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## Introduction to the Special Issue

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## **Introduction to the Year of Russia Special Issue**

**Dan Paracka**

Kennesaw State University's (KSU) Year of Russia program provided an in-depth opportunity for our campus community to learn about Russia at a very important point in time. The program featured more than 30 events including a robust lecture series, special courses focused on Russia, a symposium on U.S.-Russia relations, and a faculty and student interdisciplinary seminar that traveled to Moscow and St. Petersburg. These different elements were intentionally organized to create synergistic opportunities for sustained intercultural exchange. For example, Dr. Tom Rotnem's POLS 4449: Russian Foreign Policy class conducted eight Skype-enabled classroom discussion sessions with Russian counterparts (faculty and students) from Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Topics for the discussion sessions included: 1) NATO/Russian relations; 2) Ukraine; 3) Syria; 4) Russia's global economic status; and 5) Russia's developing relationship with China. Later, a delegation of the MGIMO faculty and students attended the symposium on KSU's campus and then KSU faculty and students visited MGIMO in Moscow.

The U.S.-Russia Relations Symposium, co-hosted by KSU and the Georgia Institute of Technology, attracted 140 people including presenters from six different countries (Brazil, Japan, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States). There were representatives from three different Russian universities and there was also a delegation of 11 students from Campbell High School and 17 students from the University of Central Florida in addition to the KSU and Georgia Tech participants. Overall, across all of the Year of Russia events, more than 3,300 KSU faculty and students participated in the program.

Many of the articles in this journal were first delivered at the conference. The articles examine a wide range of both historical and contemporary issues in Russia, its international relations, and unique position in global affairs from diverse perspectives. Topics include: Soviet-American economic relations at the end of World War II; the tragic consequences of the Soviet experiment with socialism; historic influences of Russian and American ideologies on foreign policy; Russian foreign policy as anchored in the restoration of world power status; an analysis of Ukraine's strategic geopolitical position; political homophobia as a state strategy in Russia; the danger of rhetoric that promotes United States adversarial policy towards Russia; an improving Sino-Russian relationship particularly in the Arctic region; and the application of Konstantin Stanislavsky's acting lessons on life, leadership and international relations.

For the past 10 years, with the help of many colleagues, I have written an introductory essay focused on the country of study at the beginning of each year to serve as a starting point for student inquiry and understanding. What follows is an

adapted version of the essay. I hope it will also provide a useful introduction to the issues examined in this volume.

Russia's story consists of both tragic suffering and tremendous accomplishments that have helped shape the character of its people, making them resilient and proud. At the same time, Russian society and geography are too complex, too diverse, and too large for a single culture to serve as the national heritage (Figes, 2002, p. xxviii). Russia, situated in the middle of Eurasia, is both Eastern and Western and it is this ambiguity, this pull in two directions, which has helped make Russians skilled diplomats and negotiators. Having experienced invading forces from both directions, it has also made them wary and put them on guard. For this reason and "as a general rule, Russia has pursued balance-of-power policies" (Donaldson, Noguee, & Nadkarni, 2014, p. 4). Moreover, "Russians have traditionally had a deeply ingrained fear of anarchy and the centrifugal forces that tug at the unity and stability of their vast state ... [which] has made Russians prize order and security" (Smith, 1976, p. 251). Unfortunately, the efforts to build a strong state have, at times, led to "subverted institutions and personalistic rule" (Kotkin, 2016, p. 4). This view, a type of Russian exceptionalism, where Russians are seen as having suffered under oppression for centuries and subjected to continuous external threats and harsh political realities, emerged first during the enlightenment period and was amplified as the Red Scare and Cold War emerged (Pate, 2016). However, Russia, in continuous relationship with its neighbors, influencing them and influenced by them, is not so different from the rest of the world.

Notably, the United States' views of Russia have often been biased tending towards such negative interpretations due, in part, to limited direct interaction and staunch ideological differences. Characterized by Cold War acrimony and antagonism, there has been far too little collaboration between the two countries.

### **Moscow as the Third Rome**

The early history of Russia consisted of a collection of principalities. The Viking, Rurik of Rutland, defeated the Slavs at Novgorod in 862 becoming ruler of Northern Russia and his successor Oleg conquered Kiev. According to legend in 988, "after considering and rejecting Judaism and Islam, Great Prince Vladimir of Kiev embraced the Christian faith and established it as a state religion" (Taruskin, 2009, p. 156). Nicholas Riasanovsky (2005) has asserted that adopting Orthodox Christianity is the single most important event shaping Russian identity. One of the first cities to establish broader control and establish itself as a center of trade was Kiev, which flourished between 882 and 1125. Moscow was founded in 1147 by Yuri Dolgoruky (a monument in his honor stands in front of the city hall). The cities of Kievan Rus with the exception of Novgorod and Pskov were completely destroyed in 1240 by the vastly superior military of the Mongols (also known as the Tatars). The Mongols indirectly ruled the territory from the 13th to the 15th century. It should be noted that the Mongol Empire brought many advances, not only in military technology but also in trade, taxation, and administrative systems (Weatherford, 2004, p. xxiii).

