The prolific Chris Miller, a professor of international history at Tufts University, has published four books in six years. *We Shall Be Masters* is his third, coming after two books on politics and economics in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. [1] A fourth book, a history of microchips, was released in 2022.[2] As might be expected from an author with such a quick pen (or keyboard, as it were), *We Shall Be Masters* is a sweeping and fast-paced tour through the last three hundred years of Russian foreign policy. While experts on the Russian Far East and Central and East Asia will likely be familiar with the stories Miller tells within any particular time period, the book's novelty and insight come from putting all this history together. A scholar of Imperial Russia's relations with Japan will know much about the Russo-Japanese War, for example, but might be surprised to find out that the Russians were the first Europeans to build a fort in Honolulu. It is, therefore, a welcome addition to the literature on Imperial Russian and Soviet foreign policy toward Asia. Although it overlaps in some places with John Stephan's history of the Russian Far East, Miller's focus is mostly on Russian policies and perceptions outside its borders and therefore works as a nice complement to Stephan's now-classic work, rather than as an update.[3]

Although *We Shall Be Masters* is not as innovative as its opening pages seem to promise, it is worth reading. The title is an ironic reference to a Dostoevsky quotation, meant to reflect Russians' optimism and wildly unrealistic expectations for their policies in Asia. Other well-chosen quotations introduce most of the chapters as well as the subsections. There are several excellent maps throughout that are helpful to the reader. Undergraduates and graduate students will find its narrative turns surprising and the footnotes a thorough jumping-off point for deeper research. Experts will no doubt find much to quibble with when Miller wades into their fields and eras, but this reader appreciated the attempt to weave together so many disparate events over a long period of time.
The theme of the pivot, which guides Miller's choice of cases and personalities, means that much of the action takes place in European Russia, in the capital cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow and in the minds, letters, and telegrams of tsars, government officials, and diplomats. This is perfectly defensible given the scope of the book, but it represents a different approach from the most groundbreaking scholarly work over the last several years, much of which Miller does cite, which focuses on the stories of Russians, and other ethnicities of the Russian and Soviet empires, who remained living and engaged in Asia even during periods when the metropole was distracted or disinterested.[4] The view from the metropole becomes particularly dominant in the second half of the book, while the first half gives Russian explorers and colonizers like Akesandr Baranov, Nikolai Muravev, and Nikolai Przhevalsky their due (without examining their interactions with non-Russians).

*We Shall Be Masters* is thus a relatively straightforward political history. If Miller's methods and interpretations do not always reflect the current trends in the historiography, however, he has done his homework, citing most of the literature and often more than one would expect on any given period, including a substantial portion of Russian-language scholarship. Since Harvard University Press does not provide bibliographies for their monographs, Miller helpfully includes long lists of works in the footnotes to point the interested reader to the broader scholarship, and he relies on many of the standard works in the “Russia in Asia” literature.[5] He also relies on primary documentary collections in English and Russian as well as some sources from the US, UK, and Russian archives.

Miller's main insight is that Russia has made many pivots to Asia, often when Russian leaders found themselves stymied in Europe, only to lose interest in their Far Eastern periphery and abandon their investments in the region. The paradigm makes for a coherent narrative, but it also presents a challenge for the author. This is mainly a tale of failure, and emphasizing the pattern of boom and bust risks becoming repetitive and overlooks the continuity in Russian policy maintained by officials and residents on the ground. Russian and Soviet leaders are by turns fascinated and focused on the East, until they are not.

Miller begins the introduction with the story of Peter the Great's encounter with Dembei, the first meeting between a Russian tsar and a Japanese subject, after Russian explorers on Kamchatka picked up Dembei and brought him back to St. Petersburg. Here, Miller tells the reader that Peter, famous for his westernizing reforms and efforts to bring Russia into the European club of great powers, was also fascinated by Asia. Peter, “on his deathbed,” dreamed of finding a route through the Arctic Ocean to China and India (p. 5). From this vignette, the pattern begins: after Peter's death, Russian officials (though not Russian fur traders) lose interest in the East and turn inward until explorers and hunters finally make their way across the Bering Strait.

