

# **Great Powers and Autocratic Diffusion**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rise and fall of great powers has frequently shaped cascades of autocratic diffusion. What can these past episodes help us see about the contemporary spread of autocracy? Historically, great power transitions have produced autocratic diffusion in two ways. First, the rise of autocratic great powers leads to waves of autocracy driven by conquest but also by self-interest and even admiration, as in the fascist wave of the 1930s or the post-1945 Communist wave. Second, the rise of democratic great powers leads to waves of democratization, but these waves inevitably over-extend and collapse, leading to waves of failed consolidation and rollback. While both democratic rollback and authoritarian cascades look like autocratic diffusion, they stem from very different causes. A key question is whether modern democratic decline is a post-1991 correction – that is, the delayed but inevitable rollback of the post-Soviet wave – or the beginning of a truly new wave of autocracy. I conclude with a speculative postscript about the one-party state as an emerging organizational (rather than ideological) rival to democracy.

Concerns about autocratic diffusion are not new. In 1938, British diplomat Alexander Cadogan described a troubling development in his region. “It certainly seems that an authoritarian wave is beginning to surge through the countries of Central and Eastern Europe,” he wrote. “The trend is away from democracy which is represented as clogging and inefficient.”<sup>1</sup>

Written eight decades ago, his complaint would not seem out of place today. But what can past episodes of autocratic diffusion tell us about its future? A lot, it turns out. The global evolution of modern regimes—the diffusion of autocratic and democratic governments—has followed a surprisingly specific pattern. Since the end of World War I, moments of abrupt rise and fall of great powers have consistently led to waves of regime diffusion, both toward and away from democracy. Abrupt hegemonic transitions in which democracies emerge victorious – as after World War I, World War II, or the Soviet Collapse – produce intense and far-reaching (if not always sustained) waves of democratic reforms (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

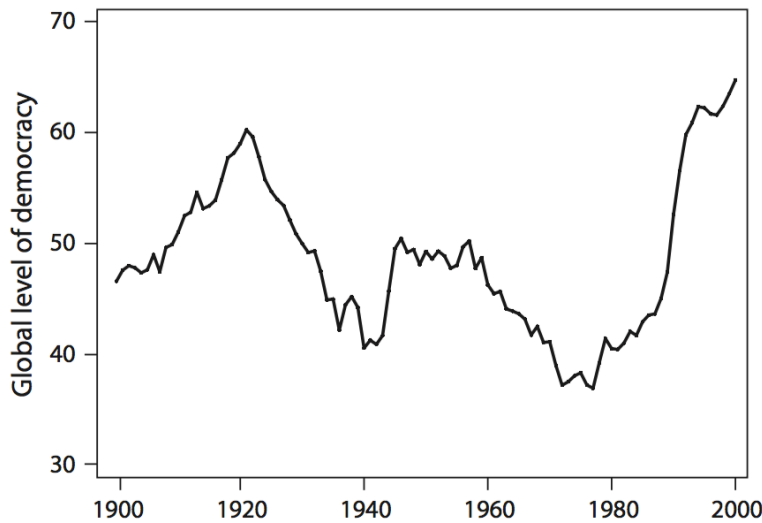


Figure 1. Average global level of democracy, 1900-2016 (Polity IV index, 0-20).

But the link between hegemonic transitions and regime waves is not limited to democracy. Both fascism in the late interwar period and communism after World War II expanded through abrupt cross-border surges that quickly transformed the global institutional landscape. (See Figure 2.) These waves of autocratic diffusion spread not only through conquest but also via self-

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Cadogan, “Minutes from January 3” (1938), Reprinted in Bela Vago, *The Shadow of the Swastika: The Rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the Danube Basin, 1936–1939* (Farnborough, UK: Saxon House for the Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1975), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Hegemonic shocks lead to democratic waves via a combination of coercion, inducement, and emulation that I’ve detailed elsewhere. Seva Gunitsky (2017) *Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton University Press; and (2014) “From Shocks to Waves: Hegemonic Transitions and Democratization in the Twentieth Century,” *International Organization* 68(3).

