

Is Russia mainly a European or Asian nation? This is a basic question about Russian history that helps explain why Russia is the way it is today. In the west, Russia borders mainly on Ukraine and Poland which are connected to Europe. In the East, Russia is bordered by Mongolia, China Japan and the Pacific Ocean. So, the simple answer is that Russia is geographically both European and Asian, or in one word, Eurasian. According the historian, \*Orlando Figes, Russia inherited its autocratic political system in large part from the Asian Mongol occupation while its European neighbors slowly developed democratic political systems that limited the power of Kings.

Orlando Figes book, *The Story of Russia*, starts with the usual story of the birth of Russia from the 9<sup>th</sup> century Kievan Rus in Ukraine. Russia developed as a composite nation made up of three main groups: Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian. Each had their own early development but over time, Russia would extend its empire west to incorporate the regions of Ukraine and Byelorussia. Then, Russian history gradually developed a new story which incorporated the Ukrainian people as “little Russians” and Byelorussians as “white Russians”. That is, they are all part of the general history of Russia rather than distinct nations. They also developed the myth that all Slavic people are part of one big family under the Russian Tsar. A myth firmly promoted to this day by Putin, who rules as the latest Russian Tsar.

In 2016 Vladimir Putin unveiled a huge statue of Grand Prince Vladimir, the ruler of Kievan Rus between 980 and 1015, in front of the Kremlin in Moscow. Putin called Vladimir the ruler of “the first Russian state”. \*(p.1) He praised the prince for creating a “strong united and centralized state, incorporating diverse peoples, languages, cultures and religion into one enormous family” (p.2) For Putin, the Ukrainian Prince was a Russian. Naturally, this infuriated the Ukrainians who already had the same statue built in 1853 overlooking Kiev. Putin was following in the steps of his predecessors such as Stalin who regularly instructed Soviet historians to re-write history to his liking. As noted by George Orwell in his book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “Who controls the past...controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past.” (p. 4)

One of the interesting aspects of this book is the treatment of the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and its impact on the development of Russia. Other books seem to dismiss this period of Russian history as a minor influence. They came as invaders then they left and that was it. However, Figes takes a closer look. After all, they ruled Russia for over 250 years! The first invasion came in 1223 and by 1240 under the leadership of the great Chingiz Khan, they controlled all of Russia and Ukraine. The capture of Kiev in 1240 put an end to the Kievan Rus dynasty which was founded in 862.

One of the interesting side effects of the Mongol rule was on the division of Ukraine. The western region of Ukraine looked west to Poland and Lithuania for support against the Mongols while the Eastern region shared the fate of Russia and generally accepted Mongol rule. Also, the Russian Orthodox church accepted Mongol rule because they offered freedom of religion to the Russians while Roman Catholic Poland tended to be less tolerant.

As the pressure mounted from Roman Catholic Europe, and particularly from the mighty Polish and Lithuanian Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Russia adopted the Kievan Rus dynasty but moved it further east to Moscow. The Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania was formally created in 1569 and this union created the largest and most powerful European power at the time threatening both Ukraine and Russia. Kiev was simply too close to this growing political power.

While European nations in the west struggled to develop democracy by gradually limiting the power of ruling monarchs, Russia remained an absolute dictatorship. This pattern of absolute power was refined by Ivan the IV “the Terrible”, Tsar from 1546-1584. Through force and coercion, he greatly increased Moscow’s rule over all the nearby territories. His control over the growing empire was modeled on that of the Mongols. The Mongol view was that the great Khan literally owned the land and all those on the land including the nobility. Russian nobles (boyars) had to petition the great Khan every year to extend their position. This forced the boyars to compete with each other for the Khans favor. There was no “sharing” of power as in the emerging European nations where noble families had won some rights and privileges. The Magna Carta, for example was created by the nobles and signed in 1215 limiting the power of

the English king. This did not happen in Russian history. Instead, like the Mongol rulers, Ivan took a free hand in creating and removing anyone he wanted at any time. The boyars were therefore totally dependent on the Tsar for their holdings and position. This view of leadership was to persist into modern history. Tsar Nicholas I who ruled from 1825-1855 has been called "Chingiz Khan with a telegraph" and Stalin as "Chingiz Khan with a telephone". (p. 53)