But first, Miller uses the rest of the introduction to make a compelling case for the book's significance. The historical record, Miller claims, does not bear out the arguments of other historians and political scientists that “enduring factors” such as geography explain Russia’s expansion in and engagement with Asia.[6] Rather, the hallmark of Russia’s interactions with Asia and the Pacific is inconsistency: “spasms of intense activity” followed by ignorance and irrelevance (p. 12). The only thing enduring is this cycle of sudden optimism followed by disillusionment and failure.[7]

Having laid the framework for the book, Miller jumps from Peter the Great to Alexander I, in the first of his eight substantive chapters, with the story of Russian expansion into North America. Soon after the Russians began laying roots in Alaska, American merchants arrived off the coast of Alaska to supply the starving colonists. The
Americans also succeeded in establishing a transpacific fur trade between the North American Pacific Northwest and China. To avoid being cut out, the Russians rushed to finance their own ‘round-the-world naval expeditions and founded Ft. Ross near the California coast. In the 1810s they gained a toehold in Hawaii, building the aforementioned fort in Honolulu, but ultimately nothing came of these efforts. Alexander’s transpacific project culminated in his ukaz of 1821 in which he claimed that only Russian ships would be allowed in Alaskan waters. Yet the absolutist monarch soon backed off his claim. The Americans ignored it and the Russians never enforced it. Soon after, the Russian Empire began a long period of territorial contraction in America. Miller dots his version of the tale with colorful asides and characters—Vladimir Baranov, the wily administrator of Alaska; Nikolai Rezanov, who led a sailing expedition around the world only to die in an icy Siberian river on his way home; Leonid Shäffer, who singlehandedly and without St. Petersburg’s approval tried to establish a Russian presence in Hawaii.

In chapter 2 and the rest that follow, the results are similar—a flurry of Russian activity and interest in Asia followed by abandonment. Thirty years after the 1821 ukaz, on the heels of defeat in the Crimean War in Europe, Nikolai Muravev arrived in the Far East to follow up the recent exploration of the Amur River by Gennady Nevelskoy. He succeeded in refocusing Russian forces from Kamchatka to the Amur River basin (for which he would become known as Muravev-Amursky). The Second Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion allowed Muravev and his partners to negotiate the 1860 Treaty of Beijing, in which the Qing ceded the territory just north and east of the Amur and Ussuri rivers, finalizing the modern Russian Far Eastern borders. From this high point followed a period of neglect.

Yet the empire did not pivot completely away from Asia. Instead, Russia’s attention was pulled toward Central Asia and pacifying the nomadic peoples along its border with western China. The third chapter follows the exploits of explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky and the “great game” in Central Asia between the Russian, Qing, and British empires. Przhevalsky’s adventuring lasted about fifteen years (1870-85) and brought Russia to the brink of all-out war with China and Britain. Unwilling to commit Russian troops to battle against their imperial rivals, however, St. Petersburg backed down and focused on domestic problems in the wake of Alexander II’s assassination in 1881.

Less than a decade later, the Russians were back at it in the Far East, with the heir apparent, Nicholas II, laying the first piece outside Vladivostok of what would become the Trans-Siberian Railway. Nicholas had just returned from a tour of Japan (accompanied by orientalist Prince Esper Ukhtomsky) that included an assassination attempt, which perhaps cemented his racist view of the Japanese. The future tsar’s quest for territory combined with his denigration of Japanese abilities set the stage for Russia’s stumble into the Russo-Japanese War. After he ascended to the throne, his finance minister, Sergei Witte, envisioned not conquest but peaceful financial penetration of East Asian markets. For this, he ably negotiated the rights to build the Chinese Eastern Railway across Manchuria, a strip of sovereign imperial Russian territory with Harbin as its hub. But Witte was unable to stop Nicholas and a coterie of aggressive officials and advisers from hijacking the finance minister’s well-laid plans and turning commercial expansion into territorial ambition.[8]

Throughout the book, readers learn little about the Russian military’s role in these pivots to Asia, and here Miller glosses over the violence of the Boxer Uprising and the battles of the Russo-Japanese War. As David Wolff has noted, the Boxer Uprising was key because “it shifted the power” within the Russian government away from Witte's
Finance Ministry and the Foreign Ministry and toward the War Ministry. One also might reasonably expect that a book about Russia’s imperial efforts in Asia would deal with events like the cleansing of fifteen thousand Chinese residents from Blagoveshchensk during operations in Manchuria against Boxer and Qing forces, or the at-the-time largest land and naval battles in history at Mukden and Tsushima in the war with Japan. [10] Defeat in these battles caused a revolution that threatened the tsar’s authority, with armed bands of men returning from the East along the Trans-Siberian. Witte, cast out of influence during this period, was dispatched to negotiate the peace terms with Japan. His hard bargaining at the Portsmouth Peace Conference, in which Russia avoided paying an indemnity to Japan, brought him back into Tsar Nicholas II’s confidence and eventually won him the premiership under the new, quasi-constitutional government cobbled together in response to the 1905 revolution. Once again, focused on restoring order within and licking its wounds from its humiliating defeat against Japan, Russia pivoted back to Europe, with even more disastrous consequences: a world war that spurred two more revolutions and finished what 1905 had started.