interest and even sincere admiration of the alternative offered by these regimes. “If the Danubian States begin now to put on the Nazi garb,” wrote the British Home Secretary in the late 1930s, “it will be because imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and because they want to ingratiate themselves in time with their future master.”<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2. Communist and Fascist Shares of Global Power.<sup>4</sup>

Fascist institutions of the 1930s, for example, spread in part by the inducements created by growing German power. After 1933, the country’s economic expansion and attracted converts through the expansion of trade ties, especially in regions lacking stable relations with Western powers like Latin America and southern Europe. Trade with Germany appealed to the vast peasant populations of these largely agricultural nations, who had a ready market for their product at prices well above world levels. As German power grew, neutrality became an increasingly difficult proposition, creating opportunities for Germany to extend its political influence. A Romanian businessman warned that “If we continue a *laissez faire* policy, Germany will achieve the conquest of Romania *à la mode hitlerienne*, that is to say, without a fight.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hoare, R. 1937. “Annual Report to Anthony Eden, February 12.” Reprinted in Vago 1975, 203–5.

<sup>4</sup> While nondemocratic regimes (currently) lack detailed measures like Polity, figure 2 charts fascist and communist waves by measuring the relative share of world power held by these states. National power is calculated via the Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC), an aggregate of five indicators: total and urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military expenditure, and military personnel. See Singer 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Hoisington 1971:480. “The economic stranglehold once established, Germany could use it for other than economic ends,” writes Seton-Watson (1945:384). “Commercial and technical missions could provide useful cover for political and military espionage, and German buyers could use opportunities for political propaganda among the peasantry.”

The economic ascent of Nazi Germany attracted imitators who were repelled by its ideology but admired its ability to rearm and eliminate unemployment. “The 1930s and 1940s were the period of fascist success,” writes Hugh Seton-Watson. “Inevitably fascist policies and institutions were aped by others.”<sup>6</sup> As an economist noted at the time, fascism allowed “a central will capable of quick decision and armed with supreme authority” combined with “a highly disciplined organisation of the productive forces of the whole economy.” Even the staunchly liberal *Economist* presented the country as a potential model for emulation in Britain: “The one great lesson that can be drawn from German economic experience in the past three years,” it argued in 1939, “is that well-organised control can secure the maximum utilisation of a country’s resources for the piling up of armaments.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the Soviet Union inspired followers after World War II because its victory over Nazi Germany, “a country most observers had seen in 1939 and 1940 as an industrial giant, suggested that the Soviet system had considerable real-world vigor.”<sup>8</sup> This victory, which “legitimated and reinforced the Stalinist system,”<sup>9</sup> played a key role in communism’s attraction in the years following the war. As Raymond Aron observed in 1944, its performance in the war “has refuted some classical arguments on the inevitable decadence inherent in a bureaucratic economy.”<sup>10</sup> The low expectations of communist military efficiency both dampened the regime’s appeal in the 1930s and bolstered it after the war’s end. “Stalin had emerged from his victory over Hitler far stronger than ever before,” writes Judt, “basking in the reflected glory of ‘his’ Red Army, at home and abroad.”<sup>11</sup>

The outcome of the hegemonic shock allowed the USSR to credibly present itself as an enticing alternative to capitalist democracy in a way that no Soviet exhortations could have done before the war. The Soviet victory over fascism lent communism a moral authority lacking before the war, transforming the regime into “a viable form of political modernity, as significant a threat to democracy as fascism had ever been.”<sup>12</sup> This gave the rising hegemon the power not only to coerce but also to attract, whether the source of the attraction was ideology or material success. “No one can deny [that] the ruthlessness of the Soviet leaders paid dividends,” wrote Granville Hicks, a Marxist who had renounced communism after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. “I grow impatient with those who argue that the Soviet regime must be virtuous because it triumphed in war, but there can be no argument about its power.”<sup>13</sup>

In sum, previous autocratic waves resulted from a sudden increase in relative global power held by leading autocratic states – Germany in the 1930s and the USSR after World War II. The clear parallel to modern day is the rise of China and the decline of American unipolarity. I will come back to this comparison in the last section.

