



UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA
TODAY:
RUSSIA'S MANY REVISIONS

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DECEMBER 2016

A REPORT BY THE CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT OF
THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

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*This essay was written for an ongoing AEI project. A version of it will be published in an upcoming volume, tentatively titled *The Rise of the Revisionists* and edited by Dan Blumenthal and Gary Schmitt.*

Executive Summary

Russia is on a collision course with the West. War is not inevitable. Confrontation and conflict are. The sources of hostility are primarily within Russia. They transcend the aims of Vladimir Putin, but spring rather from fundamental problems created during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Any Russian leader following Boris Yeltsin would have had to cope with them. Others would have handled them differently, but not necessarily better from the West's perspective or from Russia's. These problems form inherent and irreducible contradictions in Russia's relationship with the West. Western policy toward Russia must recognize them and accept the reality that Russia will remain hostile to and resentful of the West for some time to come, regardless of Western attempts at conciliation. This conflict is a crypto-war, characterized by deception and self-deception, grey-zone and hybrid war, and masking Russian crypto-imperialism. We must bring its sources out from the shadows and into the light before we can hope to meet its challenges.

There is no such thing as Weimar Russia. Analogies between Russia today and Germany after World War I minimize the problem facing the West now. German resentment resulted entirely from the harsh peace treaty the allied powers imposed upon it at Versailles in 1919 after defeating it in war. Russia was not defeated in a war, nor was any peace treaty imposed upon it. Russia lost its empire in 1991, rather, as the result of a revolution and a non-decision. Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev chose, at the critical moment, to allow the Soviet Union to collapse rather than to use force on a massive scale to preserve it. This non-decision shaped the course of the post-Cold War world.

The suddenness of the Soviet collapse was breath-taking and shocking. Soviet republics broke away from the remnants of the union faster than Moscow could comprehend. Negotiations to settle the myriad complexities of the break-up of the largest centralized economy in the world were perfunctory. No process to manage the complex citizenship challenges of Russians in the post-Soviet republics or of non-Russians within the Russian Federation was created. The Soviet military disintegrated.

Yeltsin immediately faced the determined efforts of the still-powerful Communist Party to restore the Soviet system in some way. He confronted two attempts at a military restoration of Communist rule in 1991 and 1993. With no time or energy to spare from this fight for the survival of Russian democracy, he acquiesced to a new order that did not suit Russia at all well.

Russia's identity itself had collapsed as the revelations of *perestroika* undermined the myths and narratives that had undergirded it for seven decades. Yeltsin could do nothing more than establish an identity of freedom and democracy—ideas that seemed increasingly bereft of value as the Russian economy collapsed in the 1990s.

Putin took power in 2000 determined to address these crises. He is redefining Russian identity in the terms the tsars used in the 19th Century—Russian Orthodoxy, nationalism, and strong government (they called it autocracy, but he does not). He claims the right to renegotiate the terms of the bad deals Russia made with the post-Soviet states, by force if necessary. He cites the plight of ethnic Russians in the new republics as justification for eroding or even erasing the sovereignty of those states. He seeks to restore Russia to the position of global eminence it had as the Soviet Union by re-establishing its positions in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. He stokes conflict with the West to distract it from these endeavors even as he blames the West for inventing the hostility he has created.

The West cannot appease its way out of this crypto-war. Putin requires conflict to justify his rule at home and his actions in the territory of the former Soviet Union. But Western appeasement cannot address problems that spring from deep within Russia itself. Putin is encouraging Russians to believe that they must regain suzerainty over their former empire, that they must weaken and fragment the West, that they must cut the United States down to size, and that the West will oppose them implacably in all these endeavors. Appeasement can only draw him into further demands, since he cannot allow the hostility to wane.

The West, with the United States at its head, must rather persuade Putin and the Russian people to accept the terms they themselves negotiated for the post-Cold War settlement—or renegotiate those terms on an equal basis and in peace with their neighbors. We must persuade Russia that it will lose another confrontation, and that the consequences of another loss will be even worse than those of 1991. We must cajole Russia into developing a new national identity not bound in the subjugation of a large empire and military might but rather as a peaceful democratic state with an ancient tradition and a future of hope.

We will have to accept conflict and the risk of war to succeed in this task, although we should do everything possible to minimize the one and avoid the other. But the path to enduring peace lies through confrontation, backed by determination and force. There is no other way.

Introduction

Russia is a revisionist state seeking to reclaim a lost empire. Its approach is idiosyncratic, reflecting Russia's unique situation after the end of the Cold War. Russia was not actually defeated in that war. It chose to give up its empire rather than fight for it. It set new boundaries and relationships with its newly-independent neighbors of its own accord. There was never any Versailles Treaty, and so there can be no Weimar Russia. Russian revisionism is thus an attempt to renegotiate by force a peace that it had freely made.

A trinity of revisionist drives govern Russian behavior. First, Moscow seeks to revise the terms of its agreements with the other former Soviet states. Second, it is revising the very meaning of the concepts of "Russia" and "Russian." Third, President Vladimir Putin seeks to revise the international order fundamentally. These drives are interwoven, but they exist independently of one another. Their mutual interactions pose an almost intractable problem for American and European policy-makers.

