

**The Past Has Made the Present
Tense: The Influence of Russian
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Douglas F. Tobler

In a recent book of essays entitled *Knowing One's Enemies*, a noted political scientist recounts an apocryphal story ascribed to a retired British Foreign Office professional. Through more than half of the twentieth century, year in and year out, so the reminiscence goes, this diplomat assured Foreign Secretaries that there would be no major European war. In all that time, he boasted, he had been "wrong only twice."¹ What some may consider a banality bears repeating: now more than ever we must know our "enemies," not, as in the past, in order to win wars, but to avoid them. In a sober search for understanding of those who can destroy us, we must not only ask the right questions and give the right answers but also make certain that we do not get "little things right and big things wrong."²

Our own experiences in Vietnam, Iran, and the Middle East during the past two decades suggest a great need to know more about the history, culture, and beliefs of those who, in war and terrorist encounters, have shed American blood and consumed American treasure. We have too often judged our "enemies" principally against the background of our history, political institutions, and values. Although it is true that all people everywhere share yearnings for security, happiness, human rights, and freedom, these universals must be seen as they are, in the context of each people's history, time, and experience.

The importance of full and accurate information about the world can hardly be overstated.³ Americans need to know more about the Soviet Union, and Russians need to know more—much more—about America. Perhaps on both sides it is as the humorist Joshua Billings said over a century ago: "The trouble with people is not that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so." Arkady Shevchenko—a former high-ranking Soviet diplomat and Gromyko protégé who became so disillusioned with his government and his own duplicitous life within it that he defected to the West, leaving behind family, homeland, and security—offers this advice about today's Russia:

The USSR cannot be erased from the earth or removed from its position at the center of power in the modern world. The survival of mankind may depend upon temperate relations between the Soviet Union and the United

States. . . . Each [country] measures the other's intentions largely in terms of its own . . . assumptions and outlook; and the misunderstandings that, not surprisingly, arise could result in disastrous confrontation. Thus, it is vitally important for the West to know as accurately and as completely as possible the thinking and attitudes of those who make policy in the Kremlin.⁴

But why have we not probed the Russian psyche more deeply? Stephen Cohen suggests that we have been so mesmerized and even paralyzed by the power of Winston Churchill's famous metaphor of Russia "as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" that we have ceased trying to penetrate what this twentieth-century giant could not understand.⁵ Churchill's words may have become a self-fulfilling prophecy and a comfortable rationale for intellectual indolence.

Most Americans are well aware of the role Marxist-Leninist ideology has played in the formation of Soviet policies and intentions. The marriage of the vocabulary of "world revolution" from the early days of Soviet history with "totalitarianism" from the Stalin era has over the years created a powerful and malevolent specter in the American consciousness. And although some scholars in recent years have discounted ideology in favor of traditional power politics and self-interest of the ruling elite as keys for understanding Kremlin motives, Shevchenko rightly offers this caution:

Neither do I believe that the Soviet challenge to the free world is ideologically now less threatening, or that it has simply turned into a "fairly conventional geopolitical challenge," as some analysts suggest. They exaggerate the loss of ideological faith among the population and underestimate Soviet ideological appeal in Central and Latin America, Africa, Asia and other parts of the world.⁶

Having made this point, however, Shevchenko is more direct as he levels a devastating criticism at his former colleagues:

Many features of the Soviet system are well known. But I finally realized that the divinity before which the Kremlin rulers bowed was their own power and the maximal satisfaction of their personal requirements and those of the privileged upper class. These requirements had no limit, from the acquisition of foreign automobiles to whole nations outside the Soviet bloc.⁷

So much for the imminent appearance of the Marxist-Leninist classless society!

Without wishing to downplay the impact of either ideology or power politics on the Soviet mind, I would suggest that we need to give more serious consideration to a third motive: the Russian historical experience. I am by no means alone in this view. Such statesmen as former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, scholars such as Stephen Cohen and Seweryn Bialer, and respected journalists such as Hedrick Smith, David Shipler, and Elizabeth Pond have been struck by the continuities of Russian history in the policies of today's USSR.