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<sup>6</sup> Seton-Watson 1979:365.

<sup>7</sup> Guillebaud 1939:215. *The Economist* quoted in Imlay 2007:1.

<sup>8</sup> Stokes 1993:8.

<sup>9</sup> Strayer 1998:57.

<sup>10</sup> Aron 1944:194.

<sup>11</sup> Judt 2005:174.

<sup>12</sup> Smith 1994:186.

<sup>13</sup> Hicks 1946:537.

## **Autocratic Diffusion As “Rollback”**

There is a second way in which hegemonic transitions lead to autocratic diffusion – not by the rise of autocratic great powers but by the collapse of democratic waves. All democratic waves of the twentieth century experienced failures shortly after their peak: a catastrophic reversal after 1918, a severe one after 1945, and a partial but persistent one after the triumphant post-Soviet wave.

Hegemonic shocks in which democracy emerges victorious—as in 1919, 1945, and 1989—created extremely strong yet *temporary* incentives for democratization. As a result, failure is built into the very process that creates democratic waves in the first place. In the short term, states experienced immense external pressures for reforms, both from the democratic hegemon and from their own populations. These intense pressures help sparked the initial wave by forging powerful but unwieldy pro-democracy coalitions, overturning unsuspecting incumbents before they had a chance to react, and spreading hopes of regime change to opposition movements in countries where reforms had been blocked.

In this way, hegemonic shocks temporarily override the domestic constraints that hinder democratic transitions in times of “normal” politics. As a result, in a moment of democratic euphoria some countries undergo tenuous democratization despite the absence of internal conditions generally needed to sustain and consolidate democracy: a well-established middle class, economic stability, ethnic cooperation, or past experience with democratic rule. Domestic factors that normally prevent democratization—institutional inertia, societal cleavages, or elite fears of asset redistribution—all fade into the background, overwhelmed by the structural pressures of the shock, only to resurface when the shock passes. With time, the international pressures that initially drove the wave either disappear or transform into the reassertion of traditional geopolitical interests. This can help explain the puzzling finding that while democratic consolidations require a few well-established prerequisites, democratic transitions can occur at all levels of development.

In the absence of continued external support for reforms, democratic coalitions that push for reforms in a moment of crisis dissolve as their disparate interests come to the fore. Failures of consolidation are therefore inherent in the aftermath of hegemonic shocks. In their initial intensity, hegemonic shocks create episodes of “democratic overstretch”—the regime version of a stock market bubble, in which systemic pressures create an artificially inflated number of transitions. (See Figure 3.) What follows is a counterwave of autocratic reassertion.

The rise of hybrid regimes after the Soviet collapse may be seen as the byproduct of these shifting pressures. These regimes experienced enormous external pressures to democratize after 1991 but quickly discovered the fickleness of these pressures once the initial euphoria wore off. Rulers soon found a way to sideline the opposition, governing coalitions collapsed under the weight of competing interests, and optimistic reformers found themselves outmatched by the constraints of their circumstances. While the hegemonic shock of the Soviet collapse led to partial democratization in many states, shifting external pressures contributed to democratic stagnation and rollback. As Levitsky and Way (2015) have argued, for example, much of what we call democratic recession is actually backsliding from post-1991 euphoria.