Status quo powers can hope to resist a state seeking only to revise the international order by demonstrating to it the impossibility of succeeding in that aim. Such attempts often lead to war when the revisionist power is strong and determined enough (Germany before World War I, for example)—or the status quo powers are weak or indecisive (as in the 1930s). But the requirement is relatively simple to articulate, if not to meet. The West faces no such simple task in dealing with Russia today.

For post-Soviet Russia must find a new identity and come to terms with the series of agreements that set its post-Cold War boundaries and relations with its new neighbors. The Russian nationalist narrative holds that those agreements were foolish, mistaken, forced on Russia, and have not been honored by Russia's neighbors. There is truth in that narrative. Internal conditions in Russia as the Soviet Union fell drove Boris Yeltsin to advance and then accept a series of deals that did not serve Russia's interests well in the long term. The press of time and circumstances precluded careful deliberations or the development of any meaningful plans to address the inevitable complexities of breaking up a vast centralized polyglot empire. Both the West and Russia's new neighbors did fail to keep promises made during those negotiations. Russian grievances are understandable.

This essay will largely focus on comprehending the Russian view, since that view drives Russia's behavior. A student of Russian history can even empathize with Russia's complaints. But comprehension and empathy are not agreement or approval. The hard fact is that international law and centuries-old custom require Russia to live within the terms of the agreements it made or to renegotiate them peacefully and on equal terms with its partners. Russia's recent use of force and coercion to compel the former Soviet states to concede to its demands is unjustifiable and anathema to a healthy and peaceful world order. The international community must resist rather than condone—let alone encourage—it.

The American and European need to resist Russia's forceful reconquest is relatively easy to articulate and defend, but less easy to undertake. The challenge lies in finding the correct response to the first two revisionist drives—the renegotiation of the Cold War-ending agreements and the search for a new/old Russian identity. The temptation is strongest here to think that the West can conciliate Moscow in some way that will lead to a mutually-acceptable agreement. That temptation above all must be resisted. The interaction of all three of Russia's revisionisms makes such an agreement impossible on any terms the West could accept. The superficial validity of some of Russia's grievances must not blind us to this reality. The West must find a way to uphold the settlements of the early 1990s, defend the principles of international law and order, and help Russia settle on a new identity within those parameters.

The Internal-International Divide

The West did not defeat Russia at the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union imploded, rather, in a complex revolution that ended the conflict almost as an aside.¹ The West did not impose a settlement on Russia either. Negotiations among the former Soviet states decided the most important elements of the post-Cold War world for Russia. The settlement that resulted from those negotiations is what Putin seeks to revise in the first instance. His problem is thus not initially with the victorious powers, but rather with the constituent parts of the Soviet Union. He views this problem as an internal one. Russia made a number of mistakes in the course of that settlement that we will consider presently. The other Soviet states also violated their commitments to Russia. Putin believes that Russia therefore has a right to revise the settlement, both to correct the mistakes and to hold its former partners to their promises.²

It poses a problem for the rest of the international community. The US, NATO, and their partners did not decree the resolution of the Cold War, but they did guarantee elements of it by recognizing the former Soviet states as independent countries.³ They did not guarantee that those newly independent states would abide by promises made to Russia in the course of negotiations, since those were bilateral issues on the whole. And they certainly did not guarantee Russia any right to enforce those promises, still less to revise the series of agreements of which they formed part. The West's view is and must be that the settlement of the Cold War became an international matter rather than an internal one when the new states received formal recognition. This view is incompatible with Putin's, and the differences are likely irreducible.

The Fall of the Soviet Union

The details of the collapse of the USSR are extremely hazy to most Westerners and increasingly so to many Russians. The collapse of the Soviet state and the emergence therefrom of 15 independent countries seems inevitable in retrospect, as most historical events do. It may, indeed, have been inevitable once certain key decisions were made—but there was nothing inevitable about those decisions.

One thing is very clear, however: there never was a decision made to break up the Soviet Union, nor was there ever a plan for how to do so. The Soviet collapse resulted, rather, from the accumulation of a series of decisions and events occurring simultaneously and over time in many places, often without the participation and sometimes without the knowledge of Moscow. A non-decision set it all in motion. As the Warsaw Pact countries began to drift away and independence movements arose and flourished in various parts of the Soviet Union, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev decided against using force to retain the Soviet empire. “A witness recalls Gorbachev saying in the late 1980s: ‘We are told that we should pound the fist on the table,’ and the general secretary clenched his hand in fist to ‘show how it is done.’ ‘Generally speaking,’ continued Gorbachev, ‘it could be done. But one does not feel like it.’”⁴ Gorbachev did not desire to allow the Soviet Union to fall, but he was unwilling to restore Stalinist repression to prevent it.

Gorbachev and then Yeltsin tried to negotiate various arrangements with the individual Soviet Socialist Republics to retain some kind of decentralized federal system with Moscow at its heart as it became clear that the center would indeed not hold. The hopelessness of this undertaking was by no means apparent to everyone involved. Russia’s leaders quickly resigned themselves to losing the Baltic States and possibly some of the Caucasian republics as well. Those peoples had long histories of independent statehood and relatively strong national identities despite the efforts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to Russify and/or Sovietize them.