In a long, front-page article in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Schmidt offered a distillation of insights gained in over two decades of close contact and discussion with Kremlin leaders. One should look to Russian history and geography, he counseled, for an understanding of the sources of “Russian security and inferiority complexes.” Soviet behavior since Helsinki, according to Schmidt, has much less to do with Marxism-Leninism than with “the Soviet reactions to the concrete experiences of the last few decades—and the trends of continuity in Russian history.” (“Dies [the invasion of Afghanistan and the stationing of SS-20 rockets in East Central Europe] alles hat weniger mit der bolschewistischen Spielart von Marxismus oder mit Leninismus zu tun als vielmehr mit der sovjhetische Reaktion auf konkrete Erfahrungen der letzten Jahrzehnte—und mit kontinuierlichen Trends der russischen Geschichte.”) Similarly, Schmidt interprets Soviet expansionism as largely a carryover from a powerful early Russian tradition and not primarily a product of communism.⁸ For Schmidt, then, history is the key which helps unlock the psychological world of Soviet inferiority, insecurity, and paranoia.

How history, together with ideology and perceived security needs, fits into a complex web of motivations on an issue such as Soviet expansionism in the world is explained in Elizabeth Pond’s respected book, *From the Yaroslavsky Station*:

The mandate of the self-proclaimed revolutionary is obvious. The urge to expand the Soviet Union’s international influence is untempered by any vigorous domestic political restraints. The drive is strong on triple grounds: history (harking back to the tsars), ideology (heralding the messianic triumph of Communism), and paranoia (involving a definition of Soviet security so total as to demand on occasion the total insecurity of the USSR’s neighbors). It is exacerbated on the one hand by an inferiority complex towards the West, and on the other by a pride in the USSR’s new global power. It is manifested in the Soviet refusal to endorse anything short of the total world victory of soviet-led socialism.⁹

David Shipler argues that not only has history played a powerful role in Russian life, but as contemporary Russians lose faith in the validity and promises of Communist ideology, they tend to retreat into and “idealize an irretrievable past rooted in rural simplicity and moral purity, a search for Russianness.”¹⁰

It is not unreasonable for disillusioned Russians to harken back to their past. Continuity is as much the essence of their society as change is of our own. In spite of revolution and the propaganda of revolution, change has come very slowly to the Soviet Union. Timetables for the ultimate victory of communism and its promised utopian society must be steadily revised forward. Conversely, we Americans must constantly and consciously reclaim our roots and our historic past, as in the Bicentennial celebration, as we pass through one “revolution” after another at near breakneck speed.

What, then, are the major historic experiences which have fashioned the Russian psyche? I will confine my discussion in this essay to four:

1. The history of Russia has been one of invasions or threats of invasion by foreigners exploiting a vulnerable geography. In modern times these have come primarily from Western would-be conquerors lusting after the Eurasian heartland. This historic fact has, more than anything else, fed a preoccupation, even paranoia, with security. Security, however, becomes ever more elusive as Soviet actions make their neighbors and the rest of the world feel insecure and hostile. (For a discussion of freedom and security in the contemporary context, see Gary Browning's article in this issue of *BYU Studies*.)

The Russian desire for security has bred a sustained expansion in every possible direction in quest of ever-larger buffer zones which, in turn, have produced an insularity and isolationism virtually unparalleled in the world. Historically, Russians have been a provincial people par excellence—while pursuing an empire. For these reasons, the Russians have had a difficult time adjusting to an age of possible nuclear annihilation, an age wherein absolute security has become a fiction. Americans have similar anxieties about security, but they come from an opposite direction. Geographical separation from Europe and Asia, isolationism, great power status, and wealth have given us near absolute security in the past. But that privileged status is over. We, too, must behave as part of the global village in a nuclear age.

2. Russians have a history of government by a strong, centralized authoritarian state. The tsar was the Holy Father, God's viceroy on earth; he ruled by divine right, an attitude preserved by the Romanovs and respected by most of the Russian people until well into the twentieth century. The vastness of the empire and the historical imperative for security produced and legitimized a state where power and authority were not shared. Consequently, the Russians have few traditions of freedom, individualism, self-government (except in the peasant villages), or direct representation.

3. Russians have long had a keen sense of their unique national identity and culture; they have taken great pride in a civilization different from the West. This has fostered an affection for Mother Russia, an attachment to Orthodoxy, culture, the language, and the countryside. Exiles, especially poets and the literati, have found it difficult to live and work productively outside their unique Russian atmosphere.

