

Discerning Vladimir Putin

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WE HAVE LEFT BEHIND the Russian dolls, one inside the other as if occlusion were their very point. “A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” Churchill’s famous mot (invariably quoted out of context) is no longer for us. We have come to know better. We know Russia and Russians and, especially, we know their president. We read Vladimir Putin with the confidence of a clinical psychiatrist. We know just who he is and what he is up to and what he leaves unsaid and what his secret intentions are.

Good enough, one might say, that we Americans have taken one name off our list of inscrutables. But, purporting to clear sight, what is it we see when we look across at Russia and its people and the man who has led them these past eighteen years? What do we talk about when we talk about Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin? These are our questions. Our replies must shock anyone who considers them. Orientalism—among much else, the denial of all complexity in others—fades but slowly. At this point the dolls were a marginally better idea.

If there is a more pervasive case of blindness as America assesses another nation and its leader, it has not occurred in my lifetime (which takes us back to the midpoint of the last century). Not since Stalin, in the post-“Uncle Joe” period, has a Soviet or Russian figure been so thoroughly cast as Beelzebub. In some cases this amounts to willful distortion; our policy cliques, most of our media, and our “thought leaders” (not to be confused with our surviving intellectuals) all practice it. For the rest it is a matter of acquiescence—often out of political expedience—that of late has become difficult to forgive. And, again, a willful acquiescence, I would say. One cannot otherwise explain the near-complete absence of what the Jesuits call discernment, the critical thinking of autonomous minds.

Favoring Putin or detesting him is not at issue, to run straight at a point I should not have to make. Why we think it wise to confuse

ourselves with conjured imagery is a good question. But most immediately at issue are the consequences of these misrepresentations. They are grave for all of us, no matter one's political stripe. A few years ago some of us wondered whether we stood at the edge of Cold War II. This is no longer in question: minus the ideological dimension it has commenced. As I write, it is a month since the Pentagon released its Nuclear Posture Review, advocating low-yield nuclear weapons—those more thinkable than the previously un-. It is a week since Putin, in his state of the nation speech, disclosed Russia's work on its own new generation of missiles and warheads. The sequence of these events—American action, Russian reaction—is a topic with a seventy-year history, and I will return to it. For now, this: but for Putin's recent decision to decline a new nuclear arms race, which he made clear shortly after his speech to the nation, we would be at the forward edge of one. Absent our cultivated animosities toward a leader we cannot see clearly, to say nothing of understand other than cartoonishly, this would not be our location.

Vladimir Putin is the new czar, driven by nostalgia for the old empire. He wants to recreate the Soviet Union, taking back all the republics. (And never mind that these cancel one another.) He is an ultranationalist bent on restoring Russia's superpower status. Putin is an aggressor across the world, he is a tyrant, he is a murderer of journalists, he is a fascist, he is Hitler. All of these descriptions of Russia's president have been asserted, every one leveled and taken with perfect seriousness. Masha Gessen, the émigré writer, declared last year that Putin presides over a new totalitarianism and won a National Book Award for it.

Putin is many things, not all of them worthy of approval. He is a modernizer, an internationalist, and a gifted statesman by any serious measure. But his domestic record is very mixed. If Putin has campaigned against the worst post-Soviet corruption, there remains too much of it, even if his intent is to turn patronage to national purpose in the context of his "state-centered capitalism." He exercises too heavy a hand in domestic politics, mixing coercion with co-optation. He has

regenerated a Russian middle class but does not seem to know how to field its aspirations. There is a considerable list of such shortcomings.

But the point remains: commonly accepted demonizations of Putin do not withstand scrutiny. I have already suggested why people advance and accept so many neat, facile characterizations of who Putin is. Animosity toward Russia and its leaders dates to the mid-nineteenth century, when prominent European figures—de Tocqueville, Michelet, and Sainte-Beuve among them—first cast czarist Russia as the Other of the West. The West as a modern political construct, indeed, took shape in consequence of Russia's early signs of emergence: it was defensive from the first, then, formed in reaction. But what gives this latest iteration of antipathy efficacy, personified as it is, if it is so at variance with reality? Name-calling, a depressing mark of our discourse's degeneracy, often succeeds in precluding argument. But there is something else we must consider more seriously.

