Introduction

This book is about Russian soldiers and the tsars, Communist Party bosses, and presidents they have served. The historic exploits of the Russian and Soviet armies, which crushed Napoleon and Hitler, are well known. This book tells a different, lesser known story about Russian soldiers: the role they have played in domestic politics.

As the process of Russian democratization lurches along – one step forward, two steps back, as Lenin said – Russia has at least one advantage over most post-authoritarian states. Unlike many states in transition, Russia does not have a tradition of military intervention or rule: The last successful military coup took place in 1801.

The absence of a Russian man on horseback, however, does not imply that the army has played no role in politics. Given Russia’s tumultuous twentieth century, it could hardly be otherwise. The Russian Revolution and civil war, the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, the Second World War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the current so-called democratic transition are only the most prominent examples of political turbulence. The military has weathered revolution, imperial collapse, and mass murder of the top ranks of the officer corps by the political leadership. Such a series of intense provocations would seem to provide more than adequate grounds for military intervention in politics. Except for a few half-hearted forays, however, the Russian armed forces have remained surprisingly aloof from high politics. Indeed, since the middle of the nineteenth century the army has endeavored to remain “outside politics.”

The central question of the book is, What role has the Russian army played in domestic political struggles, and why? The most fruitful way to approach the question is to think of military behavior as the product of a two-step process. Armies make political choices based on both the opportunities

1 The phrase “outside politics” is in quotes because Russian officers often used these exact words to describe their role. See especially Chapters 3 and 7.
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presented by political and organizational structure and motives derived from their normative commitments and material interests. Both opportunities (structure) and motives (agency) matter, but not in the way the previous literature suggests.

The varying strength of the Russian state is the most fundamental aspect of political opportunity. A cursory appraisal of Russian twentieth-century history shows that the army has been most involved in domestic politics during the major political crises that marked the birth and death of the Soviet Union. Periods of state weakness led to military participation in internal politics. This argument, the dominant one in the civil–military relations literature, holds up well here. But there is an important caveat: State weakness does not lead to military coups, as is traditionally claimed. Rather, a political vacuum only makes it more likely that the army will have the opportunity to seize power; whether it has the desire or ability to do so is explained by other factors.

The opportunities available for military involvement in domestic politics are also shaped by structural factors internal to the armed forces. Cleavages inside the army, sometimes deliberately fostered by civilian rulers, can make political activity more difficult. Often this component merely reinforces domestic structure and state strength. However, in several cases, cleavages within the armed forces helped determine the stance of the army. These splits were rarely decisive, but they did play a role.

At times, such as during Stalin’s rule, opportunities for military activity were so limited that the influence of officers’ motives on behavior was limited. In most cases, however, military motives played an important and autonomous role. The two basic types of motives are rational and cultural, or corporate interest and organizational norms. It is at the level of officers’ motives that this book makes its most important contribution. Officers’ norms about their proper role in politics have played a fundamental role in shaping the Russian army’s behavior. A norm of civilian supremacy has deep roots in the Russian armed forces. Even in cases when other factors were pointing strongly toward a military coup, organizational culture served to restrain concerted action. An organizational culture argument has not been widely or systematically applied to the study of military intervention. I demonstrate the utility of such an approach.

At the same time, an organizational culture approach cannot stand alone. When opportunities for military involvement in domestic politics are high, such as during the Russian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union


and the subsequent Russian transition, the military may be forced to play a role because other political actors will seek to use force to achieve their goals. The military can, almost quite literally, be dragged into politics. Normative commitments, however, tended to make army behavior weak, half-hearted, and consequently ineffective.

