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Misrepresenting Russia: Western perceptions of the Putin years, 1999-2008

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Résumé

L'ascension de Vladimir Poutine à la présidence de la Russie fut un point tournant dans l'histoire de la Russie et de ses relations avec l'occident. Lorsqu'il est comparé aux politiques plus pro-occidentales de son prédécesseur, Boris Eltsine, le nouveau nationalisme russe de Poutine changea la relation de la Russie avec l'Occident. Ce texte utilise des articles publiés dans quatre journaux influents de l'Occident—le *Washington Post*, le *New York Times*, le *Guardian* et l'*Independent*—pour montrer comment l'Occident percevait la Russie entre 1999 et 2008. Poutine fut longuement critiqué pour avoir transformé la « démocratie », instauré par l'Occident dans les années post-soviétiques, en autocratie qui reflétait plus le contexte politico-social traditionnel russe. La Russie refusa de se soumettre aux intérêts de l'Occident. Les médias populaires occidentaux, reflétant les intérêts de leurs gouvernements respectifs, ont rondement critiqué la nouvelle direction de la Russie. L'obligation perçue par les médias occidentaux de promouvoir la « démocratie » autour du globe les a menés à condamner Poutine et la Russie, ce qui créa un sentiment de « russophobie ».

Mots Clés

Vladimir Putin, Russie, URSS, occident, démocratie, journaux, médias, Tchétchénie, Ossétie, « russophobie ».

Abstract

The ascension of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency was a turning point in the history of Russia. Using articles from four influential western newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*—this text will show the West perceived Russia during Putin's between 1999 and 2008. Putin was heavily criticized as he was moving the country away from the "democracy" installed by the West after the Cold War, to a path more in line with traditional Russian principles. Russia refused to be subservient to Western interests. The western mainstream media reflected their government's interests and critiqued Russia's new path. The western media's perceived obligation to promote "freedom" and "democracy" around the world has led it to condemn Russia and Putin and to create a sense of "russophobia" in the West.

Key Words

Vladimir Putin, Russia, USSR, West, democracy, newspapers, media, Chechnya, Ossetia, "russophobia".

Introduction

On February 10, 2007, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin spoke as part of the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy. This conference was instituted in 1962 to examine issues of international security. Putin talked about Russia's changing relationship with the West since the end of the Cold War. Russia dealt with double standards from the so-called international community and he specifically criticized the foreign policy of the United States, including its excessive use of force and its involvement with NATO in developing an anti-missile shield close to Russia's borders. The speech made shockwaves around the world, sparking fears of renewed Cold War-like confrontations between Russia and the US-dominated western world.

With the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 came a new relationship, but according to Putin, "…the Cold War left us with live ammunition, figuratively speaking. I am referring to ideological stereotypes, double standards and other typical aspects of Cold War bloc thinking."[1] The post-Cold War world concentrated power in the hands of the United States. Putin argued that American domination was a cause for concern:

> We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations.

For Putin, Russia's security was the main concern. Instead of movement towards disarmament, Putin saw the U.S. introducing new initiatives in order to limit the Russian Federation's power and influence, especially with regard to Europe. The Russian President pointed to the U.S.-sponsored anti-missile defence system in Europe that provided for missile shield installations in the Czech Republic and Poland under the guise of strategic locations for defence against Iran and North Korea. The President also mentioned the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe; this Treaty, a revision of the original Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe that came into being during the last years of the Cold War, established limits on conventional military equipment in Europe. Russia ratified the revised treaty in 1999, but only three other

[1] Vladimir Putin, "Speech at Munich Conference on Security Policy," 10 Feb, 2007.

nations (Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine) have ratified the treaty since then. Putin questioned NATO's good faith, since its members refused to ratify the treaty on the pretext that Russian troops were still in Georgia and Moldova. For Putin, NATO's actions were disconcerting because Russian troops were leaving Georgia. The only remnants of Russian presence in the area were 1,500 servicemen in Moldova and they were there for peacekeeping operations and protecting warehouses with ammunition left over from Soviet times. At the same time "so-called flexible frontline American bases," with up to five thousand men, were being set up along Russian borders. For Putin, NATO expansion appeared to have nothing to do with security in Europe, but rather with Russian encirclement: "Rather than cooperation with the Russian state, [the West is] trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us – these walls may be virtual but they are nevertheless dividing, ones that cut through our continent." Putin asked who was threatening who? There seemed to be one set of rules for NATO and another for Russia.

As the Cold War ended and a "new" relationship emerged between the U.S. and Russia, the priority was to "integrate" Russia to the West. But what did this "integration" mean? Was the relationship between the United States and Russia a relationship of equals or was it rather a relationship of subservience and encirclement?

* * *

In order to answer these questions, one must first describe the present relationship between the West and Russia. Winston Churchill's epigram "history is written by the victors" best describes the situation. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War put the United States in a position of world domination. In the eyes of many, capitalist democracy had triumphed over communism. The time had come to reintegrate Russia into the western world. But how did the Russians see the Cold War? How did they see the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Neither the Western public, nor anyone else, has a complete picture of Russia. What we understand about Russia is what the western mainstream media wants us to understand about Russia. In the post-Cold War world, the mainstream media have presented Russia as a defeated country over which the United States stood triumphant. Additionally, they want us to know that

whatever plans the western powers implement for the reconstruction of Russia are best for Russia. But are they really the best initiatives to reshape Russia?

After the Second World War, the traditionalist western view held that the United States was the defender of the "free world." As Columbia University Professor Anders Stephanson puts it, "The predominant theme is an ideological one: the democratic, hitherto isolationist United States reluctantly assumes its objective responsibilities as leader of the free world and major opponent of the totalitarian and ruthless Soviet Union."[2] To counter the Soviet "menace," the United States took charge of the reconstruction of Europe after WWII and became the preeminent defender of capitalism during the Cold War. Should the accepted history of the relationship between Russia and the United States be contested?

The revisionist view of the Cold War and of its origins challenges the traditionalist view: The United States was far from a defender of democracy. According to Stephanson, "instead of naïve but decent Americans operating on the assumption of co-operation, there were self-conscious capitalist expansionists meddling with cautiously formulated and on the whole understandable Soviet security concerns."[3] The United States policy post-WWII was to create the ultimate conditions for the power and prosperity of the United States. Stephanson quotes revisionist historian Gabriel Kolko: "Having suffered no devastation, [the United States were] ready to impose [their] will 'to restructure the world so that American business could trade, operate, and profit without restrictions everywhere.'"[4] One of their first initiatives in Europe was to install the Marshall Plan, a program in which the U.S. gave economic support in order to rebuild devastated European economies and block the spread of communism following the Second World War. In the orthodox view the Marshall Plan saved democracy in Western Europe, but for Kolko it was a strategy used by the U.S. in order to subordinate European capitalism and crush any attempts at European political and economic independence. The U.S. intervened in other countries in order to suit their own interests, and the Soviet Union's zone of interest represented the only barrier to American hegemonic ambitions.

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[2] Anders Stephanson, "The United States," *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives*, ed. David Reynolds (New Haven, 1994), p. 29.
[3] Stephanson, p. 32.
[4] Ibid.

The traditionalist view retained its domination after the Cold War ended. The "victorious" United States defeated the "evil" communists and it was now up to the Americans to lead the western world in a grand initiative to transform the new Russia into a prosperous country more in line with American interests. According to the mainstream western media, the United States are the paragons of democracy and capitalism. This is also the reason for the numerous critiques of Russia today. Since Vladimir Putin became President of Russia in 1999, Russia has done things "differently." During his first two terms in office (1999-2008) Putin drew the ire of the western mainstream media. Under his watch, the country was rebuilt as a relatively prosperous, powerful, independent state. Russia is no longer subservient to American interests, as was the case during Boris Yeltsin's time as Russian President.

Is hostility towards Russia, or "Russophobia," from the days of the Cold War still present in American and western media rhetoric? The official discourse since the end of the Cold War is collaboration but this remained illusory, as the United States would rather re-mould Russia into their own image instead of working with a modern Russia pursuing its own interests and objectives. Important issues such as the alleged censure of both the Russian media and of political opponents, as well as the use of military force in Russia's "near abroad" have of course had a great impact on the mainstream media's perception of Russia, but do these perceptions represent all that is Russia today?

A re-examination of the relationship between Russia and the United States challenging the existing traditionalist views of the Cold War and the post-Cold War years is necessary. It shows that the United States did not go into Europe after WWII for altruistic reasons. During the Cold War the U.S. government acted in its own interests and not out of any sense of moral obligation to Europeans. The Soviet Union often acted in response to U.S. initiatives. One such initiative, the Marshall Plan, was developed to reconstruct Europe in light of U.S. economic interests and to prevent the spread of Soviet influence in Europe. American involvement in the divided zones of Berlin prior to the Berlin crisis is also important to mention. In addition, the long-term impact of so-called NSC 68, a strategic planning document calling for the containment of communism and the USSR, will be examined. We will also observe the United States' participation in the

regime change in Afghanistan before the war in 1978 and the consequences for the Soviet Union.

What is the role of "democracy" in Russia? For the west, democratic standards were, and still are, a constant source of concern. In a case of pot calling kettle black, the west, led by the United States, criticizes Russian "democracy," yet constantly uses "democracy" as a pretext for foreign intervention, and not as a guiding principle in the transformation of nations around the world. U.S. intervention post WWII in Greece (1947), Guatemala (1953) and Iran (1953) show that "democracy" was a mere pretext to secure U.S. support of authoritarian regimes. The U.S. is therefore in no position to criticize Russia's democracy. From tsarist Russia to communism during the Soviet era, "democracy" was never an anchor of Russian society. And what of the West's so-called attempt at transforming Russia into a democracy after the Cold War? It caused more grief than good for the Russian people. Consequently, Vladimir Putin came into the presidency in 2000 and tried to undo the last decade, moving away from the country's former subservience to western interests.

The third important theme is Chechnya: numerous alleged cases of human rights abuses in Chechnya prompted the western mainstream media to criticize Russia. It blamed the Russian government for the escalating violence in Chechnya. What is the relationship between Chechnya and Russia and how does it differ from the Western perspective? Chechnya is not simply the oppressed nation fighting against what the mainstream media describes as a "neo-imperial" Russia. Russians saw Chechen forces as violent Muslim fundamentalists. It is important to show a more nuanced image of Chechnya as the region has a long history of banditry. Terrorist operations, invasions of neighbouring Dagestan and Ingushetia, a history of abuse against Russian minorities, and general lawlessness plagued the region and caused Russia to intervene. The territorial integrity of Russia and the economic importance of Chechnya to the Russian state were also reasons for Russia's engagement in the region. The Western news publications were more likely to champion Chechnya's right to independence than to support Russia's intervention in its own territory.

To what extent did Vladimir Putin's character play a part in the west's "russophobia"? Putin is a candid and strong leader. Ironically, these qualities are why

the west cannot abide him as they have no answers to his honest views of both his country and the west's interference in it. The only way to counter him is therefore to blacken his name. His alleged "cold" demeanour is used in comparison to former Soviet leaders. This conceals the fact that Putin brought stability and respect back to a country that came out of the Yeltsin years in ruins. Putin's background has impacted the way in which the West perceives the Russian President. From his early years as an intelligence officer in East Germany to his work for St. Petersburg mayor Antony Sobchak to his role as head of the FSB, the west latches onto details from Putin's past, to present him as an unsympathetic figure. The western mainstream media reinforces that image with unflattering descriptions and questionable comparisons to other famous—or infamous—historical figures such as Adolf Hitler.

Finally, one needs to examine the North Ossetia/Georgia crisis of 2008 and the way it was treated in the western media. In their view, Russia was an aggressor, invading a small, helpless neighbour. This western perspective is simplistic and self-serving. What were Russian troops doing in the region? What was the Georgian policy towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia? How did the Western media present the crisis? The argument here is that it made a circus of the crisis, misrepresenting the conflict and ultimately painted Russia as a villain, unjustly intervening in Georgian affairs.

The United States and United Kingdom cooperated early and often in countering what they perceived as the Soviet "menace" during the Cold War. Does concurrence prevail in the way these two nations perceive Russia? The remnants of Cold War thinking still present in Anglo-American media vis-à-vis modern Russia shall therefore be examined. Examples are drawn from four major western news publications: The *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* from the United States, and the *Guardian* and the *Independent* from the United Kingdom. These four publications were chosen for their wide readership and their importance as news sources. They also represent a varied spectrum of opinions. The *New York Times* and the *Guardian* are centre-left newspapers, while the *Washington Post* and the *Independent* feature more conservative viewpoints. These four publications are also part of the mainstream media and are often defenders of American and British government policy. Why do some journalists assume such roles? Is it to enjoy privileged relationships and access to government information? Is one more

likely to be accepted if one writes within mainstream parameters? The *Washington Post* is a semi-official mouthpiece for the U.S. government. The *New York Times* is susceptible to defending U.S. policy without being overly critical. The *Guardian* tries to be critical, but often errs on the side of government. An interesting feature though is its "Comments are Free" section that follows selected articles online. These reflect a broader public opinion and are useful indicators of the success of government propaganda lines. The *Independent* is owned by a Russian oligarch, Alexander Lebedev, yet is often a voice for government opinion.

For the western media, Vladimir Putin is the barometer for changing attitudes towards Russia; his speeches drew wide media attention. Articles detailing his speeches and opinion pieces as well as any other relevant articles appearing in the days after his speeches were examined. It is from these articles that western media representations of Russia emerged. Another major source of information for this essay was David S. Fogelsong's book *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" Since 1881*. Stephen F. Cohen's *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* was also very important. Works from historians such as Anders Stephanson, Gabriel and Joyce Kolko, Philip Longworth and William Appleman Williams are also essential in examining the western perception of Russia.

This essay follows the evolution of the relationship between the West and Russia, from the days of the Cold War through Putin's first two terms in office. How did the U.S. see Russia's development? If Russia did not transform itself according to American requirements then it was reverting back to Soviet "bad habits." This message is now engrained in western and American media. Instead of presenting Russia as a partner with whom to cooperate, Russia has become a Soviet throwback; without "freedom," a backward country headed by a "cold" and "calculating" leader devoid of charisma who abuses his constituents and circumvents the law. Of course, there are nuances, but western discourse now represents Russia as a potential enemy of the west and as an obstacle to "freedom." Mainstream media with a wide readership often misrepresent the current relationship between the West and Russia. The news media use many different ways to present this negative image of Russia, as we shall see. But first let us explore the context of this long-standing rivalry between the west and Russia.

Chapter 1: History of Russia's Relationship with the West

From early on, the West saw Russia as 'evil' purely as a political manoeuvre. During the reign of Tsar Ivan IV, the West—in this case the Germans—produced misconstrued information about Russia.

> Ivan's reputation has been shaped to suit political interests abroad as well as in Russia. Germans, frightened by Ivan's drive towards the Baltic, used their new printing presses to blacken his image with sensational reports of his atrocities… They included hair-raising stories of how the Russians not only butchered their enemies…but also spitted and roasted young girls, impaled babies, and burned old people in their houses. Atrocities were...exaggerated and invented tales about the Russians were disseminated in a deliberate attempt to enlist the sympathy of the German-speaking world and the help of the Habsburg Empire…So the notion was propagated that Russians were savage heretics and their tsar a classic tyrant.[1]

During the Cold War, the USSR was the enemy. The Americans were "heroic"; the Soviets "malevolent"—this became part of western discourse and iconography. Historian William Appleman Williams wrote that American leaders thought and acted

> …according to traditional assumptions and belief that Marxism, the Soviet Union, and communists in general were wholly evil and incapable of maturing into something more humane. In one form or another, therefore, Americans operated on the premise that most of the difficulties in the world were caused by the Soviet Union or agents, fellow travelers, and dupes of the Kremlin.[2]

The traditionalist view of the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s was that "the totalitarian Soviet Union started the Cold War by expansionism while the democratic United States, initially reactive, eventually moved to stop this and so defended the free world."[3] To traditionalists "the responsibility fell to the United States of taking England's place as the balancer…by actively using its weight for the deterrence and the frustration of any challenger to the world order who was trying to make himself predominant."[4] But the United States' goals were not as virtuous and benevolent as they appeared to be. Historian Thomas McCormick notes that America's actual goals were just as self-serving as the Soviet plans represented in the western media:

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[1] Philip Longworth, *Russia: The Once and Future Empire from Pre-History to Putin* (New York, 2003), p. 88.
[2] William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, 1962), p. 291.
[3] Stephanson, p. 27.
[4] Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War as History* (New York, 1967), p. 24.

> The United States finished the Second World War determined to accomplish the 'hegemonic goals, awesomely global and omnipresent in nature' of integrating the periphery (the Pacific Rim, the Mediterranean and Latin America) into an American-led global market economy and to prevent any other core power from dominating 'the Eurasian heartland.' The Cold War (left undefined) was caused by the Soviet refusal to go along with the implementation of these goals, though there were also great problems with the Europeans right after the war. Eventually, there was 'bipolarization between Russia and America' over the future of Europe and Middle Eastern periphery.[5]

After the First World War, American President Woodrow Wilson's policy for American security "was not to defend the United States against the outside world but to change fundamentally the outside world"; the same concept also applied after WWII.[6] The U.S. intervened in Europe not only as a reaction against the spread of communism, but also as an aggressive appropriation of a market to counter Soviet influence. According to Anders Stephanson, Europe mattered more than ever before to the United States because "the Second World War prompted new globalist (rather than purely continental or hemispheric) definitions of American national security."[7] The United States were no longer only interested in Europe as just another market, but saw "a global economy shaped in America's image and interests," and moved in with "the widespread projection of U.S. bases to ensure extended defence in the new age of air power." European reconstruction after WWII was very important to the United States, and could only be achieved on American terms. The Marshall Plan, an aid package implemented by the United States in 1948 in order to help the European economies climb out of the devastation caused by the Second World War, was the solution. It was designed to consolidate American influence in Europe. Historian Philip Longworth notes the importance of this initiative:

> The curtain fell only over a year later, when the Marshall Aid programme was introduced to help Western European countries to recover from the war. Its terms had been designed to be unacceptable to the Soviet Union and its followers…So, when the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia applied for Marshall Aid, and learned that as beneficiaries they would be subject to public American scrutiny on a collective basis, like all other beneficiaries, they withdrew. It was,

[5] Stephanson, p. 44.
[6] James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Towards Russia After the Cold War* (Washingon, DC, 2003), p. 6.
[7] Stephanson, p. 6.

> after all, unthinkable that the Power which had done most to defeat the common enemy should be exposed to what was tantamount to public humiliation. That was what Washington had been counting on.[8]

The Marshall Plan was intended as a cover to push the Soviet Union into a corner and out of Europe. It also served to establish U.S. hegemony in Europe.

* * *

The Berlin Blockade was an important turning point in the relationship between the western world and Russia. After the Second World War, one of the more contentious issues was the fate of Germany. The Allies took control of Germany following agreements laid out during the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences in 1945. The country was to be administered as a single political unit by the Allied Control Council—made up of the representatives from France, Britain, Russia, and the United States—from its headquarters in Berlin. Berlin itself was also to be governed as a single unit, albeit divided into four zones governed by the four Allied powers. The four members of the council could not agree on how to run Germany, and soon Berlin was divided into four separate zones, each with its own policies deemed necessary or desirable by the occupying power.[9] The American and British zones were fused together by 1947; the French zone was merged with them in April 1949. By May of 1949, two separate states emerged, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. The U.S. traditionalist view states that co-operation broke down due to Moscow's obstinacy. The United States deemed it necessary to cease reparations to the east and merged its zone with Britain's.[10] The Western sector of Berlin proved to be a problem. According to Cold War historian Louis J. Halle,

> Here the strategic position of the Western allies appeared to be one of extraordinary weakness. They had no formal agreement giving them rights of access to Berlin across what was to be enemy territory. Not anticipating the partition of Germany, they had relied on general and informal understandings regarding the use of certain limited routes to supply the small garrisons they had planned to post in Berlin. Their access to the city and the maintenance of their positions there were, in terms of the local military situation, at the mercy of

[8] Longworth, p. 266-67.
[9] Halle, p. 161.
[10] Stephanson, p. 28-9.