The shocks, rather, came when Ukraine, Belarus, and the five Central Asian republics declared their independence and refused to join any meaningful federal system. Ukraine and Belarus have never really been independent states before, and their national identities were relatively recent and complex.⁵ The peoples of Central Asia had long traditions of independence before the Russian conquests of their lands—but not as states in anything like their current configurations. Stalin had invented their borders during and after the Soviet reconquest in the 1920s. He drew the lines, moreover, deliberately to create tension and conflict among the republics rather than to encapsulate peoples with common identities.⁶ None of these republics seemed predestined to choose a path of total independence from Moscow, and Russia’s leaders were stunned when they all did.⁷

The suddenness and unexpectedness of their decisions created a real dilemma for the ethnic Russians living in those lands. As Putin said, “the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of

millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.”⁸ Russians, he added later, “went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.”⁹ No plans for ensuring their rights as new-found minorities in newly-formed states had been developed. Several of the former Soviet republics promised to protect those rights, but many promises were not kept.¹⁰ Ethnic Russians in the Baltic Republics and Moldova were, in fact, discriminated against, denied citizenship and passports, and otherwise marginalized.¹¹ Many emigrated to Russia, but many remained.

This phenomenon is common to the process of decolonization, which frequently leaves the citizens of the colonial power in difficult circumstances in the newly-independent states. In cases where the decolonization resulted from a deliberate policy act by the colonial power, those citizens often had warning, time, and sometimes assistance. Sometimes they were, indeed, guaranteed some protections by the newly-independent regime. The process was everywhere and always messy, frustrating, and disappointing for all sides. But it was, at least, often an actual process.

There was no such process at all in the “decolonization” of the Soviet empire, nor is the parallel entirely fair to the Russians in the newly-independent states. Russians had not colonized Ukraine or Belarus in any meaningful way—they had been there for as long as the current Slavic inhabitants had. It is fairer to say that some in Ukraine and Belarus evolved out of Russianness into new identities, while others did not.¹² Similar complexities attended the historical status of Russian minorities in the other republics. All of which is to say that those concerned with the well-being of ethnic Russians had reason to be highly dissatisfied with the way in which their co-nationalists were treated during the break-up of the Soviet Union, and to regard the manner of that break-up as badly planned and unfair.¹³

That perception of the unfairness and dishonesty of the way in which the new states emerged from the Soviet Union embittered Russian leaders at the time. Yeltsin resented it, and his Communist and nationalist political opponents resented it still more. The Russian Federation passed various laws in the 1990s extending rights to Russian minorities in the newly-independent states. Russian policy documents made claims to the right to protect those minorities long before Putin was a national figure.¹⁴ The desire to revise this aspect of the Cold War “settlement” has deep roots in the Russian polity that precede and transcend Putin’s current machinations. They form a part of a fundamental revisionist drive that any Russian leader is likely to feel—although not necessarily to heed.

National Security and the New States

The collapse of the Soviet Union was unique in still another way—the “colonial” power, to use that historical analogy, lost political control and influence before it had withdrawn its military power—before, even, there was any agreement about how it would do so. The problem was three-fold. First, the Soviet military followed the age-old imperial practice of deploying conscripts in mixed units generally far from their homelands. There was no easy way, therefore, to break it up along the new political lines. Second, Soviet strategic systems, especially nuclear systems, were deployed throughout the former USSR. The nuclear systems were in Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan in addition to Russia. Both Moscow and the international community were determined to ensure that one nuclear power emerged from the ruins, not four. The Black Sea fleet was based at Sevastopol, suddenly Ukrainian territory. Third, Soviet military industry had been spread throughout the entire Soviet empire but was concentrated in Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. The question of what was to become of the components outside Russia had many thorny consequences.¹⁵

All these issues warranted long negotiations and studies with valid arguments on all sides. They were instead decided quickly, in some cases almost *en passant*, without any general agreement on principles, and in the context of chaos and near-civil war in Russia itself. Russia could claim the right to all of the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons, the Black Sea Fleet, and other strategic assets only on grounds of pragmatism or extreme ethnocentrism. Representatives of all the Soviet Republics were involved in building those systems; resources from all the republics were used to fund them. The case for sharing them among the various newly-independent states was not weak, at least from a moral perspective. But Moscow refused to countenance independent nuclear states on its borders, and the West was equally horrified by the prospect of four different states armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles. Even so, negotiations to establish the Russian monopoly on nuclear weapons were not easy, with Ukraine holding out until 1994.¹⁶

The Black Sea Fleet question was more difficult for Moscow. A weak and preoccupied Yeltsin agreed to split up the Black Sea Fleet with Ukraine, acknowledge Ukraine’s territorial ownership of the Russian part of the fleet’s base, and enter into a limited lease for it.¹⁷

Russia flat-out lost on the question of military industry. Factories in Ukraine and elsewhere continued to function (to the extent that any post-Soviet industry functioned), now owned by Ukrainian oligarchs and producing weapons for the benefit of Ukraine. Those factories, once just a part of the Soviet weapons-production and –export system, suddenly became competitors in one of the only significant exports the new Russian state had. Russian defense industry continued to rely on components produced in some of these factories, moreover. The full unwinding of this artificial disruption in a previously-coherent supply-chain only began with the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and it is not yet complete.

