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## Russia on the Edge - Edith Clowes

Thoams Ambrosio  
*North Dakota State University*

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# Review

## ***Russia on the Edge***

Edith Clowes. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. 200 pp.

### Thomas Ambrosio<sup>\*</sup>

Edith Clowes' *Russia on the Edge* is an engaging and accessible examination of three central questions of post-Soviet Russia: What is Russia? Who are the Russians? Where is Russia? The last question might be odd, given that the physical borders of the Russian Federation are not in doubt, since they are the same as those of the Russian republic borders from the Soviet period. However, when it comes to the creation of a post-Soviet Russian identity, the physical borders are secondary to how they are imagined. As stated in the preface: if Soviet identity was defined largely in terms of "time"—"linked to a vision of the Soviet state at the vanguard of history"—the post-Soviet debate over Russian identity "has been couched in *spatial* metaphors of territory and geography" (xi). Thus, "[the] geographical metaphors dominant in current discourse about identity convey the sense that *who* a Russian is depends on how one defines *where* Russia is" (xii). As such, the three questions of What? Who? and Where? are all interrelated: the construction of Russian identity after the collapse of the USSR is inherently tied to an emerging sense of, and more importantly the imagination of, geographic space.

This book explores the ways in which several post-Soviet, Russian thinkers have sought to define "Russia" through the use of "imagined geographies"—"the process of creating fictional spaces of self and other as part of traditional thinking about group identity" (4). Clowes is primarily concerned with this from the perspective of philosophy, literature, and journalism (and, to a lesser extent, film).

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<sup>\*</sup> **Thomas Ambrosio** is an associate professor of political science and director of international studies at North Dakota State University. He has published numerous articles, books, and edited volumes in the past decade, including, most recently, two articles: "Unfreezing the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict? Evaluating Peacemaking Efforts Under the Obama Administration" in *Ethnopolitics* and "Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian" in *International Studies Perspectives*. He is currently conducting research on the political rhetoric of Russian Presidents Putin and Medvedev, as well as perceptions of China as an alternative governing structure.

Although it does not shy away from the political implications of these imagined geographies, this is not a book about politics per se: it does not spend a significant amount of time on the rhetoric of political elites, except which it expresses or opposes themes derived from these thinkers, nor does it examine popular sentiments through, say, public opinion surveys. This should not be taken as a criticism, however: Clowes' decisions about what is included and excluded are clear and deliberate. One could easily conceive of a companion book written to explore these same themes from a more firmly political perspective.

The process of imagined geographies is in many ways an exercise in contrasts: the East and West of the Cold War, the north and the south of colonial and post-colonial perspectives, the heartland and rimland of Mackinder's geopolitics, the center and periphery of critical geography studies, and the "self" and "other" divide found in political and individual representations. All of these contrasts appear in some form or another in the debate over post-Soviet Russian identity and they stem from a central anxiety of Russian society: "No longer at the hub of the Soviet empire, many Russians in the 1990s worried about being on the margin" (xiii). The East-West divide that dominated the Cold War has given rise to concerns that Russia will find itself on the periphery of world events, geopolitics, and cultural transformations: "in a cultural and psychological sense they strike at the very heart of Russia's—and particularly Moscow's—greatest historical fear of being nothing more than a hinterland of the world's older and richer empires to the east, the west, and the south" (12). Russia's rapid transition from a global empire and the leader of the industrialized "second world" to a poor and geopolitical marginalized exporter of natural resources, something most commonly associated with the global "south," has only fueled these anxieties.

After a preface and introduction, in which Clowes provides a clear and concise overview of the book's themes, organization, and assumptions, the first chapter explores the "Moscow myth": the idea that the city represents the metaphorical "center" of the world. Of course, this is nothing new: from Muscovy's role in the overthrow of the Tartars, to the sixteenth century during which Moscow assumed the mantle of the "Third Rome," and finally to the Soviet period in which the city was the very heart of the global communist movement and promoted as the locus of historical progress, the Russian capital has figured prominently in Russian national identity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, then, what place does Moscow hold within the international community, within the nation, and within the

Russian soul? As seen in the chapter, the answers to this question set the stage for the later discussions about Russian identity as a whole.