It comes to a simple word: none of our prevailing versions of Putin has any *context*. There is no trace of Russian history, political culture, moral tradition, national priorities, or national identity in any of them. In conversation I call this POLO, the power of leaving out, for it is perniciously effective. Leaving out context is an old trick among the propagandists—and of our press, we must at last recognize. It now turns our discourse into irrational nonsense. Putin is this or that, or he is not this and not that: one may as well take a New Hampshire farmer to task because he does not grow rice.



One can refer to the years following the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Yeltsin era, and achieve a rudimentary understanding of Putin and how he governs. Most of us are unable to reflect back even this far, so corrupted is our orthodox narrative, a point to which I will return. It is better nonetheless to begin one's journey into Russia's present a century and more earlier. There we find the later Romanovs facing the prospect of the modernization of a state and society wherein most of what was "modern," if not all of it, would be imported from the

West. This was a common predicament during the second half of the nineteenth century. Meiji Japan had to contend with the same social, political, and, indeed, psychological disorders at roughly the same time. Only slightly later, so did the last of the Qing emperors. Japan and China are known, in more or less acceptable shorthand, as “late developers.” There is no understanding either without a grasp of the complexities lying within this phrase. Russia was also a late developer.

What does it mean to be modern? This question was posed among all the late developers. Was to modernize to Westernize? All that one once was suddenly had to go? The question was quickly turned upside down to still-thornier effect: what does it mean to be Japanese or Chinese or Russian? Was there some ineffable Japaneseness or Chineseness or Russianness, some ballast held within, that must not be lost on the way to becoming a modern nation, made of modern institutions and modern people?

These questions prompted what can fairly be called irruptions, searches for believable accounts of identity with a touch of the frantic about them. *Wakon yosai*, the Meiji ideologues proclaimed: Japanese spirit, Western things (or technology). There is *ti* and there is *yong*, Chinese “self-strengtheners” took to saying; on the one hand essence and on the other function, application, method. There is nothing remarkable in the similarity with which this matter was engaged. It was the irreducible line of inquiry. If there is anything about this worth noting, it is that neither the Japanese nor the Chinese—exactly a hundred and fifty years later in Japan’s case—have completed their replies. They are still working on them.

The Russians proved the same and very different all at once. They had much greater exposure to the philosophic and political currents coursing through Europe and made full use of this access. Alexander Herzen—journalist, writer, early socialist—spent many of his most formative years in France and Italy and was but one of numerous influential thinkers to do so. Russian *intelligents* (aspiring philosophes, roughly) were perfectly dexterous as they weighed Proudhon’s subjective idealism against the German metaphysicians and their impersonal laws of history. (Until the Bolsheviks prevailed, the French suited

them better.) But the Western tradition was not their tradition, any more than railroads and telegraphs were Russian inventions. Everyone understood this, whatever they chose to do with the fact. There were extreme slavophiles, xenophobes, and sentimentalists at one end of the continuum and extreme Westernizers at the other. But there was a recurrent thought at one or another point between these two: Russians had to cut their own path into the modern. It was to be theirs alone, *sui generis*. They would have to think it through and make it.

James Billington, the noted Russianist and later librarian of Congress, draws a useful distinction in *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism*, his acute study of a prominent political intellectual of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Nikolai Mikhailovsky distinguished between *level* and *type* when he put Russia against the West. The Europeans had achieved a higher level of development by way of technological advances, labor productivity, and other such measures. There is no need of elaboration on this point. But Russia was a higher type of society precisely because it came late to capitalist development, Mikhailovsky considered. It still had attributes the Europeans had surrendered.

What did so audacious an assertion mean? In what way was pre-modern, radically underdeveloped Russia superior as a society to the France of the Eiffel Tower, daguerreotypes, the Right Bank's opulent arcades? Or the England of cotton mills and steam?

The simplest way at this question is to consider the word *pravda*. We customarily translate it as "truth" and leave it at that, but this is not adequate, as any first-year language student can tell you. *Pravda* fuses verity—the facts of the matter—with what is just, rightness. It is naturally difficult to take this in, for there is no equivalent thought or term in English. The best we do is "moral truth," which gets us only part way there. "Every time that word *pravda* comes into my head," Mikhailovsky wrote in the late 1870s, "I cannot help but be enraptured with its wonderful inner beauty."

