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Ukraine's Agency in Japanese Discourse: Everything Ok With Government and People, While Academia in Trouble

SANSHIRO HOSAKA*
University of Tartu and The International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia

Abstract: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the problems of the Japanese academic discourse on Ukraine. This essay has two purposes. First, it describes how Russia's invasion has altered Tokyo's official policies and public discourse by driving away Russian disinformation and propaganda narratives while articulating the multiple chasms among academics regarding Ukraine and Russia. Second, it highlights the embedded assumptions commonly seen in many researchers dealing with post-Soviet space: Russia-centred ontology (e.g., "Ukraine is a periphery of Russia", "fraternal nations") and counterhegemonic epistemology that blames the collective West for "Russophobia."

Keywords: Japan, Ukrainian Studies, Russian Studies, academia, disinformation

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the problems of the Japanese academic discourse on Ukraine. This essay has two purposes. First, it describes how Russia's invasion has altered Tokyo's official policies and public discourse by driving away Russian disinformation and propaganda narratives while articulating the multiple chasms among academics regarding Ukraine and Russia. Second, it highlights the embedded assumptions commonly seen in many researchers dealing with post-Soviet space: Russia-centred ontology (e.g., "Ukraine is a periphery of Russia", "fraternal nations") and counterhegemonic epistemology that blames the collective West for "Russophobia."

Official and Public Discourse

Japan's response to Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine can be marked by a number of extraordinary and unprecedented moves both at official and grassroots levels. First, it has had far-reaching consequences for Japan's foreign and security policies, most crucially, putting an end to Tokyo's "delicate balancing act" (Shagina 2018) between

* *yokokumano2018@gmail.com*; ORCID: 0000-0002-3258-0455.

G7 and Russia. Back in 2014, Japan joined the Western sanctions on Russia, although its penalties were considered symbolic and softer than those imposed by the United States and European partners. Tokyo described Russia's annexation of Crimea as "an attempt to change the status quo by force," employing the same phrase used to respond to China's assertive behaviours in the East and South China Seas. Thus, Tokyo avoided the appearance of focusing on Russia's wrongdoings while subtly shifting discussions to Japan's main concern – China. Eight years later, Russia's brutal war buried Tokyo's remaining hopes for business-as-usual relations with Moscow and a resolution of the long-standing dispute on the Northern Territories in the near future, forcing the Japanese government to redefine the northern neighbour as a grave security concern.

Russia's war crimes also served as a wake-up call for Tokyo and spurred discussions on its national security and response to China's military rise. There is growing recognition that the security of Europe and East Asia are closely linked, and a change of status quo by force in Ukraine might have serious repercussions on future developments in Taiwan Strait. As a result, Japan discarded the illusory "strategy" sought by former prime minister Shinzo Abe to decouple Russia from China by developing friendly relations with Moscow (Hosaka 2021). Tokyo seems to have completely reversed its rhetoric; Defence minister Nobuo Kishi said that "confronting Russia will deter China." In contrast to 2014, Tokyo is now spearheading international efforts to contain Russia in the Indo-Pacific region (Hosaka 2023a).[1]

Furthermore, it was also unprecedented for Tokyo, known for its tight immigration policies, to accept 1,800 Ukrainian "evacuees" as well as deliver bulletproof jackets, helmets, and commercial drones to Ukraine despite its overly pacifistic Constitution and bureaucratic barriers. To demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine, the Japanese government changed the Japanese language names for Ukrainian geographical toponyms, adopting the Ukrainian spelling (e.g., from "キエフ [Kiev]" to "キーウ[Kyiv]", from "チェルノブイリ [Chernobyl]" to "チョルノービリ[Chornobyl]") and the mainstream media immediately followed suit (Hosaka 2023a).

At the grassroots level, there is tremendous sympathy for Ukrainians; Ukraine's resolute resistance turned Japan blue and yellow. Zelensky's speech to the Japanese parliament, which was live-streamed by major nationwide networks, struck the hearts of the Japanese audience, who barely knew where Ukraine is before February 2022 (Hosaka 2023a).