All of these issues were international matters by the time they were resolved, since the component Soviet republics were declared and recognized independent states by the end of 1991 with seats in the UN General Assembly by July 1992. The Russo-Ukrainian agreement regarding Sevastopol and the Black Sea Fleet was an international agreement, not an internal matter.¹⁸ The U.S. was a party to the agreement regarding Ukraine's nuclear arsenal. In reality, and for the West, any changes to these agreements must result from voluntary diplomatic undertakings between equal states. Yeltsin also regarded them as such perforce—he negotiated them with sovereign governments. Anyone who believes in upholding and defending international law can take no other view.

But Putin's perspective is different. The complexities regarding the disposition of Sevastopol, Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet, and so on arose from internal Soviet decisions. Had anyone thought that those decisions would lead to outcomes that would be internationally-recognized and permanent, he argues, they would not have been made in that way. He says of Nikita Khrushchev's decision to transfer Crimea to Ukraine, "This decision was treated as a formality of sorts because the territory was transferred within the boundaries of a single state. Back then, it was impossible to imagine that Ukraine and Russia may split up and become two separate states."¹⁹ Russia had an implicit right, he suggests, to revise those internal decisions before they became internationalized. He thus unilaterally renounced Russia's agreements regarding the Black Sea Fleet division and the use of Sevastopol shortly after seizing the Crimean Peninsula almost without comment.²⁰ The whole issue of Crimea, thus, has always been an internal Russian matter, and so it should remain according to Putin.

The argument here falls short of an assertion of Moscow's right to suzerainty, let alone sovereignty, over the whole territory of the former Soviet Union. It is a narrower revisionist argument focused on the way in which decisions were made before and during the collapse of the USSR and the rights of the post-Soviet states (especially Russia) to revise those decisions *ex post facto*.

This is not to say that Putin's sole aim is to reconstitute the Soviet state or the Russian Empire. We will consider that issue presently. It is, rather, to isolate a problem that is both more limited and more fundamental, namely that the Russian view is irreconcilable with the Western view even putting all questions of neo-imperialism aside. And it has nothing in common with Weimar, still less Hitlerite Germany.²¹

Neo-Imperialism

Putin does have a neo-imperial agenda, however, above and beyond—yet interconnected with—this issue. This agenda arises from a second revisionism that likewise had no parallel in post-war Germany. Putin feels the need to revise Russia's identity and national narrative. This need arises from two grounds. First, the collapse of the Soviet empire required it. Second, the pain of the introspection of *perestroika* (the reforms Mikhail Gorbachev undertook in the late 1980s that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union) is soothed by it.

Russian identity had become so closely enmeshed with the Soviet Union by the end of World War II that it was hardly possible to disentangle the two. The collapse of the USSR inevitably led to a massive identity-crisis for Russia. Many of the newly-independent post-Soviet states seemed so eager and happy to embrace historical and ethnic identities long suppressed by the Soviets and the imperial Russians before them, aggravating that identity-crisis. Their emerging identities thus came at the expense of Russia, even as Russia's own identity crumbled. Something had to be done.

Yeltsin was not able to address the identity crisis, nor did he really try. Yeltsin's mission was to move Russia from a Soviet to a post-Soviet mindset. He spent virtually his entire reign in that fight, which he nearly lost several times. He accomplished it, really, only after the 1996 presidential election in which he defeated the Communist candidate and thereby started the final collapse of the Communist Party. In the end, he managed to make Russians into post-Soviets—but not into new Russians.²²

Putin took that problem in hand and made it part of his focus. What was Russia now? It was no longer post-Soviet. It had to be something new. Or, rather, old. The definition of Russia inevitably reached back into history, as national identities always do. But to which history? This was no small question in the 1990s because the *perestroika* revolution had fundamentally revised Russians' understanding of their own Soviet history, very much for the worse.

Perestroika

The distortion and obfuscation of events and history was a hallmark of the Soviet regime. It concealed the extent of its crimes from its own people with remarkable success. Russians knew that bad things had happened during Stalin's purges and collectivization, but they did not know how bad or how extensive those things were. Soviet history concealed the fact that Stalin miscalculated terribly in 1939-1941, leaving the country open to an attack that surprised him for which he could have been prepared.²³ Soviet citizens were taught, rather, that the Second World War—the Great Patriotic War as it is known—was a bitter but glorious moment in their history imposed by Hitler, who was driven by the Western states in his attempt to destroy the Soviet Union.²⁴

Perestroika transformed Russians' fundamental understanding of their Soviet past. Suddenly they were presented with the full panoply of the horrors of collectivization, and realized the actual death toll for the first time. They learned that Stalin had been a fool and the Great Patriotic War could have cost the Soviets infinitely less than it did. They gained a detailed knowledge of all the evil things the Soviet system had done to its own people, deeply tarnishing what they had believed to be a glorious past.

Many Soviet citizens suffered a sort of collective survivor's guilt as well. Those who lived and participated in the system facilitated the crimes and benefited from them to some extent. They

learned at the same time that they had been victimized far more than they had ever understood and that they themselves were partly to blame for the even greater horrors inflicted on those who perished. They prided themselves on their honesty, noting that they were making their own accounting of the past deeds of their government of their own will. They were not forced to do so by victorious powers as Germany and Japan had been. But the pride was somber, limited only to some, and did not mitigate the psychological damage done by the destruction of a historical narrative of which they had been proud.

