

Russia: Ideology without pity

PHILLIP H. MCMATH

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

With mind alone, Russia cannot be understood. No ordinary yardstick spans her greatness. She stands alone unique — in Russia, one can only believe.

—Fyodor Tyutchev, Russian poet

The symbols that Russia values most are the Icon and the Axe: Faith and Power. Invaded from the east by Huns, Mongols and Japanese, from the west by Polish-Lithuania, Sweden, France, Austria-Hungary and Germany, and from the south by the Ottomans, French and British, she is a country always under the siege of strife and struggle, searching for security of state and serenity of soul.

Russia does not value pluralism and skepticism, but unity and faith. Her revolution was a search for a new absolute. For her there is no satisfactory solution in the mundane “bourgeois” world; she despises compromise as hypocrisy and is forever seeking a belief in something supernal. She views the West with envious contempt—morally bankrupt and decadent.

Yet she is forever ambivalent: “I am your friend and I am your foe; I want to emulate you and I want to be unique.” She feels superior and inferior, all in the same moment.

Mother Russia has been pulled through her 1,000-year history of tears in a troika of Orthodoxy (of some kind), Autocracy (of some kind) and Narodnost (untranslatable), like nationalism but deeper. There is always a contradiction between the Western and the Slavophilic, a constant striving that is never resolved. She is both European and Asian and never quite either.

The long-term pattern, regardless of her autocrat, is crackdown followed by relaxation, then crackdown, then relaxation, then crackdown and relaxation, repeated on and on, century to century. The beats are long and painful; they’re the systole and diastole of Russian history.

Russia is a very great country with a very great people possessed of a unique genius. Her cultural achievements are astonishing. Her literature, unsurpassed since the Renaissance, has an inexhaustible power and a frightening depth and beauty. It can become an obsession.

But the door to Russia’s magnificence can only be opened by pushing back a mountain of corpses; her his-

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tory is a cemetery set to music. One of these is near St. Petersburg where the numberless dead of the Leningrad siege are buried while funeral melodies caress their graves.

Russia lost millions in the First World War and its follow-on civil war. Albert Camus said the Bolsheviks in 1917 thought they were at the gates of heaven, but we know now they were the gates of hell. Evil is never more terrible than when it wears the mask of goodness. Ideology without pity will always lead to crime.

At least 20 million perished in the Leninist-Stalinist terror, and another 20 million in defeating Hitler. Stalin’s treaty with Hitler made the war possible. It was a pact between two Satans, and the Russian people paid the price. The Eastern Front was a conflagration, a furnace of annihilation in which enormous armies vanished in a cauldron of flame and ash as Russia bought the victory for all humanity.

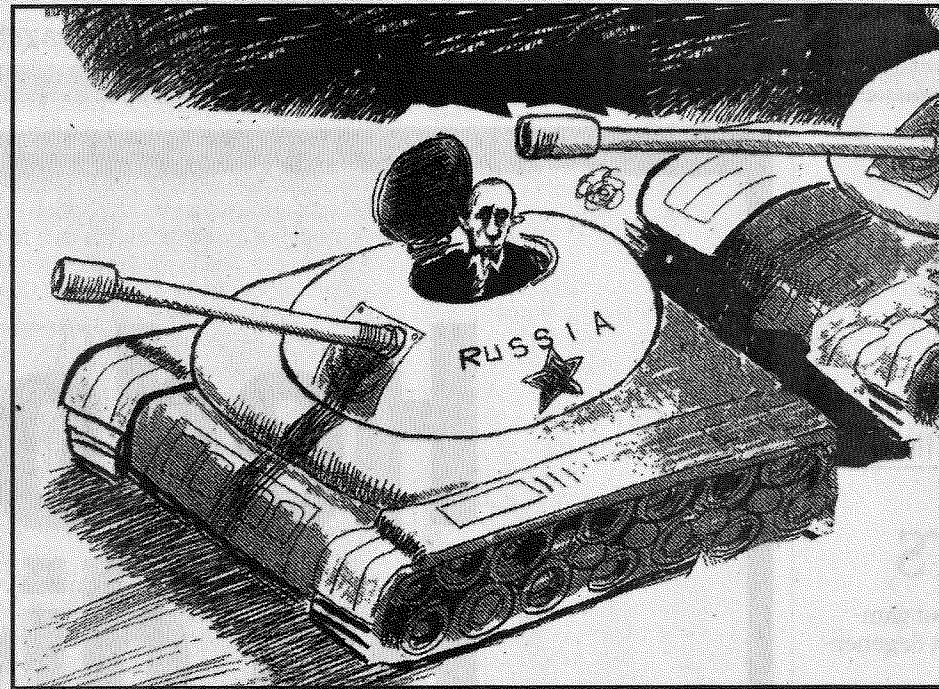
Russia has been crucified upon the cross of history, and she knows it. She feels aggrieved, humiliated, unrewarded, and unappreciated for a sacrifice that has found no redemption. She can only think of herself as a colossus among nations and is convinced of a Messianic destiny, but cannot agree with herself as to just what it is.