Ivan the Terrible also developed his role as defender of the faith to support the Russian Orthodox church. The church leaders accepted him as a kind of "God - King" with a divine right to rule. Ivan justified his murderous behavior as "God's punishment". In his view, since he was God's appointed ruler on earth, anyone opposed to him was therefore opposed to God and must be punished. He saw himself as the "agent of God" to protect the Orthodox church from all unbelievers. (p.75) Ivan and the church claimed that Moscow was a "third Rome" as the leader of the Byzantine Orthodox church. With the final capture of Constantinople by the Muslims in 1453 the leadership of the Orthodox church had moved to Moscow. There, it was safe from the expanding Muslim empire and Roman Catholic Europe. The Tsar was charged by the Orthodox church leaders with the responsibility of defending and promoting the "true" church from Muslims and Roman Catholics.

Ivan the Terrible died in 1584 but he set the pattern of absolute rule for Russia that exists to this day. Stalin, for example, called Ivan a great Russian leader because he used his absolute power to build a great nation. He also claimed that his only fault was not being ruthless enough! (p. 78) Ivan's death led to the Time of Troubles where the boyars fought each other for control. Finally, in 1613 they elected Tsar Mikhail Romanov whose family dynasty lasted until 1917.

While there were occasional attempts at democracy, the pattern of absolute rule by the Tsar remained in place. Even when Peter the Great became Tsar in 1682, his efforts at modernizing Russia focused on economics, industry and culture. He built the new modern city of St. Petersburg, modernized the army and navy, and fought several successful wars to enlarge Russia. He even managed to find time to change the Russian calendar. The Byzantine church had followed their own calendar starting with the estimated beginning of the world in 5,508 BC (before the birth of Christ). Peter decreed that starting on January 1, 1700 (the year 7,209 in the

old system) Russia would join the rest of Europe and use the same calendar. However, his political rule did not change. While many European nations struggled with the emergence of democracy by limiting the power of monarchs, Peter remained an absolute Tsar. The Romanov Dynasty ruled Russia for over 300 years until 1917 and maintained the pattern of absolute power by the Tsar to the end.

The French Revolution of 1789 with the resulting execution of the French king and Queen sent shock waves throughout Europe. Unfortunately for the progress of democratic ideals, France descended into the terror of mob rule. European monarchs must have watched with some satisfaction as the mobs turned on one another until the people of France finally said enough of this madness and meekly accepted a new king, albeit with limited powers, to rule over them. Catherine the Great of Russia, noted the Jacobin terror of 1794 in France and said, “the world will never cease to need authority” and that it is “better to endure the tyranny of one man than the insanity of the multitude”. (p. 129) The one “man” she had in mind, of course, was herself as the current Tsarina of Russia.

By 1917 Russia was in big trouble. It was WWI and the army lacked food and basic supplies with many soldiers sent to the front without a rifle! The soldiers finally began to mutiny and factory workers went on strike. Bread riots broke out in the cities and soldiers sent to stop the riots often joined the protesters instead. The government (Duma) had no power to do anything without the consent of the Tsar. Nicholas was finally convinced to abdicate but it was too late. In the midst of this chaos, a small group of Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin simply seized power. The Russian Duma under Kerensky planned to hold a constitutional assembly in December to create a new constitution for the country. The Bolsheviks however knew they would never win a general election so they seized power and disbanded the Duma. The proposed election of delegates to create a new constitution was cancelled. Thus, was born the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) which would last until 1990.

For Russians, life in the USSR was not much different than the absolute rule of the Tsar. Lenin, as the leader of the Bolsheviks (communists) essentially became the new Tsar with absolute power. He controlled the communist party and the party controlled Russia. This was familiar to the people of Russia and therefore somewhat acceptable. At least someone was in

control and there was law and order in the country. For a while, it seemed that Lenin might actually move the country in a positive direction. He introduced some basic freedoms with his New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 that recognized the basic value of a limited market economy. Russia might have evolved into something like what we see today in Communist China: an authoritarian Communist state with a limited market economy. It is almost contradictory to see a totalitarian political system co-existing with a basic free-market economy but that is what China is doing. The Russians however were not so lucky because Lenin died unexpectedly and was replaced by Stalin.