> Moscow, which had the local power to cut the routes and to capture or starve the Western garrisons whenever it might wish to do so. The Western position was militarily untenable.[11]

In their emerging fight against the "threat" of communism in Europe, the Western Allies could not leave the Western sector of Berlin surrounded by Soviet forces. The traditionalist western history says that the West took action and installed immediate currency reform in the Western sector in order to counter Soviet influence in Berlin. This led to the Soviet Union responding with an illegal blockade of Berlin. The blockade was defeated by a Western air lift of great proportions. According to traditionalist western history, West Germany was an important tool for European recovery after WWII while U.S. initiatives in Berlin saved Europe from being taken over by the communist USSR.[12]

This description of the conflict is simplistic. The German sector controlled by the United States and Britain served a more strategic purpose than 'saving' West Berlin. The Allied partners' management of the divided Germany differed greatly. While the U.S. and Britain wanted to reintegrate a West German state into Western Europe, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin removed important factories, equipment, and top personnel from the Soviet zone and moved them to the USSR. The United States started to put pressure on the Soviet Union to accommodate Western plans of a unified Berlin under U.S. control. On May 3, 1946, General Lucius Clay suggested the West abruptly and unilaterally terminate reparations to the USSR from not only West Berlin, but from the entirety of the Western zones of occupied Germany.[13] Clay feared that reparations coming out of the Western zones were making these areas bankrupt.[14] The United States-led West wanted to re-integrate a non-communist Germany into the economy of Western Europe without creating a unified Germany that could be controlled by the Soviet Union. Frustrated by the Russians' refusal to accept reunification on western terms, the Allied powers suggested a governmental system in their zones that would oppose Soviet initiatives in Germany. [15] The division of Germany could then be blamed on the Soviet Union:

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[11] Halle, p. 161-2.
[12] Stephanson, p. 28.
[13] Williams, p. 259.
[14] Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945-1980* (New York, 1980), p. 40.
[15] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, 1982), p. 74.

> …the Policy Planning Staff in November 1948 proposed "Program A"…calling for internationally supervised elections throughout the country, the establishment of a provisional German government, the abolition of zonal boundaries, and the simultaneous withdrawal of occupation forces to specified garrison areas… Germany would continue to be disarmed and demilitarized, but the economy would be encouraged to revive and trade with both Eastern and Western Europe would be allowed…the Russians were unlikely to accept "Program A" at once…it would, like the Marshall Plan, place the onus for rejection on Moscow…[16]

Berlin, the former capital of Germany, remained encircled by the Soviet zone. The West gradually introduced Western marks in East Germany, an initiative the Soviet government deemed unacceptable.[17] The USSR decided to develop its zone in its own manner by severing the West Berliners from the other zones.[18] The situation was more complicated than the traditionalist's illegal blockade view. Revisionist historian Walter LaFeber notes that

> The Western powers had never negotiated a pact guaranteeing these rights. The Soviets now rejected arguments that occupation rights in Berlin and the use of the routes during the previous three years had given the West legal claim to unrestricted use of the highways and railways. On July 28 [1948] came the American response. Without consulting anyone but a few cabinet members, Truman decided… "We [are] going to stay period."[19]

The Soviet government took measures to stop traffic in and out of Berlin. According to Halle, "Six days later they cut off all electric current, coal, food, and other supplies to West Berlin from territory under their control. The Berlin Blockade had begun. Russia had challenged the West, at what appeared to be its weakest point, to a test of strength."[20] The West had known since March that ground transportation was being limited in West Berlin. A crisis was developing in Berlin as the Soviets' initiatives "immediately made it clear that their restrictions would keep pace with the Anglo-American plans for a final partition."[21] As the blockade separated the West Berliners

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[16] Gaddis, p. 75.
[17] Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Policy, 1945-1954* (New York, 1972), p. 491-92.
[18] LaFeber, p. 77.
[19] Ibid., 77-78.
[20] Halle, p. 164.
[21] Kolko, p. 490-91.

from the rest of West Germany, the West was still trying to 'win' Germany on its own terms:

> The United States would discuss the problems of Berlin in conference only after the Russians lifted the blockade. The Russians retorted that the Berlin question was inseparable from the problem of Germany, that all agreements on which the United States based its rights were premised on a four-power control which currency reform had destroyed, and that Russia would be glad to negotiate the larger German problem without Western preconditions.[22]

During the initial, post-WWII occupation of Berlin, the Soviet Union had acted on good faith; the blockade of Berlin was an attempt to prevent the western powers' complete takeover of Berlin. In doing so, they were able to keep a foothold in Germany and to maintain control of East Berlin. History presents the USSR as the aggressor in this conflict due to the blockade itself, even though their actions up to that point were in reaction to U.S. and Western initiatives.

* * *

National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68), the April 14, 1950 report kept secret until its declassification in 1975, was instrumental in shaping the American policy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The effects of the Second World War were profound in a number of countries, with bombed out cities, high civilian and military casualties, and ruined economies. As we saw earlier, the Marshall Plan was one of the United States' initiatives in order to consolidate American influence in the important markets of Europe and Asia. Another such initiative of the United States was to involve itself aggressively in the affairs of these countries to make sure that the communist 'threat' would not affect them. As historians Joyce and Gabriel Kolko put it,

> The inevitable consequence of the upheaval in world affairs was an active and aggressive American intervention in ever-widening reaches of the globe, for, left alone, the transformation of European and Asian societies in unknown and undesirable ways—from Washington's viewpoint—was certain. This meant the seeming "internationalization"—in reality it was Americanization—of internal social conflict to prevent the imminent victories of leftist forces and provide

[22] Kolko, p. 492-93.

> economic and military aid and sustenance to rightist and capitalist elements wherever they might still be found to fill the breach.[23]

NSC-68 explained the objectives of the American policy towards the spread of communism and the Soviet influence in Europe. The report not only gave an estimate of Russian intentions towards the world, but it also detailed the American response in terms of containment, stability and counterrevolution. It proposed how to confront the Soviet "menace." According to Walter LaFeber,

> NSC-68 proved to be the American blueprint for waging the Cold War during the next twenty years. It began with two assumptions that governed the rest of the document. First, the global balance of power had been "fundamentally altered" since the nineteenth century so that the Americans and Russians now dominated the world: "What is new, what makes the continuing crisis, is the polarization of power which inescapably confronts the slave society, with the free." It was us against them. Second, "the Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to the hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority," initially in "the Soviet Union and second in the areas now under [its] control." Then the crucial sentence: "In the minds of the Soviet leaders, however, achievement of this design requires the dynamic extension of their authority and the ultimate elimination of any effective opposition to their authority… To that end Soviet efforts are now directed toward the domination of the Eurasian land mass."[24]

The document officially made the Soviet Union and communism the enemy of the West. It effectively labelled them as "evil", a stigma that still presents itself in Russian relations with the West today. According to Cold War historian Odd Arne Westad, "It is a language of evil plots, sins and sinners, demons and saviours, corruption and redemption, dramatic choices in the name of humanity by anointed leaders on the edge of the abyss."[25] But like the Marshall Plan, the report's language was a front for the true American intentions in Europe. Instead of being about resistance to an enemy who sought to "dominate" Europe, the report was a recommendation for pushing out the Soviet Union in order to make way for American political and economic domination. According to the Kolkos, "the so-called Cold War…was far less the confrontation of the

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[23] Ibid., p. 30-31.
[24] "NSC-68. A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950, Washington," pp. 4, 6. 8, 34. in LaFeber, 97-98
[25] Odd Arne Westad, "Introduction," *Reviewing the Cold War: Approches, Interpretations, and Theory* (Portland, OR, 2000), p. 84.

United States with Russia than America's expansion into the entire world—a world the Soviet Union neither controlled nor created."[26] NSC-68 was an expression of the way in which the U.S. saw the Soviet Union. More than this, it was also a way to preserve American influence against the Soviet Union, which challenged American interests all over the world.

* * *

Perceptions of U.S. involvement in the 1978-1989 Soviet war in Afghanistan depend on one's view of the conflict. From the Western perspective, the conflict was a mistake of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. The USSR invaded Afghanistan in support of Nur Muhammad Taraki, General Secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), who overthrew President Mohammad Daoud Kahn in April 1978. The Soviet-style reform initiatives applied by Taraki drew the ire of the local Islamic population and war erupted between the PDPA-backed Afghan military and local rebel forces. A December 1978 treaty between the Afghan government and the Soviet Union brought Soviet forces to Afghanistan to fight the Mujahideen rebels. The war was a major drain on the resources of the Soviet Union and it was forced to withdraw its troops in 1989. What is not mentioned is U.S. interference in a region where the USSR had important interests, especially for the security of its southern frontier.

Afghanistan's importance to the Western world predates the Cold War. Three Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839-1842, 1878-1880 and 1919) occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as Britain tried to establish Afghanistan as a defensive bastion for its Indian Empire.[27] Britain had an exaggerated fear of the Russian threat, a direct effect of the "Great Game" played between Russia and Great Britain for control over Central Asia. According to former British diplomat and author Rodric Braithwaite,

> At a high cost in blood and treasure, the British did achieve their most important objective: to keep Afghanistan out of the orbit of Russia and within that of India. By means of bribes, threats, and guarantees of support against their neighbours, they were able to persuade Afghanistan rulers to remain—reluctantly perhaps—

[26] Kolko, p. 31.
[27] Rodric Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan* (New York, 2011), p. 26.

> on their side. They remained responsible for Afghanistan's foreign policy for eight decades, until the agreement which ended the brief Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919.[28]

With the U.S. projecting its influence all over the globe, their interest in Central Asia accentuated. It began with Iran in 1946, but the situation broke down for the U.S. in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution. Afghanistan was in close proximity and of strategic importance to the Soviet Union. This made it a target for the United States' foreign policy. Braithwaite notes Afghanistan's importance to the United States:

> Might they not see Afghanistan as some kind of substitute for Iran as a base from which to threaten the Soviet Union? Might they not move into Afghanistan if the Soviets moved out? They had sent a carrier battle group into the Indian Ocean, ostensibly in case of more trouble in Iran; but might the ships not be equally be useful to further American intentions in Afghanistan as well? The Russians did not of course know that the Americans had been considering how to support the Afghan rebellion against the Communists…the logic of the Cold War meant that they were in any case bound to react to American moves on their sensitive southern border, just as the Americans had been bound to react when the Russians put offensive missiles in Cuba.[29]

The opportunity the Americans needed to intervene arose when a political crisis broke out in Afghanistan in the 1970s. Prince Mohammed Daoud Khan had taken power in a coup d'état in 1973, overthrowing his cousin Mohammed Zahir Shah and declaring himself President. The new Afghan leader was not popular with the people. He could not "satisfy the demands of the educated city intellectuals, for social, political, and economic modernisation. They wanted to see Afghanistan with a literate population, sexual equality, factories and all the other trappings of a modern state."[30] The PDPA overthrew Prince Daoud in April 1978 when he attempted to arrest the party's officer corps and civil service members. The Soviet Union recognized and associated themselves with the new government headed by Chairman Nur Mohammed Taraki and his Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin. The two leaders were initially close, but their relationship soured as a cult of personality formed around Taraki. In March 1979, the Herat Uprising between the Mujahedeen rebels and the Afghan government erupted. Amidst the crisis, Amin ordered the assassination of Taraki and took over as General Secretary of the PDPA and ruler of

[28] Ibid., p. 34.
[29] Ibid., p. 47.
[30] Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London, 2001), p. 4.

Afghanistan. The death of Taraki was a major turning point in the Soviet's intervention, as "the assassination of Taraki … [dashed] hopes that Taraki could eliminate the erratic and uncompromising Amin and rebuild the PDPA's legitimacy in the country by political moderation, or at least political unity."[31] Taraki had asked for Soviet help in defeating the Mujahedeen; his death and the escalating crisis in Herat made the Soviets realize that Afghanistan was in a real crisis and that they dare not lose the country to an insurgency.

The United States' involvement in Afghanistan also played an important role in the Soviet's intervention in the region. Even before the Mujahedeen rebellion in Herat in 1979, the United States attempted to implicate itself in the affairs of Afghanistan:

> …well before there had been any question of Soviet troops entering Afghanistan, the CIA had put forward proposals for helping the growing anti-Communist rebellion. President Carter decided at the end of March that the Soviet presence in Afghanistan must be reversed. American officials were already drawing the parallel with Vietnam. In the summer Carter authorised the CIA to spend $500,000 on helping the Afghan rebels.[32]

President Amin was also a source of concern for the Soviets. Even though the USSR was hesitant to implicate itself in Afghani affairs, it had good relations with former leader Taraki. Taraki brokered a Twenty-Year Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union on 5 December 1978. Consequently, the Soviet Union did not support Taraki's removal from power, or Amin's order to have him assassinated. According to historian Peter Tomsen, the Soviet Politburo saw Amin as "a power-hungry leader who is distinguished by brutality and treachery" and who was insincere and duplicitous when dealing with the Soviet Union. [33] Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB (later briefly the Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR) believed there was evidence that linked Amin with the CIA because the former had gone to university in the United States in the 1960s. The Soviets saw the effects of an American presence in Afghanistan as "the CIA [was] attempting to set up a 'New Great Ottoman Empire' to embrace the southern republics of the Soviet Union. Soviet anti-aircraft defences were inadequate to defend targets in the southern republics, such as the Cosmodrome in Baikonur, if the Americans

[31] Ibid., p. 6.
[32] Braithwaite, p. 114.
[33] Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York, 2011), p. 67-68.

installed missiles in Afghanistan." The Soviet Union could not allow Amin to align Afghanistan's foreign policy with the West. This would have contradicted the Soviet aim of keeping Afghanistan friendly and as a buffer on the southern border of the USSR.[34]

The Soviet Union initiated Operation Storm-333 and entered Afghanistan on 27 December 1979 in order to assist the PDPA against Mujahedeen insurrection. According to Braithwaite,

> …historians have tended to argue that the Russians were being paranoid, or that they were inventing reasons to justify their invasion. There may have been an element of that. But in the overwrought atmosphere of the Cold War each side was prone to exaggerate the threat from the other, and to engage in worst-case analysis—[which was] so much safer than simply hoping for the best.[35]

The USSR's action was not the hostile takeover of the region or an unprecedented violation of international law. It was not a brutal and unprovoked surprise attack on a neighbour as it was widely reported by the British and Americans. Rather, the USSR had security interests in Afghanistan. The U.S. was supporting the Afghan rebels against the Soviet-backed Afghan government.[36] Even if the U.S. said it had no plans for Afghanistan, the USSR could hardly accept at face value its public expression of disinterest. The best option for the security of the USSR was to assume that the Americans were trying to strengthen their position on the Soviet Union's southern borders.[37] The Soviet government saw Amin as brash and dangerous.[38] He often created fictitious accusations against other PDPA members, and even started a smear campaign against Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan Alexander Puzanov.[39] A Politburo report at the time also showed concern for Amin's potential political reorientation with the West.[40] It was therefore the Soviet Union's first policy during the crisis to replace Amin with Babrak Karmal, leader of the Parcham (translated into 'banner') faction of the PDPA. The PDPA's modernisation initiatives in Afghanistan, including education reforms and the instalment of women's rights, were unpopular in the deeply Islamic region provoked

[34] Braithwaite., p. 78.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., p. 112-113.
[37] Ibid., p. 79.
[38] Galeotti, p. 9.
[39] Tomsen, p. 162-163.
[40] Tomsen, p. 162.

an armed insurrection. The USSR's reaction was to send in the 40th Army to Afghanistan. The contingent took control of a number of governmental, military, and media buildings in Kabul and did not lose a post to the enemy.[41] The war "was never able to deliver the political success which the leaders of the country had hoped for" and the conflict grew increasingly unpopular. The war escalated as the Soviet troops came into contact with a growing number of rebels. It was also a drain on Soviet resources and personnel; the Soviets lost 137 soldiers per month between May 1985 and December 1986.[42]

The USSR's presence in Afghanistan was a source of international condemnation. Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to First Secretary of the USSR in 1985 marked a change in Soviet society—through both *glasnost* and *perestroika*, as we will see later—but also through a change in foreign policy. Withdrawal from Afghanistan became a top priority. Gorbachev tried to ease Cold War tensions with the U.S., notably signing the Intermediary-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987. Earlier in the year, he had also pulled Soviet troops out of Mongolia. A shift to a less confrontational foreign policy marked the end of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. The final troop withdrawal came in two stages, between May and August 1988 and between November and February 1989. But amidst the western criticism of the USSR over the war in Afghanistan, the Soviet reasoning behind their action was that "with an (allied) state about to fall to anarchy or outright hostile forces, intervention was an essentially defensive, reactive move to forestall such a humiliating and potentially dangerous outcome."[43]

* * *

U.S. intervention in Afghanistan contributed to weakening the USSR during the 1980s. The trend continued during the post-Cold War period as the Western world prioritized the preservation of its own interests in Russia. The implementation of capitalist democracy in post-Soviet Russia seemed like a way to integrate Russia into the Western world. It also controlled Russia's future and served the needs of the West. Bill

[41] Braithwaite, p. 145.
[42] Ibid., p. 142.
[43] Ibid., p. 143.

Clinton was the biggest advocate of Russia's transition. For the United States, the consolidation of communism was the governing principle in the reconstruction of Russia. The Clinton administration "wanted to help ensure the irreversibility of Russia's transition away from its communist, imperial, and anti-Western past.[44] This fear of a revival of communism led the United States to intervene aggressively in the affairs of Russia.

Mikhail Gorbachev came into power in 1985 and began a programme of political and economic restructuring, or *perestroika* in an attempt to breathe new life into Soviet society. Gorbachev wanted to "democratize the Party and the state to encourage ordinary people to take part in rebuilding their country" and to ensure "the accountability of those who held power in society."[45] Economically, *perestroika* also relaxed quotas and opened up certain sectors of the Soviet economy to foreign investment. Coupled with a policy of *glasnost*—or political openness—it transformed the Soviet Union and re-started détente between the two Cold War nations. Tensions with the United States relaxed as asymmetrical Soviet concessions made possible important treaties like the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) of 1987 that eliminated intermediate-range ballistic and land-based cruise missiles.[46] But *Perestroika* and *glasnost* precipitated unrest in the Soviet Union, as Gorbachev discovered he had "started a revolution he could not control."[47] The Soviet centre lost the Baltic States to popular fronts and the Caucasus to unrest and civil war. Gorbachev was pressured into further change by "conservative criticism, ethnic unrest, economic collapse, and the failure of all previous initiatives in agriculture, trade and industry."[48] Gorbachev's economic restructuring meant less military expenditure, and diminished military support. Communist governments all over the Eastern Bloc fell as elections started to open up to other parties.[49] A change in the Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) created a de-facto Russian President office in October 1989. Boris Yeltsin was democratically elected

[44] Goldgeier and McFaul, p. 145.
[45] Robert G. Kaiser, *Why Gorbachev Happened: His Triumphs & His Failure* (New York, 1991), p. 150.
[46] Ibid., p. 197.
[47] Ibid., p. 11.
[48] Ibid., p. 323.
[49] Ibid., p. 17-8.

as Russian Socialist Republic President on June 12, 1991. The USSR was disbanded on December 25, 1991.

Yeltsin became the first President of the new Russian Federation. He proved to be important to the United States as an obstacle against the return of communism. In his first visit to Washington D.C., he proclaimed that "Communism has no human face. Freedom and communism are incompatible."[50] Yeltsin was the West's gauge of events in Russia. President Clinton saw the transformation of Russia through the personal aspirations and shortcomings of Yeltsin. If Yeltsin was succeeding then so was "reform." If Yeltsin was faltering, then "reform" was in trouble.[51] The United States pushed their reforms for Russia through Yeltsin. Under the impulsion of the United States, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Russian economy was converted to a system in which communism could no longer exist:

> Yeltsin's understanding of economics was limited, but he followed the advice urged upon him by the West and set young Russian economists to the task. American free-market theory provided the framework, and shock therapy was favoured over gradualism. The ideas of the Harvard economist Jeremy Sachs, which had recently accomplished an apparent miracle in Poland, were particularly influential, and the revolution was implemented in a hurry. It seemed that this would make the transition painful but short, but according to Anatoly Chubais, one of those chiefly responsible for the manner in which the transformation was undertaken, there was another, political motive. Yeltsin was anxious to destroy the base for any Communist revival in the future.[52]

Again, politics dominated the economy. The transition to a market-based economy caused the disappearance of governmental subsidies, the collapse of the rouble, and the ruin of the Russian middle class. 'Shock therapy' was meant to align the Russian economy with western liberalized prices and currency to create a real market and private property as well as an increase in foreign trade and investment.[53] The privatization of state property was a priority.[54] These measures were taken to open up the Russian market to Western—and especially American—investment. The promotion of the Western economic model was more important than the Russian people's adaptation to a new

[50] Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York, 2008) p. 1.
[51] Goldgeier and McFaul, p. 145.
[52] Colton, p. 220.
[53] BorisYeltsin, "Prezidentskii Marafon" (Presidential marathon) (Moscow, 2000) p. 102, quoted in Colton, p. 226.
[54] Colton, p. 228.

economic system. These radical changes led to economic collapse (inflation rose to 2520 percent in 1992) and the ruin for any Soviet citizen who had accumulated savings.[55] On Black Tuesday (October 11, 1994) the rouble lost a quarter of its value in one day. In 1998 there was a second financial crash. In the face of this turmoil, the West acted fast in order to save its investments in Russia and the Clinton administration pressured the World Bank into lending Russia money.[56] These billions of dollars eventually found themselves not only in the pockets of Russian oligarchs—businessmen who had acquired great wealth during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the privatization of Russia—but in the pockets of Wall Street and other Western investment banks who had pressed for the rescue package. Dmitri K. Simes, former advisor to President Richard Nixon and president of Washington think-tank The Center for the National Interest, notes that "There are now strong suspicions in Russia that Washington deliberately sought to keep it on its knees by forcing it to accept destructive economic policies."[57] Through mismanagement and corruption, Russians were reduced to beggars and President Yeltsin was often singled out for pandering to western interests instead of Russian interests.

