

## Putin and Russia, the world's 'heartland'

Written by Eric Walberg Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг □□□□□ □□□□□□

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Russia has always fascinated me--the mystical orthodox faith brought to Kievan Rus in the ninth century, the stern heroes who defended Muscovy against the Golden Horde in the 13--15th centuries, the vast spaces, the remarkable literature of Pushkin and Tolstoy, the Bolshevik Revolution against imperialism ... The West has always been a bit jealous of its proud race of genius.

I fell in love with Russia as a teen when I discovered Prokofieff and insisted--rebellious against my teacher--on playing his fiendishly difficult Toccata in D minor for my Conservatory diploma. I have no idea how I managed it now, but I did, and the piece and my performance proved to be a fine metaphor for the logically impossibility of 20th century Russia, which lived on war and revolution, dreams and nightmares. Prokofieff returned to Russia in 1933, at the peak of Stalin's repressions, and produced his greatest works, Romeo and Juliet, Cinderella, War and Peace, his war sonatas (not to mention his Ode to Stalin). That hooked me.

Today's standoff between the Russian bear and the American eagle is yet another epic struggle in Russia's history, at the heart of Eurasia--the world's "heartland". It had a narrow brush with complete collapse in 1985--98 under Gorbachev/ Yeltsin, a weak, indecisive leadership, a metaphorical reenactment of Boris Godunov seizing the throne in the 16th century. 1985--98 was a repetition of Godunov and the legendary Time of Troubles.

1998 saw a reenactment of the rallying of the nation to expel the Polish occupiers and reassert Russian power in 1613, just as Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power ended the western invasion in the form of NATO encirclement and western carpetbaggers. That is most certainly how Russians now assess their crippled society.

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Putin is despised in the West as a corrupt chauvinist, and Russia is boycotted (though Europe is happy to continue to buy Russian oil and gas), but the reality is very different. Just as in 1613, the first Romanov Tsar Mikhail was inexperienced (a 17-year-old pious prince whose counselors were a mixed bag, some relatively honest and capable men like his father; some, corrupted and bigoted), Putin has fashioned an image of an incorruptible Russian patriot, above the fray, but all the time juggling with powerful oligarchs and complex political currents, both at home and abroad.

Putin is also like Mikhail's grandson, Peter the Great, the westernizer, but 'with Russian characteristics'. Putin grew up quickly, telescoping both these periods of Russian revival, which captured Russians' imagination and accounts for his enduring popularity.

Western media is a barometer not so much for who is a 'bad guy', but who is getting the imperial goat; who needs being brought into line. So in the West, (Nobel peace laureate) Gorbachev and Yeltsin were both slavishly praised (both are despised by Russians, rating 1% in popularity) and Putin is relentlessly pilloried. Who's the 'bad guy' and why is he 'bad'?

The American bully tries to taunt the Russian bear into doing something rash, as it moves NATO up to Russia's borders, encircling it as it did in Cold War days, wooing and inciting noisy little neighbours from the Baltics to Georgia and further. But the Russian leader stands by his principles and his fellow Slavs, despite the provocations. The Time of Troubles is over. No one is going to destroy the Russian heartland, nor will they succeed in breaking up the ancient slavnic federacy into a chain of Wal Marts.

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### 1991 sea change

Whether left or right, all agree that the US was more cautious in foreign policy when the Soviet Union was alive and well. There have been lots of coups instigated or just abetted by Washington, but, other than Korea and Vietnam, very little use of US troops in the process--until 1991.

1991 marked a sea change in world politics. Bush senior, US president at the time, professed the goal to be "a new world order--a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations ... an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfill the promise and vision of the UN's founders."

The US and the EEC (newly incorporated as the European Union in 1993) would help the ex-socialist bloc, including the ex-Soviet Union and its energy-rich Central Asian republics, rebuild their economies and political structures along western capitalist, democratic lines, fashioning weak, "postmodern states", independent in name only. This process began in Europe with the creation of the EU after WWII and accelerated in North America with the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, soon to be reinforced by the Trans-Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement, creating a monster 'rimland' American empire-lite, surrounding the Eurasian heartland.

Such alliances, with NATO under US guidance, are intended as the foundations for a united, peaceful world, a "postmodern imperialism", devoid of messy competitive wars for colonies, neocolonies or the need for a life-or-death defense of 'western civilization'. Russia was invited to join in the 1990s, but when it woke from its post-collapse hangover, it discovered that its dream of a nuclear free world had been pushed aside, and realized that the proposed peaceful postmodern imperial order was a sham. Events since have only confirmed this 'sober' assessment.

Bush senior hit the ground running, invading Iraq in January, without so much as a 'by your leave' to Soviet President Gorbachev (who merely approved, after an offer to mediate was

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ignored).

1991 was a doubly fateful year for Russians, who gained 'freedom', but most of whom lost everything after the August 1991 putsch, a few becoming fabulously wealthy overnight through blatant theft as the Soviet Union came crashing down. Mikhail Khodorkovsky epitomizes the change. A Young Communist League (YCL) functionary in the late 1980s, when no one was still joining, he and his 'comrades' opened businesses under the YCL stamp, positioned themselves to transfer them and YCL property to themselves as YCL functionaries, and then bought it for a song before their Soviet legal authority was canceled. At the same time, all state trade ground to a halt and the black market allowed them to add to their riches.