Christianity came to Russia through Constantinople but ties were severed when the Ottoman Turks took control of Constantinople in 1453. The patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church transferred north to Moscow. After Kievan Rus was shattered by the Mongols, there was no large Rus state until one was reconstituted by Muscovy. Muscovy's strength gradually grew under Ivan the Great and it was at this time that the doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome was firmly established, making Muscovy an heir to the older Byzantine and even Roman classical civilizations and the origins of Christianity. Historically, Russia has tried to set itself apart from its Asian neighbors by emphasizing its Christian nature although many of its people follow Muslim, Buddhist, or Shamanic traditions. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between "Russian" as an ethnic identity from the broader community of peoples who make up the Russian state.

According to Orlando Figes (2002), "the entire spirit of the Russian people, and much of their best art and music, has been poured into the Church, and at times of national crisis, under the Mongols or the Communists, they have always turned to it for support and hope" (p. 297). Under Christian theology, poverty was at times cast as a virtue among Russia's peasants, and excessive wealth was viewed as a sin. The liturgy in Russian Orthodox Church services is always sung and the chants and choral songs of the church are known for their beauty. However, instrumental music was long banned by the church and sacred compositions were not played in concert halls until Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* was performed in 1878 (Figes, 2002, p. 298).

### **Imperial Russia and the Rise of Colonial Nationalism**

As both Russia and Western Europe grew and consolidated, Peter the Great, who ruled Russia from 1689-1725, took on an immense project, the construction of a new capital, St. Petersburg. He led the effort to Westernize/Europeanize the empire and his most successful military efforts concentrated on establishing Russia as a Baltic Sea power. The transformation was so great that historians tend to mark Peter's reign as the end of one era, Muscovy, and the start of another, the imperial. By the time of Catherine the Great, who ruled from 1762-1796, Russian noblemen and women were emulating European language, customs, and attitudes, and immersing themselves in the secular culture of the French Enlightenment (Figes, 2002, pp. 55-57). Catherine's Russia competed with the other great empires of the age defeating Sweden again and partitioning Poland. Much of Catherine's military expansion concentrated on establishing Russia as a Black Sea power. The Black Sea port of Odessa was founded in 1796, the year of Catherine's death.

Alexander I, who ruled Russia from 1801-1825, defeated Napoleon, but he never could have done so alone. Alexander needed alliances with other European powers especially the Prussians and later decisively the Austrians who switched their allegiance away from France. Many have credited geography and climate for Napoleon's failure, but strategic leadership and skillful diplomacy were equally if not more important than the cold weather or even Russian patriotism in defeating Napoleon. It was a strategy of deep retreat and restrained patience similar to one used by Peter the Great against Charles XII of Sweden and by the Mongols to defeat

the Russians in 1223 at the Kalka River (Lieven, 2009, p. 132; Weatherford, 2004, p. 263). Between 1812 and 1814, the Russian army first retreated from Vilna to Moscow and then advanced from Moscow to Paris. In 1815, after defeating Napoleon, Alexander I signed what came to be known as the Holy Alliance with Prussia and Austria.

The Napoleonic Wars accompanied rising European nationalism where British sea power had confined French imperialism to mainland Europe, while Russian imperial interests lied primarily southwards towards the Ottomans and Persians. The Portuguese monarchy escorted to Brazil and rescued by the British from Napoleon opened the entire Portuguese Empire to British trade, indicating the importance of collaborative alliances to compete globally. Russia's defeat of Napoleon also served to embolden and strengthen British imperialism, thereby increasing competition between Britain and Russia.

Interestingly, the War of 1812 seems to have served as both a glorious imperial victory of salvation and a watershed moment in Russia's movement towards national liberation (Figes, 2002, p. 138). The leaders of the 1825 Decembrist uprising were influenced greatly by soldiers and officers who had returned from the Napoleonic battlefield. It was the first attempt ever to overthrow the imperial political system. Nobleman had witnessed side-by-side the sacrifices of peasants on the battlefield who more than proved their worth as patriots. Russia mobilized over 230,000 men for the war effort, most of them serfs. Returned officers hoped to establish a new constitution that every man could understand, protect, and defend but their plans were ill-conceived and poorly timed, choosing to revolt at the swearing in ceremony for Tsar Nicholas I, whose royal soldiers were also assembled and who dealt harshly with the mutineers. Five hundred Decembrists were arrested and 121 conspirators, including the so-called peasant prince Sergei Volkonsky, were found guilty and sentenced as convict laborers to Siberia (Figes, 2002, pp. 83-90).