This asymmetry in the relationship between the Western world and Russia is what led to the changes during Vladimir Putin's first term in office. Yeltsin resigned on December 31, 1999. He named then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as his replacement in office. Putin had quickly and quietly moved up through the ranks of Russian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He worked for Anatoly Sobchak in the Saint Petersburg Mayor's Office from 1990 to 1996, as for the FSB (the successor to the KGB) from July 1998 to August 1999. Up to then an unheralded figure in Russian politics, Putin won the next national elections and began to oversee the re-emergence of Russia's standing abroad as well as the re-establishment of governmental authority at home.[58] Due to Russia's growing wealth in oil and gas reserves, Putin improved the Russian economy. Russia became an active net creditor. He chased the oligarchs that were seen as bandits and instead re-nationalized important sectors of the Russian economy. Under Putin, Russia was more assertive internationally, criticizing western policy on everything from

[55] Ibid., p. 230.
[56] Longworth, p. 311.
[57] Goldgeier and McFaul, p. 238.
[58] Colton, p. 437.

the war in Iraq to its backtracking on nuclear arms treaties. As the profile of the Russian Federation grew, so did Vladimir Putin's. He used the Chechen terrorist hostage-taking in Beslan to change legislation to appoint republic leaders in place of elections.[59] He was disliked in the West because of his direct and frank manner of speaking, as well as his alleged "limitations" on free assembly and free speech and his perceived censure of the media in Russia.

The changes brought about by Putin meant a loss of influence for the Western world and the United States in Russia. The West no longer determined military, economic, or social policies in Russia and the Russian people were in turn moving away from the Western political and economic model. The West took amiss these developments and became vocal about the transformations in Russia and the influence of Vladimir Putin. The most common sources of criticisms—the lack of representative democracy, the situation in Chechnya, Vladimir Putin himself, and the 2008 war in Georgia—will be analyzed in the next chapters. The western world focuses on these issues in order to present a negative image of Russia. It is by constantly highlighting these perceived faults of Russian society that the western world affirms the rectitude of its process towards Russia during—and after—the Cold War. The constant critique serves the dual purpose of justifying present American and western policies towards Russia while turning popular opinion against Russia, apparently reverting to the "evil" ways of the Soviet Union.

[59] Ibid., p. 442.

Chapter 2: Democracy in Russia

For the United States, democracy is a pretext to intervene in the affairs of other countries. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was instituted in 1982 by U.S. President Ronald Reagan in order to counter Soviet organizations that were attempting to promote communism. Its major focus was in the former Communist bloc, as it worked to support the undercurrents that eventually led to the collapse of the USSR and of the Soviet Bloc. According to former *Globe and Mail* Moscow correspondent Mark MacKinnon, "Then, as now, NED portrayed itself as a grant-giving operation dedicated to doing good, while effectively serving as a tool for spreading "soft" American power."[1] Western intervention in the name of "democracy" is an important instrument in the maintenance of its power and its interests around the world.

Russia's transition to "democracy" occurred for the same reasons. The West came into post-Soviet Russia championing a change away from autocracy, despotism, and empire and towards western-style representative democracy. It would therefore be able to control Russia's transformation and to make it subservient to western interests. Dmitri K. Simes noted that insofar as "no nation is a prisoner of its history, [it has] typically [been] implied that Moscow's tsarist and Soviet imperial past must be considered very seriously in evaluating Russia's future."[2] As much as the United States wanted western-style, representative democracy to work in post-Soviet Russia, Russian history shows that this was never part of Russian culture. According to historian Andrew Jack,

> Russia's short-lived democracy has always been virtual. The country had no tradition of power-sharing in tsarist times, let alone any living memory [of it] under one-party Communist rule. That makes it fundamentally different from many of the countries of Eastern Europe, which are geographically closer to the west and were politically more diverse until the Second World War.[3]

The United States tried to shape Russia into a country which suited the interests of the west and in doing so actually harmed the new Russian state. The reforms were

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[1] Mark MacKinnon, *The New Cold War: Revolutions, Rigged Elections, and Pipeline Politics in the Former Soviet Union* (Toronto, 2007), p. 26.
[2] Dmitri K. Simes, *After the Collapse: Russia Seeks Its Place as a Great Power* (New York, 1999), p. 97.
[3] Andrew Jack, *Inside Putin's Russia: Can There Be Reform Without Democracy?* (New York, 2004), p. 324.

secondary to the gratification that came from seeing Russia, once the enemy of the west, imitate the United States.[4] This is precisely the theme of Stephen F. Cohen's book *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia*. Cohen is an American scholar of Russian Studies who teaches at New York University and has had close contact with the world of U.S.-Russian relations, being a friend of Mikhail Gorbachev and advisor to George H. W. Bush. His book is an important exploration into the way the United States saw Russia's reconstruction. Instead of trying to ease Russia's reintegration into the world, the United States instead tried to implement "democracy" and free-market capitalism in Russia without first understanding the country. It could not risk Russia taking a different direction from the one prescribed by the United States. Cohen states it best when he quotes *New York Times* correspondent Steven Erlanger:

> In effect, the United States was to teach ex-Communist Russia how to become a capitalist and democratic country, and oversee the process of conversion known as a "transition." Certainly, Russia was not to be trusted to find its own kind of change, lest it wander off, as a media enthusiast of the crusade warned, on "a strange, ambivalent path of its own confused devising."[5]

Russian opinions of the Americans' democratic movement were shaped by the hardships of the 1990s. People began to equate "democracy" with turmoil. Boris Yeltsin impoverished millions of people, encouraging rampant corruption. In comparison, Vladimir Putin represented a return to order and stability. Putin prosecuted the oligarchs, friends of the "democrats" that created chaos in Russia during the Yeltsin years. For this he was a hero. The Russian people saw the oligarchs as crooks and were glad to see them gone. MacKinnon quotes Russian political scientist Sergei Markov's assessment of Russia's transition from Yeltsin to Putin:

> …the 2004 elections represented a step forward. Putin's success showed that stability had been restored. Now the economy would continue to grow, and at some point in the future (Markov didn't say when), Russia would be ready for more political openness… In the 1990s Russia had moved too fast from totalitarianism to total freedom, resulting in political and economic chaos. Now Russia had a system in between, one that Markov argued suits it best for the time being. "It's a bureaucratic authoritarian regime," he said proudly. "Russia is on

[4] David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia"* (Cambrige, UK, 2007), p. 223.
[5] Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (New York: 2007), p. 7.

> the path from the hell of the 1990s towards a normal country. We are in a transition period."[6]

After the turmoil of the 1990s, a return to a normal life was important for the Russian people, and Putin's popularity is testament to this. According to Irina Korobleva, a woman MacKinnon interviewed, her family was planning on voting for Putin:

> Ideas like press freedom were ephemeral to her… All she knew for sure was that her job (at the Noviy Ivanovskiy textile mill) was safe and her parents' pensions were getting paid on time and in full, something that was never certain under Yeltsin. If another "democrat" got elected, she said, the country would be ruined.[7]

The western world failed in implementing western-style "democracy" in Russia, even after numerous efforts by the United States during the Yeltsin years. Foglesong states that as "the infant Russian stock market crashed (and) the Kremlin defaulted on foreign loans, and an assertive former head of the foreign intelligence service became prime minister… [this led western mainstream] journalists to blame Russia's national character for the failure of their experiment with democracy…" When the western transition of Russia failed, opinions of Russia began "a reversion towards [the] demonization of unregenerate Russians as superstitious, corrupt, and slavish."[8] The comments made by the authors of articles about Russia and Vladimir Putin support Foglesong's irony-laced observation that "Americans reacted with unwarranted alarm and scorn, worrying that if Russia was not remade in the image of the United States it would revert to communism and aggressive imperialism."[9]

The Western media publications are critical of Russian democracy under Putin. These observations about the state of modern Russia are selective, as the questionable aspects of Russian society are often highlighted. Negative developments due to western intervention in Russia are also not reported. Instances of this selective representation are commonplace in the *New York Times*. In a May 2003 report on Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly of Russia, the author quotes Putin as he outlined Russia's shortcomings: "Our economic foundation, although it has become noticeably stronger, is

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[6] MacKinnon, p. 150-1.
[7] Ibid., p. 143.
[8] Foglesong, p. 196.
[9] Ibid., 198.

still shaky and very weak. The political system is not developed enough. The state apparatus is inefficient, and most sectors of the economy are uncompetitive. The size of the population continues to diminish. Poverty is receding very slowly."[10] Putin frequently highlighted what Russian society needed to work on, but he also mentioned many positives. Great strides were made towards creating a genuinely independent court system; new Criminal Procedural, Civil Procedural and Arbitration Procedural Codes were established to guarantee human rights. Mainstream western media did not mention these facts, preferring to paint a bleaker image of modern Russia and promoting the image of a still-dysfunctional state.

Susan Jacoby's November 2003 article in the *Washington Post* described the state of post-Cold War Russian-American relations. Entitled "Now That We're Comrades, We Don't Care Anymore," the article quoted Boris Jordan, ex-head of Russia's NTV channel: "[in] America, I see that too many people have an impression of Russia as a new third-world country. Russia in the public eye, on the nightly TV news, is about criminality—the 'Russian mafia'—about AIDS, about general backwardness."[11] It is easy to paint Russia as opposed to Western values when people are told only of the crime and corruption in Russia and of the deficiencies in Russia's "democracy." An article with a clear knowledge of the difference between the reality of Russia and the perception of Russia in the West is as surprising as it is scarce. Many authors prefer to criticise Russia instead of understanding it, like Peter Baker's May 2004 article for the *Washington Post*. The previous day's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of Russia by Vladimir Putin highlighted Russia's fledgling economic and social sectors and the important advances made in them during his first term as Russian President. The article mentions Putin's points briefly before noting that Putin "offered no concrete plans to build democratic institutions, as he promised after winning re-election two months ago." Baker quoted Putin directly when he said that "Without a mature civil society, it is impossible to effectively resolve pressing problems of the people."[12] Even then the author refused to

[10] Steven Lee Myers, "Putin Tells Russians of Clouds with Reform-Plan Linings," *New York Times*, 17 May 2003.
[11] Susan Jacoby, "Now That We're Comrades, We Don't Care Anymore," *Washington Post*, 9 Nov. 2003.
[12] Peter Baker, "Putin Focuses on Economy in 2nd-Term Agenda," *Washington Post*, 27 May 2004.

focus on Russian progress and instead highlighted Russia's so-called shortcomings in the development of its "democratic" institutions.

Putin's December 2004 press conference with Russian and foreign media also fell victim to selectivity in its coverage from the *New York Times*. The newspaper's main subject was the sale of the Yukos oil company to the government-owned Rosneft. It also mentioned Putin's "deep irritation at the West's support for popular uprisings in post-Soviet states and what he described as Western double standards for elections."[13] No mention was made of the western-backed elections in Afghanistan or Kosovo, but criticism was levelled at the elections in Chechnya which were supervised by Moscow. Chechnya is within Russia's borders, which undermined the author's point. The article also stated that America "intends to continue with elections in occupied Iraq", which Putin criticized as unfair. There was also no acknowledgment of the positive advancements of Russian society, such as the fact that Russia was a net creditor, something unimaginable a few years before.[14]

Like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* also made allusions to Russia's "democracy." Ian Traynor's February 2005 article about an important U.S.-Russia press conference highlighted exactly what was important about Russia to western eyes. The article contrasted the opening statements of both Presidents, as Putin made no mention of Russian freedom, "nor did he mention the word democracy. Mr Bush, by contrast, made his most pointed criticism not in response to journalists' questions, but in his opening remarks."[15] Traynor also called Putin a hypocrite:

> Under Mr Putin, Russia is commonly described by analysts as a "managed" or "controlled" democracy and Mr Putin has in the past argued that Russia's authoritarian history makes it difficult for full democracy to flourish. Last night Mr Putin contradicted his own previous arguments. "We are not going to invent any kind of special Russian democracy," he said.

In his speech, Putin followed that statement with "…of course, all the modern institutions of democracy, the principles of democracy, should fit with Russia's current

[13] C. J. Chivers, "Getting Personal, Putin Voices Defiance of Critics Abroad," *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 2004.
[14] Vladimir Putin, "Press Conference with Russian and Foreign Media," 23 Dec. 2004.
[15] Ian Traynor, "Bush warns Russian leader to respect democratic values," *The Guardian*, 25 Feb. 2005.

state of development and with our history and our traditions."[16] For Russia, the question was how to make it work within Russia society. The author also omitted some quotes from the press conference that questioned western "democracy." A journalist from *Kommersant* (Russian business-oriented newspaper) delved deeper into US affairs and asked about "the sweeping powers conferred on the security services that mean that the private lives of citizens are now being monitored by the state." He added that "this can be explained by the consequences of September 11th, but it has nothing to do with democratic values." Ironically, Bush answered that he lived in a transparent country and that every decision was based on the Constitution of the United States.

A member of the Interfax news agency asked about violations of the rights of journalists in the US and how CNN journalists got fired post 9-11. It was a pertinent question: According to *The Progressive*, a left-wing, investigative magazine, two prize-winning journalists, columnist Dan Guthrie of the *Daily Courier* in Grants Pass, Oregon and Tim McCarthy, editor of the *Courier* in Littleton, New Hampshire, got fired for expressing views critical of George W. Bush.[17] *Texas City Sun* columnist Tom Gutting also met the same fate after writing that post 9-11, Bush "was flying around the country like a scared child seeking refuge in his mother's bed after having a nightmare."[18] The war against terrorism was a sensitive subject in the months after 9-11. Journalists who dared to speak out against Bush's tactics—or his assessment of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil"—were reprimanded. Yet the Interfax member's question was overlooked, with the simplistic answer that the government does not fire journalists, but producers and owners of news outlets do and that a free press is important. Double standards, Putin would say: Russia can be criticized, but not the U.S.

Double standards and selectivity also made their way into the *Independent*. The September 2005 report on Putin's live television and radio dialogue with the people of Russia was a surprisingly short article (for a three-hour Q & A session). Only a fleeting mention was made of Russia's "economy and political stability" and that Putin "promised

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[16] Vladimir Putin, "Press Conference on the Results of Russian-American Talks," 24. Feb. 2005.
[17] Matthew Rothschild, "Another Prize-Winning Journalist Fired," *The Progressive*, March 9, 2002, <http://www.progressive.org/mag_mcreporter02>.
[18] Simon Maloy, "Some journalists caught expressing political views not as lucky as Boston Globe's Hiawatha Bray," *Media Matters for America*, March 4, 2005, <http://mediamatters.org/research/2005/03/04/some-journalists-caught-expressing-political-vi/132845>.

ordinary people's living standards would steadily rise."[19] The bulk of the article instead chose to focus on Putin's potential run for an (illegal) third term as President, and the current problems in Chechnya. Putin mentioned many positives during the session, like the growth of people's real income and the increase in governmental grants for higher education, but none of them were mentioned in the *Independent*.[20]

At the same time in the *Guardian*, Simon Tisdall revealed that "[Putin's] personal approval rating stands at 70%, the economy is growing, and Russia will assume the G8 presidency next year for the first time." But in the same paragraph, he quoted one of Putin's opponents, Mikhail Kasyanov, as saying that "While they like Mr Putin, most Russians believe the country is heading in the wrong direction."[21] Mr. Kasyanov also accused Putin of undermining democratic institutions and extending state control over key industries. According to Tisdall, Kasyanov, in a pamphlet published by the Foreign Policy Centre in London —an independent and progressive think tank founded by former British Labour Politician Robin Cook in 1998 to promote fair and rule-based world order[22]—also criticized Putin for having removed "[almost] all the essential characteristics of a modern democratic state" in Russia. With the Russian economy in good shape, Putin's approval ratings still very high and Russia's place on the international stage more important than at any time since the end of the Cold War, one wonders if most Russians believed their country was going in the wrong direction.

Selectivity is commonplace in the *New York Times*. The April 2007 article on Putin's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of Russia focused on Russia's decision to suspend its compliance with the Treaty on Conventional Force in Europe (CFE). The newspaper speculated that Russia had acted "because [it was] angry that in 2001 the Bush administration unilaterally pulled out of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty of 1972."[23] According to Putin, the United States was "taking advantage of the [CFE] to build up their own system of military bases along [Russian] borders."[24] In addition, "new NATO members such as Slovenia and the Baltic states, despite the preliminary agreements

[19] Andrew Osborn, "Angry Russians bombard Putin with questions in trial by television," *The Independent*, 28. Sept. 2005.
[20] Vladimir Putin, "President's Live Television and Radio Dialogue with the Nation," 27 Sept. 2005.
[21] Simon Tisdall, "Empire without foundations," *The Guardian*, 28 Sept. 2005.
[22] Foreign Policy Centre Website, http://fpc.org.uk/about/.
[23] C. J. Chivers and Mark Landler, "Putin to Suspend Pact with NATO," *New York Times*, 27 Apr. 2007.
[24] Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly," 26 Apr. 2007.

reached with NATO, have not signed the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty at all. This creates a real threat and an unpredictable situation for Russia." Russia felt it was alone in upholding the restrictions of the treaty, and therefore ceased to comply with it. The newspaper also mentioned that "the revised treaty has not been ratified by most of the signing nations, including the United States," thus pointing to the treaty's invalidity. Yet the *New York Times* blamed Putin for "opening a fresh and intense dispute in the souring relations between NATO and the Kremlin." Double standards yet again Putin would certainly have replied.

The *Independent* on April 27, 2007, commenting on Putin's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of Russia also emphasized the negative and neglected the positive. The pattern is clear. According to the author, Putin "used his final state-of- the-nation address yesterday to launch a blistering attack on NATO and the West" while adopting a "hawkish stance."[25] The newspaper centered the story on Russia's suspension of its compliance with the CFE agreement. It also emphasized Putin's warning to the West not to interfere in Russian politics before the upcoming parliamentary elections. The *Independent* skipped other important parts of Putin's speech on job creation, housing improvements, and the introduction of more transparent governing structures. But of course such developments went against the western image of Russia as an uncooperative country.

The same can be seen in an October 2007 article in the *Washington Post* that described a joint meeting between Putin and American officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates. The sharp contrast in the image of both parties is evident; Putin is seen as disingenuous as he "seemed to mock the U.S. missile defence plan with biting language" and "greeted (his counterparts) warmly before launching into a harangue about U.S. plans." In contrast, Rice and Gates are seen as cooperative, as according to the *Washington Post*, "both sought to accentuate agreement" on a new missile defence system. The issue of Russian "democracy" was apparently the reason for Putin's moody behaviour: "Russian distrust of American intentions seems to have grown along with U.S. anger over Putin's steps to curb

[25] Andrew Osborn, "Hawkish Putin condemns 'meddling' West," *The Independent*, 27 Apr. 2007.

democratic institutions…"[26] The following day's article read similarly: "With the Kremlin backsliding on democracy…"[27] This shifted the focus of the piece from the important Intermediary Nuclear Forces Treaty and U.S. plans to station missiles in Eastern Europe to Russia's deficiencies in "democracy."

Failures and limitations, when pertaining to democracy, strike a chord in the west. Pointing out Russia's "deficiencies" therefore serves to divert attention from "democracy" as an instrument of U.S. domination. The U.S. was in no position to criticize, having supported their client Yeltsin's various abuses of democracy during the 1990s. Russia's "democracy" was none of America's business, Putin might have observed. 'It has ruined us,' the Russian person in the street would have added. The West's stubborn insistence on western-style "democracy" backfired. Russia asserted its economic and political independence, leaving western opinion ill at ease.

