

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

SEPTEMBER 11, 2018

by DANA E. ABIZAID
12.09.2018

Lifting Russia Off Its Knees

“To lift Russia off its knees,” the student said.

We were standing in a corner of a lecture hall at Moscow State University where students had swarmed me after my first US History lecture in September 2002.

“What do you think about Putin?” one asked.

“What do you think about Chechnya?” asked another.

“Why are you here?” an 18-year-old kid with a skeptical look on his face inquired.

“Why are you?” I fired back. “Why are you studying History?”

And the answer: “To lift Russia off its knees.” His name was Vasily and he spoke with a clarity and passion I have rarely witnessed in students regarding the goal of their education.

I’ve thought about Vasily’s answer often in the ensuing 16 years, especially recently with anti-Russia hysteria filling newspapers and the airwaves across the US. Journalists and academics are revisiting the old fear of Slavic hordes overrunning Western Europe. This is a fear deeply rooted in the Western mind, as much the result of the 19th Century “Great Game” for dominance in Central and South Asia as a legacy of the Cold War.

The tone of this analysis is almost always alarming and negative. For example, The Atlantic, taking the opportunity to harshly criticize Russian involvement in the impending battle in Idlib, Syria, recently opined, “Carnage in Idlib, at this late stage of Syria’s war, would make a farce of Russia’s claims that Syria is stabilizing and that the time has come for large-scale, organized refugee return and reconstruction.” Even when Russia has made moves to secure its own borders, the Western press lets loose a paroxysm of

irrationality like “Putin is moving missiles into Kaliningrad and [destabilizing Europe!](#)”, as if Kaliningrad is Cuba rather than part of the Russian Federation. In a classic exchange exposing baseless US fear, AP foreign correspondent [Matt Lee](#) baffled State Department Spokesman Scott Kirby regarding the movement of Russian troops to its western border by asking, “Is it not logical to look at this and say the reason that the Russian army is at NATO’s doorstep is because NATO has expanded rather than the Russians expanded? In other words, NATO has moved closer to Russia rather than Russia moving closer to NATO.”

Commentators, though knowledgeable of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Yeltsin embarrassment and the economic crises of the 1990s, haven’t stopped to thoroughly consider how those hardships might have shaped the Russian worldview. Instead, what we get in the US press is [fear mongering and questionable claims that Putin](#) manipulated the 2016 election. In addition, we are subjected to [constant exasperation](#) that Putin has the temerity to stand up to the West and that Russians have the nerve (or [stupidity](#)) to follow him. This analysis does not seek an understanding of Putin’s motives. Rather, it has the hallmarks of hollow and dangerous propaganda revealing a conscious neglect or, worse, thorough misunderstanding, of 20th century History.

As a child of the Reagan years and a US Peace Corps Volunteer tasked with bringing the trappings of civilization to the peoples of the former Soviet Union, I, too, harbored great mistrust and fear of Russia that stuck with me until my first lecture at Moscow State University. Thus, I started with a clear warning shot across the bow: “In this concise History of the US, we will begin to analyze the events that have made America the most militarily powerful nation in the world.” A hand immediately went up.

“The US is not the most militarily powerful nation in the world,” a young man named Victor said.

“Which is?” I asked.

“Russia,” he replied.

Putin recently echoed this sentiment when he said Russia had cruise missiles that could [“reach anywhere in the world.”](#) He continued, saying western countries “need to take account of a new reality and understand ... [this]... is not a bluff.” Why do Russians make such statements? Why do they strive to challenge the US in Ukraine, Syria, and Western Europe?

The answers to these questions are based in History that few take seriously enough. For example, Putin’s 2005 claim that the collapse of the Soviet Union was [the greatest](#)

geopolitical disaster of the 20th century is perceived as a clear indicator of just how mentally unhinged he is. Who could possibly lament the dissolution of a totalitarian, evil empire? Well, it turns out, many could, including those in the former Soviet Central Asian state of Tajikistan who immediately experienced a devastating civil war from 1992-1997 that saw over 100,000 people killed and the 25 million Russians who woke up in December 1991 outside the borders of newly independent Russia. Having little knowledge of events like this or the Armenian-Azerbaijani War, Georgian Civil War, Chechen Wars, ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan, the rise of Islamic militancy in Uzbekistan, and the financial ruin of millions that accompanied Ruble demonetization in 1993, has led western journalists to naively decry Putin's statement as some type of neo-Soviet imperialism.

A few days after my discussions with Vasily and Victor in History class, I noticed something scrawled on a restroom wall down the corridor from the lecture hall. In large letters it read: *Yeltsin Prodal Clintony Dushy*, or "Yeltsin sold Clinton his soul." Although I read the western press assiduously to try to understand Russia and Russians in the 1990s, that graffiti taught me more than any book or article ever could have. Those in the West who benefitted from Yeltsin's disastrous rule might find it hard to believe how disillusioned Russians became with "democracy", "liberalism" and "western values" in the 1990s. Putin understands this well. His popularity and Russia's resurgence on the world stage have little to do with the prospect of bringing the Soviet Union back or igniting a new Cold War. It is much more the result of Putin independently forging his own path forward.

Despite the temptation to blame all the West's ills on Putin, the US government and media will need to devise realistic and rational strategies to effectively work with a Russia that Putin has lifted off its knees.