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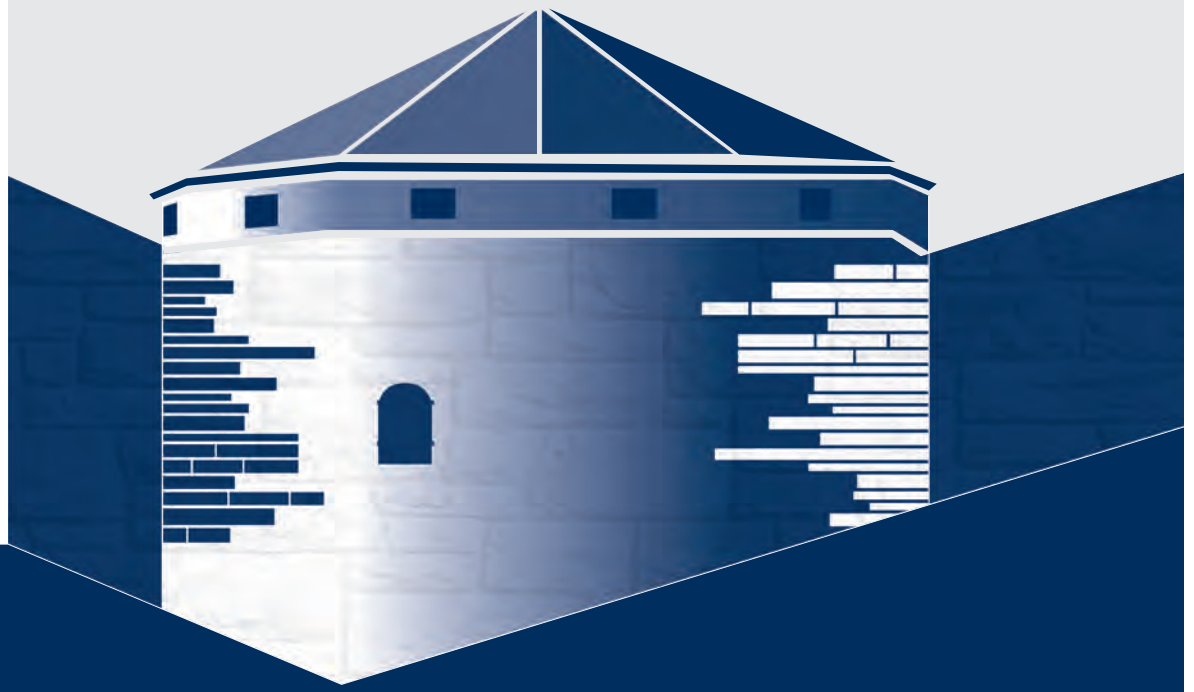
Reflections on Vladimir Putin and Russia's Foreign and Military Policy: Exploring Motivations, Factors, and Explanations

Alan Whitehorn



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Reflections on Vladimir Putin and Russia's Foreign and Military Policy: Exploring Motivations, Factors, and Explanations

Introduction

In assessing Vladimir Putin and contemporary Russian foreign and military policy, instead of final answers that emerge, it is often additional questions. It can take a lifetime to acquire expertise on foreign countries and this is even more so when a regime is autocratic, secretive, and deliberately deceptive in the information it releases.

Following my academic research and writings on communist Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was asked several years later what I would have done differently in my studies in order to better understand this complex region. I immediately replied: Read more history that covered a longer time span. With "long history" in mind, we shall analyze Putin and Russia and their intertwined journeys, as we navigate these sobering times of global pandemic and grave international conflict.

The Tsarist Tradition in Russia: Looking East and Inward or Looking West and Outwards?

To better understand Putin and his orientation, it is useful to step back and look at an overview of Russian political history and explore several key enduring themes. Amongst the most famous tsars and commissars, several—Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584), Peter the Great (1672–1725), Catherine the Great (1729–1796) and Stalin, the Man of Steel (1879–1953)—dominate the landscape. Each ruled for more than two decades. (See Table 1: Russian Leaders.) While in some ways they possessed different orientations and styles of governance, common to each, they expanded Russia's territory and powers.[1] In addition, all three tsarist leaders and the soviet communist ruler were highly autocratic rulers. This, perhaps, should serve as a reminder that despite

1. See for example, the growth in territory revealed in the following historical atlases: Barnes, *Restless Empire*; Crampton and Crampton, *Atlas of Eastern Europe*; Gilbert, *Atlas of Russian History;* Kingsbury and Taaffe, *An Atlas of Soviet Affairs*.

the appearance of some differences in Russian politics, the underlying foundation may be essentially the same: autocratic and imperially expansionist in goals and aspirations.

During the nineteenth century, major intellectual debates about the future of Russia arose with great intensity. It was increasingly evident that Russia lagged behind the West. Russians accordingly searched for solutions for this inferiority, but the proposed remedies differed greatly. "What is to be done?" was a key existential theme and became a title of major books, first by Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) and later by Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924).[2] In the century preceding the Bolshevik Russian Revolution of 1917, several major orientations emerged. Two key contrasting ones were the Slavophiles versus Westernizers.[3]

Slavophiles versus Westernizers

In general, the Slavophiles were opposed to the increasing Western influence which they saw as corrupting the "more natural and devoutly pure" Russia. Instead, the Slavophiles advocated the need to look for inspiration within Russian history and return to the founding spirit of "true" Russian roots. They believed Russia had a historically unique messianic role. As the third centre of Christendom (along with Rome and Constantinople), Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church had a key responsibility to play, particularly as, in Moscow's view, the other centres' level of spirituality had declined. In stressing the importance of the collective/group, coupled with traditional Russian organizational hierarchic structures, it followed that rule by an autocratic, paternalistic state and leader were more likely. A significant aspect of the Slavophiles was the encouragement of Pan Slavism. Not surprisingly, the Slavophiles were strong advocates of expanding Russia's leadership in East Europe. This often resulted in clashes not only with local indigenous national populations, but also rival neighbouring imperial powers such as the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires.[4]

A dramatically different perspective was offered by the Westernizers. They observed that Russia greatly and urgently needed to catch up to Western Europe and, accordingly, favoured embracing Western technology and modern organizational institutions. Westernizers believed that Russia needed to borrow newer and far better Western approaches in politics and the sciences. Their orientation was therefore more uni-

2. Lenin, *What is to be Done?*
3. See Utechin, *Russian Political Thought*; Hare, *Pioneers of Russian Social Thought;* and Kohn, *The Mind of Modern Russia*.
4. Perhaps not surprisingly, the imperialist framework can complement the paternalistic Slavophile orientation.