Nicholas I ruled with an iron hand from 1825-1855. He turned his ambitions to the Ottoman Empire defeating the Turks in 1828, winning independence for Greece and extending Russia's control over the Caucasus region. Later, when Russia assisted the Ottoman Sultan's call for assistance in putting down a revolt by Mohammed Ali in Egypt, Russia was rewarded with the rights to have its warships pass through the Turkish straits, but the British and French objected. Encouraged by Britain, the Turks declared war on Russia in 1853 and Russia was defeated in the Crimean War (Donaldson et al., 2014, pp. 22-23). It was a defeat that the Russians would not forget. European competition including Russian ambitions for control over the Ottoman Empire and its important sea trade routes would only intensify, eventually resulting in World War I.

Following the death of Nicholas I, Alexander II (who ruled from 1855 until his assassination in 1881) signed the treaty that ended the Crimean War and began initiating several important reforms, most importantly the Emancipation of Serfs (1861). The economic imperative calling for emancipation asserted that free labor is more productive than slave labor. Militarily, Russia turned to its Eastern borders winning territory in the Amur region of China and founding the city of Vladivostok in 1860. In 1874, Russia successfully defeated the khanates of Kokand, Bukhara,

and Khiva in Turkestan and later Tashkent right up to the borders of Afghanistan and British India (Figs, 2002, p. 411). In 1877, Russia renewed its conflicts in the Balkans attempting to liberate Bulgaria from Turkish occupation leading to the 1878 Treaty of Berlin (involving all of the major European powers of the time) and an uneasy accord between Russia and Austria. The Treaty of Berlin “created a series of Christian nation states in the Balkans and forced a realignment of Muslim populations” setting off massive migration movements (Karpat, 2010, p. 48). German Chancellor Bismarck also organized the 1884 Conference of Berlin known for unleashing the Scramble for Africa as the European powers divided the world into spheres of influence and their leaders engaged in a dangerous chess match of shifting allegiances and self-serving treaties.

Following the Berlin Conference, Germany increasingly saw itself vying with France, Great Britain, and Russia for predominance, and therefore looked to the Ottoman Empire as an important sphere of influence and potential ally. The Young Turks reformist movement also saw in Germany a successful, rapidly industrializing country able to help protect them from Russian expansionism (Fromkin, 1989, p. 66). German railroads connected Berlin with Istanbul.

It is during this period in the 19th century of rising nationalism and competing colonial empires that Russia expands and solidifies its rule into the Caucasus, Central Asia, and East Asia regions. Russian nationalism, like that of other 19th century nationalisms, was brutal in its treatment of minorities. It has long been argued that since Russia itself was a frontier society, its borders were relatively undefined and under-fortified contributing to expansionist tendencies. Perhaps for these reasons, Russia had also become quite adept at using local elites to promote its imperial agenda long before the British attempted to do the same in India. Russia’s frontier colonialism also had much in common with the United States’ frontier subjugation of native peoples especially in its promotion of a Christian civilizing mission. In addition, “the need to transform pasturelands into agricultural colonies and industrial enterprises kept the [Russian] government on a confrontational course with its nomadic neighbors” (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 222). At the end of the 19th century, the so-called “Great Game” in Asia pitted the world’s two most powerful nations of the period, Britain and Russia, on a collision course for control over the Middle East (Fromkin, 1980, p. 936).

### **Serfs, Slavophiles, Artists, and Intellectuals**

Following the emancipation of serfs, groups like the *narodniki* (populists) as well as many intellectuals, artists, and writers increasingly celebrated and romanticized the peasant as a heroic figure capable of withstanding great suffering with human dignity (Figs, 2002, p. 220). There was a new found fascination with a rural life little known or understood by the ruling classes of the urban centers. These artists and intellectuals viewed peasants as oppressed and in need of liberation, and increasingly advocated for all Russians to adopt the collectivist, in some ways quasi-socialist form of organization, that prevailed in peasant villages.

At the same time, Europe was also increasingly viewed by Russians as a morally corrupting influencedecadent, materialistic, superficial, and egotistical, and

it was portrayed this way in many of the works of Russia's literature. This reflected, in part, what came to be known as the Slavophile movement calling for a rediscovery of Russian roots and values, and where history might belong to the people (Figes, 2002, pp. 65, 135). Morality, spirituality, and social justice were core themes in their works. In general, the Slavophiles tended to be political conservatives, while the populists were revolutionaries. Both groups generally opposed those advocating for greater Westernization which was also a prevalent view at the time.

Artistically and intellectually, what began in the 1830s as largely a romantic view of the beleaguered peasant, by the latter half of the century began to challenge the received truths linking Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationalism under Romanov rule, and by the 1930s became an almost blind faith in progress under Communist state control eventually giving rise to more outspoken dissidents after World War II.