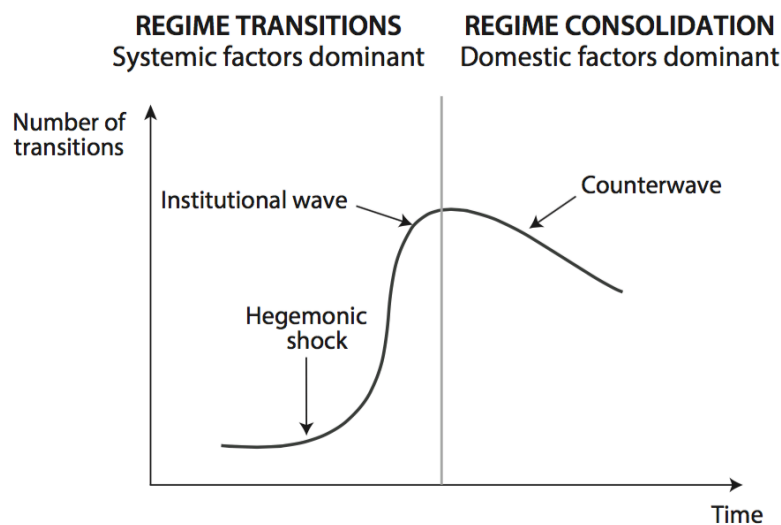


Figure 3. Autocratic diffusion as rollback from democratic waves.

The strong but ephemeral pressures that allow democratic waves to spread also ensure that at least some of these transitions take place in countries that lack domestic conditions needed to sustain and consolidate democracy. Democratization that takes place during a wave is therefore systematically more fragile than democratization driven primarily by domestic forces. After the Soviet collapse, for example, the initially strong systemic pressures for democracy weakened over time, hopeful reformers began liberalization in countries with unfavorable domestic conditions, the pro-reform coalitions that formed in the immediate wake of the shock began to fall apart, and sitting incumbents quickly learned to subvert and co-opt democratic institutions, adopting the trappings of democracy without loosening their hold on power.

Hegemonic shocks thus create a kind of Icarus effect, in which systemic pressures encourage democratic overstretch, failure, and rollback toward autocracy. At the start of a wave, these pressures override domestic constraints that prevent democratization, forge powerful pro-reform coalitions, and bolster the optimism of opposition groups. But as the shock passes and systemic pressures fade, incumbent elites learn to adapt (perhaps by reforming just enough to pacify external donors), fragile pro-reform coalitions fall apart, and optimistic reformers spearhead movements that have little chance of democratic consolidation. The result is failure, rollback, and retrenchment – an autocratic wave stemming from the bursting of the democratic bubble.

### Previous Autocratic Waves – Implications for Today

Above I have sketched out two distinct ways in which hegemonic transitions have led to episodes of autocratic diffusion – through the emergence of autocratic great powers, and via the rollback of democratic waves. What do these precedents tell us about modern authoritarian diffusion? Namely, are we currently experiencing a rollback of the post-Soviet wave, or the beginnings of a genuinely new authoritarian wave?<sup>14</sup>

This is partly an empirical question (I say partly because the measures of democracy are themselves contentious). The 2019 Freedom House annual report points out that two-thirds of

the countries experiencing democratic decline over the past few years experienced democratic transitions in the years after 1988. In other words, recent democratizations have been especially fragile, suggesting rollback dynamics. Yet worries about autocracy even in established democracies like the United States suggest that more than rollback is at work.

The long-term dynamics of global hegemonic transition do not appear to favor democracy. Since the mid-1990s, and despite occasional outbursts, the level of democracy in the world appears to have reached a Great Plateau. A key question is whether modern one-party state capitalism, as embodied by China, represents the newest credible rival to the liberal democratic model—as monarchy, fascism, and communism all did in the past. Marked by a capitalist system of production undergirded by state ownership and guidance, this system seems to offer a sophisticated blend of efficient centralization and capitalist flexibility. According to one Chinese scholar, his country’s success will “challenge the West’s conventional wisdom about political development and the inevitable march toward electoral democracy.” (Li 2013:55)

So far, however, there are few signs of overt Chinese autocracy promotion. Even Nazi Germany cultivated philofascist organizations and supported fellow travelers in South America, the Middle East, and south-central Europe. Yet China has mostly avoided preaching the virtues of its ideological model and eschewed terms like the “Beijing Consensus.” It remains to be seen if this attitude is a permanent feature of China’s historical insularity or a temporary delay stemming from a desire to secure its material position before all else.

