. Similarly, crisis heterotopias contain dual meanings. They reflect to us both crisis but also give glimpses of resolution. They have room for several tendencies and subregions of dwelling that try to escape along lines of flight. Provisioning, informal and delegated governance, everyday politics, activism and solidarity, show us how the small theories of everyday political economy, link up into the form of ‘small lifeboats’ for the people whose lives I trace out, inadequately on these pages. DIY Lifeboats are more than a striking image, as metaphor they encapsulate both flight and stuckness, craft, improvisation, refuge and solidarity. The lifeboat as a meagre yet ultimately delivering heterotopia, is the closest we can get to an example of a revolution of position for our times.