

Putin\222s Game
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History reflects trends and broad sweeps, but also the mark of powerful individuals. The US during the 1930s was divided among the very rich and the jobless or struggling poor; immigrant families trying to become American and demagogues who trashed them; Whites of all levels and Blacks who suffered wherever they were, particularly in the South where lynching was shamefully frequent; and Globalists and America-Firsters. Without the New Deal and the particular president we had then (Roosevelt), we might well have fallen into a Communist or Fascist dictatorship. Roosevelt made the difference. Furthermore, without him, the US might have heeded the isolationists and let the Nazis and Japanese divide up the rest of the world.

Russia, changing from a repressive empire to the Communist USSR, also owed its success to a few individuals: primarily Lenin and Stalin. Their small party, the Bolsheviks, outsmarted every other group, including centrists who might have permitted Russia to modernize and democratize. Leadership often makes the difference.

Russia, after the collapse of their great Communist empire, had a brief period in which young educated elites tried to establish a western-style liberal democracy. Unfortunately, it was strangled in its cradle during the chaos and near anarchy that followed the collapse.

In Russia\222s long history, its people learned: better the devil you know than the one you don\222t, anarchy. They have long been willing to sacrifice personal freedom for security, and, considering their geography (wide open to invasion) and climate (too cold to grow much food) and access to trade (a frozen North Sea with only seasonal access), Russians put up with autocrats, in the hope of at least a competent one.

They have a competent one today, Vladimir Putin, a former KGB operative, well educated, and (rare for Russians) sober. He smarted with shame at the collapse of the Soviet Union, took over the reins of power, and surrounded himself with a gang that controlled all enterprises and grew obscenely rich on them. Putin gets a huge cut of every transaction, which has made him a billionaire even slightly richer than his neighbor, Iran\222s dictatorial Ayatollah Khamenei.

Beginning as an appointed president when his drunken predecessor stepped down, Putin has won popular elections and his current one will give him life tenure. His wealth assured, he now is on a path of getting revenge for the collapse of the USSR and is trying to "make Russia Great Again." How can he do this in the face of Russia\222s challenges? Russia will never be the USSR again, but it can make its once rival and winner of the Cold War fall on its face and exit the world stage.

Putin wants the US in turmoil, using an internal culture war. He wants the US to leave all the institutions that have made the world prosper for the past 70 years: the Pacific Trade Association, NAFTA, maybe NATO, leave the Climate Change Accord, and threaten funding to the UN. Putin\222s suspiciously compliant friend in the White House, President Trump, has pursued these very policies. Raising tariffs is turning into a trade war, good for Russia, not for anyone else.

What can Putin do about Russia\222s population crash, half of that at the start of World War II? He needs more Russians, and the only way he can get them is to re-absorb neighboring countries with Russian populations. He already did this once, grabbing the Crimea from Ukraine and is plotting to absorb Ukraine in time. He is eyeing and threatening his neighbors in the Baltic, as well as Poland, all of whom, along with Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the UK, have been frightened enough to start rearming. If the US turns away from them, Russia will succeed. They can\222t fight Putin without us.

As the US bars immigration and builds walls, our fertility rate falls and Russia benefits from cutting us down to size. And as we defund and gut the State Department, trash the press and our security agencies, and turn a blind eye to election meddling, Putin smiles. He couldn\222t be luckier in his mysterious friendship with our president.

685 words

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