This happened in 1989--91, when Putin was languishing as a minor KGB agent in East Germany. By the time he returned to Leningrad, resigned from the KGB and got his political feet on the ground, the cupboard was bare. Khodorkovsky and his new 'oligarch' friends then used their new wealth to privatize the privatization process. By the time Putin was rising as Yeltsin's protege, Yeltsin was conned into giving the crown jewels (resource industries) to the oligarchs in the infamous "loans-for-shares" deals, sending their wealth into the stratosphere.

Slaying the dragons



Russia is "no longer a superpower". Its deteriorating economy is ranked "somewhere behind Spain", White House press secretary Josh Earnest announced in October 2015. It doesn't come near the Soviet Union in power and prestige. This taunt followed US scrambling of Russian military planes which were deemed a tad too close to a US aircraft carrier off the Korea peninsula, and US hysterics over Russian subs seen too near an internet cable in the Atlantic.

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How dare this second-rate Spain tweak the US nose?

Every day there is some gripe about the Russians. And don't even mention the P word. Much like Hugo Chavez, Vladimir Putin is a strong, popular leader (83% approval) who dares defy the West, has been in power for over 15 years now (ok, as prime minister for a few years to requalify), accused of corruption.

To Russians, it seems he can do nothing wrong, despite defying the West on pretty well everything, from gay marriage to bare-faced western infiltration (excuse me, democracy promotion NGOs). Or perhaps it's because of this. Russians strongly disapprove of US threats, and miss the feeling of being a key international player, which they enjoyed in Soviet times.

Western media loves to gossip about all political leaders, especially colourful ones who defy the empire. That puts Putin at the top of their list. Even a saint like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez got an unending stream of mud. The most damning attacks are on the corruption endemic in Russia after 1991. However, evidence of corruption points at most to Putin's immediate circle, family and political friends, rather than Putin himself. His son-in-law Kiril Shamalov was already a rising star of Russian business when he married the president's daughter Katerina in 2013, opening his own investment company and using his family contacts in business and banking (apparently all legit).

Putin's own background and way of thinking is revealed in a collection of interviews with Putin, his family and friends called *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait* by Russian President Vladimir Putin (2000), a snapshot of the Putin family just as they entered the bubble of power and anonymity. His early career witnessed two scandalous, dysfunctional political families--that of his first post-KGB boss, St Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, and later that of Boris Yeltsin. Putin's ex-wife and two daughters are kept out of the spotlight.

Putin is one of those rare politicians who arise at moments of crisis, intelligent and committed. He quickly took control of the post-Soviet shambles, brought some order to the chaos and instilled a sense of pride in a defeated people. His own fate and that of his country became one

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and guided what is still his greatest victory: bringing the Yelstin-era oligarchs into line. This he did carefully, going after media moguls Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Guzinsky in 2000, forcing them to sell their TV stations ORT and NRT, ironically dubbed "shares for freedom" transactions, after which they went into exile. Guzinsky sold his shares to fellow oligarch Roman Abramovich who promptly gave editorial control to the Kremlin.

Who really wants peace?

Fast forward to 2007. Munich. Putin criticized the US monopolistic dominance in global relations, and its "almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations." The result: "No one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them. Of course such a policy stimulates an arms race."

2019: Putin is still number one to Russians, but losing ground because the economy is still a wreck and corruption is rife. He inherited a mess and the West has piled sanctions upon sanctions, interfered in Ukraine to keep the two great Slavic nations, Ukraine and Russia, apart, determined to turn all the ex-Soviet countries into postmodern basket cases, begging for scraps from the western banquet table.

But Russians and those of us in the West interested in boring things like peace are as firm as Putin is in supporting Russia's principled policies around the world. His Munich speech gave 'Munich' a new meaning as a historical signpost.

In our age of instant media, this all seems like ancient history, but history often tells us more about today than the latest soundbyte out of the likes of Trump or BoJo. And cultural history even more so, revealing the swamp behind the glitz.

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I just watched the first episode of Years and Years, a British television drama series, a joint production by the BBC and HBO. It is primer on not only our moral decline, but it portrays Russia, a possible corrective, as even worse.



Businesswoman Vivienne "Viv" Rook (Emma Thompson) causes controversy by saying she "doesn't give a fuck" about the Israel-Palestine conflict on an evening talk show. Daniel Lyons (Russell Tovey) works on immigration control and marries his 'husband' and then, when Trump launches an atom bomb on China, rushes to the refugee holding centre to have sex with a Ukrainian refugee Viktor, who complains that the now Russian-occupied Ukraine has made homosexuality illegal, as in Russia. (It is not!)

That in a nutshell is our monstrous distortion of world politics, with nasty Putin-Russia even more threatening than the Soviet Union was depicted. It is impossible to deconstruct the morass that BBC and its US equivalent has created. It truly frightens me. My only solace is in genuine history, and I thank whoever or whatever that bequeathed me my quirky love of Russia and its noble and tragic history.

Rather than being an active midwife of a new world order opposed to imperialism (Soviet policy), Russia is playing a waiting game -- the age-old policy of retreat used against the Mongols, the French and the Nazis. ["Americans play Monopoly, Russians chess."](#) At times, it is wise to sit back and wait for the straw that breaks the ogre's (excuse me, camel's) back. A fool's mate comes about when your opponent is bankrupt, and it certainly looks like this is how the current game is shaping up.

What really clinched my love affair with Russia is the fervent commitment of all Russians that I've ever met to peace. They were the arbiters of peace throughout the impossible 20th century, contrary to all the propaganda we were fed in the West. So I will end on a more upbeat note: The US and Russia have many common interests--an end to terrorism, an end to nuclear weapons, environmental rescue, an end to extreme poverty. They all require cooperation. They are not zero-sum games. It's your move, Uncle Sam.

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