[26] Michael Abramowitz, "Putin Publicly Rebutes Rice, Gates on Foreign Policy Goals," *Washington Post*, 13 Oct. 2007.
[27] Michael Abramowitz and Peter Finn, "Rice Avoids Criticizing Putin as U.S. Seeks Russia's Cooperation," *Washington Post*, 14 Oct. 2007.

Chapter 3: Chechnya

Unrest in Chechnya has long been a source of controversy in the West. The region is often-championed by western civil rights-advocacy groups in the West as a prime example of Russian "aggression" against a weaker neighbour fighting for independence from Russia. This tale of David versus Goliath suffers from a skewed perspective. According to Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, two high-ranking members of the Carnegie Moscow Centre and experts in Russian foreign relations, "the new Western image of Russia [is] of a revanchist state seeking to use its military superiority over weak and defenceless neighbours to regain dominance and control their resources."[1] It is a sharp contrast to the Russian perspective: Chechnya was not a small nation trying to gain independence but rather was a threat to Russian territorial integrity. Chechnya's rebel forces were not freedom fighters but Muslim fundamentalists and terrorists. As author and political scientist Valentina Feklyunina notes,

> Another element that differs substantially in Russia's projected and perceived images is Russia's policy regarding Chechnya. Similar to the perceptions of Russian democracy, the vision of Moscow's relations with Chechnya has a much lower 'relative weight' in the projected image. What is more, while in the perceived image the emphasis is mainly on human rights and military issues, in the projected image the focus is being shifted to the political aspect of the problem. The core elements of this vision are positioning the Chechen crisis as Russia's internal problem, emphasising that Chechnya is an integral part of the Russian Federation (so that one cannot question Russia's territorial integrity), stressing the legitimate character of Chechnya's status as it has been approved by referendum results, and finally, interpreting Russia's actions in Chechnya as building a 'very strong barrier against the infiltration of fundamentalism in this part of Europe.'[2]

The West likes to use Chechnya as a *cause célèbre* for Russia's violation of human rights and therefore to discredit Russia. Russians do not like foreign interference in their domestic affairs. The normal Russian reply when it comes to Chechnya is 'mind your own business.' As Feklyunina notes, "Seeing the country as a besieged fortress has a long tradition in Russia, which was especially pronounced in the self image of the

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[1] Dmitri R. Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, DC, 2004), p. 202.
[2] Valentina Feklyunina, "Battle for Perceptions: Projecting Russia in the West," Europe-Asia Studies (60.0, August 2008), p. 611.

Soviet Union in the first years of its existence and even more so during the Cold War."[3] Chechnya is an integral part of Russia's territory; Russians continue to believe this, even as the West calls for its independence. Simple "cut-'em-loose" solutions are not feasible options.[4] Furthermore, the history of the region shows that the Chechens are not the weak, subordinated people portrayed in western media, but rather have been a constant source of trouble for the Russian state.

Located in the center of the Russian North Caucasus, Chechnya is situated on Russia's south-eastern border with Georgia. It is a republic of Russia, and therefore part of the Russian territory, like neighbouring republics Dagestan, Ingushetia and North Ossetia. The republic has a population of roughly 1.2 million people, with the capital Grozny home to 280,000 citizens. Like many of the Russian provinces of the North Caucasus, the predominant religion in the region is Islam, which contrasts with the Russian Orthodoxy of Moscow and the other central Russian regions.

The Chechens have historically resisted the Russian presence. During the Caucasian wars of the late 18th and early 19th century the tsarist government intervened to suppress Chechen resistance.[5] Anatol Lieven, political analyst and former Eastern Europe correspondent for the *Financial Times*, *The Times* (London) and the BBC, believes the plight of the Chechens has been romanticized. They were:

> …archaic warriors schooled and trained in centuries-long influences of ethnic and/or tribal solidarity and duty, to which over the past two hundred years have also been added religious unity and national suffering and resistance…they have appeared as Hector, dying in defence of his family and homeland—or even more aptly as Aeneas, a hero adopted by Virgil, given a set of Roman virtues of fortitude and stoicism…[6]

Reports from the period show that the Chechens were far from besieged innocents or noble warriors. According to historian Philip Longworth, the Chechens were belligerent people during the 18th century:

> Their upright bearing, handsome looks and eagle-beaked noses fitted a Romantic image of the noble savage… but back in the 1790s the naturalist Peter Pallas had

[3] Ibid., p. 612.
[4] Trenin and Malashenko, p. 3.
[5] John Russell, *Chechnya—Russia's 'War on Terror'* (New York, 2007), p. 30.
[6] Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Power* (New Haven, 1998), p. 330.

> thought them to be 'the most turbulent, hostile, and predatory inhabitants of the mountains… [and] without exception the worst of neighbours on the lines of the Caucasus'. Even more savage that their neighbours, they were little inclined to work… Their elite [were] carefully schooled in the martial arts from infancy. Entrusted to a tutor-cum-guardian…from outside the family, a boy would be taught how to ride, use arms, steal and to conceal his thefts.[7]

The conflicts between the natives of the North Caucasus and the Russian Empire lasted until 1864, when Tsar Alexander II issued a manifesto ending the war. During the 1840s, as many as 200,000 soldiers, or almost a third of the Russian army, were committed to conquer the Chechen territory.[8] During the Soviet era, Chechnya and Ingushetia were merged together in order to form the Chechen–Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Conflict did not stop during the Soviet era however, and Stalin mass-deported—on one hour's notice—the entire Chechen, Ingush, Kalmyk, Karachai and Balkar peoples to the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1944, on charges of collaboration with Nazi invaders.[9] They were only allowed back into Chechen-Ingush territory in 1956 during First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization initiatives. The bitter memories of this treatment still affect Chechen collective memories.

The post-Soviet era saw an escalation in conflict between Russia and Chechnya. In November 1990, during the final days of the Soviet Union, the Chechen-Ingush SSR's Supreme Council declared the region independent, as part of a new treaty championed by the Soviet government for the reorganization of its regions into 80 republic states. Because of the August Coup of 1991 against First Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the treaty was abandoned. In the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the All-National Congress of the Chechen People (NCChP) advocated Chechen independence. Led by former Soviet Air Force General Dzhokhar Dudayev, it dissolved the Chechen-Ingush SSR's government by force when it stormed one of its meetings, resulting in the death of the Soviet Communist Party chief for Grozny. In November 1991, Dudayev declared Chechnya independent.[10]

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[7] Pallas, Travels, vol. 1, p. 438. and F. von Gille, *Lettressur, le Caucase et la Crimée* (Paris, 1859), p. 109 in Longworth, p. 201-2.
[8] Lieven, p. 311.
[9] Ibid., p. 319.
[10] Richard Sakwa, "Introduction: Why Chechnya?," *Chechnya: From Past to Future* (London: 2005), p. 3-4.

From its first moments, the Russian Federation contested Chechnya's independence. President Boris Yeltsin asserted that the Chechen-Ingush Republic was never independent and was part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Dudayev's declaration of independence therefore breached the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation. Dudayev was "associated with organized crime in both Chechnya and Russia, and (was) less than popular among the Chechen themselves."[11] Moscow refused Chechnya's claim to independence, as did most of the international community.

Chechnya was also an important economic asset for the Russian Federation Serving as a transit centre for oil from as far as western Siberia and the Caspian Sea. To Moscow's dismay, "Dudaev [sic] and his associates were illegally reselling great quantities of the oil at a considerable profit to fund their own operations."[12] An independent Chechnya would threaten "the fate of the oil pipeline from Azerbaijan through Chechnya north to the Russian port of Novorossiisk" and would undermine Russian hegemony over the region, which in turn would open the door for foreign interests—like the United States—to gain a foothold in the region.[13]

Trenin notes that during the 1990s, in historically one of its weakest moments, the Russian State was continually assailed by ethnic regions trying to break away from Moscow. The Russian Federation signed a number of bilateral agreements with numerous regions between 1994 and 1997, delineating these regions' power. Tatarstan came out with extensive rights, which led to Kazan leaders speaking of "confederate" relations between Tatarstan and Russia.[14] Chechnya's fight for independence continued to undermine the Russian Federation: "[L]ocal ethnonationalist elites… saw the Chechen situation as an excuse to press Moscow for more autonomy and to use their loyalty to the federation over Chechnya [as] a bargaining chip in negotiations with Moscow."[15] The Chechen conflict encouraged instability elsewhere.

This leads us to the Chechen Wars of the 1990s. Russia was determined to regain control in Chechnya, a region increasingly subject to violence and lawlessness. According to Lieven,

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[11] Longworth, p. 307.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Lieven, p. 314.
[14] Trenin and Malashenko, p. 46.
[15] Ibid., p. 54.

> …the precipitating factor, in the escalating indirect Russian intervention in Chechnya which began in July 1994, and led to the military invasion of December, was the series of bus hijackings by Chechen armed criminals in the preceding months. If these had not occurred, then a Russian invasion would not have happened when and as it did, and conceivably would not have occurred at all.[16]

In addition, Russia had to intervene in the region in order to re-establish the security of its own people, as minority groups—and especially Russians—who were the target of criminal groups and political harassment in Chechnya.[17] In October and November 1994, two attacks on Grozny were unsuccessful, even leading to the capture of Russian civilians and military personnel. When Russian President Boris Yeltsin issued an ultimatum to the Chechen forces to stop fighting and surrender, Dudayev's government refused to comply. Yeltsin therefore called for the restoration of order in Chechnya by force. The conflict would last three years, leading to huge numbers of civilian casualties. These included Dudayev himself, who was killed by laser-guided missiles from a Russian reconnaissance aircraft. After an ultimatum by Russian commander Konstantin Pulikovsky that he was going to use ballistic missiles on Grozny if the Chechens fighters did not desert the city, General Alexander Lebed signed the Khasavyurt cease-fire agreement with Chechen independence leader Aslan Maskhadov on August 31, 1996.[18]

In September 1999, Chechen terrorists allegedly bombed apartment buildings in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgodonsk. A simultaneous Chechen initiative to invade neighbouring Dagestan pushed the Russian government, led by Prime Minister Putin, to take action in Chechnya.[19] To Russian citizens, these were "acts of war committed by Chechen terrorists and their foreign supporters against innocent Russian civilians."[20] The Second Chechen War thus began. This time, the Russian forces proved to be better organized, as they quickly took over important strongholds and eventually captured Grozny in February 2000. The Russian population supported the Russian government

[16] Lieven, p. 313.
[17] Sakwa, p. 15.
[18] Dzhabrail Gakaev, "Chechnya in Russia and Russia in Chechnya," *Chechnya: From Past to Future* (London, 2005), p. 29.
[19] Trenin and Malashenko, p. 13.
[20] Goldgeier and McFaul, p. 268.

and "saw the intervention into Chechnya… as self-defence. Until the end of the Clinton administration, solid majorities in Russia supported the war effort."[21] The conflict also proved tragic for the Russians, as a Chechen terrorist faction's takeover of a Moscow theatre in October 2002 led to the taking of 900 hostages. The result was 150 deaths, mostly due to a strong aerosol being pumped into the building to incapacitate the rebels, as well as the slow administration of its antidote.[22] Chechen rebels also occupied a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in September 2004 in order to inflame interethnic tensions and broaden the scope of the Chechen conflict. The occupation lasted for three days and claimed a death-toll of 330 people, including 172 children.[23] This second Chechen conflict ultimately led to the installation of a pro-Moscow government in Chechnya and a new constitution reintegrating Chechnya within Russia. Putin granted wide autonomy to the Chechen republic, but as an "integral part of the Russian Federation."[24]

How did the western mainstream media view the conflict? It is not hard to imagine: Russia was the aggressor in the conflict. As Longworth explains, the conflict has often "been explained in terms of a classic struggle between an imperial power [Russia] and a new nation striving to be free [the Chechens]."[25] Western media chose to represent Chechen rebels as freedom fighters instead of terrorists. Realities were somewhat different: The Chechens attacked civilian populations and committed numerous atrocities. According to Longworth,

> The war was dirty, and the government deserved the bad press it got both at home and abroad for the cruelties inflicted on the Chechens. However, the atrocities were by no means one-sided. The insurgents fought viciously, slitting the throats of Russian prisoners they had taken in view of cameras, and the army responded as viciously.[26]

As we have seen in the previous pages, the Chechens as a people have their share of responsibility for the lengthy conflict with Russia. As Lieven describes them,

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[21] "Public Support for Chechnya Operation Declining," *RFE/RL Newsline* (Vol. 6) 9 Sept. 2002, in Goldgeier and McFaul, 272.
[22] "Gas killed Moscow hostages," *BBC News World Edition*, 14 Oct. 2013
[23] Gakaev, p. 39.
[24] *Moscow News*, 26 March-1 April 2003, 3 in Mike Bowker, "Western Views of the Chechen Conflict," *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, p. 235.
[25] Longworth, p. 307.
[26] Ibid., p. 308.

> From this point of view, the Chechens might be called a nightmare for the modern Western liberal's views and ideals. They are a nationality with no identification with the state and the society in which they live, and no motivation whatsoever to conform with its laws; equipped with ancient traditions which are in contradiction to those of the 'enlightened', 'pluralist' and 'progressive' liberalism; with social reforms which make them opaque to outside investigation; internally cohesive, and remarkably efficient and ruthless in pursuit of their aims; and in a country in which a mixture of poorly institutionalised 'democracy', social disintegration, state weakness and state corruption have opened up the most enormous opportunities and spaces for organised criminal activity.[27]

The western perspective of the Chechen conflict is definitively skewed. According to historian Mike Bowker, the Western media

> …tends to portray the Chechen conflict as primarily a war of national liberation. Although rarely spelled out in these terms, the implication of much of the coverage is that the Chechen cause is just. The Chechens have been oppressed by the Russians for the last two hundred years and deserve their independence. The use of force by the Russian authorities is heavily criticized, with the media focusing in particular on the war crimes and human rights violations perpetrated by the Russian forces in Chechnya.[28]

This is what one might expect to find in the articles from the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Independent*, and the *Guardian*. Vladimir Putin's views on Chechnya from his speeches are, in general, reprinted accurately or at least in the same spirit. The journalists' opinions of the conflict colour the articles. Both the Russian state and the Chechen rebels shared in the responsibility for the atrocities of war. Yet with some exceptions, the Russians are the oppressors while the Chechens are innocent. These themes emerged in an April 2001 article in the *Washington Post* entitled "Russia's Dirty War in Chechnya." The article described the discovery of a mass grave of Chechen people, clearly executed, and among them many women and children. According to the *Washington Post*, Russian security forces were responsible for abduction and execution of these people. Nothing was said of Chechen involvement in the conflict except for "recent bombings in the Northern Caucasus, which Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov vehemently condemned, [that] may be a sign of individual Chechen desperation…"[29] Chechen involvement in the war was reduced to a Russian war of aggression. But

[27] Lieven, p. 353.
[28] Bowker, p. 223.
[29] Ilyas Akhmadov, "Russia's Dirty War in Chechnya," *Washington Post*, 19 Apr. 2001.

according to the newspaper, Russia's "war machine" was going strong, and the "dirty war" tactics had only increased since Vladimir Putin turned over operational control to the FSB. The term "war machine" was especially rich; this choice of words—instead of the "Russian army" or the Russian "security forces"—is ironic coming from the greatest war machine in the world.

The *Independent* also portrayed Russia as the "aggressor." Reflecting on the newly-cemented cooperation of Russia and the West in the post-9/11 era, author Imre Karacs bluntly assessed this relationship, noting that "…there will be no further criticism from Western leaders if Russian troops scorch the breakaway republic once more, as Mr Putin is threatening to do."[30] According to Karacs, Russia was the aggressor and the West was complicit in turning a blind eye. In October 2001, the *Independent* went even further:

> The small print in the deal is that the West appears to have abandoned its opposition to Russia's atrocious war against Chechen separatists. The horror of this conflict has been well documented. The Chechen capital Grozny been razed—twice—and thousands of civilians have been killed. Mr Putin did not inherit the latest round of this vicious conflict; he started it and it played a key role in his getting elected President.[31]

The bias of the newspaper against Russia and Putin was evident. It was not alone in the propagation of such views. At the same time, an editorial article in the *Washington Post* criticized Putin's reasoning for action in Chechnya—insisting that the region was not "…a terrorist syndicate or an Islamic movement but a nation that was conquered by Russia in the 19th century and that for more than a decade has been seeking to regain self-rule."[32] It also argued that Chechen President Aslan Mashkadov was a democratically-elected leader while comparing him to Putin who, according to the editorial, reversed "a peace accord by sending 80,000 Russian troops to invade [Chechnya]." No mention was made of the illegitimacy of the 1997 elections that brought Mashkadov to power, where according to Bowker "the turnout was low and anti-

[30] Imre Karacs, "War on Terrorism: Russia—Putin offers a 'real partnership'," *The Independent*, 26 Sept. 2001.
[31] "The high price we must pay for Russia's help," *The Independent*, 4 Oct. 2001.
[32] "Why Chechnya is Different," *Washington Post*, 4 Oct. 2001.

independent candidates were not allowed to stand."[33] The Chechen invasion of Dagestan was also left unmentioned. It was one of the reasons which triggered Russian intervention in Chechnya and Putin specifically referred to it in his statement following the E.U.-Russia Summit the day before. Russia's fight was against terrorist factions who did not represent the interests of the Chechen people.[34]

The *New York Times* also crudely glosses over the facts about the crisis in Chechnya. The purposeful misrepresentation of Russia vis-à-vis Chechnya is especially clear in an October 2001 article:

> [The] Chechen fighting was primarily a battle against radical Islamic terrorism. But the conflict between Russians and Chechens goes back centuries, and the two Russian military offensives there over the past decade have been accompanied by the brutal and widespread abuse of innocent civilians. Washington should continue to protest this inexcusable behaviour.[35]

The *New York Times* wanted its readers to believe Russia was an aggressor rather than a victim of Chechen violence and banditry. The *Times* clearly portrayed the Russian military's offensives as actions—instead of reactions—against the Chechen terrorists.

There were also articles written which accused Russia of unnecessary violence. Anna Politkovskaya's 14 November 2001 editorial in the *Washington Post* accused Russian troops in Chechnya of inexcusable atrocities. According to Politkovskaya, "The most characteristic feature of life in Chechnya today is the uncontrolled blizzard of bullets and shells all around you. No one is safe."[36] The Russian soldiers basically did whatever they wanted according to Politkovskaya, and the police stations and courts were non-existent. The timing of this article was of course significant; it came on the heels of a Joint Press Conference between George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin. Politkovskaya used the article to criticize both the Russian and Chechen authorities for the situation in Chechnya. Due to the violence, Chechnya was dilapidated and unliveable. For the people living there, a normal life was impossible.

An April 2002 article in the *New York Times* by Michael Wines was surprising. Wines described a guerrilla attack on two vehicles carrying pro-Russian servicemen,

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[33] Bowker, p. 229.
[34] Vladimir Putin, "Statement and Answers to Questions Following the EU-Russia Summit," 4 Oct. 2001.
[35] "From Russia, With Realism," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 2001.
[36] Anna Politkovskaya, "Remember Chechnya," *Washington Post*, 14 Nov. 2001.

resulting in the death of 17 soldiers.[37] The attack is an example of the atrocities faced every day by Russian troops. Instead of portraying the Russian forces as violent brutes, he instead showed them to be victims of Chechen violence. Wines attempted to get his readers to empathize with Russia during the conflict. The article noted the "…land mines that Chechen guerrillas plant almost nightly after Russian troops surrender the city to darkness and withdraw to their bunkers," and that "…Russian troops continue to die daily in a low-level guerrilla war waged by snipers and bomb-makers amid Grozny's weed-covered ruins". Wines' article was an exception to the usual run of anti-Russian sentiments about Chechnya found in the western mainstream media.

Another exception was Sharon LaFraniere's June 2002 piece in the *Washington Post*. The article started off typically, as she described at length torture methods used by Russian troops in the Chechen village of Mesker Yurt. In an interesting development, she explained how this torture started when Chechen rebels "abducted a 36-year-old Chechen named Sinbarigov, who some villagers said worked for Russia's Federal Security Service. The next day, his head was found on a stick next to the village administration building."[38] This showed how cruel and sadistic the Chechen rebels could also be, a side of the conflict rarely described in the western media.