Table 1

Russian/Soviet/Russian Leaders

Name	Years in Power		Left Office in What Way?
Russian Monarchy Era			
Ivan IV the Terrible*	1547–1584	37 years	died
…			
Peter I the Great*	1696–1725	29 years	died
…			
Catherine II the Great	1762–1796	34 years	died
…			
Nicholas II	1894–1917	23 years	death by execution
Revolutionary Transition			
Kerensky	1917	under 1 year	exiled
Soviet Era			
Lenin	1917–1924	7 years	wounded, ill and died
Stalin	1928–1953	25+ years	died
Khrushchev	1953–1964	11 years	deposed, internal exile
Brezhnev	1964–1982	18 years	died
Andropov	1982–1984	2 years	died
Chernenko	1984–1985	1 year	died
Gorbachev	1985–1991	6 years	survived aborted coup, resigned later
Russian Presidential Era			
Yeltsin	1991–2000	9 years	retired due to ill health
Putin**	1999/2022	22 years to date (2022)	

* Nominally came to throne earlier, but was not, in fact, ruling.

** Includes the year 1999 when he was prime minister and later became acting president on New Year's Eve, 2000 and the years 2008–2012 when Putin switched/castled the presidency and prime minister roles with Medvedev, but in reality retained power.

versalistic and internationalist, often with an implicit, if not explicit, democratic thrust.[5]

In many ways, the overarching debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers continued into the twentieth century and beyond. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s two leading Russian dissidents in the Soviet Union reflected these contrasting orientations. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), the influential novelist and Nobel Prize recipient for Literature, echoed the Slavophile tradition. While Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989), a physicist, father of the Soviet H-bomb, and Nobel Prize recipient for Peace, articulated the Westernizer orientation. Even now, the profound debates continue in contemporary Russia.[6] The contrast in orientations between Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–) and his Westernizer inclinations and Vladimir Putin (1952–) and his Slavophile propensity are striking in this regard.[7] An important intellectual and foreign policy influence on Putin has been Alexander Dugin (1962–) who expounds the "clash of civilizations" theme with the contrasting visions of Moscow-centric "Eurasianism" vs. Brussels-based "Atlanticism."[8] Prophetically, Ukraine is seen as a crucial battle zone.

Introductory Thoughts on East Europe and Putin

Yale University professor Timothy Snyder's book *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* dealt with the topic of the reoccurring devastating historical conflicts in Eastern Europe. Given the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, the near-decade long Ukrainian–Russian conflict and clashes in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Eastern Ukraine,[9] and most recently the three-pronged massive 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, an additional chapter was needed. Snyder provided some additional analysis in his 2018 book *The Road to Unfreedom* penned after the Russian invasion of Crimea and more recently in articles and interviews following the latest round of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[10] He had also authored a prophetic article "To Understand Putin, Read

5. Convergence theory, in many ways, presupposed that with modernization, Russia/the Soviet Union would become more pluralistic. Of course, this variant of convergence theory reflected an optimistic assumption that conditions would become better in a more technologically advanced and affluent world. By contrast, the pessimistic variant of convergence theory can be seen in the writings of dystopian novelist George Orwell's book, *1984,* in which he warns of a world more oppressive and totalitarian, particularly with the government's increasingly centralized monopolistic control of communications technology.
6. See for example Laqueur, *Putinism*, 4.
7. Kovalev, *Russia's Dead End*, 266.
8. See Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 90, 97.
9. Lourie, *Putin*.
10. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*; Snyder, "Putin Has Long Fantasized About a World Without Ukrainians."

Orwell" published in *Politico*, 3 September 2014, where he foretold that Putin's aggressive, ambitious style evokes a disturbing Orwellian quality when Putin proclaims that "War is Peace." Putin's continuing malevolent threats and 2022 war of aggression on Ukraine fit, to a troubling degree, an Orwellian dystopian vision for our future. Given Putin's words and deeds, an increasing number of observers believe that Putin is often distorting, maliciously distracting, deceiving, or outright lying, while engaged in disruptive and confrontational behaviour[11] and pursuing reckless and brutal warfare (from Chechnya, then Syria, to Ukraine). What makes him behave so?

Putin certainly revealed a skewed view of history when he claimed in his presidential address to the Russian Duma in 2005 that the break-up of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the 20th century."[12] Without a doubt, this is not a view widely held or even partially understood in the West. We need to grasp Putin's and his fellow Russians' sense of the "Times of Troubles"[13] and their feelings of profound loss regarding the disintegration of the USSR and the Soviet bloc (i.e., the enormous decline of a once mighty imperial state). Russians' nostalgia for the country's past greatness and glory is widespread.[14]

One key reason is Russia's profound demographic truncations: Moscow's territorial domain declined by about a quarter (from just over 22 million square kilometres to about 17 million square kilometres) in the dramatic and disruptive transformation from the former Soviet Union to the Russia of today. Institutionally, the Soviet Union went from a diverse Eurasian federation of 15 republics to a more homogenous single republic (Russia). Relatedly, the overall population numbers dropped by about half (from about 293 million to 144 million) from the previous Soviet period to the contemporary Russian era. The continuing decline in population (from 140 million in 2010 to a projected 132 million for 2025) is particularly critical when combined with an increasingly aging population (12.9 percent over 65 in 2010 to a projected 17.7 percent in 2025).[15] This constitutes a serious change in demographic economic size and vitality and ultimately adversely impacts the Russian polity.

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11. See Orenstein, *The Lands In Between* regarding cyber attacks, social media misinformation, and interference in the 2016 US presidential election. Over several weeks during March 2022, US President Biden described Putin as a "murderous dictator," "pure thug," "war criminal," "dictator," "menacing," and suggested "this man cannot remain in power."
12. President Putin's address to the Duma, reported by Associated Press and BBC, 5 April 2005. Some sources later suggested the wording was "a major geopolitical disaster."
13. Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique*, 257. The seventeenth century in Russian history is sometimes referred to as the Times of Troubles.
14. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."
15. Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision,* 61; Lourie, *Putin*, especially chap. 5, 80; Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 157.