Stalin was without doubt one of the most brutal leaders in history. He was responsible for tens millions of deaths. He ruled the state like Ivan the Terrible. No one was safe. Yet, for ordinary Russians, he was surprisingly popular! He used blatant propaganda to promote the cult of Stalin as a “little-father tsar” and one of his favorite sayings was, “Russians need a tsar”. (p. 225) He made sure that Russian history books portrayed the greatness of Stalin. These books were then used as required reading in schools. The press was totally controlled and information from the west illegal. And, if things went bad, he would simply blame his underlings and execute them by the thousands using staged trials to “prove” their guilt. Thus, for ordinary Russians who were indoctrinated by state media, Stalin was not that bad. Mercifully, Stalin finally died in 1953 and his brutal deeds gradually uncovered.

In 1991 the USSR ceased to exist. Russia was free at last of the communist dictatorships. But now what? In short, there was chaos. Imagine a Soviet car factory manager who gets all his orders from communist party officials. They tell him what to produce, and set a quota. All he has to do is receive the supplies and produce the cars. Now, suddenly there is no communist party official to tell him what to do. Does he still make cars? Where does he get the supplies and who sells the cars? The Soviet people had no experience with the workings of a free-market economy so they turned to the west for help. The entire economy was in the hands of the government and they needed money so they started selling everything from factories to power plants. And this led to the rise of the oligarchs.

Russian oligarchs were basically mobsters disguised as businessmen. The government sold their assets at bargain prices because they desperately needed the money to maintain

basic services. Russian investors bought huge oil companies, railways and factories for pennies on the dollar then used these assets to make massive fortunes. As they grew stronger, they began to control the government. In the midst of this chaos, Putin saw his chance to become the ultimate oligarch. He was a former KGB officer who moved up the ranks in government and became President Yeltsin's favorite bureaucrat and finally appointed Prime Minister. Using the power of the state police and legal system, he called in the oligarchs and forced them to accept his leadership or perish. Any oligarchs who resisted were mysteriously murdered or left the country.

Putin also used the government to take back control of the media. He used the radio, TV and newspapers to tell his story and brand any opposition as "enemies of the people". (p. 274) This was Stalin all over again. Khodorkovsky, for example, who had gained control of Yukos, Russia's oil giant and had the nerve to actually challenge Putin politically by supporting opposition parties, was charged with tax evasion and sentenced to nine years in a Siberian labor camp. Putin also changed the rules for elections to ensure that his party, United Russia, would be guaranteed a majority and changed the constitution so he could remain President for life if he so desired. Putin called his form of government "sovereign democracy" – that is, democracy Russian style. He dismissed criticism from the west as "meddling in Russia's internal affairs". (p. 275)

But most of all, Putin was determined to re-establish the power and glory of the old USSR. Russia had dominated a mighty empire of satellite republics and he wanted them back. None more so than Ukraine. To that end, he glorified the "great" leaders such as Ivan the Terrible and Stalin. His message to the Russian people (through his control of the media) was that strong leaders (like himself) were needed in order to make Russia great again. It was the weak leaders such as Gorbachev and Yeltsin who were to blame for the fall of the USSR. As a result of this persistent propaganda, opinion polls in Russia over the last 20 years have shown that over half the Russians now think of Stalin as a "great leader". (p. 281) Even knowing that Stalin had destroyed 10 to 30 million people, two thirds of the population still rated Stalin as a positive figure. (p. 282) This seems to indicate that even today, Russians are quite prepared "to accept the Bolshevik idea that mass violence can be justified." (p. 282) This is what happens

when the media is directed to tell a certain story over time. It also shows the critical importance of maintaining freedom of the press.

Given what we now know about Putin, it is interesting that he was very much welcomed by the west at first. Everyone knew that Russia needed strong leadership and they thought Putin would provide it. He was young, energetic and sounded like a progressive. US President Trump lavished praise on Putin and promised closer ties to Russia. It seemed that Russia had finally become a partner and friend of the west. In 2014 he made a big show of hosting the winter Olympics and made a good impression on the world. However, his nice image hid a darker reality ignored by the west. He had used his growing power in Russia to become an absolute dictator. Once the Winter Olympics ended, he invaded Crimea and claimed it for Russia. The western powers protested but did nothing. The next step was the invasion of Ukraine.