Her autocrats are always commanders in a state of war, waging perpetual battles against themselves and their own people. It’s a dark, conspiratorial world in which the death and destruction of one’s enemies are its essential components, and bondage the only agreed-upon principle.

Thus, Russia is always an empire of fear. A great power afraid is greatly to be feared. That is Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin today. His fear arises from the strength of his weaknesses, as he finds himself immured in a corrupt oligarchical prison from which there is no escape.

Putin was born in Leningrad in 1952. His mother, a factory worker and a devout Orthodox Christian, baptized and adorned him with a necklace cross; he wears it today. He attends Orthodox services. His father, an army veteran terribly wounded in the war, was an atheist.

After graduating from the law faculty, in 1975 Putin found his home in



the KGB. He considered his career a “sacred business.” The intelligence service would be his church, and the idea of a Great Russia his faith.

He was assigned to Leningrad, but upon promotion to major in 1985, fluent in German, he was posted to Cold War Dresden. It was a backwater, but Putin performed his duties as a case officer with diligent integrity.

Then in 1991 came the implosion of the Soviet Union. It was a shock. Putin confided to a friend, “All the ideals, all the goals that I had when I went to work for the KGB, collapsed.”

He was clever, sober, reliable and ruthless with an uncanny ability to win over his superiors with a charming indispensability. Filled with all the sharp energy of new ambition, he resigned from the KGB as a lieutenant colonel to become the increasingly essential protégé of charismatic mayor Anatoly Sobchak of the now renamed St. Petersburg.

Soon Putin came to the attention of Russia’s new president Boris Yeltsin, who assigned him to his staff. In 1998 Yeltsin appointed Putin the director of the KGB (renamed the FSB) and then secretary of the Security Council. The ink was not dry on these before he was elevated to prime minister in 1999.

After Yeltsin left office that same year, Putin was made acting president, and four months later was elected such. He has been the despot of Rus-

sia ever since. It was an astonishingly rapid and inconceivable rise to power from what had been essentially a hole-in-the-corner obscurity.

Putin’s ascension was propelled by the celerity of events. The post-Soviet period under Yeltsin had begun with skyrocketing hopes, only to crash in bitter failure and despair. Under Yeltsin, Russia had suffered humiliation, dissolution and a near-civil war.

Plagued by crime, corruption, and economic catastrophe, the departing, tearful Yeltsin told his people: “I want to ask your forgiveness for the dreams that have not come true, and for the things that seemed easy [but] turned out to be excruciatingly difficult. I am asking your forgiveness for failing to justify the hopes of those who believed in me when I said that we would leap from the gray, stagnating totalitarian past into a bright, prosperous and civilized future. I believed in that dream. I believed that we could cover that distance in one leap. We didn’t.”

On the way out, as Yeltsin handed power to Putin he said, “Take care, take care of Russia.”

It was a fateful decision.

Putin was grieved, not for Yeltsin or for the fall of the Soviet Union, despite what he has said, but for the destruction of the Russian Idea. For that he blamed America, the West, and the Bolsheviks as much as anyone. He said that communism “was

a blind alley, far away from the mainstream of civilization.” Russia had been betrayed time and time again, and he would rebuild her to her former greatness. This task became an obsession, and in the service of it he would do literally anything.

So he lusted for ever-greater power for himself and his sacred mission that he came to view as inseparable. “No Putin—no Russia!” became his slogan. His fate and Russia’s were one.

Putin ruthlessly restored order, rebuilt his military, transfused the economy with energy and the expedient of oligarchic corruption, brutally subdued

Chechnya, Georgia, Belarus, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine, intervened in Syria, ensnared Europe with his fuel, allied himself with China, and made Russia stand up from her mortification.

Yet there remained Ukraine. It was Putin’s ultimate goal and dream.

There is a saying: “Russia is a tale of three cities, St. Petersburg is her brain, Moscow her heart, but Kiev her mother.”

For Putin, Russia began in 988 with the baptism of Grand Prince Vladimir in Kievan Rus’. The separation of Ukraine from Russia was an abomination. He would take it back.

So Putin invaded. And in invading Ukraine, he planned a Great Russian imperium, the unraveling of NATO and Russia’s enthronement as Europe’s hegemon. Putin thinks Russia’s wounded soul can only find expiation from the swing of her axe. So he chopped his way into Ukraine, set it aflame, and now finds himself consumed by an inferno of his own creation.

He cannot leave but he cannot stay, and no one will come to his rescue. The Russians are the only ones who can save Mother Russia.

Phillip H. McMath is a lawyer, Vietnam veteran, and writer who lives in Little Rock. He has a lifelong interest in Russia.

phillip@mcmathlaw.com