The next chapter examines the nationalist writings of Aleksandr Dugin in which this popular writer and commentator attempts to establish the intellectual foundation for “the revival of Russian identity based on an all-powerful state and its reconstructed Eurasian empire” (44). Clowes admits early on that Dugin serves as “the main straw man in the debate” (xiv) and she does not attempt to conceal her loathing of his political philosophy and the increasingly authoritarian state which it seeks to legitimize. Despite her clear antipathy towards him, however, Clowes presents Dugin’s blending of geopolitics and Eurasianism fairly. For Dugin, Russia is not just a country, but rather a “sacred” place which rightfully should dominate Eurasia in opposition to the West and its “civil social values, representative democracy, and enlightenment rationalism” (57). Reestablishing (and inevitably extending) the Soviet Union’s political and spiritual control from the Russia/Moscow ‘center’ should be the most important political and foreign policy imperative of the Russian people since, for Dugin, “there is no Russian identity without empire” (63).

Subsequent chapters (three through six) serve as counterpoints to this concept, with each one providing a different view of Russia’s and Moscow’s imagined place in the center-periphery divide. In chapter three for example, Viktor Pelevin rejects the very concept of the Eurasianism that underlies Dugin’s philosophy: rather than something sacred and primordial, Eurasia is little more than “the fantasies of the Moscow-centered mind” (76). For Pelevin, space itself is neither “firm” nor “unchanging” and is, instead, the product of individual and collective imagination (95). Therefore, defining one’s self and one’s nation in terms of space is inherently absurd.

Chapter four examines Mikhail Ryklin’s neo-Westernizer writings. Rather than Moscow serving as the ‘center,’ Ryklin looks toward Berlin “as a model for a post-imperial, post-totalitarian [alternative] to empire” (97). Ryklin’s “Westernizer” orientation should not be confused with the political Atlanticists of the early Yeltsin years, which sought to have Russia “join” the West through accession to European international institutions such as the European Union and even NATO. Instead, he seeks to remake Moscow (and by extension, Russia itself) into an open, tolerant, and heterogenous political space. However, as Clowes makes clear through her review of Ryklin’s writings and the political controversies involving himself and his late wife,

“Ryklin’s initial project has now become a rearguard action of unswerving confrontation with growing contemporary chauvinism and authoritarianism” (113).

Chapters five and six explore ways in which the “center” is confronted by the “periphery” within the former Soviet Union itself—in particular, by the “south.” Rather than presenting this region as a problem or as something negative, as is frequently done in many Russian nationalist writings, Liudmila Ulitskaia and Anna Politkovskaia both represent the periphery as an integral part of the whole and, especially in the case of the former, as superior to the center. Ulitskaia works focus on the cultural vibrancy of the Black Sea coast in contrast to the “ideological and social dysfunction,” as well as the “cultural homogenization” and “threat of violence and even suicide,” found in the spiritually stifling city of Moscow (122). The presentation of a more tolerant, multiethnic, and civic Russian identity found within the periphery creates a very different sense of Russian identity than that found amongst the neo-nationalists and neo-Eurasianists.

Although articles about Russian abuses in the Caucasus and the treatment of Chechens in the “center” by murdered journalist Politkovskaia figure prominently in the book’s penultimate chapter, its focus is quite broader and includes how Chechnya is imagined in literature and film as well. The central thesis of this chapter is how “in Putin’s Russia...[Chechnya] has become an important touchstone for defining who is Russian” and the ways in which the two wars in Chechnya “have played in sharpening the hostility between competing variants of post-Soviet Russian identity” (140–41). Of all the book’s chapters, this one left this reviewer wanting more. The topic was fascinating and Clowes covers it deftly. Like the comment above about a companion volume on politics, one could easily imagine expanding this chapter into a book-length treatment. Nonetheless, Clowes does a good job bringing the discussion of the center-periphery tension full circle by placing the Chechnya wars firmly within the context of imagined geographies and the anxieties of post-Soviet Russia: “Symbolically, Russia allays its own suspicions that it might have become the postcolonial third world by physically crushing the southern, non-Christian Other within its national body and by asserting itself as a powerful northern country” (161).

This book is appropriate for graduate students and scholars in the fields of Russian politics and culture, critical geography, and ethnic/national identity formation. Advanced undergraduates might have some difficulty with it, but the best among them will find it fascinating. Moreover, despite its origins in constructivist

milieu, it is surprisingly (and thankfully) free of the jargon that too often accompanies such works. It is highly recommended.