

If the thugs in ISIS were not so busy decapitating people, we might have been paying more attention to a longer-term hostile force, Russia. Russia has been an important target of Western attention since the 19th century, when this once backward, frozen backwater came to life and proceeded to conquer and colonize all the countries across Central Asia (the old Silk Route), ending on China's border on the Pacific Ocean. They controlled 11 time zones and warranted watching.

Russia was an empire from the 18th century onward, a process only temporarily arrested by the Russian Revolution. After the communists briefly recognized the independence of their former colonies, they took them all back again under a new imperial rule, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). After a long Cold War with the west, that empire collapsed and Russia was, briefly, once more a single country, the imperial holdings given (or taking) independence.

Today, Russia is governed by an adept politician with a single-minded program of restoring the glory of the lost empire. Vladimir Putin is a modern, educated, one-time Soviet Intelligence operative and, unusual among Russians, a teetotaler. His brain does not get muddled with vodka, unlike many of his predecessors. He is fueled by a barely concealed rage at how the Soviet Union collapsed and how the United States emerged as the single hegemon in the world.

Liberal Democracy is not his thing; Russia's long past with autocratic governance is more natural to him---and, unfortunately, to the majority of Russian voters. Russia's brutal history has taught the lesson that "better the devil you know than the anarchy you get without him."

For the Russian analyst, there are a few givens that must be considered:

- o Russia can only project power in land war, concentrating on obtaining buffer zones in their periphery. This explains why the Ukraine is so important to them.

- o Their naval power has always been flawed. Most of their territorial waters are icebound much of the year, with outlets so narrow they are easy to watch. The US could see every submarine or vessel leaving these frozen ports.

- o The Black Sea offers the only warm water ports available to the Russian fleet, which explains the seizure of the Crimea. However, it is also well known that the ships are in poor shape, as are the submarines (horrific accidents killing all on board in the recent past). Russia cannot be a great naval power, as are Britain and the US. Even Japan trounced the Russians in 1906 at Port Arthur, a national humiliation.

- o Russian military training is brutal and their mandatory military service is as always corrupted by those with money to avoid it. Leo Tolstoy, the great 19th century writer and once military officer, wrote that the Russian officer corps could barely communicate with their ignorant recruits and they took their orders from a narrow upper crust of aristocratic senior officers.

During World War I, although the recruits themselves were often brave, loyal, and obedient, when faced with the literate and modern armies, the Russian infantrymen were at an increasing disadvantage. "The trinity of Tsar, Church, country still had power to evoke unthinking courage; but defeat and drink, could rapidly rot devotion to the regiment's colours and icons." (John Keegan, *The First World War*, p. 141.) Although today's soldiers are literate, they did not do well in the Afghan war for much the same reasons as they faced during World War I, bad leadership.

- o Russia's old foe, Turkey, still controls the outlets of the Black Sea, which hampers egress of the Russian fleet and the Turkish fleet is far more modern and dwarfs the size of the Russian fleet.

- o Russia's population has declined by half since 1950, whereas the Muslim populations of its neighbors is burgeoning. This is a great threat to its future. Its main source

of income, energy, is not enough to make a modern state thrive over the long haul. In addition, they make nothing that anyone wants. Putin's belligerence smacks of desperation.

675 words

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