Miller and others overstate Imperial Russia’s neglect of its eastern periphery during this period between the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian Revolution. To be sure, the empire had curtailed its territorial ambitions. Yet the Russian leadership also engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity with Japan to bury the hatchet. Imperial administrators continued building the Amur branch of the Trans-Siberian Railway inside Russia’s borders, and they shipped large numbers of subjects from the empire’s western border to its eastern edge. During World War I, Vladivostok became a major entry point for supplies from the Entente and the United States.

Chapter 5 picks up the story after the Great War and Revolutions, portraying Soviet initiatives in China as a sudden turn back to Asia. Reading Miller’s account, one would get the impression that there was hardly any revolution in the East in 1917, much less between 1917 and 1922. [11] Miller is on firm ground in claiming that Soviet leaders in the reestablished capital of Moscow became interested in China and the East more generally after their revolutionary efforts had been stymied in Europe. Still, the chronology of the chapter is a bit off. Take, for instance, Miller’s claim that the Bolsheviks only wised up to the idea of self-determination after the Allies had encircled them by intervening in the Civil War. As Erez Manela, Arno Mayer, Joshua Sanborn, and Boris Chernev have noted, however, the Bolsheviks seized power with self-determination firmly rooted in their policy plank. It was one of the most attractive things about them to the non-Russian peoples of the multiethnic empire. Taking the revolution abroad by promising radical self-determination was not a strategy to undo encirclement; the Bolsheviks’ pronouncements on the issue helped spur Allied intervention and also nudged US president Woodrow Wilson to offer a more sweeping (though ultimately paternalistic) version of self-determination. [12]

“Facing what appeared to be a mortal threat,” Miller writes of encirclement, “some Bolshevik leaders wondered whether an assault on colonialism could weaken European capitalism” (p. 149). A strange thing to write about the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin and Stalin (as the People’s Commissar of Nationalities) above all, who had always viewed self-determination as one of the main methods of upending imperialism and therefore capitalism. Lenin, after all, wrote the famous book on imperialism as capitalism’s “highest stage,” before the revolution began. [13]

Miller’s approach also fails to pick up on other interesting patterns that might point to more continuity than the seesawing narrative suggests. A major focus of chapter 5 is the case of Mikhail Borodin and his mission to foster revolution in
China. Borodin's path is indeed fascinating: he fled Imperial Russia and started a new life in the United States, “bouncing from Boston to Chicago before unrolling [sic] in Indiana’s Valparaiso University,” then back to Chicago, eventually returning to revolutionary Russia and then moving on to China (p. 152). Set in a broader context, Miller might have also noted that Borodin’s story was far from unique. These types of revolutionary transnational journeys were occurring all over. [14] For example, Aleksandr Krasnoshchekov also fled the empire and ended up in Chicago, studied law and economics, and started a family. In the summer of 1918, he returned to Russia via Vladivostok and, after improbably surviving the anti-Bolshevik and Allied overthrow of Soviet power in the Far East, rose to head a Moscow-sanctioned buffer state called the Far Eastern Republic (FER). This buffer state strategy played a major role in putting international diplomatic pressure on the Japanese to withdraw from the Russian mainland in 1922.[15] The story of Krasnoshchekov and the FER indicates that there was more continuity in Russian/Soviet relations with East Asia than Miller allows. Instead, his account exaggerates the level to which the Bolsheviks at first ignored East Asia and only “by the mid-1920s” pivoted back (p. 162).

The narrative finds its footing on more solid ground once Miller begins describing the battles between Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalists and the Soviet-backed communists in Shanghai and Canton. Previously, Stalin had backed the Nationalist Party under Sun Yat-sen and then Chiang against Japanese encroachment, but Chiang’s crackdown in Shanghai in 1927 led to a break (even as Chiang’s son was studying in Moscow at the time). By 1929, the Soviets and Nationalists were fighting an all-out war in Manchuria, which the Red Army won handily. But instead of following up his victory by grabbing territory, Stalin retreated. Communist revolution failed to follow the Soviet victory and doing more risked violent opposition from a militarily strong Japan.