Finally, causes of past episodes of autocratic diffusion show that the future of democracy is closely tied to the future of democratic great powers, and American power in particular. Ironically, America’s most enduring contribution to the global spread of democracy has been not through its conscious efforts at democracy promotion, which have often been clumsy, inconsistent, and hypocritical, but through its exalted status as a model worthy of emulation and a side worth joining. American power and success has served to legitimate the regime that it embodies and created powerful incentives for states to place themselves in the US camp. One clear lesson of past hegemonic shocks is that a sudden decline of American power poses a far greater challenge to global democracy than a gradual Chinese ascent.

### **Diffusion of the One-Party State?**

A recent defense of Francis Fukuyama’s argument about the end of history noted that his central contention — that “there is no conceivable ideological rival to liberal democracy” — remains true today. China, Russia, ISIS, or nationalism more broadly: none of these offer a “comprehensive set of political and economic ideas poised as a rival to liberal democracy with universal aspirations and global appeal.”<sup>15</sup>

However, even if democracy no longer faces an ideological rival like fascism or communism, it may be facing an emerging *organizational* rival in the form of the one-party state. The one-party state represents an alternative institutional form in which a single party maintains either a legal monopoly on power or a de facto dominance via the suppression and co-option of other parties

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/01/14/fukuyama-was-right-mostly/>

(the dominant-party state). In countries like Poland and Hungary, ruling parties are taking steps to institutionalize their dominance.

The one-party state is ideologically flexible. It can be technocratic, populist, or oligarchic. It exists in left-wing or right-wing variants. It's almost invariably illiberal, but not too proselytizing about it. Capitalists don't love it but can live with it. In some one-party states, the party itself may be relatively weak (as in Russia) or relatively strong (as in China). Populism is a common tool of the one-party state, since it often provides a convenient tool of legitimation. Because the ruling party represents the will of the people, no competing party can claim equal status. As this workshop's framing document put it, "The opposition is by definition treasonous and treacherous—and should be summarily dealt with."

Here we run up against the limits of historical comparisons. The one-party state is not a transnational movement or a coherent set of ideas. If we are witnessing diffusion, it's not the diffusion of an alternative ideology as was the case with fascism or communism. However, the one-party state still represents an *alternative organizational model*, and an increasingly attractive one. Instead of competing groups alternating power, a single body represents the will of the nation and its people. Its proponents promise it will avoid the deadlock of multi-party democracy, improve government efficiency, and better protect the country's sovereignty against the encroachments of the liberal order. If so, then the institutional rivalry of the 21st century will be between the multi-party state and the one-party state. And the century's ideological rivalries will not map onto it easily, since even one-party states occasionally seem compatible with what we call democracy (as in Japan, Ireland, or South Africa). Capitalism will be fine with either, liberalism less so.

The ideological thinness of the one-party state is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it means democracy still doesn't face an equally coherent rival. Russia does not represent a threat as an alternative way of organizing a government. Yet on the other hand, this lack of strong binding principles may give challengers more flexibility. In some ways, Russia actually has an easier task than during the Cold War. The Kremlin only has to chip away at the dominant Western narrative, rather than build up their own alternative as in the Communist days.

Another effect of the ideological thinness of the one-party state is that "autocracy promotion" often lacks the crusading element associated with democracy promotion. This is why it's often a mistake to consider it the "evil twin" of democracy promotion. Western strategies of democracy promotion are indeed often ideological, transformational, and revolutionary in intent. They are backed by a powerful normative commitment that is in fact partly responsible for the strategy's success. But the very concept of autocracy promotion, especially as it applies to countries like Russia, becomes problematic if it functions as a projected inversion of Western norms. It is an opportunistic project rather than ideological one, which may not diminish its status as a threat but does alter the nature of its causes.



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