

## **Manfred Hildermeier. *Die rückständige Großmacht. Russland und der Westen.***

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Jonathan Daly

University of Illinois Chicago

Email: [daly@uic.edu](mailto:daly@uic.edu)

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In *Die rückständige Großmacht* (The Backward Great Power), Manfred Hildermeier explores Russia's complex relationship with the west using the heuristic concepts of backwardness and modernization, terms the author considers problematic but indispensable for making sense of Russia's place in the modern world.

Ch. 1 sketches the marriage connections of Rus' princes and princesses to European ruling houses. Hildermeier contends in Ch. 2 that the Mongol conquest fostered the development of "a patrimonial and centralized-monarchical state" (21) with a xenophobic church culture. Yet interactions continued, especially through Novgorod. Intensive adaptation of European technology, architecture, building methods, and analogous know-how began in the later 1400s. By the late 1600s, a strong affinity for European culture, taste, and lifestyles characterized Russia's elites, even though non-Orthodox foreigners were required to reside in the German suburb of Moscow beginning in 1652.

Ch. 3 focuses on western-oriented transformations in the 1700s. Peter I and his entourage marveled at the high standard of living, technological progress, and everyday efficiencies of European societies during their lengthy voyages. He therefore embarked Russia on a crash course of Europeanization. Some reforms—military, science, higher education, secular schooling, westernized dress and habits—succeeded; others—local self-government, administrative efficiency—less so. Later in the century, Catherine II pursued cultural and social Europeanization, supporting satirical periodicals, promoting the arts, devolving privileges and rights to elite social groupings, and dramatically expanding secular education. Thousands of Russians traveled to Europe, but many viewed it critically. Elites developed a "divided consciousness," in which one felt both "European and Russian" (64).

Ch. 4 surveys developments from 1800 until 1917. Enthusiastic adaptation of European institutions, manners, breakthroughs, trends, and ideas combined with revulsion from European ways. Many thinkers contrasted allegedly excessive rationalization, individualism, legalism, and abstract thinking in Europe with an imagined Russian holistic and organic community-mindedness. Educational institutions expanded and gained autonomy, while autocratic government persisted; western-inspired political opposition spurred reassertions of arbitrary administrative authority. Many intellectuals hoped their country could learn from Europe while avoiding its problems and travails. The "concept of the privilege of backwardness," writes Hildemeier, "fell on particularly fertile ground in Russia" (89), while thinkers strived to conceptualize Russia's world-transforming path. Yet nearly all the major changes Russia underwent in this era were powerfully influenced by western ideas and practices. Indeed, Russia came "politically and socio-culturally closer to Europe than ever before" (148), while powerful literary and artistic influences began to flow from east to west as well.

The Bolsheviks rejected western capitalism (Ch. 5), but still "measured their success according to Western European patterns of development" (172) and massively adapted American economic methods and technology. Gigantic stores of means of production were

seized as reparations after World War II (Ch. 6), and détente enabled generous flows of western technology. But even these windfalls could not stave off failure due not to “a lack of modern rockets but rather the poverty of [Soviet] kitchens” (199). Political repression meant to placate hardliners disappointed by détente gave rise to robust western-oriented political dissidence. While Gorbachev remained committed to Soviet socialism (Ch. 7), and his reform program was positioned strongly toward the west, anti-western voices arguing for a distinctive Russian path emerged also. Under Boris El'tsin, Russia embraced the west, but skyrocketing crime and surging economic inequality boosted anti-western sentiment and made popular Vladimir Putin's emphasis on order, stability, and great-power striving. As Putin reined in independent politicians, asserted control over the judicial system, restricted civil society, adopted jingoistic rhetoric, and pursued imperialistic designs, western leaders avoided confrontation. His invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, rationalized in part as a defense against alleged western attacks on Russian sovereignty and traditional values, galvanized western countries against Putin. Yet “history shows,” Hildemeier argues, “that changes can come and indeed continuously have come very quickly” in the relations between Russia and the west (240).

A final chapter represents “backwardness” as an irreplaceable concept. It has no precise meaning, and every country develops in its own way, but for centuries Russia's elites viewed their country as striving to “catch up” to the west. As such, the concept denotes a key aspect of Russia's interrelations with western countries.

*Die rückständige Großmacht* is well organized and draws extensively on relevant historiography, though the absence of any reference to Richard Pipes and Martin Malia, scholars who reflected deeply and fruitfully on Russia's relations with the west in terms of both backwardness and affinity, is surprising. The book, which will appeal to graduate students, scholars, and advanced undergraduates, is an important contribution to the historical literature.

## **Timothy K. Blauvelt. *Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba.***

**Imperial Transformations—Russian, Soviet, Post-Soviet History. London: Routledge, 2021. xiv, 248 pp. Notes. Bibliography, Index. Photographs. Maps. \$48.95, paperback.**

Claire P. Kaiser

Georgetown University  
Email: [cep24@georgetown.edu](mailto:cep24@georgetown.edu)

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Abkhazia was an exception to even the exceptions in Soviet history: a strong base of Bolshevik support amid a popular form of Georgian Menshevism; a sub-tropical climate conducive not only to cultivating strategically significant crops (tobacco, citrus), but as the preferred vacation destination for senior Bolshevik leaders; a titular nationality that was a significant *minority* in “its” republic; and a novel territorial status for the first decade of Soviet power, the “treaty republic” (*dogovornaia respublika*). Timothy K. Blauvelt examines these peculiarities—and the opportunities and risks they afforded to local actors—in his archivally-rich examination of early Soviet Abkhazia through the lens of its charismatic and vibrant leader, Nestor Lakoba. For all of early Soviet Abkhazia's novelty, Blauvelt