This makes sense, except that Miller tries to make it a puzzle in the next chapter, on Stalin’s approach toward East Asia in the 1930s and World War II. Here he refers to the “overreaches of the 1920s,” which “had been seared in the minds of Soviet leaders” (p. 194). Given all the challenges that Stalin thrust upon the Soviet Union in the 1930s—political and military purges, an industrialization drive, and famine-inducing collectivization—the leadership hardly needed other reasons to avoid conflict in East Asia. As Miller points out, instead Stalin focused on a fortress mentality. He deported the entire population of Koreans (over 170,000) living in the Soviet Far East to Central Asia, relocated all Chinese residents away from the border, and killed around 8 percent of the region’s overall population in purges (p. 189). Stalin destroyed the Red Army’s leadership, but also embarked on a massive internal build-up along the Manchurian border. Despite this defensive strategy, the Red Army still ended up fighting three major battles with the Imperial Japanese Army from 1937 to 1939. At Khalkin Gol (Nomonhan), the Soviets won a decisive victory, allowing Stalin to focus on the threat from Nazi Germany.

Instead of this obvious explanation, Miller finds “a strange contradiction between Stalin’s strategies on his western and eastern fronts” (p. 195). Why was Stalin focused on buffer states in Europe but not in Asia? Why didn’t the Soviets follow up their victory at Nomonhan by seizing territory in Manchuria? Miller’s narrative of this period is fine without belaboring this unnecessary conundrum, which can be resolved by asking the real question: In 1939, who was the bigger threat to Moscow, Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan? The answer is obvious because, as Miller has just told his readers, the Red Army thumped the Japanese at Nomonhan, decisively ending the North-South debate within the Japanese government over whether to take on the Soviet Union or to move into Southeast Asia and confront the United States. Plus, as Miller also notes, the Soviets had already set up the puppet state par excellence in Mongolia.
This is only a puzzle if one sees Russia as eternally bent on expansion in every direction all the time. If Miller’s goal is to demolish that canard, then there would have been more straightforward ways of making that argument. As his book emphatically demonstrates, Europe has always mattered more to Russia. When push comes to shove, Russian and Soviet leaders have always pulled back from activism in the East to focus on the West.

Unless, of course, the adversary was no longer in Europe or Asia. As Miller explains in chapter 6, in the global Cold War with the United States, the Soviet Union could no longer content itself with such regional pivots. Now the whole globe was the battlefield; competition in Europe and Asia was an ever-present fact of life. And so, after the Second World War, Stalin attempted to seize territory and create buffers on both ends of Eurasia. This flurry of activity did recoup some initial gains: the Kurile Islands, the 1949 communist victory in China, the near conquest of South Korea through proxies. But eventually it backfired. Stalin died and his successors pivoted away once more.

Or at least they stop waging war for a time. Chapter 7 compares Nikita Khrushchev’s “soft power” policies with Leonid Brezhnev’s harder line approach. Khrushchev hoped to use diplomacy, economic aid, and expressions of ideological solidarity in Asia to heal the damage done by the late Stalinist period. Yet his own mercurial personality undermined both his efforts at “peaceful coexistence” with the United States and at cultivating ideological and geostrategic relations with China. Brezhnev returned to hard power, tripling Soviet forces in the Far East, increasing the Pacific Fleet’s capabilities (especially nuclear), and building the Baikal-Amur Mainline across Siberia (p. 236). In part as a result of Brezhnev’s policies, in 1969 the Sino-Soviet split spilled out in the open as the two communist powers fought a border war.

Readers might be surprised that a book on Russia’s relationship with its Eastern neighbors does not engage much with the debate over Russian Orientalism, that is, whether Russians understood Asia better than other European empires by virtue of their proximity.[16] Although he does not address the topic directly, as far as Imperial Russian and Soviet leaders are concerned, Miller makes clear which side he is on. Their fascination and understanding of East Asia was always rather shallow. This helps explain why their policies whipsawed between intense engagement and apathy. The result of this lack of deep knowledge is underlined in the example of Khrushchev’s and Brezhnev’s contrasting policies: the Soviets cannot win, or perhaps their lack of consistency is part of the problem. Whether they pursue a soft or a hard policy, Miller shows, they are almost doomed to mess it up. In some cases, the problem is implementation, as in Khrushchev’s, and in others it is a matter of strategy, as in Brezhnev’s. In previous chapters, when Stalin took a passive approach, it was bad timing; when he became more bellicose and territorially ambitious, Miller also judges this the wrong approach. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the book is that Russia just cannot win in Asia.