The revision of this *perestroika* history began quickly. Yeltsin's political opponents on both the left and the right began attacking it early in the 1990s. The Communists, led by Gennady Zyuganov, argued for the achievements of the Soviet system. Their arguments became more salient and convincing as the post-Soviet system led to initial dramatic decreases in the quality of the lives of most Russians. Nostalgia for the old regime grew rapidly, propelling the Communists to a sustained third of the popular vote and a dominant role in the legislature throughout the 1990s.²⁵

But that third of the vote seemed to be a hard ceiling, and the nostalgia for Communism was not a substitute for a new identity. The right-wing party of Vladimir Zhirinovskii began the process of constructing that identity. Largely accepting the *perestroika* narrative of Soviet failures, Russian nationalists opened the aperture on Russia's history. They reclaimed the notion of Russia's unique place and role in the world and tried to assume the mantle of Russian Imperialism in a positive light. They began to speak of pre-Soviet heroes going back many hundreds of years while trying to get Russian citizens to think of themselves as the descendants of Riurik, Ivan the Terrible, and Peter the Great.

Zhirinovskii failed to garner significant electoral support, however. His party, and the Communists even more, also began to embrace the darker sides of Russian history. They were in full cry for atavistic anti-Semitism of the sort that had fueled the tsarist pogroms and Soviet repression of Jews by the end of the decade. Some embraced fascism openly, sporting neo-Nazi symbols and even praising Hitler. Both the nationalists and the Communists were trounced at the polls. Zyuganov lost the 1996 presidential election to Yeltsin despite entering the contest with an overwhelming lead.²⁶ Communist dominance of the legislature evaporated in the 1999 legislative elections, while the always-weak nationalist block collapsed almost entirely. Putin crushed Zyuganov and the others in a first-round win in the 2000 presidential election, winning by over 20 percentage points.²⁷ These parties thus failed to create a new identity for Russia, although they laid some seeds.²⁸

Putin tended those seeds and harvested their fruit from the very first days of his administration. He hearkened back to the days of Riurik, the legendary founder of Russia, in his "Open Letter to Voters" in February 2000: "Our land is rich, but there is no order..."²⁹ Thus medieval chronicles report that the ancient Slavs wrote to the Viking Riurik, whose people were called the Rus, in 860-862.³⁰ Putin omitted the last part of the sentence, however: "Come to rule and reign over us." And so Riurik moved to Novgorod and created the first Russian state and people. It was a remarkably and uncharacteristically nuanced and deft bit of rhetoric to mark the start of a coherent effort to

redefine Russia as the inheritor of more than a millennium of expansion and triumph. Did Putin mean slyly to cast himself in the role of Riurik, father of the Russians?

Who are the Russians, then, according to Putin? The Russians are an ancient Slavic people descended from the Rus who inhabited the land from Ukraine to Finland. They have been Christian for more than a millennium following the conversion of Vladimir the Great in 988. When the Christian church split in 1054, Russians followed the Eastern Orthodox rite and its leader, the Patriarch of Constantinople. When the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, the Russians became the principal inheritors and defenders of the Orthodox tradition. An apologist for Ivan the Terrible, in fact, identified Moscow, the “third Rome,” as the successor to Constantinople as the leading city of all Christians.³¹

The Russians are also the inheritors of the glory, traditions, and patrimony of the Kievan Rus principalities of which Kiev was, naturally, the center. Putin noted that Ukraine and Russia “are not simply close neighbours but...we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other.”³² The Russians fought the Mongol invasions and thus claim to be defenders of Europe and Christianity against the Asian hordes (although Kiev was destroyed and Moscow became a Mongol client for a time).

They are also the heirs to Peter the Great, who brought Western ideas into Russia while also conquering Western lands. Peter defeated Sweden in the early 18th Century to “plant a foot firmly on the [Baltic] Sea” and “break through a window into Europe,” in the words of Pushkin.³³ Peter modernized Russia and set it on the path to becoming a great power.

Russia’s European-ness is essential to Putin: “Above all else Russia was, is and will, of course, be a major European power...For three centuries, we—together with the other European nations—passed hand in hand through reforms of Enlightenment, the difficulties of emerging parliamentarism, municipal and judicial branches, and the establishment of similar legal systems...[W]e did this together, sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of European standards.”³⁴

Aleksandr I revived Russian messianism following Napoleon’s 1812 invasion. Russian armies fighting under the icons of Orthodoxy drove the French all the way back to Paris, freeing Europe from the yoke of tyranny in the first “Patriotic War.” His successors crafted the guiding doctrines of the late Russian Empire based on the principles of Orthodoxy, nationalism, and autocracy.