Jonathan Steele's October 2002 article for the *Guardian* assessed the recent history of the Russia-Chechnya conflict. In describing Moscow's hard-line policies with Chechnya, Steele recounted how President Yeltsin

> …was not willing to see his…multi-ethnic Russian Federation disintegrate in the same way. His main tactic against the Chechens and their leader, Dzhokar Dudayev, was to use economic sanctions to try to isolate the small oil-rich region on the northern slopes of the Caucasus and bring it to heel. When this failed, Mr Yeltsin took the disastrous decision to send troops into Chechnya in 1994.[39]

Russia's territorial integrity, or the lawlessness present in Chechnya after the breakup of the USSR, was not mentioned. Steele did mention the banditry and hostage-taking endemic to Chechnya between the Chechen wars, yet still painted Russian

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[37] Michael Wines, "Rebel Ambush in Chechnya Betrays Putin's Rosy View," *New York Times*, 19 Apr. 2002.
[38] Sharon LaFreniere, "Chechen Refugees Describe Atrocities by Russian Troops," *Washington Post*, 29 Jun. 2002.
[39] Jonathan Steele, "Moscow Reaps the Chechen Whirlwind," *The Guardian*, 24 Oct. 2002.

intervention in the region as a political tactic used in early 2000 to win the presidency for Putin. Disregarding the numerous terrorist operations in the Caucasus and in Moscow, Steele noted that Putin "was quick to try to exploit President Bush's "war on terrorism," saying [the Russians] were the first victims of Islamic fundamentalism." Putin's comments were interpreted by the *Guardian* merely as hot air in order to appeal to the western world. Steele's survey of the conflict was simplistic and ignored the fact that Russian actions were in response to Chechen terrorism.

The references to Russian aggression could also be very subtle—or not. In another October 2002 article, Wines reported on the beginnings of the Moscow theatre siege for the *New York Times*. The author casually mentioned as context that "The Chechens, who are demanding an end to Russia's war in the separatist republic, had earlier released 12 other hostages…"[40] In an article about terrorists taking over a theatre in the name of the Chechen Republic, Wines referred to the conflict as "Russia's war," laying the blame at Russia's feet.

Some articles simply blamed Putin for the escalation of violence. While arguing that Putin's show of force in the Moscow theatre siege was necessary, the Sunday *Observer* blamed Putin for the escalation of the conflict:

> …Putin's struggle in Chechnya, far from bringing that insurgency closer to an end, has instead exacerbated the potential for terrorist violence to be visited on Russians. The temptation now for Putin must be to further extend his campaign in Chechnya. He should be strongly discouraged. It would be a fatal error that would pile tragedy on tragedy, continuing in the same mistaken path that Russia has pursued for almost decade.[41]

Likewise, the *New York Times* criticized both the Chechen rebels and the Russian forces for their roles in the escalation of the conflict and for their descent "…ever deeper into a hellhole of brutish behaviour."[42] The newspaper recounted the atrocities of the war on both sides, yet ended with a warning to the Russians that "…the Chechens have some legitimate grievances about a long history of harsh Russian rule. Mr. Putin should recognize that he cannot end their insurrection through force alone." The author clearly

[40] Michael Wines, "Chechens Kill Hostages in Siege at Russian Hall," *New York Times*, 25 Oct. 2002.
[41] "Putin Should Not Ape Bush," *The Observer*, 27 Oct. 2002.
[42] "The Slaughter in Moscow," *New York Times*, 28 Oct. 2002.

fights on the Chechen side, hinting that Putin did not want negotiations, and instead opted for brute force. This continued to serve the image of Russia as an aggressor.

In addition, arguments for Chechen independence were found in the *Washington Post.* In the aftermath of the Moscow theatre tragedy where at the time 115 Russians had lost their lives due to Chechen terrorism, the criminals still get more sympathy from the western media. Chechnya is described, in spite of its terrorist activities, as "…a predominantly Muslim republic devastated by two wars in the past eight years [that] deserves a fair settlement with Moscow that would restore its right to self-rule."[43] The western media's favouritism toward Chechnya was clear as the author tried to paint a sympathetic picture of Chechens even in the aftermath of the unspeakable acts committed by its terrorist factions.

One of the most one-sided articles was published in the *Independent* by international correspondents Phil Reeves and Mary Dejevsky. Both journalists have a long track-record on Russia; Reeves covered the Yeltsin years for the *Independent* while Dejevsky worked in the Soviet Union for some time and corresponded on (predominantly Russian) foreign affairs for the BBC and the *Times* (London). The article, titled "The bloody history of a people with an unquenchable thirst for independence" described the relationship between Russia and Chechnya as an imperial nation conquering a weaker state. From the beginning, the article noted that "…Vladimir Putin faces the most wrenching dilemma of his presidency: does he continue to try to subjugate Chechnya by force, or does he move towards talks that would grant the Chechens the autonomy they so crave…"[44] It continued with a simplistic view of the relationship between Russia and Chechnya. The author mentioned the early 19th century conquering of Chechnya, the mass-deportations of 1944, and post-Cold War relations, during which Yeltsin decided against Chechen autonomy because allegedly, "enough break-up was enough." The authors argued that the strategic position of Chechnya and its natural reserves of oil were the reason for continued Chechen subjugation, ignoring Chechen violence and insurrection. The poor economy and lack of infrastructure in Chechnya were then used as arguments to justify Chechen actions. After Islamic militants invaded Dagestan and

[43] "Terrorism's Losers," *Washington Post*, 29 Oct. 2002.
[44] Phil Reeves and Mary Dejevsky, "The bloody history of a people with an unquenchable thirst for independence," *The Independent*, 29 Oct. 2002.

apartment buildings in Moscow were bombed, the authors still saw Russia as the aggressor, as "the response from Moscow was uncompromising." According to Reeves and Dejevsky, Chechnya was unfairly added to the ranks "of global terrorists" and their quest for independence lumped in "with the anti-Western jihad of al-Qa'ida." They took the position that Chechnya was a victim of unfavourable circumstances rather than a haven for criminals in the Caucasus.

Another casual mention of Russian aggression is present in David E. Sanger's September 2003 article for the *New York Times*. Sanger detailed Russia's desire to keep their $800 million contract with Iraq to build a nuclear reactor and described at length U.S. concerns over the deal while doubting Putin's intentions. Even though the article is about U.S.-Russia relations in the Middle East and the dynamic between Putin and Bush, Chechnya was mentioned. President Bush reflected "growing American concern about Russia's brutal military action in Chechnya" while making no mention of the equally brutal terrorist operations Chechen rebels increasingly deployed on Russian territory or the U.S.'s own "brutal" campaign in Iraq.[45]

Dejevsky's September 2004 article in the *Independent* started off with empathy for a shaken Russia in the wake of the terrorist activities. She noted that Russians were at a breaking point, and did not need the West's appeal for cool heads and negotiations, but rather were looking for "… a good old-fashioned iron fist."[46] Dejevsky also noted that "Mr Putin can be blamed for upping the stakes in Chechnya. It was he who ordered the brutal offensive in 1999, a policy which helped him to a landslide presidential election." Again there was no mention of the Dagestan invasion, the Moscow apartment buildings, or of Chechen brutality against ethnic Russians, three reasons that pushed Moscow to intervene in Chechnya. The conflict was simply blamed on Russian aggression.

In a September 2004 article in the *Washington Post* by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser dealing with the aftermath of the Beslan school massacre, much is made of the conflicting reports of the Russian officials about the number of insurgents involved and the number of hostages and deaths. The article implied that a cover-up of the tragedy was taking place and that the number of victims was far less than local reports indicated.

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[45] David E. Sanger, "Russia Won't End Accord with Iran to Build Nuclear Reactor," *New York Times*, 28 Sep. 2003.
[46] Mary Dejevsky, "Putin's greatest political danger is to appear soft," *The Independent*, 3 Sep. 2004.

Understated is the case made by Russian officials that the terrorist group was "allied with Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev and led by Ingush fighter Magomed Yevloyev…"[47] These were two important leaders in the rebel cause. The authors downplayed the role of Chechen separatist warlord Basayev in order to focus on Russian ineptitude and duplicity after the tragedy. Similarly, the *New York Times*' report on the Beslan siege by Steven Lee Myers and Sophia Kishkovsky made subtle mention of Russia's negative role in the tragedy. Putin, the authors argued, "would not consider changing the Kremlin's strategy there, despite years of war and atrocities that have left the Chechen people embittered."[48]

Some trends become clear. In the American newspapers, the *Washington Post* is much more direct in its criticism of the Russian action in Chechnya and of Putin's policies compared, for example, with the *New York Times'* Michael Wines, who presented a more nuanced picture of the conflict, putting blame on Chechen rebels when appropriate, and showing how Chechen actions started the conflict. As for the British papers, the *Independent* takes a harder line against Russian policy and often neglects to mention Chechen actions that led to Russian army intervention. The *Guardian* seemed less interested in the Chechen-Russian crisis.

The mainstream media presented a skewed, hostile view of Russia and Putin while being sympathetic to the Chechen rebels. Russia was the enemy aggressor, using brutal force against people who only wanted their freedom. This is not a surprise, if one takes into account the western mainstream media's "russophobia." The media boiled the conflict in Chechnya down to a tragedy created by a clumsy Russian bully. For the West—and the U.S. especially—calling Russia a bully due to operations against terrorists within its borders is ironic given the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

[47] Peter Baker and Susan B. Glasser, "Russia Collects Dead at School," *Washington Post*, 5 Sep. 2004.
[48] Steven Lee Myers and Sophia Kishkovsky, "Putin Says Russia Faces Full 'War' to Divide Nation," *New York Times*, 5 Sep. 2004.

Chapter 4: Vladimir Putin against the West

Vladimir Putin has long had a contentious relationship with the West. Since his appointment by Boris Yeltsin as Prime Minister, the Western mainstream media has depicted Putin as an unknown entity in his first few years in office (both as Prime Minister and as President), as an ally in the fight against terrorism, and then as "hopelessly authoritarian."[1] Yet at home he enjoys high approval ratings and many of his policies have benefitted the Russian people. Under his leadership, Russia went from a politically economically enfeebled nation to a strong, influential country with whom other countries want to do business.[2] According to the Western media, Putin has also used his power to censor the independent media in Russia, and his governmental realignment meant the centralization of governmental powers around the President. During his time in power, Russia's path greatly diverged from the one the U.S. had laid out for it during the post-Cold War years. Putin's ascendancy and subsequent demonization in the West masks the extent of the west's interference in Russian affairs.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born on October 7, 1952 in Leningrad. He graduated from Leningrad State University in 1975. After graduation, he joined the KGB, a move that would define his future career but would especially colour the way he is perceived in the West. He was a KGB officer and monitor in East Germany from 1985 to 1990, when he was recalled to the Soviet Union. As a putsch against then First Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev spelled the last days of the Soviet Union, Putin took what he described as the hardest decision of his life and quit the KGB.[3] His political career started in May 1990 when he became an advisor on international affairs to Saint Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak. In 1997 he was named as Yeltsin's Chief of the Presidential Staff. He was appointed head of the FSB—the successor agency to the KGB—in the summer of 1998. According to historian Michael Stuermer, he came back "to his personal and ideological roots."[4]

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[1] Stephen F. Cohen, "The Media's New Cold War," The *Nation*, 31 Jan. 2005, p. 20.
[2] Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991), p. 176.
[3] Jack, p. 67.
[4] Michael Stuermer, *Putin and the Rise of Russia* (London, 2008), p. 29.

His meteoric rise through the Russian political ranks continued, as Yeltsin named him acting Prime Minister on August 9, 1999. Yeltsin then resigned on December 31, 1999, leaving the unknown Vladimir Putin as the Acting President of the Russian Federation. According to Edward Lucas, international editor of the *Economist*, "little was known about him, personally or professionally. He liked judo and spoke German."[5] Entering office, Putin's first decree was to pardon Yeltsin and his family from charges of corruption. On March 26, 2000, Putin won the national elections and became President of Russia.

Putin's first two terms, from 2000 to 2008, were marked by important events, both domestically and internationally. He faced two major crises. The first was the *Kursk* submarine disaster; while participating in a naval exercise in the Barents Sea, a torpedo warhead inside the submarine *Kursk* exploded, leading to the detonation of other warheads. Twenty-three men survived the ordeal but died waiting for rescue. Due to the Russian government's refusal to give access to the submarine, rescue attempts by the British and the Norwegians were not carried out. Putin took the blame for his government's neglect and the inability to act quickly to save the personnel aboard the vessel.[6] The second crisis was the war against separatist forces in Chechnya. In 2003, a new constitution was adopted by referendum, reintegrating the breakaway region into the country and making Chechnya a republic of Russia.

A prolonged fight against the oligarchy of Russia also marked his first years in office, as a class of opportunistic entrepreneurs took full advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the privatization of the Soviet economy. These people were very influential and "enjoyed virtual control of most of Russia's major industries: oil, gas, aluminum, banking, communications, copper, steel and coal."[7] Putin brought them to court, and many, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky were convicted for tax-evasion while others like Boris Berezovsky were accused of corruption. Khodorkovsky's prosecution made him a martyr for American critics, yet at home, the overwhelming majority of

[5] Edward Lucas, The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West (London, 2008), p. 19.
[6] Jack, p. 63.
[7] Longworth, p. 316.

Russians applauded Putin's actions.[8] His popularity grew for he was seen as a man of action and strength, but more importantly, as a man of the people.

Putin also reorganized governmental structures, centralizing power in the hands of the presidency. The eighty-nine republics of Russia were regrouped into eight 'super-districts', each run by a plenipotentiary representative named by Putin himself.[9] He also launched new government initiatives to improve health care, education, and agriculture. The economy improved under his presidency, and Russia became a net-creditor for the first time since the end of the Cold War. The recuperation of the economy came at the expense of many companies, including Khodorkovsky's petroleum company Yukos which was eventually sold to the Russian state company Rosneft. One of the more enduring aspects of Putin's legacy in the West is his alleged curtailment of individual liberties, including the censure of the media in Russia. Western journalists, intellectuals and politicians charged Putin's government with manipulating election campaigns and stifling political opposition.[10] This is ironic, since U.S. agents backed Yeltsin's repression of the Russian legislature in 1993 and the fixing of national elections in 1996.

Unperturbed by his Western critics, Putin worked to better lives of the Russian people. Wages rose and the general standard of living increased.[11] During Putin's first term, the rouble's value remained solid compared to Western currencies and the banking system recovered. Many Russians saw Putin as Russia's saviour as they once again had decent lives and a sense of optimism about the future.[12]

Putin's personality also plays a part in the way the West perceives him, and comparisons are often made with his predecessor Yeltsin. During the last years of his presidency, Yeltsin had a negative public image. In October 1993, Yeltsin illegally ordered the dissolution of parliament; when the parliament resisted, he took military action against them. This resulted in 187 deaths. Yeltsin's radical economic reforms coupled with rampant corruption led to the financial crisis of 1998. The President looked incompetent and subservient to the U.S. In addition he was an alcoholic, often drunk in public. Yeltsin was ridiculed both in his country and abroad.

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[8] Foglesong, p. 221.
[9] Jack, p. 234.
[10] Foglesong, p. 219.
[11] Stuermer, p. 160.
[12] Lucas, p. 54.

Putin was Yeltsin's opposite. As Edward Lucas wrote in his book *The New Cold War*, Putin "was a straight-talking tough guy, visibly sober and well organized; the best-educated and best-traveled Russian leader since Lenin."[13] Composed and stoic, Putin was very different from Yeltsin's jovial drunk. According to right-wing German historian Michael Stuermer, Putin "cultivates the air of the CEO of a global corporation"[14] and is "nothing if not a perfectionist, and he cannot stand disorder and lack of discipline."[15] According to historian and noted Cold War anti-communist Richard Pipes,

> …the absence of social and national cohesion, the ignorance of civil rights, the lack of any real notion of private property, and an ineffective judiciary—prompted Russians to desire strong tsarist rule. With few lateral social ties, they relied on the state to protect them from each other. They wanted their rulers to be both strong and harsh, qualities designated by the Russian word groznyi, meaning "awesome" (incorrectly translated as "terrible"), the epithet applied to Tsar Ivan IV. Experience has taught Russians to associate weak government--and democracy is seen as weak--with anarchy and lawlessness.[16]

Putin was willing to "roll back all things Yeltsin"[17] The mainstream media, preferring a weak Russia and a western puppet at its head, soon took a dire view of the new President. According to David S. Foglesong, "as early as the fall of 1999… American cartoonists began depicting [Putin] as a sinister figure in a trench coat (an allusion to his work as an intelligence officer in the 1970s and 1980s.)"[18] Stuermer makes such associations in his book: "Vladimir Vladimirovich greeted each guest with a handshake and that discerning look straight into the eyes that he had obviously taken from his former incarnation as an intelligence officer."[19] This image of the Russian President is omnipresent in Western literature about Putin. Political scientist and former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski compared Putin to Mussolini.[20] The *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof likened Putin to the dictatorial rulers of Chile and Spain: Putin was "a Russified Pinochet or Franco," who was guiding Russia "into

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[13] Ibid., p. 38.
[14] Stuermer, p. 47.
[15] Ibid., p. 18.
[16] Richard Pipes, "Flight from Freedom: What Russians Think and Want," *Foreign Affairs* (83.3, May-June 2004), p. 10.
[17] Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York, 2005), p. 64.
[18] Foglesong, p. 224.
[19] Stuermer, p. 40.
[20] Foglesong, p. 225.

fascism."[21] Negativity is the key, as rarely did the mainstream media attempt to show a good side to Vladimir Putin, instead focusing on either his KGB past, his censorship of the media, or his alleged mishandling of a number of sensitive episodes in modern Russian history, such as the Beslan school massacre or the *Kursk* submarine disaster.

The *Washington Post* wasted no time getting right into unflattering comparisons. The first notable example comes in an article entitled "Putin's KGB Way."[22] "Covert operations are what Putin, a former KGB agent, was trained for" said the *Washington Post*. The article, which dealt with the government takeover of the NTV television station, also commented that Putin "expressed admiration for his KGB colleagues who persecuted dissidents in the 1970s." Numerous references to the KGB did nothing to endear Putin to American public opinion.

The comparisons go further than Putin's own Soviet past. A June 2001 article in the *Washington Post* by U.S. Librarian of Congress James Billington about the first meeting between then-American President George W. Bush and Putin started off well, talking about the improving Russian economy and Putin's own growing popularity. But the positive quickly gives way to the negative:

> "Putin wants to be a de Gaulle -- a hero who restores national pride by asserting strong central authority. But there is danger that nationalism, fuelled by the pessimistic depression of ordinary Russians, might turn him or a successor into a Milosevic -- a tyrant who restores pride by re-establishing Russian hegemony in parts of the former U.S.S.R., much as the Serbian leader tried to reassert Serbian dominance in a disintegrating Yugoslavia."[23]

The de Gaulle reference is actually quite appropriate, as Putin is like him in that he centralized power in the President's hands. The American media were critical of de Gaulle as he also did not bow his head to U.S. interests. Former President of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic was charged with war crimes by the United Nations—including genocide and ethnic cleansing against Albanians in Kosovo—for his actions during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and his name brings about images of violence and destruction from the mainstream media. The article then pointed to the Soviet past, describing Putin's precarious situation akin to former Soviet Union leader Mikhail

[21] Ibid., p. 225-6.
[22] Marsha Lipman, "Putin's KGB Way," *Washington Post*, 17 Apr. 2001.
[23] James Billington, "OK, They've Met. Now Let's Get Engaged," *Washington Post*, 17 June 2001.

Gorbachev: "There is a tragic possibility that Putin could end up unintentionally destroying the fledgling democratic system he is trying to reform – rather in the way Mikhail Gorbachev broke down the communist system he was only trying to restructure." Instead of supporting Putin's initiatives, the Western press criticised his methods.

In November 2001, the *Guardian* took aim at Putin. The article covered a press conference between Bush and Putin in which both sides agreed to cut down their country's stockpiles of nuclear warheads. The usual skewing and necessary spin was already present. Instead of an emphasis on Russo-American cooperation, there was notable scepticism towards Putin. Compared to President George W. Bush, Putin looked less than friendly: "The US president was at his most expansive and genial. Alongside him, Mr Putin, who generally wears the air of a just-sacked football manager, remained poker-faced."[24] This was not the only cynical reference in the text: "Mr Putin invited the U.S. president to St. Petersburg in midwinter. It was unclear whether this was an example of bleak Russian humour." The author played with typical Russian stereotypes of emotional dullness and cold demeanour and created a very unflattering image of the Russian President. The article concluded that Putin had trouble at home: "President Putin has to persuade a sceptical audience at home that he is genuinely looking after Russian interests. It is important for him not to be seen enjoying the barbecue too much."

Western journalists often portrayed Putin as the stereotypical "cold" Russian, though the stereotype was of course false. In a November 2001 report in the *Washington Post* on a Russian-American agreement to cut nuclear arms, the author noted that the discussions between Bush and Putin shifted from arms reduction to the occupation of Kabul by the U.S. and Russian-backed Northern Alliance: "Both leaders said they were concerned about reports of human rights abuses by the alliance forces against suspected members and sympathizers of the Taliban militia…although Bush seemed somewhat more concerned than Putin."[25] Readers could not have misunderstood the *Washington Post*'s parting shot.