With the break-up of the Soviet bloc, a number of former Warsaw Pact client states (e.g., Poland, Hungary, East Germany [GDR], the former Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria) ceased to be under Moscow's direct formal military command of the Warsaw Pact. These reductions in imperial reach represented a shrinkage of about 755,000 square kilometres and about 90 million persons, and further diminished Russia's geopolitical size and impact. By contrast, the European Union continued to grow in population (448 million in 2021) and expand eastward (e.g., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, and Romania), as did the military alliance of NATO (e.g., stretching from the north with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, then to Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia in the mid-East region of Europe, and to Romania and Bulgaria in the south).[16] NATO, which comprised only 12 states in 1949, totalled 30 by 2022. In the eyes of Moscow, these EU and NATO expansions, particularly if they eventually were to include the all-important Ukraine, posed an "existential challenge" to Russia's once pre-eminence in Eastern Europe and even to Russia itself. Quite notably, the distinguished American diplomat-historian George Kennan, whose writings were a catalyst for the Cold War containment doctrine, believed NATO's expansion eastwards to be a mistaken strategy and policy.[17]

Despite these significant territorial and population losses for Moscow's imperial rule, the newly independent territories and populations remain, for the most part, viable and the majority of the inhabitants (perhaps excluding portions of the Russian-speaking minorities) found the new arrangements acceptable. Given the geographic proximity and past economic ties with the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc, these states could have continued to trade and to interact peacefully and constructively with Russia, particularly given their need for oil and gas. But such a pattern of cooperative co-existence among equals has not been Moscow's style. Historically, whether in Tsarist or Soviet times, Moscow's attitude has been one of threats, coercion, and attempted imperial control over neighbouring peoples and states. Given the history and socialization patterns of the Russian generation currently in power, it seems likely to remain so under Putin and his KGB/FSB colleagues.

Despite Moscow's shock and frustration at the loss of geopolitical influence in the post-communist era, one still must pose: What sort of amnesia did Putin possess about the consequences of World War I and World War II? Political autonomy for former Soviet republics and satellite states seems hardly so devastating in outcome compared to world wars. What kind of Moscovite leader would dare to downplay the enormous

16. Lourie, *Putin*, 141.
17. Lourie, *Putin*, 141.

Russian losses in the deaths and destruction of those two world wars?

Perhaps the sense of the Times of Troubles will continue for Russia. Despite having had initial successes, fuelled in large part by high oil prices and revenues, Putin's reckless and deadly actions also significantly hurt Russia. For example, the post-2014 Crimean invasion led to sanctions being imposed by the West on Russia and Russia's exclusion from the major power G8 meetings, which reverted to being the G7. Even more dramatically, the major Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resulted in historically sweeping and severe Western sanctions, the freezing and seizing of Russian assets in the West, the withdrawal or suspension of many Western corporate operations inside Russia, and the removal of many Russian corporations and banks from the critical and all-powerful monetary SWIFT banking system. Putin's bellicose actions have also adversely affected the entire European region and the world. For example, there has been significantly increased Western military spending and deployments in Eastern Europe; a dramatic and historic reorientation of German defence and military policies; a massive, forced migration of millions of Ukrainian refugees; and a significant disruption to the global economic order and material goods supply chains. As a new prohibitive arms race has rapidly unfolded, the peace dividends of the post-Cold War era seem increasingly a nostalgic memory. In military personnel and spending allocations, we are already witnessing a reversal of the post-Cold War declines.[18] Tensions and border incidents have increased. If conflict continues to escalate further and spirals out of control into a larger regional war or even an international one, the dynamics can easily become a minus-sum game. Notable examples are the 2014 war in eastern Ukraine, the 2020 Karabakh war in the South Caucasus, and the far more devastating 2022 Russian–Ukrainian war. In the latter case, the Ukrainian mass casualties and fatalities, property and cultural destruction, and precipitous decline in economic and social welfare are grim reminders of this fact. So too, the sudden and dramatic economic isolation and decline and accompanying shortages in Russia are substantial. They have been angrily described by Putin as Western-imposed "economic warfare." Relatedly in the South Caucasus, the greatly increased military spending, presence, and use of more deadly weaponry on the Azerbaijan–Armenia border (largely Russian-supplied on both sides) resulted in a diminished sense of overall security in the region that culminated in the Karabakh War of 2020. The situation there remains tense and highly unstable. The spill-over effect of the 2022 war in Ukraine seems to have made the current situation in the South Caucasus even more conflict-prone. To avoid deadly escalatory scenarios, we need to under-

18. Legvold, *Return to Cold War*.

stand the world view and geopolitical goals of Putin, along with the nature of Putin's Russia that is emerging.

Some Overview Questions

The centuries-old intellectual debate in Moscow between Slavophiles and Westernizers still exists. Recent events suggest that more insular nationalist Slavophile goals are once again displacing nascent and fragile Westernizer's aspirations of liberalization and greater openness to Europe. The West-friendly quasi-democracy of the Gorbachev era of the late 1980s and the Yeltsin era of the 1990s have greatly receded.[19] Instead, it is suggested by some that we are witnessing renewed would-be Tsarist ambitions, propped up by Russian Orthodox Church officialdom.[20] Others suggest a ruthless KGB/FSB-recruited Bonapartist dictatorial regime is rapidly emerging.[21] Even more pessimistic analysts suggest that the old Brezhnev era reflected an authoritarian and somewhat lethargic bureaucratic communist state, while Putin's Russia seems to have evolved once more towards a more dynamic, ambitious, and ruthless semi-totalitarian regime or more recently fully totalitarian, as Masha Gessen suggested in *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*.[22] The change has occurred more rapidly than many expected and has been accelerated by the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian war. It is not uncommon for an authoritarian regime to raise the spectre of an alleged foreign enemy and imminent war danger to increase internal repression.

The West's attempts to understand Russia have been a long-term intellectual and diplomatic pursuit spanning several centuries. In the nineteenth century, the world's naval superpower, Britain, sought a "balance of power" in continental Europe. Amidst the decline and eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Foreign Office in London sought to stop the ongoing Tsarist Empire's expansion into Eastern Europe, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus regions. There was apprehension that Moscow wanted to dominate the Black Sea and gain access to the Dardanelles and the Mediterranean Sea, along with strategic routes to the Near East and Asia. British soldiers died in the Crimea in the 1850s to pursue such a foreign policy of blunting the Russian advance. Later

19. Kovalev, *Russia's Dead End*.
20. Myers, *The New Tsar*.
21. Arutunyan describes the new system as "caesaropapism." *The Putin Mystique*, 253. Similar to a praetorian guard, an estimated 400,000 troops of the National Guard (Rosguard) now report directly to Putin as president and not to the Minister of Defence. Lourie, *Putin*, 4–5.
22. Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia,* explores the possibility of new forms of totalitarianism. See particularly Gessen, *The Future is History*.

in the twentieth century, Winston Churchill, the illustrious politician and historian, described Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma…."[23]

The Carrot and the Stick: The Marshall Plan and NATO

In post-World War II Europe, as Stalinist Soviet military domination and tight political control over Eastern Europe took hold, the former British wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, speaking at Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946, warned that an "Iron Curtain" of dictatorship, massive censorship, and state-directed propaganda had descended over these East European satellite countries.[24] The apprehension concerning Stalin's malevolent ambitions and deeds were accentuated by the Soviet regime's militant ideological rhetoric. In 1947, on the eve of the Cold War, George F. Kennan, the American Ambassador in Moscow, penned a pioneering and pivotal piece in *Foreign Affairs* under the nom-de-plume "X."[25] It provided the intellectual blueprint for containment theory and a string of US-based military alliances (NATO, CENTO, SEATO)[26] that encircled and sought to constrain the Soviet Union from Europe, through the Middle East to Asia.