Putin embraces the 20th-Century version of that messianism, noting that the celebration of the end of the Second World War in Europe (Victory Day) “can justly [be] called the day of civilisation’s triumph over fascism. Our common victory enabled us to defend the principles of freedom, independence, and equality between all peoples and nations.... [Russian soldiers] saved the world from an ideology of hatred and tyranny.” “Also certain is that Russia should continue its civilising mission on the Eurasian continent. This mission consists in ensuring that democratic values, combined with national interests, enrich and strengthen our historic community.”³⁵

Russians are above all, however, members of an ancient nation-state. The greatest heroes of pre-Romanov (that is, pre-17th Century) history are those who participated in what is known as the “gathering of the Russian lands.”³⁶ All territories inhabited by Russians were part of a single state by the end of the 16th Century. They remained part of a single state until 1991 apart from brief periods of disorder. They should be part of a single state in the view of Russian nationalists, or, rather, of a single polity that includes in the odd phrase of the tsars, “all the Russias.”³⁷

The collapse of the Soviet Union destroyed the unity of Russian lands, undoing centuries of conquest and then imperial retention. Russian nationalists will find it hard, perhaps impossible, to reconcile themselves to the loss of those lands, at least as long as they rely on historical concepts to define Russia’s identity.

Post-Soviet Russia is most like Weimar Germany in this respect. Nationalists regard the truncation of the Russian state as unnatural and artificial. They seek to “re-unify” lands that were historically whole. Putin himself compared Russia to Germany at the end of the Cold War (eschewing deliberately, no doubt, any hint of Weimar Russia). He noted, falsely, that Russia had supported Germany’s quest for re-unification in 1990, and asked Germany to do the same for Russia in return. He was speaking at that moment only of Crimea, but there is no actual reason to distinguish Crimea from any of the other “traditionally” or “historically” Russian lands.³⁸

The Russian national identity thus defined is therefore inevitably revisionist and neo-imperialist. It must seek to re-establish Moscow’s control over at least the lands inhabited by Russians, if not over all of the lands ever governed by Russia.

But this neo-imperialism is forced to be crypto-imperialism, at least for the moment, by the fact that Russia itself acknowledged and accepted the loss of these lands. The absence of a Versailles Treaty imposed and enforced by victorious foreign powers greatly complicates Putin’s efforts to lay claim to the former Soviet republics. He can complain about the way in which the devolution of the Soviet empire proceeded—and does—but he has found it impossible thus far to justify simply demanding the reversal of that process.

The crypto nature of this imperialism is reflected in the way Putin has been pursuing it. He is unable to blame it all on foreign powers and demand that they redress his grievances; he relies instead on the established arguments for Russia’s rights to protect Russians in the former Soviet republics. This is not simply a matter of “grey zone” warfare. It also reflects the challenges he faces in the ideological basis of his attempt to re-gather the Russian lands.

And the problem is not simply a matter of conflict with the West. As Leon Aron and others have argued eloquently—and Russians argued at the time—there is a correlation between Russian (or Soviet) imperialism and autocracy at home.³⁹ Faced with the choice between domestic liberty and retaining the empire, Russian leaders and people chose the former every time in the 1990s. Putin may wish it had been otherwise and is making the opposite choices today. But he operates in a world of narratives not only of his own devising. The narrative of Russian liberty is an important

one, and it does not easily coincide with a neo-imperial narrative baldly expressed. The crypto-imperialism relying on the oppression of Russians and seemingly nit-picking arguments about promises not kept is therefore aimed as much at keeping elements of the Russian population on board as it is on facilitating hybrid warfare against the West.⁴⁰

It also handles another challenge Putin inherited from the 1990s, namely the feeling that Russia should focus on making itself strong and not waste its energy on struggles beyond its borders. The rhetorical/ideological impossibility of simply making the leap back to saying that the Soviet borders are Russia's actual borders makes it harder for Putin to argue that any and all Russian activities in former Soviet states are worthy expenditures of Russian blood and treasure. This is yet another reason for the cryptic nature of his neo-imperial drive.

There are outright Russian nationalists in Russia, to be sure, and in large numbers. They make up a growing portion of Putin's electoral base, in fact.⁴¹ They are not numerous enough to win Putin elections, however, particularly when Russia's economy is doing so poorly. Putin faces a number of options in the run-up to the next round of presidential elections in 2018. He can try to turn the economy around and regain enough popularity to win without egregiously rigging the voting. He can try to develop enough support to win based on non-economic issues such as patriotism and nationalism. He can try just to rig the voting. Or he can dispense with the forms of representative government by suspending elections temporarily or permanently.

He is least likely to choose the last path, which would lead to international denunciation and isolation and also alienate a large segment of the population. It would also destroy the ideological basis of his regime and force him to develop an entirely new one. He is instead working on the first three simultaneously.

But he faces a conundrum in this effort. Attempts to stir up atavistic nationalism rely on identifying enemies abroad and confronting them, at least in Putin's approach. Putin and his attack-dogs thus vilify the pro-Western post-Soviet states and justify military threats and actions against them. They also rely heavily on a narrative of confrontation and enmity toward the Western powers, and particularly the U.S. They thus pursue the traditional paths of Soviet and imperial Russian argumentation that defines Russia as a strong and righteous power encircled by malign and hostile states against which it must mobilize to defend itself.⁴²

That narrative runs athwart the most direct path to improving Russia's economy in the short run, however, namely sanctions relief. The Russian economy suffers many deep structural problems, as Putin has long noted and lamented. Its transition from the Soviet centralized and state-owned economy has been partial and fraught. Privatization placed vast enterprises in the hands of oligarchs. Inadequate legal structures and poor tax policies—and even poorer mechanisms for collecting taxes—failed to woo sufficient international investment even before the sanctions began following the invasion of Crimea in 2014. The Russian economy was and remains in the grip of

robber-barons who owe their positions to Putin. It thus never moved past the status of rentier state based primarily on mineral wealth, despite the skill of its educated classes.