### **The Trans-Siberian Railroad and East Asia**

The development of railroads was a central aspect of infrastructure development in Russia at the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th centuries. Railways, a symbol of modernity, attracted people to towns and brought growth, replacing the old world of rural Russia with a new more urban context. Birth rates also increased dramatically during the second half of the 19th century with the population rising in Russia from 50 to 79 million. As more and more land was farmed (primarily in the southern regions) soil quality declined along with agricultural and livestock production, resulting in shortages and eventually famine (Figes, 2002, p. 258). Overall, less than 15% of Russian land is fit for agriculture as the tundra is a treeless plain with poor soil and little precipitation, while the taiga region, over half of the nation's land mass, has cold winters, hot summers, leached soils, and is covered in forest.

In 1898, China granted Russia a 25-year lease over the Liaotung Peninsula and Russia completed the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1903. In 1904, Japan, concerned about losing its trade privileges with China due to Russian expansion, launched a surprise attack on the Russians at Port Arthur. Japan's substantial military victories against Russia (the Russian navy was defeated at Tsushima and the army lost 80,000 men at Mukden) resulted in concessions of Manchurian territories to Japan and contributed to revolutionary fervor throughout Russia. The 1905 Revolution in Russia was fueled by striking workers, peasant unrest, and military mutinies, which led to the creation of the State Duma, a multiparty system and a Constitutional Monarchy in 1906. The 1905 Revolution largely failed to create real change in the political power of Tsar Nicholas II and it would not be until the middle of World War I and the additional suffering placed on the nation that a more complete revolution would occur.

## The Russian Revolution and World War

Russian losses during World War I exceeded 3 million people and caused great hardship. In 1917 in the middle of the war, Russia experienced two revolutions, revolutions that were a reaction to over 300 years of monocratic rule. The Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin came to power during the second revolution in October 1917 and promised to end Russia's involvement in World War I. They signed a peace treaty with Germany in 1918 but continued to face incursions by Allied forces, especially Polish forces. They signed a peace treaty with Poland in 1921 ceding parts of the Ukraine and Belorussia to Poland. Conditions in Russia continued to deteriorate. At least 5 million Russians died of starvation and disease during the famine of 1921 and the Bolsheviks had no choice but to accept foreign assistance. Three million Russians fled their native land between 1919 and 1929 (Figes, 2002, p. 528). In 1921, "Lenin's answer to the crisis was the New Economic Policy which represented a retreat from socialist economics. The peasants were given greater freedom, and private trade and private ownership of small businesses were again legalized" (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 51).

Lenin also revised Marxist thought to emphasize its international dimension highlighting how imperialist nations exploited their colonies exacerbating the problems of class struggle. He believed that Russia would lead a worldwide movement of liberation from the oppression of bourgeois capitalism. Lenin's death in 1924 resulted in a divisive power struggle with Joseph Stalin emerging as the leader, ruling from 1929-1953. He immediately created large state-run farms to collectivize agricultural lands, expand industrial output, repress religion and close churches, and purge all opposition. It is estimated that as many as 10 million people died during the manmade famine of 1932-34, and an additional 7 million people were killed and 8-12 million arrested during the purges of 1934-38.

With the onset of World War II, the Soviet Union crippled by Stalin's Great Purge of 1937, having executed or imprisoned many high ranking officers, was generally ill-prepared for war and signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. They were caught off guard when attacked by Nazi Germany in June 1941. By mid-September 1941, Hitler's forces had cut off the city of Leningrad and advanced to within a few hundred miles of Moscow. With great sacrifice, the Russians stopped the Nazi advance and slowly began to push them back. The siege of Leningrad lasted 900 days and as many as 1 million people died of disease and starvation before it was broken in January 1944 (Figes, 2002, p. 492). By the end of the war, 27 million people in Soviet Russia (especially many Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, and many of the civilian victims were Jews) had died but the country emerged with control of vast territory in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Donaldson et al. (2014) stated, "That the Soviet Union not only survived but emerged from the War as Europe's strongest power was a tribute to Soviet military valor and diplomatic skill" (p. 62). World War II, or The Great Patriotic War as it is known in Russia, mobilized all of Russia's resources including more than 1 million women who served with the Soviet armed forces as medics, scouts, snipers, and communication operators, and in combat positions in the infantry, artillery, armored tank, and anti-aircraft divisions (Pennington, 2010).



