

The Cold War is back, but it is a different Cold War because it is a different Russia. It is important to know who the Russians are and what has shaped their worldview, including their sometimes justified suspicion and hostility toward the US.

Some features of Russian government go back to their beginnings as a country in the 10th century. Their geography places them very far north, which means that food, particularly grain harvests, are uncertain. The country has experienced more famine than feast. This is one reason for aggressively moving in on neighbors with better geography and better harvests (Ukraine and Belarus).

Their geography also places them amid several thousand miles of flat, open plains, leaving them vulnerable to attack from enemies. The only protection from this danger is to occupy neighbors and hold them as buffers against more distant invaders. This is how the Russian Empire grew, ultimately absorbing lands in 11 time zones.

Because of this geography and always imminent danger, they need stability in their governance, even when that stability is provided by a monster. Even under Ivan the Terrible or Stalin, better the devil they knew than the devil they didn't know. This explains their preference for dictators such as Assad or Ghadaffi than anarchy without them.

Unlike the way in which western Europe developed, with a basis in Roman and Church law, with charters of semi-independence given to cities and universities, with powerful guilds such as the merchants, Russia had none of these.

Because of Western Europe's geography, once Rome fell, no one country could conquer the rest. There were always multiple power centers that came and went among these countries. They warred among themselves, but one winner never prevailed.

Russia was converted in the 10th century from paganism to Byzantine Christianity (Russian Orthodox), and from the start, this religion and the Russian rulers (Tsars) functioned in unity. There was no Protestant Reformation in Russia. In the Kremlin museum, I recall seeing, side by side, the hundreds of jeweled dresses of Catherine the Great and the jeweled robes and treasures of the Orthodox Church, a troubling show of extravagance in a country where peasants froze and starved. During the Communist period, this reality was condemned and the first effort was made to create a more equal citizenry. At least, this was the theory that made Communism so appealing to idealists who never caught on until the USSR collapsed, that this was a cruel hoax.

What is perennial in today's Russia is an autocratic ruler (Vladimir Putin); seizure or domination of neighboring countries as buffers (Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus); a vicious security system that does not hesitate to use assassination; rabid propaganda system (fake news is not new; remember the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion"); and distaste for western democracy. Like the late Russian Empire, the USSR, and Putin today, there is paranoia about the press, about spies, and distrust of "intellectuals."

Russia actually had a brief taste of democracy upon the fall of the USSR, but it morphed into anarchy and criminal chaos. They want no more of that. There is little difference in the way Putin rules from the rule of the Communists before him and the Tsars before them. Although monarchy has not returned, the Orthodox Church, banned during the Marxist period, has returned and is promoted.

But Putin's Russia is not a revival of the USSR. For one thing, its population has shrunk in half since the beginning of World War II and shows no signs of reviving. The fertility rate is as low as that of Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, and Greece---all of them having experienced fascism or communism in the near past.

And Putin's Russia has only a poisonous nationalism going for it, not as persuasive an ideology as Marxist-Leninist Communism. Ideologies are ideas with teeth: ideas that people can live for, or willingly die for. Today's Russia does not have that, other than greed, corruption, and efforts to destabilize their enemies. Their tenure as a major power may well melt down before this century is out.

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