Enraptured? Inner beauty? These evocations suggest a world within a word—romantic to a fault, maybe. What is the nature of this world? At its center was the *obshchina*, the village commune. It was in

the obshchina—poor to destitution, centuries unchanged—that one found the moral truth of Russia. In its simplicity and conservatism, the commune was Russia's reply to the materialism smothering all the old, noted ideals of Western Europe. It embodied an idea of life that transcended the new, merely scientific idea. It was pre-Cartesian. In its customs and its naturally occurring notion of justice it was a fortress against law (in its modern elevation to supremacy) and the czarist metropole. "Heaven is high, and the emperor is far away," Chinese peasants used to say. The obshchina embodied a roughly similar thought. The state and its laws were of another universe to the commune dwellers (and the urban elites who read meanings into them). The commune had a kind of not-on-paper sovereignty, it is not too much to say. By the time Mikhailovsky wrote of "inner beauty," the obshchina was thought of as the clue to a new Russia, a still-Russian, modern-but-not-altogether-modern Russia. Russians were not to climb into Max Weber's "iron cage," to put the point another way. (And the *intelligents* would have read their Weber.) This made Russia a superior type of society.

I offer this as a summary of the wave of populism that crested in Russia in the mid-1870s. It produced novels and landscapes, some of the latter still worthy of museum walls. At its romantic extreme it amounted to Russians Orientalizing Russians. This populist nationalism was not the only current running through Russian intellectual life, and it was not to survive the Marxification of political debate from the 1880s onward. Lenin, always good for cutting appraisals of others, later called the (wellborn) Mikhailovsky "a society fop" given to spouting "insipid trash."

There is something to consider in the (wellborn) Lenin's remark. He had an argument, but his scorn of the populists betrayed their influence on the Bolsheviks, as Eric Hobsbawm and a few other historians have noted. It was another case of difference mattering most when differences are narrowest. Let us not miss the worthwhile point. No one since the last Romanovs has been able to ignore rural Russia. "To lead I had to follow" is the thought of a nineteenth-century French radical. Its place in Russian political culture is to me unmistakable.

There is plenty to suggest Vladimir Putin is well acquainted with the notion. This modernizer is consistently attentive to the unmodern, and the unmodern in Russia is vast.



Some years ago I took a walk in central Moscow with a new acquaintance. It was my first time in the Russian capital, and I remarked on its dignity, the best of its architecture, the pride people took in their dress. I had not expected to see such things. We were along the Lubyansky Proyezd, not far from the Mayakovsky Museum and the old KGB headquarters. The Bolshoi and Red Square were a little farther on.

My companion asked, “Do you know what you would have seen here when the century turned to 2000?”

I did not and said so.

“Empty bottles, syringes, petty thieves, homeless people. Empty lives everywhere.”

This is a mere snapshot of what Boris Yeltsin handed Vladimir Putin when Yeltsin was effectively chased from office on New Year’s Eve in 1999. Putin won his first presidential election three months later. In the simplest terms, his inheritance was a nation at the edge of collapse for the second time in a decade—the third in less than a century.

The facts of the case are well established: unemployment and poverty rates, while hard to measure, were respectively up to 50 percent and 75 percent. The large middle class of the Soviet era—yes, there was one—was destroyed. There was a “mortality crisis,” as one American scholar put it. Malnutrition, alcohol, drugs, disease, homicide, suicide: these had claimed several million lives, by accepted estimates. Life expectancy dropped by nearly ten years, to less than sixty. Corruption and kleptomania, like the bottles and syringes, were everywhere. The formidable national assets accumulated during the seventy-year Soviet period were—no other word—looted by a combination of local oligarchs and foreign investors.

It is only mildly surprising that most Americans remain dimly aware, if at all, of the Yeltsin years’ tragedies. The wall of nonsense

erected to obscure them was high, thick, swiftly in place, and remains so. Michael McFaul, the most brazenly dishonest American ambassador to serve in Moscow during my lifetime, said late in the Yeltsin era, “Basic arrows on all the big issues are pointing in the right direction.” By then Bill Clinton, as president, had already declared, “Yeltsin represents the direction toward the kind of Russia we want.” The Western press was unreservedly complicit in this immense deception. “We edited out the pain,” one correspondent later acknowledged.