There are no quick fixes for this problem, as Putin discovered in his first 14 years in power (as president and prime minister). The economy did well enough to satisfy many Russians when oil prices (and oil-indexed gas prices) were high. The collapse of the oil market, however, put Russia in a terrible position from which it would not easily have recovered. The imposition of strong sanctions in 2014 and 2015 pushed it over the edge.

Putin recognizes all of this and thus focuses on the one aspect of the problem that could change and improve the economy quickly—the relaxation or end of sanctions. Yet he faces a dilemma. He needs to pursue confrontational policies to support nationalism and advance the crypto-imperialism required to achieve the aim of re-gathering the Russian lands. But those policies make it hard for him to concede to Western demands for sanctions relief.

I am deliberately setting aside here the questions that arise from attempts to psychoanalyze Putin. Various statements in his pseudo-autobiography and as president suggest that he would not be inclined to resolve a problem by backing down in any case.⁴³ He has, however, shown a strong sense of pragmatism when serious issues were on the line, as, for example, in his response to Turkey's shooting-down of a Russian fighter aircraft. Efforts to read his soul are too weak a basis on which to formulate policy when there are alternatives. The structural problems facing him were he to seek sanctions relief through compromise make it unnecessary to guess about how he would make decisions in a vacuum.

Putin has therefore chosen other paths to achieve sanctions relief. He is using bribery in various forms to seduce one or more EU states in hopes that they might veto a sanctions extension. He is actively working to weaken the EU in general by supporting Euro-skeptic parties. He is ostentatiously flexing his military muscles in an attempt to coerce European states to concede. And he is rheostatting the conflict in Ukraine to gain leverage in sanctions negotiations. These efforts have not yet led to the erosion of sanctions. They have, however, steadily shifted the character of the intra-European discussion about sanctions in Putin's favor. It is unlikely that the sanctions will survive absent a significant change in the situation.⁴⁴

Russia's attempt to break the post-Crimea sanctions is not a form of direct revisionism, since the sanctions themselves are a new phenomenon. These efforts are, rather, an attempt to mitigate the effects of revisionist policies without abandoning or moderating those policies. They weave nicely into a larger undertaking to revise the international order fundamentally.

Revising the World Order

Putin rejects the post-Cold War international structure fundamentally. He insists that it is unraveling, which he views as good. He aims to assist with that unraveling and claims to seek a new order that is more peaceful, stable, and just. He is thus in this respect a revisionist of the most traditional sort.

Russia's fall from superpower status in 1991 shocked its leaders and probably many of its people. The shock came not merely from the fact that the Soviet Union had been a superpower. The Russian Empire had regarded it as more than a "Great Power" since the early 19th Century at least. Alexander I's defeat of Napoleon established Russia as the dominant power in Eastern Europe. Prussia and Austria fell into nearly vassal status after 1807 and remained there for many decades. Nicholas I, Alexander's successor, was known as the gendarme of Europe and embraced the role. He was readying an army to suppress the Belgian Revolution in 1830 when a revolt in his own Polish lands diverted him. He did send a large force to quell the Hungarian uprising against Austria in 1849. His defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856) drove his son, Alexander II, to focus on massive internal reforms, including the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Russia's distraction facilitated the work of Otto von Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke the Elder to unify Germany, creating a strong rival on Russia's western frontier in 1871 for the first time in more than a century. Russia remained much stronger than both Austria (now Austria-Hungary) and the declining Ottoman Empire even so. Its pretensions to first-rank great power status remained until the empire's collapse in 1917.

Any Russian nationalist contemplating Russia's traditional role in the international system, therefore, would expect Russia to be among the most powerful and respected states—and to be treated accordingly. The sudden Soviet collapse, however, stripped Russia of almost any right to such pretensions. Moscow lost a sizable portion of its territory and nearly half of its population almost overnight. Its economy collapsed, as did its military. It became mired in domestic struggles that nearly destroyed it, including two failed coup attempts in the 1990s. Russia effectively vanished from the world scene as any sort of meaningful actor for almost a decade. Only Russia's nuclear arsenal required other states to treat it as anything other than a weak, if large, regional state with little ability to affect its neighbors.

Russia had suffered hard times in the past. Succession struggles in the mid-18th century periodically drove Russia inward. Tsar Paul's defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1799 caused a retreat from European power politics for a few years. We have considered the aftermath of the Crimean War. Russia's loss to Japan in 1905 generated a brief revolution and a similar withdrawal and loss of face and influence. But Russia always returned to first-rank status after such setbacks. Putin's desire to repeat that experience in the current environment is not surprising.

The post-Cold War international order posed a novel problem for a Russia seeking to “rise from its knees,” as Putin likes to say, and rejoin the ranks of the great powers: American global dominance.⁴⁵ Never before in modern history had a single state amassed such a disproportionate influence over the entire world. Louis XVI, Napoleon, and Hitler had dreamed of a universal empire and undertaken to achieve it, but all had failed. The U.S. was not an empire, but it had achieved global preponderance of which these historical figures could only dream. There was thus no body of great powers which Russia could rejoin after getting its house in order. There was one superpower whose strength Russia could not hope to match in any timeframe Putin was willing to accept.