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[24] Matthew Engel, "Bush tells Putin that he will slash warheads by two-thirds," *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2001.
[25] Karen DeYoung and Dana Millbank, "Bush, Putin Agree to Slash Nuclear Arms," *Washington Post*, 14 Nov. 2001.

The *Guardian* also indulged in derisive comments. In a reference to the unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the newspaper noted that "The Kremlin knew the decision was coming and last night Mr. Putin was an embodiment of KGB-trained inscrutability."[26] The KGB reference added a touch of skepticism about Russian intentions and tainted the image of President Putin.

While Putin is the target of mostly negative comments, a few journalists are surprising in their realistic and positive portrayals of the Russian President. In May 2002 the *Guardian* opined that Putin "has been generally accepted as the first Russian leader who truly understands the limits of Russian power - not only now but even in a future where Russian strength has been restored."[27] Putin's foresight was also noted in the article: "Certainly his prudence means he has consistently avoided unwinnable confrontations." This portrayal of Putin as a smart man who knows his place in international politics was a refreshing alternative to the shifty ex-KGB soldier or caricature of a Soviet officer he was usually seen to be.

The *Guardian* also depicted Putin as a modernizer. His speech at G8 Summit in June 2002 was deemed important: According to the article, "This conference was itself symbolic of Mr Putin's personal commitment to change, at home and abroad."[28] His part in modernizing the farming economy in Russia was noted: "By creating a free market in land…Mr Putin is redirecting a centuries-old debate about land rights that exercised the likes of Turgenev and Tolstoy, was central to the Bolshevik revolution, and caused some of the biggest Stalinist-era upheavals." The company Putin kept is important, as both Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy were proponents of social reform. Putin's policies aimed at the renewal of the farming industry were instances of social reform and welcomed Russia into the 21st century, as according to the *Guardian*, "Rural Russia remains a vast, brooding, conservative land deeply in thrall to an ageless past."

In contrast, the *New York Times* believed Putin had a lot to answer for. His past role in the Soviet state apparatus was never long forgotten. In a May 2003 article about Putin's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of Russia, the newspaper notes that

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[26] Ian Traynor, "Russia puts a brave face on the inevitable," *The Guardian*, 14 Dec. 2001.
[27] Michael Woollacott, "Russia now know it has no option but to join the west," *The Guardian*, 17 May 2002.
[28] "Russian rights: Putin tackles an ageless inheritance," *The Guardian*, 28 June 2002.

Putin's speech showed a "lack of specific detail" which "recalled speeches of Soviet leaders who vowed to usher in a better tomorrow."[29] The image is not of a Russian President trying to move his country forward but rather of a Communist leader trying to stave off discontent.

The *New York Times* continued to bring up Putin's past. An article entitled "Putin's Democratic Present Fights his K.G.B. Past" is a good insight into the way the western world perceived Russia and Putin.[30] The article's title refers to the dichotomy of present-day Russia, where a nascent democracy appears to fight with the remnants of Soviet institutions. "A wealthy businessman who is close to him—and spoke anonymously to remain that way—said there were in fact two Putins, a security agent and a democrat, struggling for equipoise." The article encapsulated the west's perspective of Russia, still clinging to its Soviet past.

Less than a month later, the *Times* returned to the charge. "Putin's Old-Style K.G.B. Tactics" says the leader.[31] The article, about the arrest of Russian oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, stated that "after laboring to project the image of a rational, law-abiding statesman, President Vladimir Putin of Russia has reverted to the vengeful violence of his old employer, the K.G.B. [in order to deal with Khodorkovsky]."

The next interesting article, printed in the *Independent* on September 5, 2004, was a report on the Russian government's answer to the Beslan school tragedy. Putin's response to the tragedy and to the role of the Chechen terrorist in the siege was compared to President George W. Bush's rhetoric during the war in Iraq:

> "Such boldness may allow Mr Putin to stem the immediate flow of criticism, but he will have to work harder to convince Russians that he can contain the perceived terrorist threat emanating from the north Caucasus in the longer term. And here, Mr Putin appears to be borrowing, almost shamelessly, from President Bush's script. In each of the three recent terrorist attacks, including the school siege, Mr Putin has hazarded a link with al-Qa'ida. Whenever Mr Putin has spoken of terrorism in Russia, he has described Moscow's efforts to combat it as part of the "global war on terrorism"."[32]

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[29] Steven Lee Myers, "Putin Tells Russians of Clouds with Reform-Plan Linings," *New York Times*, 17 May 2003.
[30] Steven Lee Myers, "Putin's Democratic Present Fights his K.G.B. Past," *New York Times*, 9 Oct. 2003.
[31] "Putin's Old-Style K.G.B. Tactics," *New York Times*, 29 Oct. 2003.
[32] Mary Dejevsky, "Emotional Putin vows tough reforms to combat terror," *The Independent*, 5 Sep. 2004.

Since Bush's 'global war on terrorism' drew criticism in some circles, associating Putin's response with Bush's could possibly have an effect on the Russian President's image.

Putin's own past also continued to haunt him. A July 2006 *New York Times* article reported that Putin was trying to convince former U.S. commerce secretary Donald L. Evans to be the chairman of a leading Russian oil company. The article hinted that this was a sign of disrespect towards the United States. Because of this incident, American President George W. Bush held "to a warier view of Mr. Putin, a former KGB boss who is freshly assertive on the global stage."[33] This is ironic, since Bush's father, former U.S. President George H. W. Bush was head of the CIA before coming into the White House. Once again, evoking Putin's KGB past is meant to influence the reader into distrusting Putin.

Everyone seems to get into the act. An October 11, 2007 article in the *Guardian* described how Western attitudes were hardening towards Russia's foreign policies. Although the article itself is very scant, the end of the article is interesting. A quote from Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former U.K. Foreign Secretary, said it all: "What is really striking is the crudity of a Russian foreign policy run by a secret policeman advised by secret policemen."[34] Again, the allusion is to the KGB, that prototypical image of Soviet law and order, mistrusted by the western mainstream media.

The most interesting comparison involving Putin was not with de Gaulle, his Soviet past, or the stereotypical Russian image, but rather with a well-known and respected American figure. The October 2007 article in the *Washington Post* about Putin's televised question-and-answer session with the Russian people had a surprising title: "Putin Finds Expedient Hero in Four-Term U.S. President." The comparison with President Franklin D. Roosevelt drew parallels between the two men:

> "FDR, according to a consistent story line here, tamed power-hungry tycoons to save his country from the Great Depression. He restored his people's spirits while leading the United States for 12 years and spearheaded the struggle against "outside enemies"… Putin rescued an enfeebled Russia from the chaos of the 1990s, banished or imprisoned dangerous billionaires and regained

[33] Thom Shanker and Jim Rutenberg, "Bush Begins Advanced Course on the Ways of Putin," *New York Times*, 14 July 2006.
[34] Simon Tisdall, "Keeping a lid on Putin's resurgent Russia," *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2007.

> respect for his newly enriched country on the world stage. And Roosevelt ran for a third and fourth term because his country needed him. Translation: Putin, too, should stay."[35]

Although Putin mentioned many times he would not run for a third consecutive term, the article chose to focus on the chance he might nevertheless do it, violating the Russian constitution and acting undemocratically, the usual sticking point for the western world. The mainstream Western media continually found negatives about Putin. It was clear to them that Putin should go.

* * *

Vladimir Putin was criticized in the West because his vision for Russia greatly differed from what the West expected Russia to be. The first post-Soviet years were marked by Boris Yeltsin, a weak man dependent on the West and open to their ideas and influence. Putin changed all that, not by necessarily opposing the West, but by establishing independent policies from the west. "Such vehement [Western] vilification stemmed in part from the collapse of inflated hopes for the transformation of Russia."[36] Not a "transformation" but a continued subservience. As Putin's second term approached, the attacks became even more pointed: "Cartoonists regularly drew Putin as a medieval tsar, or portrayed him as a fanatical follower of Lenin and Stalin."[37]

Western attacks on Putin also served another purpose. The West's experiment in implementing "democracy" in Russia did not have had the desired effect of transforming Russia into a subservient state, the economy of which was to be integrated into a U.S.-dominated system; its primary effect is the man sitting in the President's chair today. The disastrous post-Soviet years which culminated in financial collapse, coupled with the unflattering image of President Yeltsin as a puppet led the Russian people to hope for a strong leader capable of establishing political stability and economic prosperity. They wanted a leader who was not afraid to take a tougher stand against the West in order to rebuild Russia's strength as a great power.[38] What the West appears to overlook is that its interference in Russia and its support of Yeltsin created a backlash amongst the Russian

[35] Peter Finn, "Putin Fins Expedient Hero in Four-Term U.S. President," *Washington Post*, 19 Oct. 2007.
[36] Foglesong, p. 226.
[37] Ibid., p. 225.
[38] Lucas, p. 70.

people to which Putin responded. The West—especially the U.S.—is trying hard to vilify Putin for it much preferred the weaker, subservient Russia led by Yeltsin. Indeed, it is ironic that Yeltsin named a successor who by his actions repudiated much of what he had done. Yeltsin himself might even have realized what he had done, and Putin was his initiative to fix it.

Chapter 5: The Conflict in South Ossetia

The South Ossetia War of 2008 provoked the ire of the West. The mainstream media seemed to ask how a powerful country like Russia could intervene in the affairs of its much smaller neighbour, Georgia. This was the usual double standards: Could only the West intervene in smaller countries, as the U.S. did in Afghanistan or Iraq? Viewing the dispute as a simple instance of Russian military bullying ignores the reasons for the conflict. Georgia was a U.S. client state, nominally independent but under U.S. influence. The South Ossetian people wanted independence from Georgia and a union with Russia. The Georgian leadership, under President Mikhail Saakashvili, a Georgian nationalist eager to join the European Union and NATO, wanted to recapture lost territory. Russia involved itself in order to defend the people of South Ossetia.

On closer inspection, the conflict was also a struggle for influence in the Caucasus. The West—dominated by the United States—wanted influence in the region. It supported Saakshvili's government and sought to expand NATO's reach to Russia's borders.[1] NATO's encirclement of Russia led the West to champion the Ukraine's membership into the organization. Russia was under siege: Territories for a long time under its sovereignty were being taken over by the West. Russian intervention in Georgia and South Ossetia gave notice to the West that Russia was still the dominant force in the region and that it was not going to be pushed around in its own backyard.

South Ossetia is located between Georgia and the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. Before the 2008 conflict, the country was home to approximately 60,000 Ossetians and 10,000 Georgians.[2] According to Swedish politician and former European Parliament member Per Gahrton, entering South Ossetia is like "entering a part of Russia" and the Ossetian citizens there associate with the Russian Federation.[3] South Ossetia had longstanding claims to independence from Georgia. Conflict brewed everywhere in Russia from 1918 to 1920 as a result of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and of western military intervention. The Georgian government was controlled by the

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[1] Jack, p. 299.
[2] Per Gahrton, *Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game* (New York, 2010), p. 57.
[3] Ibid., p. 60.

Mensheviks, but the South Ossetians sympathised with the Bolsheviks. The result was a series of revolts which the Menshevik government crushed in 1918.[4]

South Ossetia and fellow breakaway province Abkhazia both became disputed territories within Georgia. During the Soviet period South Ossetia was made an autonomous oblast in the Georgian SSR in 1922; Abkhazia in 1931. As the Soviet Union collapsed South Ossetian and Abkhaz separatist movements emerged. As a reaction to Georgian aspirations for independence, in 1989 the Supreme Soviet of South Ossetia declared itself a republic, a decision which the Georgian Supreme Soviet nullified.[5] Georgia's declaration of independence in March 1990 terminated agreements Abkhazia and South Ossetia had with the Soviet government. Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdi declared that South Ossetian motives for independence were part of a Russian ploy to undermine Georgian autonomy. Gamsakhurdi's dictatorial rule was marked by a nationalist "Georgia for the Georgians" agenda, which played an important part in escalating ethnic violence between Georgia and its breakaway regions.[6] According to historian Aleksei Arbatov, "Georgian nationalism threatened to eliminate the limited autonomy Abkhazians and South Ossetians had enjoyed under the Soviet system."[7] In September 1990, South Ossetia therefore proclaimed itself to be a Soviet socialist republic and seceded from Georgia, a decision which the Georgian leadership did not recognize.[8] Georgia tried to get South Ossetia back under its control, which resulted in a new conflict from 1990 to 1992. Georgia also fought a war with Abkhazia in 1992-1993. On January 19, 1992, in the midst of the war, 98.2% of South Ossetians voted to join the Russian Federation as an Independent Republic.[9] On June 24 of that year, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze agreed to a ceasefire in South Ossetia. Abkhazia and Georgia reached a ceasefire agreement in 1994, though skirmishes continued.

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[4] Svante Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and separatism in the South Caucasus- cases in Georgia," Uppsala Univesity (2002) in Gahrton, p. 58.
[5] Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York, 2010), p. 57.
[6] George Khutsishvili, "Intervention in Transcaucasus," Perspectives IV: 3 (February-March 1994), <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol4/Khutsishvili.html>.
[7] Alexei Arbatov, Abram Chayes, Antonia Chandler Hayes, and Lara Oldson*, Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union: Russian and American Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 343.
[8] Ibid., p. 356.
[9] Ibid., p. 360-1.

In 2008, the conflict flared up again, as paramilitary forces from South Ossetia started using heavier weaponry.[10] Georgia, emboldened by a privileged relationship with the Bush administration, retaliated by also increasing its armaments, behind the pretext of defending itself from a Russian invasion. Russia had also been augmenting its ground and airpower in South Ossetia. Russia also sent more peacekeepers in the region—yet still respecting the 3,000-men limit instilled in a 1994 CIS decision—and as a result, the inflow of North Caucasian volunteers sent to help grew.[11] Russia in turn accused Georgia of concentrating troops in the Kodori Gorge (a river valley in Abkhazia) in order to invade Abkhazia. In truth, both the Russian and Georgian sides were mobilizing, waiting on the other to make the first move.[12]

On August 7, Saakashvili ordered Georgian armed forces to shell a number of important South Ossetian positions, including downtown Tskhinvali and the surrounding heights and villages. The next day, a major military offensive was conducted by Georgian troops in order to take Tskhinvali. Russia responded with air strikes in defence of the South Ossetian citizens and the Russian peacekeeping officers in the region.[13] On August 8, the Russian Air Force bombed the Georgian city of Gori, a strategic point for the Georgian Army. After heavy fire, Russian troops eventually took the city. On August 10, South Ossetian troops bolstered by Russian troops coming in from the Roki Tunnel were able to clear Georgian troops from Tskhinvali and the neighbouring heights. The next day, Russian troops moved into Georgia, where they continued air and artillery strikes against Georgian forces. Russia also sent 9,000 troops to Abkhazia. With Russian support, Abkhazian troops mobilized in the Kodori Gorge in order to remove the Georgian presence from that area. The Georgian army was crushed. After a five-day war, Russian forces occupied the Georgian interior.

A ceasefire was brokered on August 12 with French and E.U. mediation. In the aftermath of the conflict, some 3,700 Russian military personnel were kept in and around South Ossetia, to safeguard the region against any further attacks.[14] Furthermore, the

[10] Asmus, p. 26.
[11] Ibid., 31.
[12] Gahrton, p. 176.
[13] Ibid., p. 37.
[14] Gahrton, p. 181.

Russian Federation officially recognized the republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states on August 26, 2008.[15]

From the West's perspective, Russian military intervention meant that it was trying to reassert control over its neighbours. For Russia, the war was aimed against U.S. presence in the Caucasus. Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ronald Asmus explains it in his book *A Little War that Shook the World*:

> …this was a war that was aimed not only at Georgia but at Washington, NATO, and the West more generally. It was also aimed against a European security system Moscow had come to see as tilted against itself and which it believed encouraged or enabled countries like Georgia to go West against its interest.[16]

Western observers like Mr. Asmus (who was an early proponent of NATO expansion into Eastern Europe in the 1990s) believed that Russia used this conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia in order to send a message to the West that its expansion towards Russia's borders and its interference in what Russia considered its own backyard was unacceptable.[17] Georgia, under American tutelage, was gravitating towards the West; Russia put a stop to this movement. According to Asmus, Russian intervention in Georgia was alarming:

> Moscow did not just invade a neighbour for the first time since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It broke the cardinal rule of post-Cold War European security that borders in Europe would never again be changed by forces of arms.[18]

The statement is ironic, as NATO involved itself in the realignment of Yugoslav borders when they supported secessionist governments in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia during the Yugoslav wars of the late 1990s. Russia was a firm supporter of Yugoslavia's right to territorial integrity, and feared that intervention against the sovereign nation would create a dangerous precedent. The West applied one set of rules for Yugoslavia—dismemberment—while fighting for Georgian territorial integrity.

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[15] Asmus, p. 211.
[16] Ibid., p. 5.
[17] Ibid., p. 15.
[18] Ibid., p. 14.

The conflict in Georgia was not the first instance of U.S. intervention on Russia's borders. The West also involved itself in Ukraine's 2004 Presidential elections. U.S. consultants and organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) supported activist movements in Ukraine, which led a U.S.-orchestrated grassroots movement for the election of Viktor Yushchenko as President. Yushchenko was seen in Russia as a western sympathizer; he sought European integration and a membership in NATO. Russia and Putin favoured Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych. The "western" candidate prevailed as Yushchenko won the elections, even amidst a controversial presidential race, which included Yushchenko almost dying, allegedly from dioxin poisoning.

Western involvement in Ukraine irked Russia. The Ukraine has been part of Russia for more than a thousand years and Kiev home to the first Russian state, the 9th century Kievan Rus. It therefore did not sit well with Russia that Ukraine was a target of U.S. meddling. Russia sees Western involvement in Ukraine—like the proposal to have it join the E.U.—as part of a movement to encircle Russia. Western and U.S. engagement in Russia's backyard is regarded as a form of indirect aggression.

Russia (and Putin) of course drew heavy criticism in the western media for its military action against Georgia. "Putin Makes His Move," announced a *Washington Post* leader. Author Robert Kagan made a number of comparisons between the Russo-Georgian conflict and the actions of Nazi Germany during the inter-war years. "The details of who did what to precipitate Russia's war against Georgia are not very important. Do you recall the precise details of the Sudeten Crisis that led to Nazi Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia?"[19] The author also compared post-Cold War Russia's international relations to those of Germany between the two World Wars; "The mood is reminiscent of Germany after World War I, when Germans complained about the "shameful Versailles diktat" imposed on a prostrate Germany by the victorious powers and about the corrupt politicians who stabbed the nation in the back."

Kagan then mixed Hitler metaphors with Tsarist metaphors. He proceeded to compare Putin's actions to the imperialist ambitions of the Russian monarchy: "The man who once called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of

[19] Robert Kagan, "Putin Makes His Move," *Washington Post*, 11 Aug. 2008.

the [20th] century" has re-established a virtual [tsarist] rule in Russia and is trying to restore the country to its once-dominant role in Eurasia and the world." Two things need to be noted from this statement. First was the comparison of Putin's years in office to tsarist rule, which was new. Usually the comparison was with the Soviet period. Second, that Russia was trying to restore its 'once-dominant' role in Eurasia is a misleading concept; even at its lowest point during the mid-1990s, Russia was still the most influential state in the region. Russian influence in the Caucasus dates back more than 200 years. This is Russia's backyard, not the West's, and especially not that of the U.S.

The *Washington Post* articles followed the same line of thought. The Nazi terminology comes back in an article entitled "Black Sea Watershed," by Asmus and former Assistant Secretary of State (and noted anti-Communist) Richard Holbrooke: "Having issued passports to tens of thousands of Abkhazians and South Ossetians, Moscow now claims it must intervene to protect them—a tactic reminiscent of one used by Nazi Germany at the start of World War II."[20] Not satisfied with their comparisons to the Third Reich, the authors then compared Putin's successor as President of Russia, lawyer Dmitri Medvedev, with former Soviet leaders: "Hopes for a more liberal Russia under President Dmitri Medvedev will need to be re-examined. His justification for the invasion reads more like Brezhnev than Gorbachev." The distinction between Brezhnev and Gorbachev was especially noteworthy. For the West, Gorbachev represented a Russia which created links with the United States and the western world while Brezhnev represented the closed-off, neo-Stalinist Soviet Union that fuelled so much of the Soviet imagery present in mainstream western media.