## Stalinism and the Cold War

Under communism, old aristocratic ideas were abandoned for new proletarian ones where science and a mechanized collectivism promised to transform the world, where faith in religion would be replaced by scientific progress. Communism called for the abolition of private ownership over the means of production, state control of everyday life, and subordination of the individual to the power of bureaucracy. While the socialist ideal called for equality and the destruction of hierarchy, it especially targeted the privileges afforded to both the well-educated and religious institutions (Shafarevich, 1974, pp. 44, 53-54). The Soviet economy largely operated on plans from above rather than consumer demand from below. While very successful as a tool of industrialization, the planned economy did not necessarily promote individual initiative or innovation. It has been highly criticized for lacking quality and competitiveness. Solzhenitsyn (1974) criticized the communist state for usurping land ownership from peasants, political power from trade unions, and voice from minority communities (p. 11).

Following World War II, “both the USSR and the United States perceived themselves as heading coalitions struggling for peace and justice against an evil and determined rival” (Donaldson et al., 2014, pp. 73-74). Under such a competitive nationalistic framework, the United States and Russia viewed compromise and accommodation as forms of unpatriotic treachery. Solzhenitsyn (1974) described the context thus: “not a single event in our life has been freely and comprehensively discussed, so that a true appreciation of it could be arrived at and solutions found” (p. ix). He called for the USSR and the United States to find common interests, to cease being antagonists, and ensure respect for human rights (Solzhenitsyn, 1974, p. 8). He was critical of unfettered freedom devoid of moral responsibility and immersed in protecting its own self-interests. He called for both social justice and the renunciation of violence, for freewill in joining the social contract.

After Stalin died, Nikita Khrushchev took over denouncing Stalin in a secret speech and released 5 million people from the *gulags* (forced labor camps that housed mainly political prisoners). Khrushchev’s rule saw numerous challenges and confrontations including the Soviet invasion of Hungary (1956), the Suez Canal crisis (1956), Sputnik and the space race (1957), the erection of the Berlin Wall (1961), and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962).

The Cold War began with stalemates dividing East and West Berlin and North and South Korea, leading to divisiveness in other parts of the world and increases in arms sales. The Cold War begins in the Middle East with the Suez Canal crisis. In 1955, Gamal Abdel Nasser obtained \$200 million dollars of advanced Soviet weaponry from Czechoslovakia, a move that angered the United States, which then withdrew funding for the Aswan High Dam project leading to the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal and the subsequent British, French, and Israeli attack on Egypt (Ahmed, 2011, p. 58). Weapons were the chief export of the USSR to the Third World (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 86). In 1962, Soviet-supported Nasser began carrying out a proxy war in Yemen that spread into Saudi Arabia resulting in increased military support to Saudi Arabia from the United States (Bronson, 2006, pp. 85-88). U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East were to ensure access to oil

and prevent any hostile power from acquiring control over this resource. During the Cold War the Soviet Union was seen as the primary threat to those interests (Sick, 2009, p. 295). In 1968, when the British announced their intention of reducing their presence in the Middle East, the United States looked to partner with Iran and Saudi Arabia in order to counter the threat of Soviet expansion. This Twin Pillars policy ignored the issue that both Iran and Saudi Arabia were unhappy with Israel's aggressive stance in the Middle East. For Iran, the United States' support for Israel was untenable; however, "the Saudi leadership considered its geostrategic competition with the Soviets and its relationship with the United States more important than the Arab-Israeli one, and viewed the United States as its long-term central partner in that larger struggle" (Bronson, 2006, p. 120). Saudi Arabia and the United States became partners against "Godless" communism. Saudi Arabia was the United States' most important ally during the Cold War, assisting the United States to conduct proxy wars in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Yemen, and the Sudan. The U.S.-Saudi partnership helped bankrupt the Soviet Union and contributed to its defeat in Afghanistan and losses in Africa (Bronson, 2006, p. 203).

Khrushchev was succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev in 1964. During the Brezhnev era, the major conflicts and issues included the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), the Vietnam War, war in Bangladesh (1971), Yom Kippur War (1973), SALT I & II ballistic missile agreements, war in Angola (1975), Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), and the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

It was estimated "that from 1950-1970, Soviet per capita food consumption doubled, disposable income quadrupled, the work week was shortened, welfare benefits increased, consumption of soft-goods tripled and purchases of hard-goods rose twelve-fold" (Smith, 1976, p. 58). By 1970, life expectancy reached 70 years and the Soviet Union had the highest ratio of doctors to population in the world. Furthermore, in 1974, 85% of all working-age women were employed, the highest percentage in the industrialized world (Smith, 1976, pp. 72, 130). However, by the late 1970s, there were significant signs of trouble. *New York Times* correspondent Hedrick Smith, in his 1976 book, *The Russians*, reported that the Soviet underground economy or black market grew out of the system's inefficiencies, shortages, poor quality, and terrible delays in service (Smith, 1976, p. 86). Communism became a patronage system where who you knew and their administrative position in the party's privileged class was decisive to improving one's quality of life (Smith, 1976, p. 29).

