

Putin's Wars

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Chechnya and Georgia are only preludes. The real topic is Ukraine

Russia has been an expansionist empire for the past 500 years. When it fell apart, during the Bolshevik revolution and after the fall of communism, instinct drives them to put it back together. The desires of the subject peoples – Poles, Balts, Georgians and Ukrainians – are never taken into consideration. The rest of the world often acknowledges Russia's "sphere of interest" and does not probe deeply about human rights.

Russia tried democracy in the decade starting 1991. It didn't work. The elections were far from fair, and the people are not democratic in nature. Nobody was excited about the government. Vladimir Putin, who took over in 1999, had the insight that what the country really wants is a tsar.

Putin invented "sovereign democracy," the system with enough trappings of democracy to satisfy an uncritical West while allowing himself unrestricted control. Custine wrote 175 years ago that the Russian tsar had more power than any single person in the world, and that the Russian mentality was okay with that. Putin has re-created the czarist system, and his approval rates are hovering in the 80 percent range.

The book details the elaborate planning that goes into supposedly unplanned events such as the war in Georgia and the "rebellion" in southeast Ukraine. Elements include the use of irregular forces such as Cossacks, Chechnyans, and local thugs, and the massive use of propaganda. Russia's ability to sway the libertarian right and the nationalist movements in Western Europe has been awesome. The book describes how and why it is done.

It is amazing that a book published in February could so accurately predict the way the war in Ukraine has unfolded in the half year since. The entire thing has been driven by Russia, in an obvious drive to reestablish its empire. This is done with no regard for the Ukrainian people, including the Russian speaking majority from he pretends to be protecting.

The author's introduction briefly describes the three parts of the book. I copy it below.

Part I : "Russia and the Curse of Empire" (chapters 1– 5) In this part I analyze the role of empire building in Russian history and look at the similarities and differences with empire building in Western Europe. Why is it that in Russia empire building and despotism have always tended to go hand in hand? What are the differences and similarities between the legitimation theories used for empire building in Russia and in the West? This part ends with a chapter on "empire fatigue" in post-Soviet Russia and suggests that empire fatigue came to an end with the arrival of Vladimir Putin, who considered it his historic role to reestablish the lost empire. In the final chapters of this part the different diplomatic initiatives of

Putin are analyzed, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Russia-Belarus Union State, the BRICS, the Customs Union, as well as his most recent project: the Eurasian Union.

Part II: “The ‘Internal War’” (chapters 6– 9) Part II analyzes how Putin, convinced that in order to rebuild the empire he needed to rule for at least twenty years without interruption, put a system in place that guaranteed this continued rule. It analyzes in detail how he eroded and dismantled the democratic reforms, manipulated the party system, introduced fake parties, falsified elections, and transformed the ruling party “United Russia” from a centrist party into a revanchist and ultranationalist party. One particular chapter describes the activities of the Kremlin’s youth movement “Nashi,” which enabled the Kremlin to inculcate its adherents with its ultranationalist ideology and strengthen its grip on civil society by harassing and intimidating opponents. Another chapter describes the new role, assigned to the Cossacks, who function as Putin’s praetorian guard and auxiliary police force after the mass protests of 2011– 2012.

Part III: “The Wheels of War” (chapters 10– 16) In this part the wars of Putin’s regime are analyzed and compared with other recent wars fought by (Soviet) Russia. In the first chapter three lost wars are analyzed: the war in Afghanistan, the Cold War, and the First Chechen War. This analysis is followed by a chapter on the casus belli, which offered (then) Prime Minister Putin an opportunity to start an all-out second war in Chechnya: the so-called “apartment bombings” of September 1999, which killed hundreds of Russian citizens. The Kremlin ascribed these attacks to Chechen terrorists, but the official Kremlin version is put in doubt by allegations that the FSB, the KGB’s follow-up organization, masterminded these explosions. This chapter is followed by a chapter on the Second Chechen War, a war characterized by purges, torture, and forced disappearances. I explain that this war had a triple function for the Kremlin: to consolidate Putin’s position, to legitimate Putin’s power, and, additionally, to enable him to roll back the democratic reforms. In the final chapters the 2008 war with Georgia is analyzed. I distinguish three phases in this war: a “cold” war, a “lukewarm” war, and, finally, the “hot” (five-day) war. Despite the Kremlin’s declarations that this war came as a surprise, I present and analyze the many circumstances indicating that this war was preplanned with the objective of bringing about a regime change in Georgia.

The last two paragraphs of the book offer an excellent summary – and a prescient warning:

...“The Kremlin’s blackmail was successful. Yanukovich refused to sign the agreement— the result of six years of hard, protracted negotiations— in exchange for the Kremlin’s offer of a \$ 15 billion loan and a discount in the price of Russian gas. Yanukovich met with mass protests at home. The protesters were not reassured by his statement that a Ukrainian membership of the Eurasian Union was not (yet) on the agenda. It is clear, however, that most European governments, treating the relationship with Ukraine as a technocratic problem, have massively underestimated the important geopolitical implications of Ukraine’s choice. However, it is not sure that this is also the case for Moscow. **If Ukraine were to opt for deeper integration into the European Union, a Georgian scenario could not be excluded, in which the Kremlin could provoke riots in Eastern Ukraine or the Crimea, where many Russian passport holders live. This would offer Russia a pretext for intervening in Ukraine in order “to protect its nationals”**

and dismember the country. Unfortunately, such a scenario cannot be excluded. It is a corollary of the five principles of Russian foreign policy, formulated by President Medvedev on August 31, 2008. The fourth principle he mentioned was “protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be.” It leaves the door open for military adventures throughout Russia’s “neighborhood.”

"In 1992 Brzezinski warned: “The crucial issue here . . . is the future stability and independence of Ukraine.” In 2012— twenty years later— in his book *Strategic Vision*, Brzezinski repeated this warning, writing: “It cannot be stressed enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.” Brzezinski’s warning is, more than ever, still relevant today. It is not without reason that Polish analysts especially , or analysts of Polish origin, warn about the dangers of Russia’s new imperialism. Their country was, in the twentieth century (and in the centuries before), the main victim in Europe of the aggression from the imperialist powers, which dismembered and occupied the country. When the Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski was asked: “Can you imagine any kind of renewed geopolitical conflict to your west in your lifetime?” he answered “I have a vivid imagination, but no, I cannot imagine an armed conflict between us and Germany.” When asked: “Does your imagination extend to the possibility of a future conflict to the east ?” he answered: “Our relations with Russia, like yours [U.S.A.], are pragmatic but brittle. And unfortunately , after the war between Russia and Georgia, I’m afraid conflict in Europe is imaginable.” Another East European politician, Czech President Vaclav Havel, expressed the same concern sixteen years earlier: “I have said it so often: if the West does not stabilize the East, the East will destabilize the West.” This is a warning that should be taken seriously.