With no grasp of this history, we cannot hope to understand the forty-eight-year-old who took office in 2000. And we ought not pretend to. Putin’s immediate imperatives were plain. Highest among them was stabilizing national institutions to counter another threat of collapse. He had to redirect national wealth back to an impoverished citizenry. Reining in the oligarchs, putting millions back to work, reconstituting some form of political process, safeguarding nuclear stockpiles: all this and more was on Putin’s plate.

But his inheritance extended further back than a single decade of post-Soviet misconduct. Yeltsin’s greatest error, apart from his incessant inebriation, was his craven eagerness for acceptance among Western neoliberals. In this essay’s terms, he acquiesced when Bill Clinton, along with legions of economists and investors, told him that to modernize was to Westernize. This left Putin with questions and problems that dated to the later czars. This is so for a simple reason: the Western-centric thesis is fatally wrong. It is crudely ridiculous or ridiculously crude, and I am back and forth as to which.

To see Putin’s predicament properly, it is well to imagine ourselves looking out two windows giving onto present-day Russia. One will be in the Ararat Park Hyatt, not far from where I walked and had my history lesson. The other will be out of any train on a half-day’s journey from Moscow or St. Petersburg.

My point may already be evident. From the former window one will see shops the match of any along the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. There will be bars and restaurants of many varieties. There will be stylish people and people carrying briefcases. These people will be exposed and (in one or another measure) disposed to the ways

of the West. Some will be impatient with Putin's program and altogether with Russia's pace into the twenty-first century.

From the train one will see less picturesque versions of the old, wonderful landscapes hanging in the Tretyakov, Moscow's Louvre. Out this window will be a country that remains in many ways pre-modern. One will imagine the villages to be slightly updated versions of the *obshchina*. In the villages there will be churches—Orthodox, of course. There will be people among whom poverty is not uncommon. But they will be people who, in my limited exposure, seem remarkably *à l'aise dans leurs peaux*, as the French say—at ease in their skins. They want life to improve more than any other Russians, the surveys say. But they want little to do with Western neoliberalism, for they have had a taste of it and it is not, in any case, their idea. They are conservative to their marrow. They value order—the order of custom more than law—above democracy, for they have known disorder too well and do not see that democracy, in its Western manifestations, at any rate, does much to alleviate it.

In all of this I mean to suggest something of the context so assiduously omitted from most Western accounts of Russia and its president. It is not properly described as a Western nation, but neither is it Asian. It has features of both and so is a third thing, unto itself. State and society intersect differently. A divide between city and village, now a century and a half old, persists. Russia has no democratic tradition in the Western sense, and most of its people (not all) are wise enough to understand democracy is desirable but does not travel well as an import item.



There must be people who praise Putin without qualification, but I have not heard of them. This is right: he does not deserve that kind of approbation (as no national leader does, indeed). If he is defined by his record, the record is defined by his multiple obligations, and these are ever conflicting with one another. This requires constant acts of balance. In my view this is a sound basis on which to understand who Putin is and what he does.

Shortly before he was elected for a fourth and final term in March, Putin was asked what he would do were he to lose. “I’ll start working as a combine driver,” he replied. It was a tossed-off remark in a farm-equipment factory, but it was an odd one just as surely and deserves a moment’s thought. We can use it as a mirror, reflecting back to us what a political figure standing for office thought it opportune to say. Putin the modernizer is well aware of what the West’s technological advances can do for Russia, but he wanted to tell the majority that elected him that he is also mindful of how Russians live and the pace they can manage into the twenty-first century—which is to say, into the modern.

Another example in this line will be useful for its prominence in the prevailing Western narrative. Five years ago this June, Putin signed what is commonly known as “the anti-gay-propaganda law.” Its official intent is “for the purpose of protecting children from information advocating a denial of traditional family values.” There would seem no way to consider this legislation positively. I cannot think of one. But this excuses none of us from viewing it in context.