With Soviet expansion and tightening control in Eastern Europe and a growing political and military threat to Western Europe, the West responded in twin-fold fashion: economically the Marshall Aid Plan was launched in 1948 to assist war-torn Europe, while militarily NATO was formed in 1949 with the intention to stop the large and powerful Russian army rolling westward. Canada played a key part as one of the 12 founding members of NATO, and provided significant troops, tanks, and fighter aircraft, particularly in the earlier decades.

Today the Alliance has expanded east and grown to 30 member countries, including the addition of a number of former Warsaw Pact member states (e.g., Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states). Some have called for even more states to join, such as Georgia and Armenia in the South Caucasus and most significantly, Ukraine, the second largest polity in Europe and a key component of the Eastern European heartland. In 2022, Sweden and Finland

23. Speech by Winston Churchill on a BBC radio broadcast, 1 October 1939. The second and lesser-known part of Churchill's famous 1 October 1939 BBC radio quote offered the following observation about Russia: "…but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."
24. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*.
25. The original "X" article appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947. Reprints and commentary on the original article can be found in several edited books including in Gati, *Caging the Bear*. See also Kennan's later book *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*.
26. The full titles of the acronyms were: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Central Treaty Organization, and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

jointly explored membership and on 18 May, both countries applied to join NATO.[27] Past NATO expansions seem to have been catalysts for Putin's mounting fears, growing anger, increasingly belligerent tone, and aggressive reactions toward the West. He has continued to assert this.[28] He has repeatedly condemned NATO's eastern march towards what he considered Russia's heartland.[29] In significant measurable ways, Russian military and political leaders feel more vulnerable, given the territorial and population losses from the truncation of their former Soviet empire. The natural reaction of Moscow was to lash out and try to regain greater control over the territories and peoples of the region that it had once firmly maintained as a buffer zone between Russia and the West. Russia's and Putin's pan-Slavic proclivities in considering Ukraine a subsidiary part of the Russian nation and imperialist talk of *novorossiya* (New Russia) reinforce such inclinations.

Evolving Frameworks to Understand Russia and Its Leaders

To understand the dramatic changes in the world of comparative politics in the post-World War II era, a number of different analytical frameworks emerged. The pioneering volume by James Bill and Robert Hardgrave *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory* outlined some of the more widely used theoretical models.[30] In comparative Russian and East European studies and the analysis of comparative communism, the development and elaboration of alternate theoretical models came later. One pioneering book that collated a number of the differing methodological and conceptual perspectives was the volume edited by Frederic Fleron, *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences*.[31] More recently, William Zimmerman in *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin* explored alternate analytical models for different

27. Cook, "Finland, Sweden Apply to Join NATO in 'Historic Moment' Amid Russia's Ukraine War."
28. Griffiths, *Should the West Engage Putin's Russia?*
29. Putin, "*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*."
30. In the pioneering volume by Bill and Hardgrave, *Comparative Politics*, amongst the useful theoretical models described were modernization, culture/socialization, interest group politics, elite analysis, class rule, and systems theory. Each of these could and were utilized by other authors to analyze Russian politics. For example, Barghoorn, *Politics in the USSR,* employed the structural functionalist variant of systems theory, a framework that would also be widely used over several decades in the highly influential overview, comparative politics textbook by Gabriel Almond and colleagues, *Comparative Politics Today* and which included a major section on Russian/Soviet politics.
31. The edited volume by Fleron, *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences* included entries utilizing the totalitarian, bureaucratic, interest groups, and other frameworks. This analytical comparison was continued in a later 1993 co-edited volume, Fleron and Hoffmann, *Post-Communist Studies & Political Science.*

decades and leaders.[32]

For much of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the dominant paradigm for analyzing the Soviet Union/Russia was the totalitarian model. While one of the first major usages occurred in the 1920s, its popularity in the West as a framework grew in the post-World War II Cold War, particularly amongst political right-wing authors and émigrés. Amongst the major authors of textbooks that utilized this framework were Merle Fainsod and Zbigniew Brzezinski.[33] The model's main features included a single all-powerful despotic leader who ruled through a single party, allowed only one official ideology, and made extensive use of state-directed and controlled propaganda and censorship. It was a highly centralized, coercive state that swiftly and brutally crushed all attempted political opposition. The regime sought to monitor, control, and directly rule over all groups and organizations. Autonomous and independent organizations were not allowed. Its dictator's ambitions were far wider than those of traditional autocratic regimes that also ruled by coercion. The totalitarian leader, by contrast, sought to remake the land and its people utilizing the regime's official ideology as the blueprint for planned social transformation. As a number of authors noted, the totalitarian model seemed to fit the Stalinist era, particularly describing the era of the "Great Purges" of the 1930s.[34]

Daniel Bell penned a landmark article in the April 1958 issue of *World Politics* entitled: "Ten Theories in Search of Reality: The Prediction of Soviet Behaviour in the Social Sciences." The pioneering essay was reprinted in his influential 1960 book *The End of Ideology*. Bell searched for different models to explain the unfolding dynamics of Russian society and the enigma of Moscow's Kremlin decision-making. Each framework sought to provide insights, often of a different nature. Amongst the frameworks that Bell suggested: the modernization and transformation of a once traditional Russian community; continued class rule, but perhaps in a revised form (e.g., James Burnham on the "managerial revolution" and Milovan Djilas on the "new class");[35] a highly formal-

32. Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia*, 5, offers four major analytical categories to study contemporary Russian history: democratic, competitive authoritarian, full authoritarian, and mobilized totalitarian.

33. See for example, Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled*. For a summary of the traits of totalitarianism, see Brzezinski, *Ideology and Power in Soviet Politics*, 19; and Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship & Autocracy*, 21.