By the early 1980s the costs of war abroad had seriously undermined the Soviet economy fueling disillusionment if not despair at home. Between 1982 and 1985 the USSR had three successive leadership changes. Mikhail Gorbachev was elected general secretary by the politburo in March 1985 inheriting dismal prospects—most notably a stagnant economy, poor agricultural productivity, substandard housing, declining life expectancy, and rising infant mortality. His first unexpected crisis was the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in April 1986.

### ***Perestroika and Glasnost***

Aimed at restructuring and not dismantling the Soviet system, Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring) reforms and *glasnost* (openness) campaigns required great courage as they nonetheless challenged the foundations of communist ideology. He recognized how military power and expenditures had been generally unproductive and that there was a need to shift focus and find a way to empower people to become more competitively engaged in the global economy. He was also particularly focused on curbing nuclear proliferation and the arms race. In the late 1980s, Gorbachev began withdrawing troops from conflicts in Angola (1988) and Afghanistan (1989), ending military aid to Nicaragua (1989), sponsoring a cease-fire in the Iran/Iraq war (1987), and encouraging Vietnam to withdraw troops from Cambodia (1989).

The opening up of reforms in Soviet Russia soon spread in unexpected ways throughout the region. In the spring of 1989 Poland conducted elections with Lech Walesa's Solidarity labor union winning the majority of contested seats; this was followed by a wave of mass demonstrations in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, all leading to the ousting of Communist Party control and new elections. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the reunification of Germany signaled an end to the Cold War as Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990.

In 1991, concerned about the slow pace of reforms in Russia and the collapse of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, Russia became an independent state under pro-democracy President Boris Yeltsin, the first freely elected leader in Russian history, and soon thereafter formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), first with Belorussia and Ukraine and then adding Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Russia's first order of business was to negotiate new relationships and promote economic integration with the former Soviet republics and gain acceptance/membership in organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, there were many hurdles and roadblocks to joining these European and global institutions, and the CIS proved to be a very loose federation with each of the members pursuing their own interests and memberships in these international organizations, and each establishing its own currency. Russia offered CIS nations below market prices for commodities such as oil and gas, asking in return that these countries not enter into external defense treaties or allow foreign military bases to be established in the region, but this tactic largely failed and soon Russia was increasing prices to assert greater control (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 178). The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) gained membership in the European Union in 2004 along with former Communist bloc countries of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. More concerning to Russia, these countries also all joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance originally created to prevent a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Notably, Finland, which

has as much reason to distrust and fear Russia as any nation, is a member of the European Union but not of NATO.

### **Conflicts in the Balkans and Caucasus Regions**

Continued NATO expansion was based on old fears of the potential for Russian aggression and was viewed by Russia as a broken promise that limited their influence in partnering to resolve regional conflicts. Immediately following the breakup of the Soviet Union, several conflicts arose in the former republics including civil war in Tajikistan, two secessionist movements in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the independence struggle of the Trans-Dniester region in Moldova, all of which contributed to these fears and to declining regional trade. The total volume of trade between Russia and the former Soviet Republics dropped by half between 1989 and 1993. In 1992-93, despite pledges of a \$1.6 billion assistance package from the United States and a ten-year deferral on debt obligations, Russia continued to experience severe economic hardships, hyperinflation, unemployment, and reduction in social services (Donaldson et al., 2014, pp. 170, 237-238, 252, 257). It is estimated that by mid-1993, more than 40 million Russians were living below the poverty line.

The biggest conflicts in the region testing the evolving relationship between Russia and the West (NATO) were the wars in the Balkans and the war in Chechnya. The West did not question the right of Russia to assert authority over Chechnya but it did object to the brutality of fighting forces and the killing of civilians. Russia charged that the violations of human rights were being committed by Chechen rebels. The two-year war in Chechnya ended in 1994 with a compromise agreement providing some local autonomy to the region. However, the failure of Russian troops to win the war contributed to a gradual decline in Yeltsin's popularity as he was increasingly viewed as inept and weak, capitulating to Western demands. (Indeed, the West was treating Russia this way in its refusal to involve them more closely in actions in Kosovo.) Yeltsin was also increasingly seen as undemocratic following a Constitutional crisis and legislative power-struggle that included his impeachment and bombardment of the Russian White House in 1993.

Terrorist attacks by Chechen rebels involving over 2,000 hostages at hospitals in Budyonnovsk in 1995, and Kizlar in 1996 continued to force the question of how to deal with the region. In 1997, Yeltsin and Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov signed an agreement that was to extend autonomy, end hostilities, and follow the rules of law. Of special note, Chechnya is strategically important because it provides a vital link in the flow of oil from Baku, Azerbaijan, to the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk (Donaldson et al., 2014, pp. 240-245, 264). Comparatively, the level of concern and regulation over the placement of oil and gas infrastructure between the United States, Canada, and Mexico as regards to environmental protection and impact studies pales with the security risks and economic competition over the placement of oil and gas pipelines in the Baltic, Caucasus, Caspian Sea, and Central Asia regions. Throughout the region of the former Soviet Republics, the process of controlling oil and gas resources and supply pipelines is highly contested.

