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I dedicate this book to the generation that lived through
the caesura of 1989–1991, the post-Soviet era,
and that era’s catastrophic end.
May the force be with us and with those who come after.

Contents

List of Figures.....	9
Acknowledgments.....	11
Introduction.....	13
1. Key Concepts in Post-Soviet History	19
Human Beings, the World, and History	20
Political Creativity and Imagination	22
The Framework of the Post-Soviet Period.....	31
2. The Logic and Stages of Post-Soviet History	43
Perestroika and the 1991 Revolution.....	44
The Post-Soviet Diffusion, 1992–1994	58
Stabilization, 1995–2000	66
New Century, New Conflicts, 2001–2008.....	73
The Period of Conflicts, 2008 On	79
Concluding the Era.....	85
3. The Evolution of Perceptions of Post-Soviet Development ...	89
Stage 1: Living through the Caesura and Revolutionary Change, 1989–1994.....	93
Stage 2: Humbled Conceptualization, 1995–2003.....	97
Stage 3: Questioning Post-Soviet Progress, 2003–2022	103
War and the Interrupted Transition.....	110
4. The Achievements of Post-Soviet Political Creativity	113
The Democratic Outcomes of Post-Soviet Political Creativity	114
Division of Supreme Power into Branches and Levels.	119
Refounding the State and the Nation.....	121
The Liberal-Democratic Potential of European Integration	124
Rule of Law.....	125

Autonomy of the Judicial Branch	127
Elections as a Right and a Practice	128
Democracy as a Unity of Electoral, Liberal, and Deliberative Practices	132
The Autocratic Outcomes of Post-Soviet Political Creativity	141
Unified Supreme Power and Neopatrimonial Rule	144
Post-Soviet Sovereignty	150
The Autocratic Effects of War	154
Conclusion	159
Bibliography	163
Index	181

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Division of Power Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	120
Figure 2.	Legislative Constraints on the Executive Branch Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022.....	121
Figure 3.	Rule of Law Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	126
Figure 4.	Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022.....	128
Figure 5.	Voter Turnout by Election Type: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	130
Figure 6.	Electoral Democracy Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	131
Figure 7.	Comparison of Electoral, Liberal, and Deliberative Democracy Indices by Country: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	133
Figure 8.	Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	135
Figure 9.	Mobilization for Democracy Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	135
Figure 10.	Core Civil Society Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	138
Figure 11.	GDP Per Capita (Purchasing Power Parity): Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1990–2022.....	142
Figure 12.	Homicides per 100,000 Population: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1990–2022	143
Figure 13.	Neopatrimonialism Rule Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	149
Figure 14.	Ideology Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	152
Figure 15.	Mobilization for Autocracy Index: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022	156

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Introduction

The post-Soviet era in Eastern Europe and northern Eurasia began in 1991 with the signing of the Belavezha and Alma-Ata Accords and ended in 2022 with the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of that year. Even though armed aggression—and hence the early phase of the current war—in Ukraine had started eight years earlier, it was the combined air and land assaults by Russia on a sovereign neighboring state in February 2022 that put the closing punctuation mark to the post-Soviet period.¹ That period, between the fall of the USSR and the invasion of Ukraine, was a significant time of change for the post-Soviet states, change that was driven by major developmental tendencies rooted in the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and expressed in the creation of new nation-states in Eastern Europe and northern Eurasia. Vladimir Putin's decision to launch the February 2022 invasion dealt the final, decisive blow to the post-Soviet order.

This opening statement is the starting point for the linked arguments about Post-Soviet Humans and their historical habitat that unfold in this book. If I am correct that the post-Soviet era has reached its terminus, then the era can be considered substantially complete for the purposes of scholarly research while phenomenologically open for philosophical reflection. For this reason, and unlike before 2022, post-Soviet studies may finally enjoy some distance from the object of their investigation. With the declining role of scholarly ideological engagement and identity bias, research on the post-Soviet era now has a chance to become an academic discipline.²

For the purposes of my argument, the post-Soviet period is bookended by its beginnings in the simultaneously destructive and

1 The current war in Ukraine started with Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014 and the installation of the pro-Russia Aksyonov government there.

2 An ideological commitment and identity bias were two main drawbacks that were obvious in studies in this area conducted over the past thirty years, including my own.

creative processes of 1989–1991 in the Soviet Union and its terminus in another set of military and revolutionary events that acquired avalanche force in early 2022. These simultaneously destructive and creative processes of 1989–1991 and 2022 emerged in the historical caesuras that separated the post-Soviet period from what it succeeded, the Cold War era, and what has succeeded it: a new, as yet unnamed time kicked off by the big war in Eastern Europe.³

As a historical period, the post-Soviet era had its own logic and dialectics. The logic of its evolution is connected with what I call the post-Soviet tetrad, a set of four socioeconomic, cultural, and political trends or tendencies that can be concisely summed up as democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization. Many initially thought these tendencies were conjoined in such a way that each would support and imply the others, and that if a country realized one, the probability was high that the others would follow. That was the logical expectation. It turned out not to be the case, for each tendency had its counterpart, its oppositional value, so to speak, that was also always available, and how the different tendencies and their counterparts might combine turned out to be unpredictable. Thus the dialectics of the era manifested in the way these four trends combined in contradictory ways. Emerging market economies, for example, could choose to support antidemocratic actors, which would thenceforth limit their free market aspirations; the former socialist republics, now nation-states, could turn hostile to common European norms and practices and continue on a modified Soviet path. The individual trends themselves were the sites of struggles among countervailing forces as they sought to establish themselves. The post-Soviet democratization process had to compete with the pull toward autocratization. Efforts to establish free markets had to struggle with oligarchical control over competition. Nation building was constantly being torn between ethnonationalist, civic nationalist and individualist models. The Europeanization process in the former socialist republics

3 Thus the post-Soviet period can be seen as the second interwar interval, after the interval between the two world wars (1918–1939), in the recent history of Eastern European and northern Eurasian peoples.