In a sense, Ukraine became truly "independent" in the perception of the Japanese public. Before the full-scale invasion, the construction of Ukraine's image was subordinated to "the Russian factor"; many Japanese confused Ukraine with Russia or incorrectly perceived Ukraine as a far-flung part of Russia. Similarly, many viewed Ukraine merely as a theatre of a proxy war between the United States and Russia (Geraskov 2018). Ukraine's

1 For the ambiguous attitudes of "non-Western" states to Russia's full-scale invasion, see the contributions of Dharmaputra (2023) and Tabosa (2023) to this volume.

heroic fight against the Russian invaders boosted the interest of ordinary Japanese in the country hidden behind the northern neighbour, illuminating Ukraine's rich history, culture and language. It also opened the eyes of most of the media gatekeepers to Russian propaganda on Ukraine. On nationwide broadcasting channels, Japanese participants of the Valdai Discussion Club and scholars of Russian studies who had disseminated Putin's talking points in 2014 were mostly replaced by Ukrainianists and European politics experts (Hosaka 2023a).[2] In February and March, the chair and members of the Japanese Association of Ukrainian Studies appeared on national networks nearly every second day and briefed on Ukraine, debunking Russian disinformation on Ukraine. Although many security experts, seeing the war through the prism of Russia, misjudged at the beginning of the full-scale invasion that Russia would take Kyiv quickly and defeat Ukraine, they provided more substantiated analysis on what was going on in the battlefield than area studies scholars.

Asymmetry Between Russianists and Ukrainianists

Despite widespread acknowledgement of Ukraine's historical and political agency at the grassroots level, many academics in area studies have continued to demonstrate neo-colonial, Russo-centric templates. According to the list of Slavic-Eurasia researchers issued by the Japanese Slavic-Eurasian Research Centre in 2012, of 1,467 scholars registered, only 15 explicitly tied their field of expertise with Ukraine; i.e., Russianists outnumber Ukrainianists around 80:1. Several academic associations for Soviet and Slavic studies were established in the 1960s–1980s, while a separate association for Ukrainian studies was formed only in 1994, with a far lower membership. Due to the limited demand in Japanese educational institutions, studying "small countries" was challenging for academics; some had to cover both Eastern European countries and Russia as their academic targets (Iwashita et al. 2015, 34). Although the Japanese Association for Ukrainian studies tripled its membership from 2014 to 2021 (20 to 60 members), the quantitative preponderance of Russian studies over Ukrainian studies has continued to date.

There are multiple groups of intellectuals, partially overlapping with scholars of Russian and Ukrainian studies, who have been systematically advancing Russian narratives on Ukraine. These groups are loosely connected with each other, with some having access to decision-makers. First, Japanese members of the Valdai Discussion Club, the Kremlin-supported epistemic community, have been primary drivers of Moscow's templates on Ukraine in Japanese academic, media, and business discourse in 2014. Second, the most politically significant is the group led by pro-Russian parliamentarian Muneo Suzuki. This group was consulted by former prime minister Abe, who met with Putin 27 times in the hope of solving the Northern Territories dispute. Suzuki's old ally and former diplomat

2 When public interest in Ukraine surged in 2014 – 2015, due to a shortage of scholars of Ukrainian studies, the media invited well-known Russianists to comment on the Ukraine issue. Narrating the "Ukraine crisis" thus became a part-time job for scholars of Russian studies, and it was not without flaws due to their lack of knowledge of Ukraine (Ueno 2014, 1).

Masaru Sato, who is a best-seller writer on Russia topics, confessed that he occasionally receives *temnik*, disinformation bullet points, from the Kremlin insider, his old "friend" Aleksandr Kazakov – the Kremlin's former adviser to the "Donetsk People's Republic" head Aleksandr Zakharchenko. Third is intellectuals collaborating with the neo-right, anti-US and anti-globalism political organization *Issuikai*, which is affiliated with the Russian Liberal Democratic Party and French National Front. The organization's leader Mitsuhiro Kimura arranged former prime minister Yukio Hatoyama's visit to the occupied Crimea in 2015. The fourth group is scholars studying "de facto states" in post-Soviet space. As elsewhere (see e.g., the case of France in Koval 2020), they tend to overemphasize the agency of "people's republics" while ignoring Russia's leading role in installing fake "non-state actors" .