Another *Washington Post* article, by Michael Abramowitz and Colum Lynch portrayed Russia as the aggressor and overlooked Georgia's role in the escalation of the conflict. The authors compared Russia to the former USSR in describing an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council about the Georgian conflict:

> The United States convened the session on Georgia in the hopes of increasing international pressure on Russia. The meeting quickly degenerated into a

[20] Ronald D. Asmus and Richard Holbrooke, "Black Sea Watershed," *Washington Post*, 11 Aug. 2008.

> quarrel between the U.S. and Russian envoys that recalled some of the most contentious U.N. spats between the United States and the Soviet Union.[21]

This type of comparison was unfortunately common in Western newspaper stories about the clash in South Ossetia. Surprisingly though, the authors did acknowledge Russian envoy Vitaly Churkin's opinion of the conflict:

> Churkin accused the United States of aiding and abetting Saakashvili, saying more than 100 U.S. advisers were providing training to Georgian forces on the eve of their military offensive against South Ossetia, and suggested that U.S. officials may have given Georgia the "green light" to strike.

Churkin points to the U.S. as the aggressor. Abramowitz and Lynch criticized the Russian envoy's comments, but they did not deny them—allowing the reader to consider possible U.S. involvement in Georgia.

Holbrooke and Asmus also published an article in the *Guardian* with a reprise of Putin's Nazi Germany-reminiscent accusations, as well as Medvedev's Brezhnev-like justifications.[22] In addition, the authors note that "for too long, Moscow has used existing international mandates to pursue neo-imperial policies." The use of the word 'neo-imperial' is especially noteworthy and ironic, coming from such supporters of American foreign policy as Holbrooke and Asmus.

What distinguished the *Guardian* from U.S. papers were the articles on their website which appeared under the title 'Comment is free.' Here readers can react to opinion pieces. In Holbrooke and Asmus' article, one might assume that comments would be critical of Putin. The contrary was true, as most of the commentators challenged the two former U.S.-State Department employees. 'Gazpacho' noted for example that "according to reports the majority of the citizens of the disputed areas don't want to be part of Georgia. Why not let them break away? The 'West' has no moral ground for intervening to keep the disputed territories within Georgia in view of the precedent of Kosovo." 'Hughhezzie' attacked Holbrooke personally, writing "Apparently you seem to take part in this affair… it's very much like that infamous Croatian operation in Krajina you have some connections with." The commentators either

[21] Michael Abramowitz and Colum Lynch, "Bush, Cheney Increasingly Critical of Russian Aggression Over Georgia," *Washington Post*, 11 Aug. 2008.
[22] Richard Holbrooke and Ronald Asmus, "Russia Crosses the Line," *The Guardian*, 11 Aug. 2008.

denounced Holbrooke for his anti-Russian stance, or mentioned western involvement in Kosovo and Iraq to discredit him. 'Amrit' warned: "Do not forget [the] USA and UK adventure in Iraq. Georgia, [the] US ally is there fighting Iraqies." 'EwanMG' responded to Holbrooke's assertion that the EU should reprimand Russia's aggression by noting that

> The international order that you talk about refused to recognise a referendum, albeit irregularly held where the overwhelming majority of Ossetians voted for independence. The Council of Europe just said no, and I think this has the whiff of politicking and double standards on our part, because we really liked Georgia and wanted them onside.

'EwanMG' later proposed that "When 90% of the inhabitants are Russian, and when 95% voted for independence, I think there's a good argument that you can convince a court this is self defence." Others, like 'Mazurka' blamed the Georgian leadership: "There is no democracy in Georgia - its just western propaganda. Saakashvili is a dictator and a dangerous demagogue. He crushed a peaceful opposition demonstration using brutal force against his own people. More than 1000 people are imprisoned in Georgia for political reasons." 'WeHappyFew' mentioned that there was "No mention of the Georgians shelling civilians the night before the invasion. Regardless of provocation, shelling civilians is murder." 'Olching' went further, berating Holbrooke's assertion that Russia's actions are unaccountable, as "Unlike the US and UK in Iraq (and in recognising Kosovo), Russia have a UN mandate to be in South Ossetia and protect the local population from the Georgian army. The Georgian army shelled [South Ossetian capital] Tskhinvali and Russia is fulfilling its brief." This aspect of the conflict was rarely mentioned in the western mainstream media and it is refreshing to see that the common citizen was aware of it.

Others pointed out that the conflict had roots in much deeper problems. 'Cesca01' believed that the international community was more at fault than it cared to admit, as Russian actions were retaliation for an earlier provocation:

> His [Saakashvili] election platform of retaking separatist states and subsequent mission to join NATO have been a serious provocation to Russia for some years now. NATO is rightly regarded as a tool for US political influence which Moscow just [is not] going to tolerate knocking on its front door. Western [governments] made the big mistake of humiliating and marginalising Russia since the break up of the Soviet Union, they no longer care about our opinion.

> They know our [governments] never want to think good of them and there [is not] an honest broker among us who can help in the current crisis. By taking this hard line with Georgia, I think Moscow [is] sending a message to Western as well as regional [governments] that they will not be shoved around any more, especially in their own region.

There were a few discordant voices. 'Kulich66' sided with Holbrooke and even made use of the same type of WWII imagery: "Do you recall Poland in 1939? France promised them military support against Hitler. Do you remember what happened then?" 'Reallyanavatar' was afraid that the Cold War days were back:

> …it is obvious that all pretence about Russia looking after Ossetia will be gone if it continues on into unambiguously democratic and sovereign Georgia as opposed to Ossetia and Abkhazia. If Russia is now seeking to control it neighbours with the threat of force then we are back 30 years in time and the old lessons will need to be dusted off.

Holbrook and Asmus' article was not the only heated topic of conversation in the *Guardian*'s "Comments is Free". An article by David Clark, founder and editor of *Shifting Grounds*, a blog devoted to discussing and advocating of new politics of the common good, is also interesting. Its leader was clear: "The West can no longer stand idle while the Russian bully wreaks havoc."[23] "The Russian bully" is especially indicative of Clark's position while also very ironic, as the West regularly imposes—with guns drawn—its interests around the world. As with the Holbrooke and Asmus article, the majority of the comments challenged Clark. 'NemesistheWarlock' reacted to Clark's statement that "Georgia's treatment of minorities …has been generally good" by asking "How exactly could denying them their democratic wishes and murdering them be defined as *generally good*?" 'Ramessesell' asks,

> David Clark, are you aware that Georgian troops killed, and in many cases tortured, hundreds and possibly thousands of innocent civilians in South Ossetia? Around 34,000 South Ossetian refugees are now housed in makeshift camps across the Russian border in North Ossetia… you should at least try to garner the basic information behind the conflict rather merely than spouting your ill-informed prejudices.

[23] David Clark, "The west can no longer stand idle while the Russian bully wreaks havoc," *The Guardian*, 11 Aug. 2008.

Some other commentators, like 'SectionNine' did not blame Georgia, but rather the West:

> We have moved NATO's borders closer to historic Moscow, long after the utility of NATO to the United States has come to an end. The Russians are merely looking out for their national interests. The less we Americans have anything to do with that part of the world, the better. This is Russia's sphere of influence; it is best we leave it that way.

This perspective on NATO is important as it was often ignored in western articles about Russia. During the Cold War, NATO was an organisation of collective defence formed to oppose external forces, namely the Soviet Union; today it opposes Russia.

After the numerous articles comparing modern Russia with Nazi Germany, it is encouraging to see that this same imagery was used by *Guardian* readers to describe the West. 'MerkinOnParis' lamented the fact that "The UN-mandated peacekeepers in Ossetia were attacked by NATO trained stormtroopers, something which [Clark] neglects to mention." 'TurgutReis' compared Saakshvili to Milosevic : "2000 killed in one day, I'd say that's pretty much in the Milosevic league."

Another article, an August 2008 opinion piece by Swedish scholar Svante E. Cornell, specialist in security issues in Eurasia, also criticized Russia's involvement in Georgia. His piece in the *New York Times* started off as a realistic assessment of the events in Georgia. Yet it degenerated, laying much of the blame at Russia's feet and neglected to acknowledge American involvement in the conflict. After initially allocating some of the blame to "the United States for supposedly encouraging Mr. Saakashvili's risk-taking by pushing NATO membership for Georgia," the article proposed no further solutions until the end, where the author suggested stronger U.S. involvement in the region:

> Once the fighting is over, America must step up its campaign for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. Should European countries reject the idea, America could designate them "major non-NATO allies," along the lines of Israel and Pakistan. This would involve more American military trainers in Georgia, intelligence-sharing, joint exercises and other steps, if not a full pledge by Washington to defend the country in case of attack.[24]

[24] Svante E. Cornell, "Russia Blames the Victim," *New York Times*, 12 Sept. 2008.

Cornell ignored the American role in training the Georgian troops. This negligence in reporting the U.S.'s part in the conflict is typical of Western media coverage during the Ossetian conflict.

The *New York Times*' coverage of the conflict in South Ossetia is highly critical of Russia and of Putin in particular. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and notorious American cheerleader Thomas L. Friedman wrote an essay entitled "What Did We Expect?" and offered a somewhat different view:

> "If the conflict in Georgia were an Olympic event, the gold medal for brutish stupidity would go to the Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin. The silver medal for bone-headed recklessness would go to Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and the bronze medal for rank short-sightedness would go to the Clinton and Bush foreign policy teams."[25] (A23)

The mainstream media view attacked Russia for "brutish stupidity." For Russia though, Georgian ethnic and political aspirations were turning into aggression against South Ossetia. Surprisingly, Friedman also criticized the U.S. for the double standards it applied towards Russia since the end of the Cold War. He perfectly encapsulated the message from the West to the Russians: "We expect you to behave like Western democrats, but we're going to treat you like you're still the Soviet Union. The cold war is over for you, but not for us." He also quoted foreign policy expert Michael Mandelbaum's opinion that U.S. foreign policy towards Russia, post-USSR, was wrong: "One [premise] was that Russia is innately aggressive and that the end of the cold war could not possibly change this, so we had to expand our military alliance up to its borders." The United States is responsible for Russia's mistrust of the West; it should therefore not be surprised to see it take action against further western interference in its "near abroad."

Like Holbrooke and Asmus, another article in the *Guardian* got a lot of criticism in its 'Comment is Free' section. Former BBC Correspondent Robert Parsons' "Georgia: More sinned against than sinning" is itself a critique of Chief Foreign Correspondent Jonathan Steele's "Crisis of lies and hysteria." Steele criticized Saakashvili's initiative of launching an artillery barrage at Tskhinvali. He also wondered out loud if the United States were behind this decision while criticizing the West for trying to expand the

[25] Thomas L. Friedman, "What Did We Expect?," *New York Times*, 20 Aug. 2008.

European Union and NATO to Russia's borders.[26] Parsons—who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the origins of Georgian nationalism—countered that South Ossetian militias started the conflict. According to him, Russia's alleged defence of South Ossetia fooled no-one and instead, Russia intervened to reign in Georgia and Saakashvili.[27] When perusing the 'Comment is Free' section, we can see that his line of thought was unpersuasive. 'Martinusher' wrote:

> Ignoring the who, when, and why of the actual conflict for a moment you have to ask yourself why Georgia, a tiny country, had decided to rearm… strategically it made no sense unless it was designed in the long term to drag the US into conflict with Russia. As it is, the conflict was started prematurely and there was no way that anyone else was going to get involved so the result was predictable.

'David119' asked why "Yet again an apologist for Georgia ignores the central question: Do the peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have the right of self determination, YES or NO?" 'NemesistheWarlock' also wondered "…why on earth did the Russians call an emergency session of the U.N to warn of Georgia's intentions and try to get them and the [South] Ossetian militias to lay down their arms, only to be blocked by the US, UK et al. on behalf of Georgia immediately before Saakashvili ordered the attack?" 'MerkinOnParis' even denounced Parsons's past as director of the Georgian Service at Radio Liberty from 2003-2005: "This would be the same Robert Parsons who worked for neo-con propaganda organ Radio Liberty? Looks like it."

'GreekForGodsGift' mentioned of one of the central themes of this thesis when he wrote: "I would like to draw your attention to the following phrase in this outrageous propaganda piece: "This may be the level of debate one expects of the Russian media, but not elsewhere"… Is the implication here "Russia = everything inherently bad?"" 'Fioanu' commented that "Thankfully most readers who have commented don't share the same biased and inaccurate account given by Robert Parsons. [This] says a lot [about] the public and disappointingly little about the integrity of many of the columnists reporting on the brief war caused by Georgia."

[26] Jonathan Steele, "Cries of lies and hysteria," *The Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2008.
[27] Robert Parsons, "Georgia: more sinned against than sinning," *The Guardian*, 29 Aug. 2008.

The credibility of mainstream western journalists deteriorated further as questionable comparisons involving Putin continued to occur. An August 2008 editorial for the *Washington Post* commented that "Russia's new in-your-face "diplomacy" rivals that of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney on their most hubristic days. Vladimir Putin and [then Russian President] Dmitry Medvedev don't care if you are with them or against them on their invasion of Georgia. They just want you to get out of their way."[28] As we have seen, Putin was regularly chastised for his actions in the western mainstream media. Yet this example was nevertheless surprising as it invited negative comparisons between Russian and U.S. leaders that denounced both parties.

Former *New Yorker* staff writer James Traub's September 2008 article for the *Times* discussed the new state of affairs in Russian politics. After a short description of Soviet history and that "for all its bluster, [Russia] seemed eminently containable," Traub described the situation in modern Georgia as a "neocon nightmare in the Caucasus" where everyone spoke of Russia in Soviet-era terminology.[29] Apparently, Russia was again an imperialistic menace:

> "But it's not only cold warriors like Mr. Cheney who have characterized Russia as a rogue state. Richard Holbrooke and Ronald Asmus, former officials in the Clinton administration, compared Russia's assault on Georgia with Hitler's march on Czechoslovakia, airily justified by the alleged need to protect ethnic Germans. For the first time in almost 30 years — at least since the invasion of Afghanistan — Russia has come to be seen as a threat to world order."

Is Russia a threat to world order or to American order? The comparison to Hitler is especially outlandish. But in what appeared to be an article about the return by Russia to Soviet-era imperialist tendencies, Traub questioned the West's involvement in Georgia and how the West saw Russia's involvement in the crisis. He speculated that Russia was not an aggressor: "…Russia acted not out of an age-old impulse for territorial expansion, or the wish to banish the humiliation and contraction of recent years, but in response to a series of intolerable provocations. It was we…who had violated the status quo." Traub stated that there were two ways to view Russia: "It is either an expansionist, belligerent power whose ambitions are insatiable, or a "normal" state seeking to restore influence

[28] Jim Hoagland, "Democrat's Georgia Question," *Washington Post*, 31 Aug. 2008.
[29] James Traub, "Coming to Grips With Russia's New Nerve," *New York Times*, 7 Sept. 2008.

and regional control along its borders, commensurate with its growing wealth and power." It was a rare sight to see an author taking a realistic approach to Russian actions instead of categorizing Russia as an aggressor.

Yet criticism was the more common approach for the Georgian conflict. A September 2008 article in the *New York Times* blamed Putin, insisting that due to Russian actions, even "…longtime allies like China and Serbia [were] wary…"[30] The New York Times made no efforts hiding its disdain for Putin: "For three and a half hours on Thursday, in tones that were alternately pugilistic and needy, Vladimir V. Putin tried to explain himself." The newspaper also mentioned Putin's logic for his invasion of Georgia which he compared to allied efforts during the Second World War:

> "He said Russians had no choice but to proceed beyond the conflict zone to eliminate Georgian posts and ammunition depots — a move he compared to that of the Soviet Army in World War II, which pursued Nazi forces across Soviet borders and into Western Europe. "By the way, it was not only Soviet forces that entered Berlin," he said. "There were Americans, the French, the British there. Why did you go there? You could have done some shooting along the borders and called it a day.""

The argument was a stark rebuttal to the political scientists and journalists who had argued that Russia's incursion into Georgia over-reached the defensive measures to defend South Ossetia.

The Western media exploited the Georgian conflict in order to discredit Russia's continued influence in its 'near abroad.' This strategy resembled the western media's efforts to tear down Russia during its crisis with Chechnya. As was the case with Chechnya during the Chechen wars, Georgia's responsibility for the South Ossetia crisis was barely remarked while Russia's was exaggerated. Similar to the articles on Chechnya, most Western journalists called on Russia to halt their "aggression" against Georgia and criticized what they perceived as yet another Russian show of force. The difference here is that we can see that some readers were not convinced. If the *Guardian* columnists are a representative sample, the comments section in the *Guardian* provides evidence of popular scepticism.

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[30] Ellen Barry, "Strung by Criticism Over Georgia, Putin Asks West for a Little Understanding," *New York Times*, 12 Sept. 2008.

Instead of galvanizing the public opinion against Russia and Putin, journalists with their anti-Russian rhetoric have only raised doubts about their own credibility. The tactics used by the Western mainstream media—in print form, at least—did not work on readers of the *Guardian*. They made up their own minds about what actually happened during the conflict, and the majority decided that the responsibility for the crisis belonged to Georgia, the United States and the European Union, but not Russia.

Western journalists became agents for their respective governments' views. Cold War references, criticism of Russia's "democracy," and Russian "brutality" in Chechnya and South Ossetia appear drawn from a wellspring of russophobic bias. Comparisons of Putin with Hitler seemed particularly outlandish, insulting, and dangerous. In his book *Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game*, Per Gahrton disclosed the findings of an international, independent fact-finding mission on the crisis in Georgia. It stated that both Russia and Georgia had their share of blame in the conflict:

> On September 30, 2009, an EU-sponsored committee led by the Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini published a thousand-page report which corroborated the initial reports[31]… 1.) It is impossible 'to assign overall responsibility' to one side alone. 2.) Open hostilities began with Georgia's shelling of Tskhinvali. 3.) Some Russian forces other than peace troops were in South Ossetia prior to Georgia's attack. 4.) Georgia's use of force was unjustifiable. 5.) Russia's use of force beyond South Ossetia was also unjustifiable. 6.) The Georgian intention to carry out genocide 'could not be proven.' 7.) Ethnic cleansing was carried out against Georgians.[32]

Although the EU can hardly be considered an objective source, the report was a more representative view of the conflict than what the Western mainstream media were trying to show. The Western media's agenda was to make us perceive Russia as a belligerent state, one that always has a hidden agenda and continually looks to dominate its neighbours in its quest for power. But how is this message so in favour and seemingly so well-coordinated?

When dealing with the South Ossetian conflict, one can look to the Ukraine for similarities. According to David Foglesong, the Orange Revolution showed how the U.S. and the West perceived the post-USSR world:

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[31] Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report Vol. I-III, September 2009 in Per Gahrton, 188.
[32] *Civil Georgia*, 30 Sep. 2009, in Per Gahrton, p. 88.

> "The treatment of the Orange Revolution as a morality play, with the heroic Yushchenko and his fair-haired ally Yulia Tymoshenko triumphing over the villainous Yanukovich and Putin, reflected a deeply entrenched tendency to cast complex political developments on the territory of the former tsarist and Soviet empires in the stark terms of good and evil."[33]

The Orange Revolution was of course revealed to have been an operation coordinated between the U.S. and E.U. against Russia. A "Western" candidate was proposed, in favour of rapprochement with the West and inclusion in the E.U.; Russia could then be further isolated. The strategy eventually backfired, as the 2010 presidential elections saw the "villainous" Russian Yanukovich become President, with the "heroic" Yushchenko garnering only 5.5% of the vote.

The Western world tried to paint the South Ossetia conflict in similar tones of "good" and "evil." According to Dmitri K. Simes, the coverage of the South Ossetia crisis was "hysterical and one-sided" and "The suggestion that Russia started the war is simply a distortion of reality."[34] Georgia, with its U.S.-educated President Saakashvili, was seen as the "good" guys while Russia and Putin were "evil." According to Thomas de Waal, historians like Asmus purposefully misinterpreted the conflict:

> [Asmus'] version…of the August war is wrong on all its main counts: on whether it was the Russians who made the first aggressive move, whether the South Ossetians shelled Georgian villages in the hours before Tbilisi's assault and whether the Georgian leadership was interested in avoiding civilian casualties. Saakashvili [transmitted] a message in which his country was the unambiguous victim - the Russians invaded to steal Georgian territory after the South Ossetians needlessly attacked Georgian civilians. It [was] well pitched for consumption in Western capitals but a long way short of the whole truth.[35]

This misinformation, like the labels of "good" and "evil," are important in influencing western opinion of Russia. As during the Orange Revolution (and during the Cold War) these are tools used to mask the complex nature of the conflict from the western public opinion. The U.S. government and media treated Georgia as an innocent victim, trying to gain entry into NATO. The latter of course would gain a strong foothold in Russia's backyard.[36] Their efforts to encircle Russia have thus far failed in the south.