4. Russians have wrestled throughout their modern history with a sense of economic and technological inferiority vis-à-vis the West. At least since the time of Peter the Great's "Great Embassy" to the West in 1697–98, they have stood in awe of what the West has produced, while at the same time craving recognition commensurate with their size, power, and culture—a recognition which has been forthcoming only since 1945. Much of the contemporary parading of military paraphernalia on holidays is not only a "guarantee" of security now and in the future but also a demonstration of having arrived as a force in a world dominated by industrial, technological, and scientific achievement. The same is true for Russian participation in world sporting events such as the Olympics. Most importantly, however, both the Russian leadership and people seek worldwide recognition as a modern, powerful state which is producing a more just, secure, and progressive society in a hostile world. They are thus genuinely offended when referred to as gangsters or criminals, especially because they live in a society that tends to regard propaganda more seriously than we do.

Each of these historic forces requires some explication. Since the beginning of history, the vast Russian plain has been a magnetic attraction to invaders. From the Mongol Horde of the thirteenth century through the successive incursions by Poland, Sweden, France, and Germany, Russians have been forced to defend themselves or endure subjugation at the hands of foreigners. The Bolsheviks were particularly offended and made permanently suspicious by the crude attempts of the Western Allies (including the U.S.A.) to intervene on the side of the Whites in the early years of the Civil War.¹¹

All of these wars were fought on Russian soil by the Russians themselves. All were devastating, reaching proportions nearly incomprehensible to the West in World War II (to Russians, the "Great Patriotic War"), when they withstood the best and the most that Hitler could marshal against them. Most Americans do not know that when Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, he lined up over three million men, many with fighting experience, in 153 divisions, 3580 tanks and 2740 airplanes against a Russian army that was larger in number but technologically inferior.¹² Moreover, Stalin's recent purges had decimated the Soviet army leadership corps; their replacements were untested and inexperienced.

But what Americans may have forgotten, Russians know only too well. As Stephen Cohen has written:

More than any other event, including the Revolution, the War shaped the Soviet Union as it exists today, as a political system, society and world

power. Its legacy endures among citizens because it was an experience of inseparable—and colossal—tragedy and triumph.¹³

This is, however, not all.

After four years of savage fighting from Moscow to Berlin, it culminated in twenty million Soviet deaths, about equally divided between soldiers and civilians. That often cited but little understood statistic means that virtually every family lost one member or more. And it does not include the millions of survivors who were maimed for life.¹⁴

Visitors to the Soviet Union today see many monuments to the war. Nor is the war's memory confined to the "war generations." The younger generation of Russians takes pride in the role their parents and grandparents played in ridding the world of Hitler and in helping establish their country as a world power. Westerners are often astonished by Soviet expressions of spontaneous patriotism. For example, David Shipler recounts an experience with a teacher who "was blindly loyal to her country and her system, a deep patriot so warm-hearted that her countrymen felt like family to her. Every saccharine short story about Soviet suffering and heroism in World War II . . . brought tears to her eyes."¹⁵

Americans have sometimes found it difficult to understand and appreciate evidences of Russian patriotism while taking our own for granted. Here again the selectivity of what we have learned—from our impressions of Communist tyranny, from the comments of dissidents, and from our tendency to believe what we want to believe—has led us to apply a somewhat different standard to the Russians than we might to ourselves. The Russians are, for example, still grateful for American Lend-Lease during the war but point out that it represented only 4 percent of Soviet gross production at the time, a fact difficult to find in American history books.

The Russian experience in World War II—and against other invaders—teaches a further lesson: these people have a long history of coping successfully with all forms of adversity. *Nine Hundred Days*, Harrison Salisbury's monumental story of the siege of Leningrad, portrays vividly the Russian capacity for "hunkering down" and enduring immense deprivation to defend their homeland. But such resistance was common throughout Russia. Shevchenko has described this trait of his countrymen well:

There is no doubt that the USSR is experiencing serious domestic and other difficulties. But it has overcome worse troubles in the past. It has both tremendous natural wealth and vast human resources. In their ability to withstand centuries—not decades—of hardship and privation and yet persevere, the Soviet people are unmatched by any nation on earth, with the possible exception of the Chinese.¹⁶

The Russian preoccupation with defense, coupled with the size of their expanding empire, has given them little experience with the larger world.

Their participation in the expansion of Europe in the age of discovery was belated and tangential; they had a full agenda to settle their own trackless territory. Russian history is thus not only a history of insecurity but of insularity, both deeply ingrained in the people as well as the present-day leaders.