Since February 2022, overtly Russian disinformation and propaganda narratives have been largely marginalized in the Japanese mainstream media, but they still appear sporadically, though instantly debunked by experts. As was the case in 2014–2015, anti-US sentiments prompted left-wing intellectuals to see the "Ukraine war" as a proxy war between NATO and Russia, with Ukrainians as victims of American imperialism. Even some commentators suggested Ukraine should surrender "to save human lives" (see e.g., the critique by Shinoda 2022). Togo Kazuhiko, a former high-ranking diplomat affiliated with Muneo Suzuki, called for the need to compromise by giving Putin a certain amount of "gift" (Togo 2022a). In October 2022, Togo was added to the list of "experts" of the Valdai Discussion Club with his article "A Japanese View on the Conflict in Ukraine." In this article, Togo argued that Russia's actions were "of a defensive nature" and directed "against overwhelmingly aggressive actions taken by Zelensky and backed by Biden" and called for taking Putin's nuclear intimidation seriously, which otherwise "would lead to a Third World War" (Togo 2022b). After February 24, accusing Japanese mainstream discourse of the one-sided view and "Russophobia" (see the section below), some senior scholars of Russian and Ukrainian studies (Ueno 2022; Matsuzato 2022) started to collaborate with a conspiratorial website organized by the Happy Science religious organization whose leader claims he can talk to Putin's "guardian spirit" and spreads conspiracy theories on Russia's war crimes in Bucha.

Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings

Although these groups resonating with Russian narratives are politically and ideologically derived from different roots, common ontological and epistemological underpinnings can be identified. Ontological Russo-centrism, which denies or diminishes Ukraine's agency, is shared by scholars of Russian studies; they reject the need for examining Ukraine as a separate object of their academic inquiry. For example, in 2014, Nobuo Shimotomai, a scholar of Russian politics and Japanese old-timer in the Valdai Discussion Club as well as co-chair of the organizing committee of the 2015 Japan-hosted congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies (the ICCEES), argued that the country known as Ukraine is "an imagined community" created by Lenin and Stalin

by combining the "half-Polish" world and "Novorossiya." Shimotomai described the relationship between Russia and Ukraine as "fraternal," and, therefore, argued that there is no doubt that "the future of Ukraine will only lie on improved relations with Russia" (Hosaka 2023b). Russia-centred ontology is also shared by scholars from other fields, including IR, who favour Moscow-friendly "realists," such as John Mearsheimer (see also the contributions of Kazharski 2023, Dharmaputra 2023 and Tabosa 2023, this volume) and Richard Sakwa, whose academic narrative portrays Ukraine as a mere geopolitical battleground of the great powers, blaming NATO enlargement and rationalising Putin's response.[3]

More widespread among scholars, irrespective of their field, is an epistemic aversion to the dominant Western discourse. The flip side of this is scholars' preoccupation with "alternative" explanations of Russian autocracy and aggressive foreign policies denounced by what they reduce to the "Western Russophobia."[4] The consequence of this epistemology is evident in a symposium on the "Ukraine crisis" during the 2015 Japan-hosted ICCEES congress, to which the Japanese organizer, Kimitaka Matsuzato, a Ukrainianist studying "de-facto states" in post-Soviet space, invited the representatives of the "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Crimea parliament" – Aleksandr Dugin's neo-Eurasian activist and local political technologist – to provide "alternative views" to the Western "anti-Russian" discourse. Sharing this type of anti-mainstream, counter-hegemonic epistemology, scholars' empirical or theoretical passions (e.g., the pursuit of agency of "Donetsk People's Republic") easily convert into vulnerability to the Kremlin's information manipulation, entailing strong bias at methodological levels. Researchers' propensity to demonstrate local perspectives risks overestimating the political subjectivity of purportedly indigenous groups if they are ill-equipped to investigate the genuine, mostly hidden, link between a sponsor state and its puppets (Hosaka 2023b).[5]

Multiple Cleavages and Ukraine's Agency

Multiple factors determine how and to what degree scholars perceive Ukraine's agency. After February 24, cleavages became vivid not only between Russianists and Ukrainianists, but also between humanities scholars on the one hand, and international law and security studies scholars on the other, and between senior and young generations.

In March, senior historians of the USSR/Russia, including professors-emeritus Haruki Wada, Takeshi Tomita and Nobuaki Shiokawa issued a statement "What should the Japanese government do to stop the Ukraine war as quickly as possible?". The statement calls for the Japanese government to play the role of mediator between Russia and Ukraine, along with China and India, which abstained from voting for the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion (this unrealistic call was not taken seriously by the government). The senior historians renounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine but asserted that the continuation of the war would "threaten the lives of Ukrainians and Russians and deal an irreparable blow to the future of Ukraine and Russia." Since Ukraine