Perhaps more important than what explains Russian military behavior is what does not. Over the last 200 years the Russian military has never intervened in politics to protect its own bureaucratic interests. The Russian/Soviet military has endured severe threats to its corporate interests, such as the Stalinist purges, during which thousands of officers were murdered, and recent massive budget and force cuts that have left thousands of officers homeless and without pay for months, but these blows have not precipitated a military coup. The poor performance of the corporate interest approach is especially noteworthy given its prominence both in the comparative politics literature on military intervention and in the literature on Soviet civil–military relations. Roman Kolkowicz and Timothy Colton, the authors of the two most important books on Soviet civil–military relations, both adopted this approach. Although this argument may perform better for other countries, the Russian case clearly demonstrates its limitations when employed without reference to other factors.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the rest of the book by providing a typology of the multiple approaches to the study of military intervention in politics. The prevalence of military coups in the 1960s and 1970s worldwide spawned an impressive body of research, with a wide range of hypotheses. I survey and systematize this literature and draw from it the four perspectives mentioned above: domestic structure, organizational structure, corporate interest, and organizational culture. Several other approaches are set aside as not relevant to the Russian cases. Chapter 8 summarizes the conclusions, and it pursues some important theoretical and policy-relevant themes brought out by the rest of the book.

The empirical chapters, Chapters 2–7, represent the heart of the book. I investigate 19 cases of actual or potential military involvement in high politics. These events run from Peter the Great to Boris Yeltsin, a period of over 300 years. The result is the only survey of Russian military behavior in sovereign power issues that covers the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods.

Not all of these chapters are created equal. Chapters 2, 4, and 5 cover large swathes of history, bringing together cases from different time periods. Chapter 2 looks at the imperial period from Peter the Great to World War I, Chapter 4 covers the period from the end of the Russian Civil War until World War II, and Chapter 5 runs from World War II to Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power in 1985. More detailed case analysis is presented in Chapters 3, 6, and 7. Chapter 3 focuses on the Russian Revolution, Chapter 6 deals with the Gorbachev period and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Chapter 7 examines the post-Soviet transition under Boris Yeltsin. These periods merit special attention not only because of their intrinsic historical interest, but also because the open politics of these times provide a wealth of source material. I believe the new material presented in these chapters justifies the lengthier treatment. Additionally, the comparisons between the different theories are sharpest in these cases.

Three basic comparisons form the foundation of the analysis. First, the comparison to other states is explicit in the first and last chapters and is implicit throughout. Second, I compare Russia to itself in a historical (diachronic) manner. Finally, I compare different types of military behavior to each other. The goal of these comparisons is both to explain the conduct of the Russian armed forces and to draw conclusions about when different explanations for military intervention are likely to be the strongest.

I use a wide range of sources for the empirical sections of the book. In a project of this size, some use of the Russian and English-language secondary literature is inevitable. When using secondary historical accounts, I have tried to distill the dominant viewpoint from the available sources and be explicit when I am taking sides in a debate. A substantial chunk of the case studies is based almost entirely on primary source research, including extensive archival research and interviews. I found it necessary to consult the available primary sources either because the secondary literature did not speak directly to the questions that I am studying or because there were specific debates in the existing historiography that additional primary research could help resolve.

The book is meant to be useful to a variety of readers. Social scientists will be interested in the assessment of competing explanations for military intervention. Historians will note the new evidence on some significant events from Russian history, such as the revolution, the Stalinist purges, and the

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6 For an excellent discussion, see Ian S. Lustick, “History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias,” American Political Science Review, 90 (1996), 605–618.
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collapse of the Soviet Union. Policy makers may focus on (a) lessons for understanding the conditions that contribute to military coups and (b) what the story implies for the future of Russian democracy. In sum, the book seeks to contribute to our theoretical understanding, our historical knowledge, and our practical political judgment.
I

Explaining Military Intervention

Coups are the ultimate problem of civil–military relations. From ancient Rome to today's democratizing states, Juvenal's question – “but who is to guard the guardians themselves?” – has been of central political importance.

This chapter examines the range of possible explanations for military involvement in domestic politics. No single approach can by itself explain the hundreds of coups that have taken place over the years in a wide variety of countries – that is to ask too much of social science theory. Rather than posit a “golden bullet” theory that explains everything, the goals here are more modest. First, I map the lay of the land in this corner of the academic field. Second, I suggest how these different approaches may complement each other in a two-step model of military behavior. Before we turn to the different ways of explaining the phenomenon of military intervention, however, it is important to be clear what we are talking about.

MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN SOVEREIGN POWER ISSUES

The notion of a military coup evokes images of soldiers with machine guns seizing television and radio transmitters and surrounding government buildings with armored vehicles. Our stylized visions of the classic coup tend to obscure the fact that the military can have a decisive influence on determining who rules the state in many different ways. Staying in the barracks sometimes can be as influential as leaving them. When conceived of in this fashion, the notion of a coup is really shorthand for a range of military behaviors, both active and passive, that can lead to a change in the executive leadership of the state.

Timothy Colton has crafted an evocative phrase to label this class of events: sovereign power issues.1 The sovereign power domain of civil–military

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relations concerns the question of who rules and who decides who rules. Colton distinguishes this domain of civil–military relations from two others: defense policy and societal choice. Defense policy is concerned with issues directly related to the armed forces’ professional concerns, such as the defense budget, military doctrine, and procurement policy. Societal choice issues are nondefense domestic political, economic, and social issues, such as macro-economic policy or education policy. Although societal choice issues are not an obvious domain of civil–military relations, military role expansion into these questions has been a common route to more extensive military involvement in politics. This book is about sovereign power issues.

There are three possible forms of military involvement in sovereign power issues. The first is the traditional focus of much of the civil–military relations literature, military intervention. Military intervention is the use, actual or threatened, of force by members of the military, either alone or with civilian actors, in an attempt to change the executive leadership of the state. The second possible outcome is military resolution of a civilian sovereign power dispute, or military arbitration. Military arbitration occurs when multiple persons or groups claim to hold legitimate state power and the military is forced to decide from whom to obey orders. This is different from military intervention because the military has not made an autonomous decision to become involved in sovereign power issues, but is forced to play a role due to civilian activity. Military arbitration is a case of military involvement in sovereign power issues, but not one of military intervention.

The third possible behavior is no military involvement in sovereign power issues. This potential outcome is crucial and often overlooked. Much of the existing literature on military intervention studies only coups and not noncoups, thereby introducing selection bias into the research design.

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2 The members of the military that make a decision to intervene are almost always officers; so in most circumstances, references to the armed forces, the army, or the military apply primarily to the officer corps. The terms “military” and “armed forces” will be used interchangeably. To avoid repetition, the term “army” will on occasion be used to refer to the military as a whole; it should be clear from the context whether the term “army” is being used in this broad sense or in its more restricted meaning. A “military coup” is a special class of military intervention, an attempt to seize state power by the use of force, whereas military intervention is a broader category and includes intimidation or threats of noncooperation with the civilian leadership. For more extended definitional discussions, see S. E. Finer, The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 20, 127–148; Edward Luttwak, Coup d’Etat: A Practical Handbook (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 19–27; Eric A. Nordlinger, Soldiers in Politics: Military Coup and Governments (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 2–3; Bruce W. Farcau, The Coup: Tactics in the Seizure of Power (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 1–9.

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“No involvement” may be overlooked so often because it is the “normal” state of events; military intervention and arbitration are rare occurrences. There are probably very few military officers who wake up every day and ask themselves, “Should I organize a coup today?” Although there is a natural tendency to study the event rather than the non-event, without attention to this category it is impossible to determine the bounds of applicability of a particular theory. 4

SOVEREIGN POWER ISSUES: MODE AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

No one should underestimate the creativity of scholars’ imaginations. A veritable cornucopia of explanations for military behavior in sovereign power issues has been advanced over the past several decades. To bring some order to this discussion, I distinguish different approaches based on their mode and their level of analysis.