Chapter 8 covers the Mikail Gorbachev’s efforts to spread and revive “soft power, Soviet style” in Asia even as the Soviet state collapsed (p. 254). Gorbachev’s good intentions came to naught, just as they did with his efforts to reform the Soviet economy and politics. Initiatives such as considering a Japanese offer to buy back the Kurile Islands for the considerable sum of $122 billion only served to antagonize the security services and Soviet residents of the Far East. Boris Yeltsin, his successor as president of post-Soviet Russia, was too busy staving off another state collapse and quashing conflicts in the European borderlands to do much in Asia.

Miller’s conclusion—written in 2021—focuses on what he sees as Russian president Vladimir Putin’s pivot to Asia following the 2014 seizure of Crimea and propping up of rebels in eastern
Ukraine. As a result, the United States and Europe ended cooperative partnerships with Russia and implemented harsh economic sanctions. Once again shut out of Europe, “the Kremlin decided to turn east instead,” throwing the country into China’s embrace (p. 274). Briefly tracing the Kremlin’s failing efforts to stave off decline in the Russian Far East, Miller repeats that “locked out of the West ... it made sense to consider its neighbors to the east” (p. 280).

Miller foresees Putin’s pivot as echoing the pattern of Russia’s relations with East Asia, with similar results. Closer economic ties to China make Russia more vulnerable to a Chinese economic slowdown, and there is no sign that Beijing is willing to make serious investments in the Russian Far East. But then the analysis gets a bit muddled. “The second challenge” Putin faces in turning east “is geopolitical,” Miller writes, as “Russia has locked itself out of Europe.... Hence Russia turned toward Asia” (p. 283). Russia and China’s authoritarian alignment might not “persist indefinitely,” and if “Russia eventually decides to improve ties with Europe” it would undermine the whole purpose of Putin’s move. We now know that rather than hedging his bet, Putin doubled down with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The point is not to tweak Miller for failing to predict the war, which few thought would happen even days before the Kremlin invaded Ukrainian territory. It is merely to point out that perhaps this is a case where history does not rhyme. Putin apparently launched the attack on Ukraine in part because he felt confident that his “dear friend” Chinese President Xi Jinping would support him. [17] For the entire period that Miller covers until Putin’s presidency, the same underlying conditions held: Russia may have made poor strategic choices and stumbled in its Asia policies, but it was always more powerful on the whole than China and Japan. Even in the case of Russian America, its power was greater than the United States’ but was hampered by its geographic distance from its colonies. Under Gorbachev, as the Soviet Union crumbled, China’s economic revival had only begun. Now the balance has shifted drastically in Beijing’s favor. Before long, the relationship between China and Russia might come to resemble that of the United States and Canada. The prospect of Russia returning to the European fold and cooperating in a balancing coalition against China seems as remote as ever.[18] Given the declining population in the Russian Far East and Russia’s moribund economic prospects for the foreseeable future, perhaps Putin’s goal was less searching for a “‘Eurasian exit’ from ‘European crises,’” as Miller so aptly quotes Kremlin foreign policy guru Sergei Karaganov (p. 289). Maybe this pivot was instead about using China’s embrace as a springboard for attaining whatever Putin’s goals are in Europe, whether they be reconstructing the Russian Empire, resurrecting Russia’s status as a great power, or firewalling off Russia with a buffer in eastern Europe. Should Putin fail to do any of these things, his embrace of Xi will look to historians less like a pivot and more like the drift of a tyrant who was pulled inexorably east by China’s gravity. Even when Putin eventually cedes or loses power, it is hard to imagine a scenario where Russia can disentangle itself from China, given the imbalance of power between the two countries and China’s importance to Russia’s economic and security interests.

In the end, Miller reasserts that Russia’s approach to Asia has been driven not by “enduring interests” but “by emotion, ideology, and optimism.” Miller has done an excellent job proving this thesis. As Putin’s war has accelerated the plunge in relations with the United States and Europe to new lows, and as a new cold war with China seems to be emerging on the horizon, it feels too optimistic to hope that Washington, Moscow, and Beijing will base their policies toward one another on interests rather than ideologies and emotions. Conversely, emotions change, sometimes quickly, and ideologies are often malleable, so it is still possible Russia and China could find themselves at
odds in the future, even if that seems hard to imagine in the present.

Notes


[8]. The standard work on this version of events is David MacLaren McDonald, *United Government and Foreign Policy in Russia, 1900-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).


[18]. John Mearsheimer and other realists have long argued that the United States should focus on cultivating Russia as an ally to balance against China. For one example, see John J. Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2021 (November/December 2021), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

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