What, exactly, was Putin attempting? He did not outlaw homosexuality. The Kremlin, I am reliably told by a friend who has walked its halls, has many gays in its bureaucracy. Putin and the Duma banned public manifestations. Why did Putin approve of this distinction? What does it suggest? In my read, he is not much concerned with people’s private lives and gender preferences for the simple reason that he has vastly more consequential matters on his mind. Among these are two: to prevent the metropole from getting too far out in front of the village, and to protect his modernization project—which is to the benefit of gays, not least—from the rigid moral conservatism that is still a powerful current in Russian society.

Context: we still leave it out when we cite Churchill’s remark in his 1939 broadcast on BBC radio. He merely meant that one had to look at Russia’s national interests to understand what it would do in the war then just begun—as he made clear in his very next sentence. But his meaning is lost. And it is the same with Putin. Reducing him to a stock character—homophobe, in the case just cited, but there are all

the other renderings—leads to no productive place. A powerful man with self-evident appeal among Russians is not a tyrant or dictator if he needs to build a broad consensus to get anything done—as Putin does. He cannot be termed intolerant of criticism if debates of his program are far livelier and more diverse in the Russian press than in the Anglo-American—as emphatically they are. Ridding Russia of its parasitic oligarchs has required politically connected business allies who can look awfully like mere replacements. But if they did not serve the reconstruction project that is Putin’s Russian Federation, safe to say, they would not be so situated in it. There is little question that Putin has stemmed the tide of boundless plundering and capital flight. Incessant sanctions against Russian institutions and executives, along with sovereign eurobond issues and other official enticements, now combine, indeed, to reverse it: there is mounting evidence in the financial markets now to indicate that Russian capital is beginning to repatriate.

Apart from stabilizing a nation that had veered toward nonexistence—or maybe as a function of this imperative—another of Putin’s pressing pursuits is for a reconstructed idea of national unity. This requires “a consensual history,” as Stephen Cohen, the noted (and unduly vilified) Russianist put it in a recent lecture. It must comprise the czars, the Soviets, and the post-Soviet decades, such that it can be understood in grade-school classrooms, in villages, and in St. Petersburg and Moscow living rooms. It is notable that no new orthodoxy replaces the old as this project proceeds. Critique is more or less explicitly encouraged—as when, for instance, Putin approved a museum dedicated to the Stalin-era gulags three years ago. This goes to a key point: there is authority deriving from power and there is the moral authority found in Russian tradition. Putin can be termed authoritarian (as against dictatorial), insofar as the majority of Russians consider that he acts broadly within Russian tradition. Law as we understand it has little to do with this.

“Managed democracy” is the political frame within which Putin advances his national program. It allows for opposition to the governing United Russia (note the party’s name), but there are fence posts,

and the perimeter is not generously drawn. One finds this in many non-Western and developing nations—in Singapore, in Iran. (One finds it in the United States, too, but that is another conversation.) Having lived in a few such countries, I do not find the arrangement appealing. It reminds me of the rules of sumo: often, the object is simply to force opponents out of the circle. At the horizon, managed democracy is an oxymoron, in my view. The democratizing project is to push the boundaries outward, but it is the rare case—South Korea is one—where this is accomplished other than too slowly, if at all.

But again, context.

Some years ago Partha Chatterjee, the noted Bengali scholar, gave us the term “governmental technologies.” His topic was *Popular Politics in Most of the World*, as the subtitle of an essay collection put it. There we find that legitimacy tends to derive less from participatory political processes than from the provision of security, services, sound infrastructure, and altogether the prospect of well-being within the polity. I confess to disliking this thought as much as any Westerner—or, indeed, non-Westerner—might. I rather hope humanity’s future does not lie with it. But it is the cold soul who cannot understand it. “Most of the world” does not have the privilege of taking for granted all that (most or some) Westerners do, and here we cannot leave out the stability that preoccupies Putin.

Now we come to Russia’s position in the foreign sphere, for there can be little question now—providing one refers to an accurate record—that external forces act repeatedly to threaten the stability that is Putin’s *sine qua non*.