## Oligarchs and a Powerful Petro State

More recently, economic growth was accompanied by the rise of oligarchs, a small number of people who gained control of a large share of what had earlier been state assets as the Soviet economy privatized. The means by which they gained control has also been called into serious question. Jerrold Schecter (1998) noted that “six hundred bankers and business people have been killed since the fall of the Soviet Union” (p. 13). Some of these oligarchs have treated Russia like their own personal property while others invested in building a stronger civil society through supporting democratic institutions such as a free press (Gessen, 2012a, pp. 124-134). A number of high profile corruption and murder cases have emerged in recent years including cases involving not just oligarchs but also political dissidents such as: the arrests of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Dmitry Rozhdestvensky, Pussy Riot, and Alexei Navalny, and the deaths of Sergei Yushenkov, Alexander Litvinenko, Boris Berezovsky, Galina Starovoitova, Anna Politkovskaya, Sergei Magnitsky, and Boris Nemtsov.

Helped by soaring revenues of petroleum exports, the rise of Vladimir Putin has been largely ascribed to his success in responding to the “dizzying economic decline of the early 1990s [that] produced a profound sense of national humiliation” (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 117).

In 1999, Chechnya invaded the Dagestan region of Russia and Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin to put down the incursion. This was followed by several terrorist bombings in different cities across Russia including two in Moscow that resulted in more than 100 deaths and led Putin to initiate a full-scale war on Chechnya producing hundreds of thousands of refugees (Gessen, 2012a, pp. 23-27). Later that year, Yeltsin resigned and Putin became his successor. Putin won the election for president in 2000.

Beyond the important policy differences on the wars in Kosovo, Libya, and Iraq, NATO enlargement, and attempts to establish U.S. military bases and missile defense systems in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Putin has generally been supportive of developing good bilateral relations with the United States. This is best exemplified through Russia’s support for the war on terrorism. At the same time, Putin has insisted that Russia’s role in regional and world affairs be recognized. Since he became president, Vladimir Putin has worked to concentrate power and eliminate critics and competitors. As one of his vocal critics has observed, “three months after his inauguration, two of the country’s wealthiest men had been stripped of their influence and effectively kicked out of the country [and] less than a year after Putin came to power, all three federal television networks were controlled by the state” (Gessen, 2012a, p. 174).

After 9/11, the war against Chechnya was largely portrayed as part of the West’s war on Islamic fundamentalist terrorism (Gessen, 2012a, p. 229). The 2004 hostage crisis at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in which 342 mostly children were killed was followed by “Putin’s decision to centralize Moscow’s control over Russia’s regions by discarding the popular election of regional governors and republic presidents” (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 384).

Russia's growing economic success and Putin's efforts to take back control from the oligarchs was largely touted among the emerging BRIC countries' multipolar world (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) (Gessen, 2012a, p. 243). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was another sign of Russia's attempts to develop strong regional partnerships. Putin won a landslide victory for re-election in 2004. In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev became president and appointed Putin prime minister as he was ineligible to run for a third consecutive term.

Today, "most economic production is in private hands, the ruble is fully convertible, and prices are free to fluctuate with supply and demand" (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 9). Russia also has a large domestic market and well-educated workforce. Russia has joined the IMF and WTO but continues to be very dependent on oil and gas revenues which have been subject to significant price fluctuations effecting economic stability. Gazprom has a near monopoly on natural gas production and transport in Russia and about 17% of the world gas production, 18% of estimated reserves, and 15% of the global transport network (Donaldson et al., 2014, p. 150). Unfortunately, Russia has poor protection of property rights, relatively high levels of corruption, increasing state ownership, and an unpredictable judicial system (Guriev, 2016, pp. 21-22). Prospects for Russia's future economic growth are unclear and will depend largely on the degree of improvement in regional trade relations, legal protections, and controlled government spending.