34. See for example Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia,* 6–7.

35. The idea of continuing class conflict and domination, even after the communist revolution, was suggested by several leftist authors. For example, see Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution;* and Djilas, *The New Class*. Laqueur suggests a contemporary variant of "state capitalism," "new class," and "new nobility," *Putinism*, 118–121.

ized and centralized Russian bureaucratic polity;[36] a despotic leader's totalitarian control over all aspects of society;[37] the continuation of Slavic cultural traditions;[38] and geo-political imperial rule.[39]

As the bipolar global Cold War receded, détente began to emerge first with Nikita Khrushchev in the 1960s and even Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s; accordingly, debates about appropriate strategy and tactics arose in the West.[40] Discussions involved not only the nature of the nuclear age and ultimate motivations of the post-Stalinist Russian leaders, but also the appropriate framework for understanding a more modern Russian polity and society. As Russian society changed, Russians (both the mass public and the leaders) became more urban, educated, and affluent, but had they begun to change in attitudes? Had they become more moderate and semi-pluralistic?[41]

The Left in the West suggested that important change had occurred and prospects for peaceful co-existence were thus greater. The Right warned that the fundamentals of Russian society and politics had not changed and that we should remain vigilant, lest more political dominoes fall, with the expansion of Russian influence around the world.

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, with his policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), seemed to usher in a dramatic and positive change in Russia's world view to a more Westernizer orientation. Canada played a role in facilitating East/West dialogue, particularly during Gorbachev's 1983 visit to Canada. However, with the rise of Putin from 1999 onwards, there emerged increasing concentration of arbitrary executive power in one person, renewed militant Russian nationalism and a strong re-assertion of Russian geo-political ambitions, reflecting an apparent revisionist desire to reverse the recent tides of history.

As Putin continues to alter the Russian political landscape, there have been renewed efforts both in the West and even within Russia to find a more accurate framework to analyze the more than two decades-long, yet still unfolding, Putin-era political system. Amongst the labels and characterizations posed: (1) "Russia Inc," "Kremlin Inc,"

36. For a later, book-length analysis of the bureaucratic corporate model in the form of "USSR Inc.," see Meyer, *The Soviet Political System*. See Laqueur, *Putinism*, 119 for an updated variant.
37. The émigré Polish–American academic Zbigniew Brzezinski was one of the preeminent scholars on Russia and Eastern Europe and a strong proponent of the totalitarian model. See for example his *Ideology and Power in Soviet Politics;* and Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship & Autocracy*.
38. See Laqueur, *Putinism*, 5.
39. See for example Librach, *The Rise of the Soviet Empire;* and Judah, *Fragile Empire*.
40. See various authors in Hoffmann and Fleron, *The Conduct of Soviet Foreign Policy*.
41. Skilling's interest group and Lodge's group models seemed to increasingly fit within this framework. See Skilling and Griffiths, *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics;* and Lodge, *Soviet Elite Attitudes Since Stalin*.

"Gazprom State" (Levine; Dawisha, Hill), "state capitalism" (Dawisha, Laqueur) or "dictatorial petrostate" (Kasparov) which echo Meyer's corporate description "USSR Inc." of the Brezhnev communist era; (2) "oligarchy" (Browder), "kleptocracy" or "kleptocratic authoritarianism" (Dawisha, Satter, Kasparov, Snyder), "crony capitalism" (Aslund, Lucas) which are reminiscent of Burnham's and Djilas "new class" exploitation model; (3) "caesaropapism" (Arutunyan), "Leviathan" (Medvedev), or "never-ending presidency" (Dawisha) which draw parallels to Trotsky's "Bonapartist" characterization of the Stalinist era; (4) "KGB Incorporated" or "KGB mafia state" (Kasparov, Applebaum, Dawisha) echoing the Chekist-purge era; (5) "totalitarian" (Zimmerman, Kovalev, Satter, Kasparov, Gessen) or "high tech authoritarianism" (Medvedev) and a variant of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff) which draw on Fainsod, Friedrich, Brzezinski, and even Trotsky.[42] To help assess these analytical categories, it is useful to evaluate Putin, both the man and political leader.

A Preliminary Sketch on Putin's World View

Several accounts about Putin's life, psychological profile, and world view have been published. The biography *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, by Masha Gessen is an excellent volume. Also informative are Walter Laqueur's *Putinism: Russian and Its Future with the West*; Steven Meyers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*; Anna Arutunyan's *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*; Fiona Hill's and Clifford Gaddy's *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*; Garry Kasparov's *Winter is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must be Stopped*; Richard Lourie's *Putin: His Downfall and Russia's Coming Crash*; Sergei Medvedev's *The Return of the Russian Leviathan;* and Mark Galeotti's *We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong*. There have also been thoughtful articles by Nina Khrushcheva, Anne Applebaum, Ian Robertson (a psychologist) and Roger Cohen.[43]

Amongst the traits that Putin, the former KGB/FSB agent and head,

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42. See for example Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, 313, 294; Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique*; Levine, *Putin's Labyrinth*, 35; Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia*; Satter, *Darkness at Dawn*, 77; Griffiths, *Should the West Engage Putin's Russia?;* Aslund, *Russia's Crony Capitalism*; Lucas, *The New Cold War,* 214; Kasparov, *Winter is Coming*, 91, 98, 117, 123,150, 162, 166; Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 18, 79, 98; Gessen, *The Future is History*, 295, 298, 307, 383–4; Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*; and Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected,* 246–247, and others have suggested different models over the unfolding of years of Putin's rule.

43. See for example Khrushcheva, "Inside Putin's Mind"; Applebaum, "The Myth of Russian Humiliation"; Robertson, "The Danger That Lurks Inside Vladimir Putin's Brain"; Cohen, "The Making of Vladimir Putin." See also Roxburgh, *The Strongman.*

has revealed is a persistent pattern of coercion and threats.[44] He seeks to reverse the weakened condition that Russia has found itself in. Echoing the Slavophiles, he advocates a more conservative "going back to past traditions." He, like so many fellow Russians, feels that during recent decades Russia witnessed unacceptable humiliation and loss of status, land, and power. Accordingly, he implemented a rapid revitalization of the military and a reassertion of its pivotal role in society. Given the increasing economic and cyber confrontations with the West, Putin has opted for more insular Russian self-sufficiency (autarky), somewhat reminiscent of Stalinist "Fortress Soviet Union." Putin calculated that this was a way to provide protection for Russia from the West's economic clout, foreign pressure, and even political intrusions. This was even more the case after the Western-imposed sanctions following the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and more draconian western-imposed sanctions, the beginning of an economic "iron curtain" around Russia is unfolding.