One of the major achievements in the whole panorama of human history is the rise of political freedom and democracy in the West. There was a time in the nineteenth century when virtually everyone in Western civilization viewed democracy as the inexorable “wave of the future.” It was, therefore, no accident that the war that ended that age of optimism, World War I, carried the slogan to “make the world safe for democracy.” Americans can be forgiven for taking democracy for granted and assuming that all people everywhere should want what we have. Given our history, we can hardly conceive of anything less. But the Russians have had no such historic experience. Their earliest ties were with Byzantium, the Eastern Roman Empire, before the Mongols came. First Kiev, then Muscovy arose without adequately incorporating the civilizing ideas and institutions of Greece and Rome or the medieval traditions which produced the Magna Carta. Nor did the Russians fully experience the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the scientific revolution, all of which played such a powerful role in the growth of individualism, the dignity of man, and the rise of independent thought in the West.

Russia knew no Locke and had no Glorious Revolution; the eighteenth-century Enlightenment only flickered in St. Petersburg, failing to register any appreciable permanent impact on the Russian polity or social institutions. Their best candidate among the few enlightened despots, Catherine the Great, was clearly more despotic than enlightened. Her use of the language of the Western philosophies constituted a kind of verbal “Potemkin village,” designed to camouflage the expansion of serfdom and the absence of political reform.

Reform was simply not part of the Russian administrative impulse. This accounts, in part, for the later mushroom-like sprouting of Russian revolutionary movements in the nineteenth century. Where there is no possibility of reform, revolution is the only hope for change.

What reform there was came largely from the top down, from Peter’s importation of Western technology (but nothing else)¹⁷ to Alexander II’s emancipation of the serfs under the influence of the higher bureaucracy and for the benefit of the state. Where genuine attempts at change were begun—like the Speransky reforms under Alexander I or the establishment of representative *dumas* under Nicholas II after the Revolution of 1905—they were generally half-hearted at best and often retracted once the original impetus was gone.

From the time when Muscovy first laid claim to the honors of the Third Rome (after Rome and Byzantium) in the fifteenth century, Russians have had a curious love-hate, attraction-repulsion relationship with the West. This erupted in the nineteenth century when pro-Western literati—Westernizers—embarrassed over Russian backwardness, pressed for the introduction of Western civilization, with its rationalism, science, material well-being, socialism, basic human freedoms, and secularism, into their benighted homeland. Their opponents, the Slavophiles, also wanted “progress” but preferred to preserve at the same time the unique and wholesome Russian institutions and virtues: religiosity, spirituality, the healthy communal Russian village (*mir*). These were considered infinitely superior to the superficiality and hollow materialism of the West. This pride in things Russian, in the depths of Russian “soul,” has been probed and celebrated by the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from Turgenev to Solzhenitsyn. It is this national pride, this Russian identity, which Hitler offended so deeply, not only with his invasion of their territory and brutalization of the people, but especially with his doctrine that Slavs were subhuman, so that even anti-Stalinist Russians fought valiantly for Mother Russia against the foreign devil. It was this same national pride to which Stalin appealed in the darkest days of the war to rally the people against the aggressor.

Despite this national pride, however, Russians have historically had a kind of inferiority complex about their country’s backwardness. They are unsure of their place in the world. Even more than Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Russia has all the attributes of a *parvenu*. Russia’s industrial revolution began in the last years of the tsars and was carried forward by Stalin with ruthless speed at enormous human cost. The emergence of the Soviet Union as a world superpower brandishing military might and nuclear capability signifies an attempt to overcome a longstanding inferiority in a world that especially respects industrial, military, and nuclear power. Nor have consumer goods been entirely neglected in this leap into the modern world. It is true that the Russians do not have the material goods and standard of living enjoyed in the West, but they have more than they have ever known. No ordinary Russian in history has lived this well.

While Americans, as I have suggested in this essay, would do well to learn more Russian history, it is equally important for Russians, from top to bottom, to come to know America. Shevchenko himself marvels how in spite of institutes, studies, and English classes, Soviet leaders find it difficult to take the pulse of America, to understand American values, thought processes, and institutions.¹⁸

The purpose of all historical study is understanding: understanding of each people's development, understanding of the human condition, understanding for responsible citizenship in the world. A study of Russian history can facilitate all of these as we come to know our "enemies" better. It is not a foolproof tool, but it is far better than ignorance. In a tribute to American democracy, Walt Whitman casts this refrain:

Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy!
Of value is thy freight—tis not the Present
Only
The Past is also stored in thee!¹⁹

The past is also stored in the Soviet Union. Historically, it is a fundamentally different past from our own, but it, too, requires our careful attention.