The reasons for the invasion of Ukraine are partly geopolitical. Russia has always had an uneasy relationship with Europe. Russians remember the long struggle against Poland and Lithuania followed by Napoleon's invasion in 1812 and finally, the brutal invasion by Germany in 1914 and 1939. These invasions were all from the west. Moscow was occupied twice: once by Poland and once by France. And, in 1939, German troops were within sight of Moscow. Russia had historical reasons to fear the west. In order to protect herself from the west, Russia developed a system of buffer states. Eastern Europe was the middle ground between Russia and Europe. Many nations such as Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania are all on the border between Russia and Europe. If Russia could control these smaller "buffer" states, they would provide protection from the west.

In 1917 Russia created the USSR which in time incorporated most of these border states (except Poland) as Soviet satellites. Of these, the Ukraine Soviet state was the most important. Then, the USSR collapsed and all these border states were set free. Putin's goal was to take back these states under Russian control. In 2005 he called the collapse of the USSR as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century". (p. 286) However, by the time he was able to assert his power and control over Russia, it was mostly too late. After seventy years of brutal rule, these states saw a chance to escape Russian control by joining with the west. To ensure

protection from Russia they decided to seek membership in North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). In 1999, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO. Five years later, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were granted membership. So, while Putin fought for control within Russia, almost all the traditional Russian buffer states had joined NATO.

NATO was formed by the United States after WWII as a defensive alliance to counter the threat of Soviet expansion further west into Europe. The Soviets countered by forming the Warsaw Pact military alliance and this led to a long Cold War between Soviet Communism and the west. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 that also ended the threat of the Warsaw Pact. For many in the west this suggested that there was no longer a need for NATO. However, NATO did not disband and in fact soon began to add new members from the former Soviet states. Even though NATO considers itself a defensive alliance, Putin saw it differently. In 2022 he declared that if Ukraine joined NATO, that would be a “direct military threat” to Russia. (p. 293)

The incorporation of the former Soviet satellite states into NATO renewed Russia’s old fears about the west. This was clearly seen by them as a threat to Russia’s security and Putin was determined to reverse this trend. He called the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet satellite states as “a serious provocation”. (p. 285) In 2008, Russia sent in troops to force Georgia to drop its bid to join NATO. In Ukraine, he made sure that the temptation to join NATO would be rejected. He used blatant political interference to ensure that Ukrainian leaders stayed loyal to Russia. This worked for a while until the Ukrainian people went to the streets in mass demonstrations in 2013-2014 demanding control of their own affairs. Then they elected Vladimir Zelenskyy to assert Ukrainian sovereignty and reject Russian interference. With the diplomatic door closing, Putin sent in the army.

What Now? According to Figes, this war will not end well for either side. He calls it “an unnecessary war, born from myths and Putin’s twisted reading of his country’s history”. (p. 301) The invasion has failed and the longer the Ukrainians continue to fight, the harder it will be for Putin to convince the Russian people to support the fight. Deposing Putin might change things but the most likely outcome of that scenario would be another dictator who may or may not continue the war. Given the superior Russian military resources, it is likely there will be some



kind of Russian victory. But, what kind? For Russia, a withdrawal means humiliation. For Ukraine, there is only victory or defeat.

For Ukraine, their best hope might be for a stalemate with some kind of peace treaty brokered by third parties such as the UN. However, this probably means a long and bitter war. The lessons of American war in Vietnam show that a small nation can win in the long run with small victories and the determination to continue the fight. A victory for Ukraine now means complete independence and joining NATO for protection from Russia. Before the war, some 55% of the Ukrainian population favored joining NATO. After the invasion, that figure jumped to 72%. (p. 300) By invading the country, Putin has rolled the dice. Either he wins or he has pushed Ukraine firmly into the hands of the west.

\*NOTE: All page references are from the book by Orlando Figes: *The Story of Russia*.

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Orlando Figes is a Professor of History at Birbeck, University of London.

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Contact information: bvzel24@gmail.com