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[33] Foglesong, p. 225.
[34] Dmitri K. Simes, "Russian Roulette," *National Interest*, 1 Nov. 2008, p. 4.
[35] Thomas de Waal, "Missiles Over Tskhinvali," *National Interest*, 1 Nov. 2010, p. 87.
[36] Simes, "Russian Roulette," p. 4.

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The 2014 Crimean crisis has also demonstrated to the West—or should have in any case—that there are limits to further encroachment on Russia's southern frontiers. Starting in November of 2013, protests broke out in the streets of Kiev following Ukrainian President Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement. After proposals for constitutional reforms failed and Yanukovych was ousted in a U.S.-backed coup d'état, Russia refused to recognize the putschist government. The Crimean Parliament reacted to the Kiev coup d'état by organising a referendum to approve reintegration with Russia. On March 16, 83% of the eligible electorate voted 96% in favour of joining Russia. Two days later, Putin officially approved the reintegration of the Crimea into the Russian Federation.

As was the case during the Georgian crisis, the Western media made up their own facts about the conflict. According to Yale professor Timothy Snyder in *The New York Review of Books*, "Ukraine was now a dictatorship" and that "through remarkably large and peaceful public protests…Ukrainians have set a positive example for Europeans."[37] These statements presented Russia, and Putin, as brutes intervening in Ukrainian affairs while also glorifying the plight of the Ukrainian protestors. According to Stephen F. Cohen, what Snyder omitted to show was the brutality of the protestors, which included "[t]he occupation of government buildings in Kiev and in Western Ukraine, the hurling of firebombs at police and other violent assaults on law enforcement officers and the proliferation of anti-Semitic slogans," hardly positive examples to set.[38] Snyder, like many other western "experts" on Russia and Ukraine, also failed to mention that Ukraine was not yearning for European integration as the West was fond of saying, but was still deeply divided as to whether it should join the West or remain close to Russia, with

[37] Stephen F. Cohen, "Distorting Russia: How the American media misrepresents Putin, Sochi and Ukraine," *The Nation*, 11 Feb. 2014.
[38] Ibid.

whom it has centuries of shared linguistic, marital, religious, economic, and security ties.[39]

The distortions present in Western media about Ukraine—like Georgia or Chechnya before it—are reflections of western and American policy towards Russia. The hypocrisy is palpable: The universally created precedent the West created when they advocated Kosovan separation from Serbia does not apply when it involves South Ossetia or Crimea.[40] The end goals are the containment and encirclement of Russia. Cohen summarized it best when he noted that "…the most crucial media omission is…that the struggle for Ukraine is yet another chapter in the West's ongoing, U.S.-led march toward post-Soviet Russia, which began in the 1990s with NATO's eastward expansion and continued with U.S.-funded NGO political activities inside Russia, a US-NATO military outpost in Georgia and missile-defence installations near Russia."[41] According to Putin, Russia "has every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment… continues today. [The West is] constantly trying to sweep [Russia] into a corner because [it has] an independent position" and because it does not align itself with the West.[42] Therefore, as the western governments sit powerless in the face of resurgent Russian state, all they can do is smear Russia and Putin in the media and apply economic sanctions.

[39] Stephen F. Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternative: From Stalinism to the New Cold War* (New York, 2009), p. 169.
[40] "Full text of Putin's speech on Crimea," *Prague Post*, 19 March 2004.
[41] Cohen, "Distorting Russia."
[42] "Full text of Putin's speech on Crimea."

Conclusion

Western hypocrisy in dealing with Russia is palpable. The Western world criticizes Russia's alleged censure of its media and its human rights violations yet has a history of supporting "anti-democratic" regimes all over the world. The west disapproved of Russia's actions in Chechnya, while at the same time leading the charge against alleged terrorists in Afghanistan and Iraq. Vladimir Putin is the next coming of Hitler, yet like the Nazi dictator, he enjoyed high approval ratings at home. And the West criticized Russian support of South Ossetia independence in the Georgian War of 2008 while NATO supported the break-up of Yugoslavia, bombed Serbia and championed Kosovo's independence.

As mouthpieces for their respective Western governments, the journalists studied in this text were masters of disinformation about Russia. The mainstream media outlets toe the government line and therefore reflect their opinions. Cooperation with their respective governments means easier and better access to information. Refusal to cooperate with the interests and opinions of the governments gets you into trouble. The recent case of Edward Snowden, the ex-CIA employee and NSA contractor who leaked top secret NSA documents to several media outlets, illustrates this point. The American government has charged Snowden with espionage and theft of government property and he is now in asylum, ironically enough, in Russia. Journalists need to be subservient to government interests in order to get government information. This explains why Stephen F. Cohen notes that "Not even…publications reputed to be the most thoughtful on foreign policy seemed capable of rethinking Russia."[1] They are not rethinking Russia because their governments do not want to rethink Russia. The West still believes in western-style "democracy" for Russia while indicting Putin for the "problems" they perceive in Russian society.

According to the West, Russia's behaviour today is unacceptable. 'Russophobia' in the Western mainstream media is a prominent way of critiquing Russia's independence from the West and refusal to be subservient to Western interests. The United States had a plan for the "integration" of Russia into the Western world. It included, according to

[1] Cohen, *Soviet Fates*, p. 193.

Réseau Voltaire columnist Karl Müller, to submit Russia to untenable economic conditions in order to keep Russia under thumb and to seize its primary resources, all under the guise of a supposedly advantageous capitalist system, working to the benefit of U.S. economic interests.[2] The E.U. also got involved, slowly appropriating for itself parts of the former Soviet sphere of influence so that all that would be left would be an isolated and weakened Russia. Boris Yeltsin was firmly entrenched as a U.S. puppet at the head of the Russian government, and subordinated "Russian foreign policy interests to Western, particularly American, preferences."[3] According to many Russians across the political spectrum, Washington was the source of many of Russia's problems, as the U.S. was only "helping" Russia in order to keep it on its knees.[4]

Putin refused to bow his head to Western interests. He pushed out the oligarchs and re-nationalized the energy sector of the Russian economy, centralizing more political and economic power into the Russian government's hands. The West lost control over Russian resources. The Russian president was no longer a mouthpiece for Western interests and challenged western and U.S. hegemony on the international stage. He sought to re-establish Russian influence and to stem U.S. clout in Russia's near abroad. This sparked criticisms in the West. Putin's words became twisted, in order to blacken his name and to condemn his policies. According to *Voice of Russia*'s Dmitry Babich, "the Western media… ascribes itself the right to be the "translator" of things the leaders of other countries [such as Putin] have to say… If reality does not correspond to Western stereotypes (which we, the media, have formed)—then so much worse for the reality."[5] Putin was not playing along, so he was ostracized.

The Western media then proceeded to compare Putin to other historical figures, including past Soviet leaders. The characterization and subsequent vilification of Putin is in line with similar views present in the literature dealing with the Western image of former Soviet leaders.

Historian Walter Laqueur starts off his biography on Joseph Stalin noting that he was "physically unattractive, devoid of warmth and spontaneous enthusiasm, not a good

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[2] Karl Müller, « Pourquoi ne cesse-t-on pas de s'en prendre à la Russie? » *Réseau Voltaire*, 23 Dec. 2013.
[3] Simes, p. 228.
[4] Ibid., p. 238.
[5] Dmitry Babich, "Myths about Russia: Can one believe western media's 'translations' of Putin?" *Voice of Russia*, 23 Jan. 2014.

speaker and not a great thinker."[6] George F. Kennan, in his landmark 1961 book *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*, minced no words about Stalin, calling him "a man of incredible criminality… without pity or mercy; a man in whose entourage no one was ever safe; a man whose hand was set against all that could not be useful to him at the moment…"[7] Stalin's image really came under fire as the Soviet archives opened up to the West during Gorbachev's glasnost. There, records of the atrocities he committed and the enormity of his crimes came to light. According to Laqueur, there was "extreme cruelty and mendacity in his character" and that "more often than not Stalin is regarded as one of the great criminals of all time..."[8] Although essential in the Allied victory during WWII—which grants him more support than a similar figure like Hitler—Stalin is seen as a villain due to the scope of the Great Purges he ordered. 3.6 million Soviet citizens were either incarcerated in work camps or outright killed, as "licensed and arbitrary violence was the principal characteristic of Stalinist rule."[9] Stalin's lack of empathy combined with the atrocities he committed forever taints his image in the West. Yet there is admittance by Western historians that Stalin does have some redeeming qualities and that he marked Russian society. He restored time-honoured Russian traditions and expanded Russia's borders[10]; his Five-Year Plans brought the Soviet industry into the twentieth century. Historians such as Alter Litvin and John Keep rightly remind us that Stalin's forced development of the industrial infrastructure impoverished the population and led to human rights abuses on a massive scale.[11] The comparisons between the two men are unjust, but Putin and Stalin are treated alike by the Western media: the negatives, like their personalities or questionable acts (although not nearly of the same scope) are highlighted and the positives conveniently pushed aside in order to better colour the opinions of the public.

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[6] Walter Laqueur, *Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1990), p. 1.
[7] George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*, in T. H. Rigby, *Political Elites in the USSR: Central leaders and local cadres from Lenin to Gorbachev* (Brookfield, VA: Gower Publishing Company, 1990), p. 129.
[8] Laqueur, p. 279, 277.
[9] Alter Litvin and John Keep, *Stalinism : Russian and Wester views at the turn of the millenium* (New York : Routledge, 2005), p. 214.
[10] Laqueur, p. 287.
[11] Litvin and Keep, p. 216.

Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin though, gain more favour in their Western image due to the fact that they attempted to transform the Soviet Union—and later Russia—to be more in line with Western and American ideals. De Montford University lecturer Mark Sandle creates an instantly positive image of Gorbachev with the title of his book on the man, *Gorbachev: Man of the Twentieth Century?* In his conclusion, Sandle attempts to assess his life and legacy, describing Gorbachev as such:

> …he is considered by some to be a central, almost heroic figure in any history of recent times. His bold and courageous initiatives, his peace offensive, his commitment to encouraging democracy and freedoms at home and abroad, his dignity in leaving office, his unswerving devotion to his wife and family, his espousal of environmentalism, all speak of a leader who has indelibly left his imprint on the twentieth century.[12]

Such lavish praise is in sharp contrast to the criticism aimed at the other Soviet leaders before him. According to Andrei Grachev, "despite tremendous political pressure at home that on a number of occasions risked sinking the boat of political reform, it was he who remained uncompromising on the principle of 'freedom of choice'—the sovereign right of people to determine their own political systems and to choose their leaders and alliances…"[13] He supported many initiatives important to the West, like democracy and freedom, and therefore is celebrated.

> After his less than seven years in power Gorbachev left behind him a peacefully dismantled totalitarian system in the biggest country of the planet and a different Russia reconciled with the rest of the world. He raised the 'iron curtain' that came down after the Second World War and allowed and encouraged the reunification of Germany and Europe after more than forty years of division. He succeeded in initiating, together with his Western partners, a disarmament process which for the first time in postwar history slowed down, even turned back, the arms race. Without any doubt Gorbachev's policies gave a powerful impetus to globalization.[14]

We are very much removed from the aggressive neo-Cold War language and imagery associated with Putin in recent years. Gorbachev is seen as a proponent for

[12] Mark Sandle, Gorbachev: Man of the Twentieth Century? (London, Hodder Education, 2008), p. 301.
[13] Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble: Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 223.
[14] Grachev, p. 230.

change and peace in the West, while Putin, opposed to Western intervention, is seen as a tool for conflict.

Finally, Yeltsin has a positive image in the Western media because as we have seen in previous chapters, he was a cheerleader for the Western reconstruction of Russia. The West—and especially the United States—funnelled their ideas for the transformation of Russia through Yeltsin, who obliged. Like Gorbachev—and unlike Putin—Yeltsin is seen as an actor for change in modern Russia. Unlike Gorbachev though, Yeltsin's image in the West shines due to the fact that he "evolved into a hero of the anti-communist opposition to Soviet rule… He had (also) evolved into a charismatic leader of almost mythic proportions, especially among those who had assumed that the Soviet and communist control structures were unassailable."[15] His image as the man who destroyed that hated communism helped to cover up the fact that he also destroyed Russian society, through ill-advised economic reforms, or that he was an incorrigible drunk. But unlike Putin, he aligned himself firmly with the West, and therefore the Western media still sees him as a positive figure.

The criticisms of Putin are part of a larger historical context in which divergent ideas from the Western perspective were often derided by the Western media. Like Stalin, Putin in vilified in the Western media because he does not keep the Western line. If he supported western ideals, like Gorbachev and Yeltsin did, he would instead be celebrated. His name would not be synonymous with trouble, as it is now in the Western media.

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'Russophobia' is the West's response to Russia's divergent path. It is also, according to Cohen, a way for journalists, feeling "embittered by the failure of projects they backed in the 1990s" to hit back at Russia.[16] There are many reasons for this "russophobia." First, the West—but mostly the U.S.—is angry that Russia is not

[15] George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 95.
[16] Cohen, *Soviet Fates*, p. 187.

following the "democratic" model set up during the Yeltsin years. The U.S. has a history of reshaping nations in their own image:

> [After WWII] Roosevelt and his successor, Harry Truman, determined that the destroyed nations of Japan and Germany must be rebuilt in America's democratic image. The Marshall Plan, John Kennedy's Alliance for Progress in Latin America, the interventions in Southeast Asia - all were at least in part attempts to export democracy to countries with weak or nonexistent consensual governments. The Cold War became defined by America not as a competition between two countries…but as one between two systems, democracy and totalitarianism.[17]

The same was true for post-communist Russia. According to David Foglesong, "When Americans expressed their concern for democracy in Russia in the first years of the twenty-first century…they often seemed to envision that Russia would emulate practices and institutions in the United States"[18] Foglesong explained that U.S. leaders seemed to envision Russia adopting an American political system, complete with two major parties and the offsetting powers of the executive and the legislative branches of government. He argued that these measures were not assured to improve the Russian political system; "Yet the actual results of such reforms seemed to be secondary, in the minds of leading Americans, to the ideological gratification of seeing Russian imitate the United States." The U.S. view of its relationship with Russia is described by former National Security Advisor Dmitri K. Simes:

> On one track, the United States [promoted] its interests and values over Russian objections, expanding NATO to include Russia's neighbours, moving NATO bases closer and closer to Russian borders, withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, establishing new antimissile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, and lobbying for energy pipelines from Central Asia that bypass Russia. On the other track, Washington [expected] Russia to act as a junior partner, supporting American positions on non-proliferation, counterterrorism and a host of other international issues.[19]

The relationship was one-sided. Putin decided not to conform to U.S. wishes; in fact, his involvement in Russia's transformation is actually an important part of the western mainstream media's backlash against Russia. According to Cohen,

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[17] Jordan Michael Smith, "The U.S. Democracy Project," *The National Interest*, 1 May 2013, p. 26.
[18] Foglesong, p. 223.
[19] Simes, "Russian Roulette," p. 4.

> American officials, journalists, and academic specialists effusively welcomed Putin in 2000 as Yeltsin's rightful heir—as a man with a "commitment to building a strong democracy" and to continuing Russia's turn to the West. Having misunderstood both Yeltsin and his successor, they felt deceived by Putin's subsequent policies.[20]

When the West saw that Putin did not comply with Western democratic principles as they thought he should, they turned on him.

Second, Russia is an important foil in the assertion of U.S. national identity.[21] The U.S. has always seen itself as a defender of "freedom" and "democracy" around the world and as such uses many ways to intervene in other countries' affairs. Non-profit organizations such as the NED (National Endowment for Democracy), according to columnist Jordan Michael Smith of realist magazine the *National Interest*, are "a quasi arm of the U.S. government, devoted to supporting groups wishing to subvert autocratic governments or prevent them from gaining strength."[22] Russia is one of their projects. U.S. leaders have criticized, among other things, Putin's alleged censorship of the Russian media, as well as his centralisation of Russian governmental power into the President's hands. According to Foglesong,

> "the impulse to denounce Putin originated more from a diffuse feeling among American opinion leaders [such as the mass media] that America had to champion the cause of freedom…Only a quarter of Americans surveyed in 2004 believed that democracy promotion should be a top priority in US foreign policy. Yet key politicians, journalists, and intellectuals seem to have felt that it was vital to affirm America's mission in the world through rhetorical commitment to a free Russia."[23]

Prominent and influential American leaders therefore see it as imperative that the cause of Russia's freedom and democracy be championed by the U.S. The scope of American involvement in the promotion of Russian democracy does not stop merely at harsh-tongued bluster emanating from Western mass media. According to the *National Interest* columnist David Rieff, "The mainstream view of the American project from its founding has been marked by a mystical sense of mission, a belief in the redemptive role of the United States in global affairs, a missionary zeal in which remaking the world in

[20] Cohen, p. 176.
[21] Foglesong, p. 219.
[22] Smith, p.26.
[23] Foglesong, p. 222.

America's image seems not an act of hubris but the fulfillment of a moral duty."[24] Historians James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul also concur that the U.S. has a moral obligation to implicate itself in Russian affairs. The pair argued that the Clinton administration's "failure to at least preserve rhetorical consistency about the importance of democratization undermined [its] moral authority" as the defender of democracy in Russia. The same also went for Clinton's successor, George W. Bush. Goldgeier and McFaul note that

> "…some internal issues that had been of concern during the cold war, including the promotion of human rights and democratic practices in Russia, should have remained on the agenda. As Putin continued his crackdown on freedom at home, Bush should not have remained indifferent. The Wilsonian ideals that Bush embraced in dealing with other parts of the world should have entered his Russia policy."[25]

This obligation felt by U.S. and Western leaders to promote and defend democracy has now evolved into "russophobia." According to Foglesong, "Many of the critics appear to have been influenced by an urge to contrast Russia and the United States in ways that would reinforce a sense of American righteousness and virtue." "Russophobia" is therefore a way to advocate the primacy and legitimacy of Western democratic model. The United States' sense of its own virtue continued to be connected to a differentiation from Russia, like the Soviet Union before it.[26]

As we also saw in the chapter on the South Ossetian crisis, U.S. leaders also have a tendency to see complex conflicts in simplistic terms of "good" versus "evil." As heir apparent to the Soviet Union in western eyes, Russia therefore unjustly gets labelled "evil" when they get involved in the affairs of their neighbours, as was the case in Ukraine or Georgia. Even in Chechnya, a romantic notion has set in that portrayed "the war with Russia as a battle to the bitter end, pitting Chechen liberty against Russian genocide."[27] U.S. and Western initiatives to support these countries (or republics) against Moscow are therefore seen as "heroic" and promote the mystique of the West as the defender of the free world.

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[24] David Rieff, "Evangelists of Democracy," *National Interest*, 1 Nov. 2012, p. 58.
[25] Goldgeier and McFaul, p. 351.
[26] Foglesong, p. 228.
[27] Thomas de Waal, "Chechens I Used to Know," *National Interest*, 1 May 2011, p. 67.

"Russophobia" is present in many different ways in the Western media, yet it all comes back to the same idea: The West—and especially the United States—are angry and disappointed that Russia's interests and policies no longer follow western interests and policies. The Western mainstream media, as voices for their respective governments, therefore present a broad, well-coordinated attack in order to vilify Russia. "Democracy" in Russia was criticised because it did not emulate western (especially U.S.) democracy. It was in the West's interest for the Chechen rebels to get their independence and weaken Russian territorial integrity in the process; Russia's efforts against Chechnya were criticized because they prevented this from happening. Putin was criticized because he was not obedient to western interests as Yeltsin was. And Russia's role in the 2008 South Ossetia crisis was criticized because in successfully intervening on South Ossetia's behalf, Russia was able to shut down U.S. encirclement plans in the Caucasus.

Through all these guises, "russophobia" present in the Western mainstream media serves not only to criticize modern Russia for not cooperating for the West but also to present the West's insecurities about Russia's future. Simes notes in his 1999 book *After the Collapse*: "It is this threat—the threat of consistent and firm resistance to U.S. policy around the globe—which is the challenge most likely to be posed by Russia in the twenty-first century."[28] No longer under Western or U.S. control, Russia is now poised to re-take its place as one of the world's leading nations. The U.S. does not want this to happen. According to neo-conservative American commentators William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "American hegemony is the only reliable defence against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible."[29] The vehement criticism of Russia in the mainstream media is one of the important tools which the U.S. uses to justify its blackening of Russian policy.

[28] Simes, p. 250.
[29] William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Towards a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 1996), p. 23 in Simes, p. 250.

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