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1. Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 503.

2. *Ibid.*, 504.

3. An example of the costs of misunderstanding an enemy can be found in the writings of Count Bernstorff, German ambassador to the United States in 1917, who vigorously warned his government against an unrestricted submarine war that would bring the United States in 1917, who vigorously warned his government against an unrestricted submarine war that would bring the United States into World War I. Reflecting on the tragedy somewhat later, he observed: "In my opinion, the underestimation and lack of knowledge of America. . . was a major factor in the decision. When the climax of the tragedy was reached, it was not believed that the U.S. would enter the war with its full political, military and economic power" (quoted by Dr. Jurgen Kalkbrenner, consul-general of the Federal Republic of Germany, in a speech at Boston University, October 1985, in *Statements and Speeches* 3 [November 1985], 7).

4. Arkady Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Universe Books, 1981), 168.

5. Stephen Cohen, *Sovieticus: American Perceptions and Soviet Realities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985),

6. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow*, 368.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

8. Helmut Schmidt, "Mit den Russen leben," *Die Zeit*, 24 June 1983, 4.

9. Elizabeth Pond, From *the Yaroslavy Station: Russia Perceived* (New York: Universe Books, 1981), 168.

10. David Shipler, *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* (New York: Times Books, 1983), 5.

11. Elizabeth Pond cites a revealing insight gained by George Kennan on the Allied intervention:

"The Allied intervention only helped to further compromise the Whites and turn the population toward the Reds," concluded diplomat-historian, George Kennan. "The whole affair," he wrote, "was a 'fantastic brew' of misunderstandings, war hysteria, coincidences and mistakes." In a personal note he added: "Until I read the accounts of what transpired during these episodes,

I never fully realized the reasons for the contempt and resentments home by the early Bolsheviki towards the Western powers. Never, surely have countries contrived to show themselves so much at their worst as did the Allies in Russia from 1917 to 1920.” (Pond, *From the Yaroslavsky Station*, 163)

12. Lothar Gruchmann, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuth Verlag, 1967), 120–21.

13. Cohen, *Sovieticus*, 112.

14. *Ibid.*; Pond lists the following statistics: “In 1945 the Soviet Union was devastated, after a foreign occupation of half a million square miles of its territory and the destruction of 1700 tons, 70,000 villages, and the homes of some 25 million people” (Pond, *From the Yaroslavsky Station*, 165).

15. Shipler, *Russia*, 6.

16. Shevchenko. *Breaking with Moscow*, 368.

17. In Robert K. Massie’s massive biography, *Peter the Great*, there is a masterful summary not only of how Peter viewed Western Europe but also of an attitude which has largely prevailed throughout Russian history since then:

[Peter] had travelled to the West in order to learn how to build ships, and this he accomplished. But his curiosity had carried him into a wide range of new fields. He had probed into everything that caught his eye—had studied microscopes, barometers, wind dials, coins, cadavers and dental pliers, as well as ship construction and artillery. What he saw in the thriving cities and harbors of the West, what he learned from the scientists, inventors, merchants, tradesmen, engineers, printers, soldiers and sailors confirmed his early belief . . . that his Russian were technologically backward—decades, perhaps centuries, behind the West.

Asking himself how this had happened and what could be done about it, Peter came to understand that the roots of Western technological achievement lay in the freeing of men’s minds. He grasped that it had been the Renaissance and the Reformation, neither of which had ever come to Russia, which had broken the bonds of the medieval Church and created an environment where independent philosophical and scientific inquiry as well as wide-ranging commercial enterprise could flourish. . . .

But, curiously, Peter did not grasp—perhaps he did not wish to grasp—the political implications of this new view of man. He had not gone to the West to study “the art of government.” Although in Protestant Europe he was surrounded by evidence of the new civil and political rights of individual men embodied in constitutions, bills of rights and parliaments, he did not return to Russia determined to share power with his people. On the contrary, he returned not only determined to change his country, but also convinced that if Russia was to be transformed, it was he who must provide both the direction and motive force. He would try to lead; but where education and persuasion were not enough, he would drive—if necessary, flog—the backward nation forward.” (Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980], 232–33)

18. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow*, 230–31.

19. Walt Whitman, “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood,” in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 457–58.