Echoing the Slavophiles, a major component of Putin's ideological vision is a strong dose of nationalism. Putin promotes grandiose projects fostering Russian national symbols and power often over ordinary economic and social welfare calculations. The Covid pandemic provided a painful and deadly reminder of the inadequacies of funds and equipment in the medical sector. Meanwhile, Putin resides in somewhat insulated palatial estates and compounds, a personal isolation accentuated even more by pandemic health concerns. Reminiscent of the Stalinist era, Western sanctions have created shortages and difficulties for Russia, but Putin is unwilling to yield to such foreign pressures. He sees Russia in the midst of a historic life and death "existential struggle" for its long-term survival as a major nation. Accordingly, he believes Russia needs to urgently reclaim its superpower status, even if it means nuclear brinkmanship, potentially risky undeclared cyber-attacks upon the United States, and invasions of neighbouring states. Putin is unwilling to allow Russia to slip into becoming a diminished regional power or just a component sub-unit of the Western-dominated European Union. Till 2020, Russian public opinion seemed to share this view. However, Putin's popularity slipped during the Covid pandemic[45] and seems to have been somewhat adversely affected following the costly 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as evidenced by the significant numbers of young professionals leaving Russia.

Putin seeks to reconstruct Russia's imperial reach. His goal is to swiftly revise the current, and in his view, unacceptable regional and global status quo and reverse Russia's decline that had occurred during the

44. Levine, *Putin's Labyrinth*.
45. Baunov, "Where is Russia's Strongman in the Coronavirus Crisis?"

Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras. To achieve this, like his Tsarist and Commissar predecessors, Putin is willing to employ a number of means: (1) brutally oppress smaller nations (e.g., Chechens, Tatars); (2) truncate other states (e.g., Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova), and create splinter puppet regimes (e.g., South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Donetsk, Luhansk and Transnistria);[46] (3) threaten other countries (e.g., the Baltic States); and (4) seek to reassert dominance in a region (e.g., the Caucasus). Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone suggested that this is Russia's "Munroe Doctrine." Putin's overarching long-range aspiration seems to be to re-establish the former Soviet Union's territorial scope. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was an attempt in 1991 at keeping many of the former Soviet republics within the fold. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and later Armenia) in 2015 was, in Putin's vision, a bolder and more assertive move that intended to also include Ukraine as a key component. Ukraine was and still is a much-coveted target, either by soft power means (e.g., offering subsidized gas) or those of hard power (e.g., military threats and, if necessary, truncation or full invasion). Putin is unwilling to yield such a large, populous, and strategic border state as Ukraine.[47] If he could not initially control all of it, he was willing to grab Crimea in 2014, with its key strategic naval port and carve off largely Russian-speaking parts of eastern Ukraine. But that initial land grab seemed in the long run insufficient to him. In particular, Crimea, with its major Russian naval base, had inadequate land access and was potentially vulnerable. Accordingly in 2022, he sought far more—larger portions or all of Ukraine. Putin is even willing to pay a very high price in economic costs, tolerate large numbers of military casualties, jeopardize long-term East-West relations, and even risk nuclear war or environmental catastrophe to reclaim such a major building block for a new pan-Slavic union. At the very least, he is unwilling to let Ukraine slip into the full orbit of either the European Union or, even more gravely, NATO. He would rather destabilize or turn Ukraine into a devastated wasteland. In so doing, he is echoing Russian defensive actions against Napoleon's and Hitler's eastern invasions in earlier centuries. The difference, of course, is Putin is engaged in offensive war. More germane, with the 2022 invasion, Pu-

46. Amongst the examples are Transnistria splintering from Moldova in 1991, South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia in the early 1990s, and Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine in 2014. The population and territorial size of these micro-states are quite small: about 470,000 persons for Transnistria, 55,000 for South Ossetia, 240,000 for Abkhazia, but a little larger for the more recent examples of Luhansk 1,465,000 and Donetsk 2,300,000. The recently created micro-puppet states are very much controlled by Russian troops, financing, and governmental administrative measures. The emergence of these highly dependent client micro-states is a case of Russian imperial re-expansionism piece by piece. See Whitehorn, "Putin and His Puppet States."

47. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

tin seems to be following the military tactic of "total war" and heavily targeting civilians, a policy that he previously pursued in Chechnya (1999) and Syria (2015).

Given that he believes Russia is in the midst of a major struggle with regard to its overall fate, Putin has concluded that it is crucial for Russia to employ much of its entire arsenal of powers. Accordingly, he is willing to utilize both conventional (e.g., large intimidating border military exercises, economic oil and gas blackmail or invasion) and unconventional methods (including disinformation, propaganda, cyber warfare,[48] Russian fifth columnists, and even "little green men" with unmarked uniforms grabbing foreign strategic installations and locations).[49] He continues to probe in provocative and sometimes reckless fashion various regional and international thresholds to reclaim (by force or trickery) and to rebuild features of the Soviet era. The all-powerful charismatic leader, as with a number of other dictators, achieved initial successes, in Putin's case particularly during rising oil revenues. As a result, Putin acquired over time a growing sense of impunity regarding his violent deeds and acquisitions of territory. With each major success, this high-risk taker seemed willing to bluff, threaten, challenge, and deceive even more. To further accomplish this, he has fostered the image of a KGB/FSB tough guy who never backs down from a fight, no matter how dangerous. One example was his rapidly escalating threats and harsh actions against President Erdogan and Turkey, after the latter's shooting down of a Russian military plane along the Syrian/Turkish border in 2016. His brutal military targeting of masses of civilians in Ukraine in 2022 suggest that, despite heavy Russian military personnel and equipment losses, he is willing to pursue a deadly ruthlessness towards all of his opponents—soldiers and civilians alike.

Putin is not only committed to an all-out struggle for the future of a powerful Russia, both politically and militarily, he also seeks to augment Russia's economic might. To achieve this, he was willing, when he could, to extract higher prices for Russian oil and gas from smaller, vulnerable foreign countries. He was even willing to cut off strategic supplies suddenly in highly vulnerable winter months. Coinciding with this Russian state ambition, Putin possesses a greedy and covetous personal streak. As Dawisha and other authors note, Putin has overseen the emergence of a "kleptocratic" clique of oligarchs[50] where

48. Lourie, *Putin*, chap. 10. He even directed hacking into the 2016 US presidential election campaign.

49. During the Russian invasion/re-occupation of Crimea, there were many unidentified soldiers in camouflaged uniforms, who were, in fact, Russian troops, but they did not wear their official military insignia. This fostered stealth aspects of the invasion and made it easier for Moscow's initial denial of involvement.

