



Why Russians Support the War

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Jeffrey Gedmin: Do we have a Putin problem or a Russia problem today?

S. Frederick Starr: We have a Putin problem because we have a Russia problem. Bluntly, the mass of Russians are passive and easily manipulated—down to the moment they aren't. Two decades ago they made a deal with Vladimir Putin, as they have done with many of his predecessors: You give us a basic income, prospects for a better future, and a country we can take pride in, and we will give you a free hand. This is the same formula for autocracy that prevailed in Soviet times, and, before that, under the czars. The difference is that this time Russia's leader—Putin—and his entourage have adopted a bizarre and dangerous ideology, "Eurasianism," that empowers them to expand Russian power at will over the entire former territory of the USSR and even beyond. It is a grand and awful vision that puffs up ruler and ruled alike.

What do most Russians think of this deal? It leaves them bereft of the normal rights of citizenship but free from its day-to-day responsibilities. So instead of debating, voting, and demonstrating, Russians store up their frustrations and then release them in elemental, often destructive, and usually futile acts of rebellion. This "Russia problem" leaves the prospect of change in Russia today in the hands of alienated members of Putin's immediate entourage, many of whom share his vision of Russia's destiny and are anyway subject to Putin's ample levers for control. Thus, our "Putin problem" arises from our "Russia problem."

JG: Are you surprised that so many Russians support the war in Ukraine?

SFS: Winners attract followers, and since Putin's seizure of Crimea in 2014 Russia's massive propaganda industry has loudly declared the Ukraine invasion as a triumph and systematically suppressed all information to the contrary. The question now is whether and how average Russians will turn against the war as they see their sons, husbands, and brothers return from Ukraine in zinc coffins. For more than a year no one dared speak of the dead soldiers, and mentioned them only by using the army's own euphemism for those sent home: "cargo" (gruz). But this is now changing.

During the czars' Crimean War of 185–56 junior officer and aspiring writer Leo Tolstoy reported admiringly of the doggedness of Russia's soldiers in spite of their status as serfs, a form of slavery. Such determination is lacking today, with most of Putin's volunteer troops fighting simply for pay and the rest being ill-trained draftees. But in spite of the facts that even their officers sometimes speak of them as "meat" (miaso) and that some fifteen thousand frontline troops have laid down their arms, this has yet to lead to a massive social outbreak back home in Russia. But again, this appears to be changing.

JG: If autocracy and the imperial idea have roots in both Russian and Soviet history, what happened in the 1990s? Was there a missed opportunity to begin democratization? Do we need to go back further in history to understand persistent authoritarian tendencies?

SFS: After the collapse of the USSR, most commentators in the West—and I include myself—were guilty of what Alan Greenspan, speaking of financial markets, called "irrational exuberance." Talk of Russia's new "civil society" was everywhere, and U.S. presidents sent ambassadors to the new Russia whose sole background was in the techniques of NGOs and electoral politics. All this is quite understandable, for the Soviet Union's red flag no longer fluttered above the Kremlin. However, hindsight enables us to reconsider that moment in a more clinical light.

In his memoir, Russia's first foreign minister after the collapse of communism, Andrei Kozyrev, reminds us that the only two institutions that actually collapsed in 1991 were the Communist Party of the USSR and the legal entity known as the USSR. However, the Communist Party quickly reconstituted and rebranded itself, and the millions of Russians who had thrived by managing Moscow's control in the Baltic countries, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, immediately began dreaming of some sort of imperial restoration. Worse, the KGB and armed forces lived on and nurtured deep resentment against the West for, as they thought, bringing down the USSR. They and millions of other ordinary Russians were like the amputee who still feels sensations in the severed limb.

Faced with a similar situation after France lost the war to retain Algeria as part of the French state, six-foot, two-inch Charles de Gaulle stood tall, declaring that he foresaw a better, richer, and happier France without Algeria. And so it ended. But five-foot, seven-inch Vladimir Putin whom Russian intellectuals dismissed too quickly as "Lilliputin," took the low road, declaring to the Munich Security Conference in 1997 that the breakup of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century."

The goal that Putin pursued single-mindedly thereafter was somehow to reattach to Russia its fourteen severed limbs of empire. He was inspired in this tragic folly by a phalanx of twentieth century Russian thinkers and publicists who had convinced themselves that the linguistic and cultural differences among the peoples of Eurasia today count for nothing against their more ancient underlying linguistic and civilizational unity. Bearded former guitarist Aleksandr Dugin is but the best known of the pseudo-philosophers who spread this bizarre notion. Following the collapse of the USSR such ideas were in the air in reactionary Moscow. Putin had only to claim them as his own.

Ignoring all this and driven by its own enthusiasms, the West fundamentally misread the events of 1991 and ignored the emergence of a poisonous neo-imperial ideology. Even now, there are some Americans in think tanks and investment firms who persist in their illusions and look to the National Security Council to embrace their pleas for a negotiated peace. That would be short of a Ukrainian victory.

JG: Say something about independent thought in Russia, the great writers and composers. Do they reflect something in Russian society? Or have they been operating outside and apart from Russian society? What explains their inability to influence and shape Russian culture?

SFS: George Kennan always viewed writer Anton Chekhov as the model of the wise, prudent, and Western-oriented Russian intellectual. The list of others in that group extends deep into the 19th century and glitters with such names as novelists Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy, writer Alexander Herzen, composer Igor Stravinsky, a bevy of modern-thinking Russian lawyers, and a host of Soviet-era figures culminating in Nobel Prize-winning physicist Andrei Sakharov.

But there were always others who went along with Russia's imperial project or actively abetted it. This list, too, includes some of Russia's greatest artists and thinkers, beginning with the urbane and otherwise humane poet Alexander Pushkin, who actively supported Russia's conquest of Poland. Think of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's thunderous Marche Slav, or Fyodor Dostoevsky's hatred of Catholicism and socialism, which he equated with the West, or his belief that Russia's 1877 war against the Muslim Ottoman empire was necessary for salvation. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's post-Soviet proposal to combine Ukraine, Belarus, northern Kazakhstan and Russia into a new superstate also comes to mind. Particularly relevant today are the words of the much-hailed Russian poet Josef Brodsky who, writing after Ukraine declared its independence, dismissed Ukrainians as "khokhols" (the equivalent of our "N-word") and versified about "spitting or something into the Dniepr."

It was long customary for Western intellectuals to opine on what they called "the Russian soul." What they missed is that Russia has at

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