By mode of analysis, I mean whether the dominant logic of the argument is structural, rational, or cultural. Structural explanations focus on the formal arrangement of units and the distribution of material capabilities across these units; the key issue is relationships. Rational arguments assume that actors endeavor to advance their goals or preferences; the key issue is interests. Cultural accounts look to peoples’ subjective understandings of themselves and the world around them; the key issue is ideas. 5

If looking at the mode of analysis leads to the question “What matters?,” the level of analysis problem raises the question “Who matters?” In principle, there are many different plausible levels of analysis; in evolutionary biology, for example, the appropriate level could be the gene, the individual, the species, or perhaps something else. For the study of military involvement in sovereign power issues, four levels seem particularly relevant: individual, organizational, domestic, and international. 6

Three modes of analysis and four levels of analysis gives us a grid with twelve cells (see Table 1.1). Three of these cells are logically empty, so we are left with nine basic types of explanation.

**Explaining Military Intervention**

**Table 1.1. Explaining Military Intervention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Rational</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individual self-interest</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Organizational structure</td>
<td>Corporate interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Domestic structure</td>
<td>Political culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>International structure</td>
<td>World culture</td>
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Not surprisingly, some of these perspectives on military involvement in sovereign power issues have received more attention than others. And testing all nine of them in a book of this nature would try the patience of reader and author alike. Fortunately, some of them can be dropped out for logical, methodological, or empirical reasons, to be discussed below. Four approaches are chosen for further testing in the cases: domestic structure, organizational structure, corporate interest, and organizational culture. In the sections that follow, I go through each approach in turn, starting at the individual level and working my way up to international level explanations.

**INDIVIDUAL LEVEL EXPLANATIONS**

The logical place to start is with the individual officer. After all, it is General Smith or Colonel Jones who ultimately makes the decisions and potentially risks his neck. Most theoretical writing on military intervention, however, tends to downplay individual level explanations because of the difficulty of building testable and generalizable theory at this level. These concerns, as we will see, are well-founded, but this does not mean that we can ignore the individual officer in any attempt to explain army behavior. A structural approach based at this level of analysis would presumably look at genetic structures, which is beyond both my abilities and the available evidence, so we will restrict ourselves to the rational and cultural modes of analysis.

**Individual Self-Interest**

This type of argument stresses the rational incentives for individual military officers to either engage in or avoid participation in sovereign power issues.

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7 Many of the existing studies in civil–military relations combine insights from two or more of these perspectives. For heuristic reasons, however, I treat them as analytically distinct.
Given that the use of force can lead to unpleasant consequences, death being perhaps the most noteworthy of these, self-interest seemingly would enter into an officer’s calculations. What a theoretical approach would predict at this level of analysis, however, is quite difficult to specify.

At first glance the well-known literature on collective action problems should be relevant here. A simple form of collective action logic seemingly would imply that coups would rarely or never take place. The collective action problem therefore is not a tenable general explanation for the absence of coups, given the more than 350 attempted military coups between 1945 and 1985, although it may help explain why they are not even more frequent.\(^8\)

Much of the recent literature on collective action endeavors to explain why and under what conditions it takes place, given its ubiquitous nature.\(^9\)

Coup decisions are influenced by collective action logic, but they are not pure examples of a social dilemma.\(^9\) Control of the state is not a pure public good, like clean air, because the benefits of it, such as power and wealth, are excludable. To the extent that material incentives motivate military intervention, the major spoils will be grabbed by the conspirators themselves, although the army in general also may benefit.

Moreover, the structure of the situation mitigates the collective action dilemma. Armies rely on coercion and hierarchy, coups arise in small conspiratorial groups, the decisions of a handful of officers often can tip the scales, and plotters are able to provide selective incentives (side payments) to other participants. Organizing a coup, then, is closer to what Donald Green and Ian Shapiro call a “quasi-dilemma” than a pure collective action problem.\(^10\)

Other scholars working in the rational choice tradition have come to diametrically opposite conclusions about the best strategy of rational officers. Gordon Tullock, for example, argues that doing nothing, the best strategy in conventional collective action logic, is the worst strategy for officers during a coup attempt. Tullock reasons that neutrality will be punished by the winning side, so the trick for an individual officer is to figure out which side will win and commit to it early enough that his participation is rewarded.\(^12\)

\(^8\) This number is from Steven R. David, *Third World Coups d’Etat and International Security* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 1–2.