neither invaded Russia nor attacked Russian civilians, it can be interpreted that the senior scholars of Russian studies tacitly equated the lives of Russian invaders to those of innocent civilians in Ukraine. Further, the statement encourages that "the Russian and Ukrainian forces must immediately cease hostilities at their current positions and initiate formal ceasefire talks," neglecting the fact the Ukrainian armed forces were defending its territory and population. Another odd assertion is "the Russian forces must halt their all-out assault on Kiev, which is also a Russian religious holy site" (*Japanese Society for the Study of Russian History* 2022), subscribing to Moscow's historical propaganda that views "Kiev" as the origin of Russia (Kuzio 2018; Yermolenko 2019) and unwittingly resonating with "our historical land" deployed by Putin (2022) as a motive of Russia's "special military operation." In April, these historians, together with other like-minded scholars sharing pacifist views and counter-mainstream discourse, organized an online seminar and exchanged opinions with the Russian and Indian ambassadors to Japan (Choshu Shimbun 2022). These actions by senior scholars caused controversy, and not all younger Russianists shared their position (Kanamori 2022).

A similar statement was issued on March 2 by the Board of the Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies (JAREES). The statement on "the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces" starts:

> As researchers studying Russia and Ukraine and collaborating with scholars and academic institutions in both countries, we are deeply concerned about the great suffering of the people in these countries and the split in Russian society caused by the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. Such aggression is completely inappropriate as a way to resolve problems between two countries that have deep ties to each other. (JAREES Board 2022)

The statement does not differentiate Ukrainian and Russian citizens ("the people in these countries"), obfuscating the perpetrator-victim relation.[6] It even gives the impression that scholars are more concerned about the split in Russian society rather than the fate of the Ukrainian state and people against which Russia has waged a genocidal war. While the signatories of this statement see the "deep ties" between two countries that they think should predetermine their relationship (implicitly, the "fraternal nations"), they do not mention Russia's infringement of Ukraine's sovereignty and independence and its violation of international law. The statement ends by calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops "not to make further sacrifices" and "hop[ing] for the earliest possible restoration of peace" (JAREES Board 2022).

On the contrary, the Japanese Association for Ukrainian Studies, which includes not only Ukrainianists but also experts in European politics and security and former Japanese ambassadors to Ukraine, reacted more quickly and resolutely. Its statement issued on

6 Under the alleged academic neutrality, western intellectuals tend not to distinguish between the victim and the perpetrator (Koval et al. 2022, 10).

February 27 demonstrates "solidarity with the Ukrainian people," clearly denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "the foundations of international law under the UN Charter." It further stresses that "Ukraine is an independent sovereign state that is neither subordinated to Russia nor what it unilaterally regards as its sphere of influence,"[7] asserting that "all Ukrainians have chosen a path of freedom, democracy, and economic prosperity that will not be undermined by Putin's violence." The statement does not suffer from bothsidism, making it clear that the Russian army is "inflicting heavy causalities and damage throughout Ukraine," not vice versa. Notably, it concludes that "Russia, stop the war immediately!" without any ambiguous "peace" rhetoric (The Association of Ukrainian Studies in Japan 2022).

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion has articulated the positionality of scholars. Both Russo-centric ontology and counter-hegemonic epistemology diminish Ukraine's agency. The former hesitates to separate Ukraine from Russia – their main "turf" of academic inquiry – due to what they regard as "deep" historical and cultural ties between the two nations. However, the "fraternal nations" would look different in light of the fact that over the past 500 years, Ukraine was invaded by Moscow eleven times and rebelled against its rule five times.[8] The anti-hegemonic epistemology obfuscates Ukraine's subjectivity and its role in the broader imagination about the collective West led by the US attacking and humiliating Russia.

Sergei Zhuk (2014) points to a hidden nostalgia of senior scholars of Soviet/Russian studies towards Moscow. In Japan, in addition to that, the elder generation of scholars who grew up in a post-WWII overly pacifist milieu urges both sides to put down arms, incapable of imagining the far-reaching consequences of Ukraine's surrender or unilateral ceasefire, which would entail not only the loss of the state's sovereignty and independence but further victims of Russia's genocide against the Ukrainian people. These scholars have trouble identifying the causes of the war, including its initiator (many of them blame the US and/or Ukraine) as well as the perpetrator-victim relationship. Possible solutions they recommend, therefore, ignore Ukraine's subjectivity and are often out of touch with the war realities and way off the mark.

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7 The English translation was corrected by the Author to reflect the original Japanese version.

8 Muscovites invaded Ukraine in 1492–1494, 1500–1503, 1507–1508, 1512–1522, 1534–1537, 1632–1634, 1658–1659, 1674–1676, 1917–1918, 1918–1921, and 2014–?. Ukraine struggled for independence from Moscow in 1666–1668, 1692, 1708–1709, 1711, 1943–1950s (Brekhunenko 2017).

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