## **Syria and Ukraine**

Lukyanov (2016) wrote,

In February [2016], Moscow and Washington issued a joint statement announcing the terms of a 'cessation of hostilities' in Syria agreed to by major world powers, regional players, and most of the participants in the Syrian civil war ... Even as it worked with Russia on the truce, the United States continued to enforce the sanctions it had placed on Russia in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea. (p. 30)

Russia's actions in Crimea and in Syria represent in part a response to U.S. aggression around the world since the end of the Cold War and what it generally views as an overly assertive U.S. foreign policy (Lukyanov, 2016, pp. 32-35). Many Russians see Putin's annexation of Crimea "as righting a historical injustice and reclaiming Russia's status as a world power" (Lipman, 2016, p. 44). But Russia needs to develop good relations with Ukraine and its other neighbors through diplomacy not force of arms. The biggest threats to Russia are not European expansionism and certainly not the ambitions of neighbors and important potential trading partners like Ukraine; rather it stems from on-going destabilizing conflict in the Middle East. In many ways, the West needs a stable Russian military presence in Sevastopol (it had a lease agreement through 2042) which makes Russia's aggression in Crimea, the Ukraine, and even Syria all the more troubling. Russia has played and can play a productive role in Syria as it did with the removal of

chemical weapons. It would be interesting to consider what influence the Moscow Patriarchate might have in regards to policies or relief efforts on behalf of Syrian Orthodox Christians. Russia's Middle East relations are critically important in resolving conflicts there, especially its relations with Turkey and Iran. Therefore, it is critical the United States and Russia come together over strategic policy in Syria. There will not be real or lasting security in the region without stable cooperation with Russia.

## Conclusion

To summarize some of the main points of this introduction, Russia has tended to have strong leaders with centralized control. It is a predominantly Christian society with diverse ethnic populations and neighbors. It has suffered and sacrificed greatly through serfdom, war, and famine but remained very patriotic, hard-working, and high-achieving in both science and the arts. It has been very conscious of protecting its interests through strategic defense and diplomacy working to maintain a balance-of-power approach in its foreign policy and international relations.

The storied history of U.S.-Russia relations over the last century, epitomized by the Cold War era, has often been antagonistic resulting in disastrous third world proxy wars, a tragic and wasteful consequence. Real collaboration in joint problem-solving efforts has been lacking, collaboration in space exploration being one exception and disarmament another. Direct trade with Russia has also been limited.

There is a great deal of trauma and tragedy in Russia's history and current context that give cause for caution and concern (the same is true for most countries including the United States and its genocide of Native Americans, slavery, Vietnam, and Iraq), but these faults and mistakes need not define the future. We must learn from such mistakes rather than allowing them to become self-fulfilling prophecies where participants become complicit in a never-ending narrative of distrust and fear. As noted in this essay, it has been asserted that "centuries of invasion from both east and west engendered fear and distrust of the outside world" by Russia (Schechter, 1998, p. 26) but such circumstances have also promoted a strategy emphasizing a desire to form alliances and mutually beneficial relationships to weather such storms. Generally speaking, in global affairs, we should be looking to societies' strengths for answers, not the weaknesses for excuses. A paradigm shift from a worldview of competing empires to one of mutual responsibility is critically needed.

Rather than blaming others, people and nations need to recognize the creative power of collaboration across communities and cultures. War is costly and wasteful but we should not think that building coalitions and relationships is inexpensive or easily accomplished. It takes time and patience to develop trust and understanding.

As this issue goes to publication, investigations continue into the Trump campaign and its possible collusion with Russia to influence the U.S. presidential election. Regardless of the role of the Trump campaign, there does appear to be evidence of Russia's involvement in trying to influence American voters especially through social media platforms. It is not unusual or unheard of for foreign governments to try to interfere or influence the outcomes of elections. According to

Dov Levin of Carnegie Mellon University, the United States has done so more than 80 times worldwide between 1946 and 2000 (NPR, 2016). One thing that makes the current case different are the new tools available for carrying out such cyber-attacks. The use of social media that involves Americans themselves in spreading misinformation seems aimed at dividing society against itself. In many ways, we should be less worried about whether democrats or republicans win an election (as both are American parties that despite differences should have America's best interests at heart), and more concerned about issues of bipartisanship in support of the union. When the issue first emerged, Stephen Cohen (2017) wrote,

The allegations are driven by political forces with various agendas: the Hillary Clinton wing of the Democratic Party, which wants to maintain its grip on the party by insisting that she didn't lose the election but that it was stolen by Russian President Vladimir Putin for Trump; by enemies of Trump's proposed détente with Russia, who want to discredit both him and Putin; and by Republicans and Democrats stunned that Trump essentially ran and won without either party, thereby threatening the established two-party system. (n.p.)

More recently, Masha Gessen (2012b) wrote that there is no reason to believe that "a tiny drop in the sea of Facebook ads changed any American votes" but a more likely explanation is that "a great many Americans want to prove that the Russians elected Trump, and Americans did not" (n.p.). The current crisis seems to have more to do with the new tools of social media and American divisiveness at home as it has to do with foreign affairs. Given the relentless ubiquity of access to the 24-hour news cycle on our mobile devices, the American public needs to learn how to become more responsible and discerning users of media technology. At the same time, these phenomena also underscore just how much we live in a global society and how much we have to learn about living cooperatively for the common good in such a world.

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