

The Russian Bear Still Has Teeth Laina Farhat-Holzman
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Many of us miss the Cold War, not because it was without violence (there was, but nothing like that of the two World Wars), but because the antagonist was so interesting. As Churchill once said, \342\200\234Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.\342\200\235 But perhaps it is not as mysterious as we thought then. We only need look at its geography and history to see inevitable continuity---an eternal Russia.

Another reason for preferring the Cold War\342\200\231s Russia to today\342\200\231s Islamo-fascists is that the Soviets and Russians en mass have actually produced intellectual products: fine arts, music, great literature, and ballet. The most notable terrorist-hero today is a bomb designer, two of whose products, the shoe bomb and the underwear bomb, failed to work. His sole and questionable talent is to destroy and kill; the Russians, even at their worst, are better than that.

\342\200\242 Geography. This enormous country, 9 time zones, has always been wide open to invasions from their neighbors, being largely vast open plains. Their worst invaders were the Mongols, then the Swedes (yes indeed), the French under Napoleon, and the Nazis. This has left them very paranoid about their neighborhood, requiring as many buffer zones, willing or unwilling, as they can intimidate. The ongoing chaos in the Ukraine is part of this issue. The Russians do not want one of their important buffers to turn to Europe rather than to Russia. They will do whatever it takes to assure this.

\342\200\242 History. What later became Russia was made up of barbarian tribes that harassed Byzantium, the Eastern Roman Empire, ending in the 10th century, with the conversion of the Russian princes and their people to Eastern Christianity. Christianity had already split between the Catholic Church headquartered in Rome and the Orthodox church under the Byzantine Emperor\342\200\231s control. This fateful division led to two very different social orders: the west with separation of church and state and the east with a model of autocracy which has never left them.

In 1237-40, the Mongols invaded, destroying almost all of its burgeoning cities, the memory of which still haunts Russians. In 1552, Iran the Terrible conquered the Mongol khanates and established Russian rule over lower and middle Volga. Following that, the Cossacks, a fierce tribe, began conquering Siberia, a movement completed by the end of the 19th century with Russia taking Siberia and Central Asia to the Pacific.

The Romanov Dynasty of kings began with an election in 1613 by the national council, and it lasted until its fall to a revolution in 1917. The Romanovs ruled over a growing Russian Empire, ultimately replaced by the Soviets. It was just the same empire with new rulers.

What we see today under the leadership of Vladimir Putin is an attempt to restore Russian influence, not necessarily by conquest, over what has for so long been the Russian Empire.

A given in the Russian consciousness is that the devil you know is better than the devil you don\342\200\231t. Most Russians, excluding today\342\200\231s educated elites, remember what happens when the central government is weak: anarchy. This same fear haunts the Chinese and the Iranians, both of whom have experienced chaos and invasions when their rulers were weak.

\342\200\242 Contradictions. In just one day during the recent Olympics in Russia, the extremes of Russian culture could be seen. On the ugly side were Cossacks who have a history of pogroms and horrors, using their whips on some young women (the Pussy Riot group), singing and performing in the street. The whip (or knout) has long been a favorite tool of Russian bullies. But meanwhile, in the Ice Palace, Russian skaters were dazzling us all, skating to the great 19th century music written for that other Russian treasure, the ballet.

\342\200\242 The Military. The great Russian military is today stressed by three problems: a disastrous low birthrate, abuse of the recruits, and corruption. Drink, drugs, and despair are still the monsters dogging Russia\342\200\231s attempts to restore the glory of the Russian Empire.

672 words

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