50. Dawisha uses the terms kleptocracy and kleptocratic authoritarianism, *Putin's Kleptocracy.* See also Laqueur, *Putinism* and Myers, *The New Tsar*, 480.

increasingly the economy is run by a few mega-billionaires who are greatly assisted or even sponsored by state officials under his command. He is the "hegemonic oligarch." Some authors have described this as a "mafia" state.[51] It is reported that Putin himself has amassed a vast fortune (estimated by some to be as high as $200 billion)[52] and lives in several extravagant mansions and compounds in various parts of Russia. This is certainly a dramatic contrast to the spartan apartment life of his childhood in post-war Leningrad, where so much had been destroyed and so many had died during the World War II siege of the city.[53] It seems likely that such memories of childhood conditions of deprivation may motivate, in part, such excesses today. Ironically, his brutal wartime devastation of Ukrainian cities eerily echoes his own family's perilous plight eight decades earlier under the Nazi onslaught.

There is little doubt Putin is an exceptionally ambitious and vain individual. He is currently serving a fourth term as president (2000–2008; 2012–present), with one intervening period as prime minister (2008–2012), when he was in fact still in actual firm control. As of 2022, he has been in office for more than two decades. He has already surpassed the duration in power of Mikhail Gorbachev (6 years), Vladimir Lenin (7 years), Nikita Khrushchev (11 years) and Leonid Brezhnev (18 years). With constitutional amendments on presidential term limits, Putin seems to be aiming to equal or even surpass the Soviet totalitarian tyrant Joseph Stalin (25 years; see Table I: Russian leaders.) Given the dynastic tradition in Russian politics, it seems plausible that ultimately his goal may be to be "president for life," as Garry Kasparov has suggested.[54] There are prudent reasons for Putin making such a choice, including a wish to avoid likely death or future arrest and prosecution by any possible Russian successor or even the International Criminal Court (ICC) on war crimes or crimes against humanity.

The historical pattern and psychology of dictatorships is that, with the passage of time, the dictator continues to remove those who would dare to question or challenge his views and policies, but in so doing increasingly isolates himself. The circle around the leader becomes more and more concentrated into a smaller group of compliant "yes-men." As Milovan Djilas's book *Conversations with Stalin* so chillingly reported about an earlier era: the inner circle becomes increasingly fearful of the growing power and paranoia of the dictator. With the passage of

51. See for example Satter, *Darkness at Dawn;* and Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, 254.
52. Browder, *Red Notice,* 169; Galeotti, *We Need to Talk about Putin*, 55; Khan, "Putin Claims He Makes 140,000 and Has an 800-Square Foot Apartment."
53. Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*.
54. Kasparov, *Winter is Coming*, chap. 5; Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy,* 294. Serving as head of state for life has been a prevalent pattern for long-term rulers of Russia and the Soviet Union (e.g., Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Stalin).

time, he becomes more ambitious, ruthless, delusional, and risk-prone. The dramatically increased isolation caused by a dangerous global pandemic has probably hastened and greatly accentuated this phenomenon in Putin's case. The visually dramatic scenes of him sitting isolated and greatly distanced from subordinates who were all clustered at the opposite end of an exceptionally long table is revealing.

Sadly, one can suggest that Putin, particularly as he oversees one of the largest nuclear arsenals in the world, is a dangerous dictator today and seems likely to be even more so tomorrow.[55] In the words of the distinguished British author Lord Acton: "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Putin has increasingly eliminated independent and competitive media,[56] bypassed constitutional constraints (including the so-called "chess castling" swap with Dimitri Medvedev to get around limits to consecutive number of presidential terms of office) and purged or killed a growing list of political rivals. He had already turned the once fragile quasi-democratic system into an increasingly authoritarian regime. He has ruthlessly pursued the political exile, imprisonment (often on trumped up charges with show trials), and even the killing of those who dare to question, let alone challenge, his rule.[57] He has taken control of more and more organizations within Russia, particularly key ones such as the military (e.g., the creation of his own personal National Guard) and the all-important mass media (particularly television). His goal seems to be to remake Russia, its people, and even its neighbouring states.[58] In so doing, Putin reveals the more deadly and vaster ambition—that of moving beyond mere status quo authoritarianism to re-creating a powerful quasi-totalitarian state, as Masha Gessen has evocatively suggested in *The Future is History*.[59] Putin seeks to re-establish a more centralized and coercive regime under his command as an all-powerful leader. Even peaceful protest is not tolerated. Those who criticized Putin's Ukrainian war policies (which Moscow described euphemistically as only a "special military opera-

55. This is a theme suggested by Peters, "Vladimir Putin Will Only Become More Murderous and Dangerous."
56. Kovalev, *Russia's Dead End*, chap. 6, particularly 244–245 where he lists the number of yearly attacks on the media.
57. One can note for example the show trials of Mikhail Khodorkovsky (2003), Pussy Riot (2012), Alexei Navalny (2013) and the killings of Anna Politkovskaya (2006), Alexander Litvinenko (2006), Sergei Magnitsky (2009) and Boris Nemtsov (2015) and the poisoning of Sergei Skripal (2018). In 2020, Navalny barely survived being poisoned and later, after recovering, was jailed in 2021, with his sentence augmented still longer in 2022. See Knight, *Orders to Kill*. See Browder, *Red Notice* regarding Magnitsky and the subsequent Magnitsky-inspired sanctions.
58. Laqueur, *Putinism*, 85.
59. Kovalev uses the words "totalitarian" and "expansionist imperial," *Russia's Dead End*, 217, 219, 285, 309. Gessen uses the term "totalitarian" in the sub-title of *The Future is History*.

tion")[60] are condemned and their jobs placed in jeopardy.

Putin believes that Russia needs to reclaim its historic global role as a pre-eminent superpower and is willing to employ threats and force, both conventional and unconventional. With a declining and aging population, slower innovation in significant technological sectors, and an economy increasingly lagging behind[61] the United States, the European Union and China, Putin may be in a strategic sense correct in believing that an ambitious and determined military posture is the most efficacious path for Russia's imperial ambitions. It is, nevertheless, a potentially costly endeavour in both the short and long run. In earlier soviet decades, Moscow strained under the economic costs of its military rivalry with the United States, particularly towards the end of the communist era. The same financial imbalance that adversely affected Russia previously still continues to exist, particularly in an age when oil prices plunged by more than two-thirds from a high of $145/barrel in 2008 to less than $50/barrel by 2017 and below $40/barrel in June 2020. Ironically, while the war in Ukraine dramatically drove oil prices back up to new highs of over $120, subsequent Western sanctions on Russia have ostracized and isolated the Russian economy and greatly limited the ability to actually sell Russian oil and gas, particularly in the West. The Russian economy is exceedingly dependent on oil and gas exports as crucial sources of much-needed foreign income and its GNP.[62] As Lourie and others have noted, the best time for the "petrostate" is perhaps not in Russia's future, but in its past.[63]

The 2022 War in Ukraine and Some Reflections on the Future

In recent years, significant developments in Russia and neighbouring post-soviet states, suggest major interrelated questions: First and foremost, what is the emerging nature of twenty-first century Russian society and politics? Secondly, what are the real foreign policy and military goals and motivations of Moscow's leaders, particularly that of the mercurial and increasingly dictatorial Vladimir Putin? The trajectory in recent years is troubling.