He began his presidency as an avid pro-Westerner, though more intelligently than the abject Yeltsin. There remains much of neoliberalism in his economics. He still refers to Americans and Europeans as “our partners,” sometimes on the same day they call Russia “our enemy.” But Putin has lost his illusions, as he has remarked several times over the years. He announced this forthrightly at the Munich security conference, an annual affair, in 2007, when he spoke bluntly against American unipolarity—blaming it, indeed, for a creeping state of global disorder that must be evident now to anyone who looks

out the window. That speech was the birthday of the new iteration of Western animosity toward Russia, in my view. Putin's perspective has evolved gradually since Munich, always in the same direction. Georgia in 2008, when Washington tacitly (or otherwise) encouraged Georgians to begin hostilities with Russia; Libya three years later, when NATO ignored a US pledge to limit bombing to humanitarian purposes; Ukraine in 2014, when the United States actively cultivated the 21 February coup: these are among the mile markers, each either a provocation or a betrayal.

"Aggressor" is among the previously listed epithets commonly invoked to characterize Putin. My favorite in this line came when NATO began expanding its presence in Poland and the Baltics after the US-cultivated coup in Kiev four years ago. That autumn the State and Defense Departments complained that Russia had drawn too close to the West—"on NATO's doorstep," as Chuck Hagel, defense secretary at the time, put it. The assertion is ridiculous by grade-school standards: hardly can Russia move itself eastward to accommodate NATO's eastward advance, and at this time it was positioning weapons within its own borders to counter "NATO's doorstep." Hagel's formulation is extreme but perfectly illustrative of the Western habit of reversing cause and effect, American action and Russian reaction. This dates at least to the late 1940s, if not earlier.

When Putin decided to reclaim sovereignty in Crimea, it was the morning after the coup in Kiev—an event that instantly jeopardized the Russian navy's Black Sea base and its only warm-water port. Russians applauded the move (as did Crimeans via a referendum that is not seriously questioned even by those most skeptical of its propriety). But before and since, Putin's most persistent foreign policy critics at home complain he is too slow in protecting Russia's interests against the West's repeated challenges to them. These internal complaints are part of the domestic politics Putin must manage—nationalists vs. Westernizers and accommodationists. One need neither agree nor disagree with those critical of Putin to see their point.



Putin's state of the nation speech a few weeks before the March 2018 election was a revealing presentation in ways most of us missed. While our press focused on Putin's description of new-generation weaponry—another case of Russian reaction following American action—the guts of it concerned where he thought Russia was in its own story and where he wants to take it during his final six-year term. It is nothing if not ambitious—and inclusive. The villages and provincial cities are to share the effort and projected benefits as much as the large urban centers. Putin proposes to increase per capita GDP by 50 percent. This implies a very high annual growth rate in years to come: 4 percent to 6 percent. It would put Russia “among the five largest global economies,” as Putin reckons it. Measured by purchasing power parity, Russia would be ahead of Germany and on the way to challenging Japan. “This is a very difficult task,” he acknowledged. “I am confident we can accomplish it.”

The difficulty is beyond question. But having witnessed other such moments at close range, I am wary of judging it impossible. In my read, Putin puts Russia at the brink of its “take-off” phase—where Japan was in 1960, when it announced its “Income Doubling Plan” (which succeeded several years ahead of schedule), and where Xi Jinping placed China in his noted speech to the Nineteenth Party Congress last year. “We are ready for a genuine breakthrough,” Putin asserted. He is a technocrat, do not forget. He loves numbers—his speech was filled with them. How much of what he forecasts will be achieved, it is no one's now to say. We will have to see, but this could prove out, wholly, or in considerable part.

I conclude by noting something Antony Blinken published in response to Putin's speech, as I found it nearly as striking as anything the Russian leader had to say. It appeared on the *New York Times* opinion page. “Mr. Putin is a masterful painter of façades,” this high functionary during the Obama administration wrote. “But his Russian village looks increasingly less Putin and more Potemkin.”

I wondered for some days where Blinken drew his confidence. Raw statistics—historical, leaving aside prospective—contradict it. Then I considered the matter differently: there is no confidence to

find in Blinken's assertions. The more I thought about them the more stunningly hollow they seemed. I find anxiety rather than certainty in his argument, fear even, and in this it is pithily expressive of the current national orthodoxy. I detect an inability (or refusal) to see, along with a concomitant need to believe, rather than think. And if Vladimir Putin's Russia obliges us in one way above any other, it is to look intently, and then to consider carefully, all it is we see. It is to discern.