There are a number of ongoing social and economic strains in Russia:[64] (1) there has been a long-term decrease in state income from oil

60. Such Orwellian state language control has some Russian dissidents mockingly suggesting that Tolstoy's *War and Peace* might have to be renamed *Special Military Operation and Peace*.
61. Laqueur, *Putinism,* particularly chaps. 6, 9.
62. Marshall Goldman describes Russia as a "Petrostate." See Lourie, *Putin,* chap. 6, particularly 107, 112.
63. Lourie, *Putin,* chap. 6. Also, Legvold, *Return to Cold War*.
64. See Stoner, *Russia Resurrected,* particularly chaps. 4 and 5.

and gas exports (in 2022 prices increased, but distribution was problematic); (2) a decline and aging of the adult working population and a subsequent state response of raising the retirement age for pensions; (3) a significant lag in technological innovation in key sectors compared to other major powers; (4) inadequacies in the Russian medical response to the Covid pandemic; and (5) quite significantly, the likely increased financial cost of an acceleration of a new arms race. Together these developments suggest the possibility of a minus-sum game scenario for Putin's Russia. Such socio-economic conditions seemed conducive to fostering greater urgency and desperation by the aging and increasingly autocratic leader.

In the 1930s, Winston Churchill warned the British public and politicians that, despite being war-weary after World War I, they needed to be more vigilant regarding a rising threat from an impatient, ruthless, and ambitious, revisionist dictator. Germany's Hitler was a man who could not be appeased by the Western democracies' series of concessions. Such an aggressive, expansionist nationalist dictator had an insatiable appetite and Eastern Europe was a key target for those ambitions. In 2015, the former world chess champion and prominent Russian dissident Garry Kasparov,[65] now in exile, repeatedly warned that the West was confronted once more with a similar situation. This time by Putin's Russia. Accordingly, the West must avoid another round of political appeasement. Kasparov, like an increasing number of others, views Putin as an ambitious, revisionist dictator in an already too dangerous world. Increasingly, Putin's ambitions and deeds in Eastern Europe place much of Europe and the West on a collision path with Russia. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has dramatically accelerated that dangerous trend. Putin's inclination to take major risks and engage in brinkmanship is evident. His willingness to confront opponents with force and the threat of force are well-documented. Particularly notable was the raising of the nuclear threat during the 2014 Crimean takeover and the 2022 Ukrainian invasion. In both cases, Ukraine was the goal and target, but other states were also affected.

For two decades, Putin had sought to reverse the Western drift of Kyiv, particularly the eastern extension of NATO, and most recently demanded the demilitarization and the so-called "de-Nazification" of Ukraine.[66] For Moscow, the latter meant removing the role of Ukrainian nationalists. He threatened war if the Zelensky government did not yield, but the youthful and previously untested Ukrainian leader stood firm, despite the hundreds of thousands of Russian troops assembled on the border in February 2022. Putin, an aging, increasingly isolated, and

65. Kasparov, *Winter is Coming*, chap. 10.
66. Snyder, "Putin has long fantasized about a world without Ukrainians."

angry totalitarian ruler, unleashed a military assault on the Ukrainian democratic state. The initial twin goals of a coup and installing a compliant puppet regime failed. Subsequently, Putin opted for a slower and more brutal three-pronged invasion campaign from the North, East, and South. Increasingly, the aggressive Russian battle plan has targeted the Ukrainian civilian population with massive artillery and aerial bombardments, cutting off electricity, fuel, and food. It is a war of aggression and involves war crimes against civilians. It even put at grave risk Europe's largest nuclear power station and raised the nightmarish spectre of a continental environmental disaster. His bellicose threat of nuclear weapons escalation is chilling. Putin's initial territorial goals included expanding the strategic Crimean naval outpost of Sevastopol that dominates the northern shores of the Black Sea, re-asserting full military control over the Sea of Azov, and providing land bridges east to Russia and west to Transnistria, the breakaway Russian-dominated Moldovan state. In so doing, Putin sought to reduce Ukraine to a landlocked and increasingly vulnerable regime. It seems his "real-politik" aim was at least to bifurcate Ukraine into two halves, divided by the Dnipro/Dnieper River. In so doing, Putin would greatly expand upon his Donetsk and Luhansk puppet states. Ultimately, if he cannot control Ukraine or at least turn it into an unarmed, neutral buffer state, it seems he would prefer to make it a wasteland.

Echoing Stalin in the 1940s, Putin seems to have set his sights on establishing a new Russian bloc, ranging from Belarus in the North to Crimea and Abkhazia in the South. In a challenge and response international relations dynamic, NATO has been re-energized, re-unified, and re-armed. Germany's geo-political posture towards the East reoriented and military expenditures greatly increased. Ironically, Putin has fostered a stronger and more determined adversary. There is a growing gulf and increasingly polarized military divide between the US-led NATO countries in the West and Moscow and its satellite states in the East. It seems like the beginning of a new Cold War or even a "clash of civilizations,"[67] if we do not rapidly escalate into a hot war, either by design or by accident.[68] It seems the "Bloodlands" of Europe continue to be a focus of inter-state rivalry, tensions, and conflict.

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67. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Orenstein, *The Lands in Between*, 90. In his earlier pioneering volume, *The Common Defence,* 447, Huntington outlined the contrasts between despotisms and democracies in making defence and foreign policy: "A monarchy or despotism … is like a full-rigged sailing ship. It moves swiftly and efficiently. But in troubled waters, when it strikes a rock, its shell is pierced, and it quickly sinks to the bottom. A republic, however, is like a raft: slow, ungainly, impossible to steer, no place from which to control events, and yet endurable and safe. It will not sink, but one's feet are always wet." The passage still seems timely in the West's dealings with Putin.

68. Whitehorn, "Putin and the 2022 Russian Military Conflict in Post-Soviet Lands."

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