The European states could have posed a counter-balance to the U.S. had they been sufficiently unified and willing to oppose Washington. But the European project was only just getting underway in the 1990s, and the re-unification of Germany focused Europe inward for a time as well. The U.S., in Putin’s view, seized the opportunity to consolidate its control over Europe by strengthening and empowering NATO, thereby subjugating Europe to America’s will. It proclaimed itself the “indispensable nation” and spoke of “unipolarity,” suggesting that the U.S. was all too well aware of its ability to establish a protracted global hegemony and its desire to do so.⁴⁶

Yeltsin allowed this phenomenon to proceed unchecked. He acquiesced with it, indeed, through both action and inaction. Russia did nothing when a U.S.-led European coalition invaded the former Yugoslavia (as Putin saw it), supporting ethno-religious separatism at the expense of Russia’s favored South Slavic client, Serbia. Yeltsin protested the expansion of NATO into first the Warsaw Pact countries and then onto the territory of the former Soviet Union itself only weakly. The expansion seemed to Russians to violate agreements Moscow thought it had secured as the USSR fell apart, but Yeltsin signed an agreement with NATO accepting both the expansion and an observer status for Russia in America’s hegemonic alliance.⁴⁷

Putin was determined to do better than Yeltsin at standing up to the U.S. American hegemony was intolerable in itself because it deprived Russia of its rightful role in the world. It was also the primary obstacle to Putin’s efforts to restore Russia’s identity and re-gather the Russian lands. It was also, he believed, illegal. The U.S. and its allies rewrote international law to suit themselves. They had no right to involve themselves in Kosovo in 1999. Rather than obtaining a U.N. Security Council resolution that would have given them such a right, they asserted a doctrine that Putin found not only illegal but extremely threatening—that the decision by NATO to act was enough to give international legitimacy to an invasion of a sovereign state. They then supported Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence. Putin constantly condemns both actions, but also cites them as precedential justifications for his own undertakings in the former Soviet lands.⁴⁸

Putin has steadily added to the list of supposed violations of international laws and norms by the U.S. and NATO over time. He condemned the Iraq invasion in 2003, of course.⁴⁹ He bitterly assailed the NATO-led operation that removed Moammar Qaddafi from power in Libya in 2011.⁵⁰ He felt particularly betrayed in that instance because NATO seized on a UN Security Council resolution that Putin had specifically crafted to avoid giving it the right to take direct military action.

He viewed the imposition of sanctions on his personal allies and then on sections of the Russian economy after the Crimean invasion as evidence of America's determination to use its economic power to subjugate Russia and any other state that might oppose it.⁵¹

He is committed to cutting the U.S. back down to size, weakening or fragmenting NATO, and ensuring that the EU cannot act as a concerted bloc against him at a minimum in order to reverse this deplorable, from his perspective, situation. He has made common cause with the other states who resent American and European domination, particularly Iran and China. His aim is to re-create a world order in which Russia is respected as much or more than the U.S., has regained its traditional preponderant influence in Europe, re-established itself as a major player in the Middle East and Asia, and wields veto power over any actions other states might take beyond their borders or to Russia's detriment.

He regards his argument against American hegemony as self-demonstrating. American actions have not only been illegal—they have been devastatingly ineffective and, indeed, counter-productive. U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in the 1990s created the al Qaeda threat. American and European military intervention in Afghanistan after 2001 has led to failure, chaos, and further radicalization. The invasion of Iraq created ISIS and sparked a regional war. American operations against the “legitimate” regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria fuels both ISIS and al Qaeda there—indeed, Putin claims, the U.S. is directly supporting al Qaeda against Assad. The U.S. helped overthrow Hosni Mubarek in Egypt and then did overthrow Qaddafi, spreading the chaos and violence of the Arab Spring and adding more fuel to the Islamist fire. American hostility toward Iran has prevented a natural ally from playing its rightful part in fighting the terrorists.⁵²

Putin also accuses the U.S. of fomenting and supporting the “color revolutions” that toppled post-Soviet rulers, especially in Ukraine and Georgia.⁵³ Those revolutions brought corrupt, incompetent American puppets to power in Tbilisi and Kyiv, creating crises that Russia was forced to resolve. When Putin did attempt to protect Russian populations victimized by these Western-sponsored criminal governments, the U.S. rallied its European lackeys to prevent and then punish him.

Putin finds it hard to see what benefit America gains from all of the disaster and chaos that it has caused. He thinks it very clear, however, that the U.S. has shown itself unworthy of the role of hegemon and incapable of exercising it properly. The post-Cold War international order is thus collapsing of its own accord. Russia must help it transition to a new and more stable—multipolar—basis.⁵⁴

Restoring Russian pre-eminence in the former Soviet states is a first step. Demonstrating the fecklessness of NATO is the next. Gaining the support of European parties and then states will both re-establish Russia's dominant position on the continent and cut America's key proxies away. Re-establishing the Soviet Union's former position in the Middle East will prevent the U.S. from pursuing its disastrous unilateral military policies. The US will have to accept, in the end, that it is

only one of several great powers once more, with a constrained sphere of influence and the obligation to respect Russia's ascendancy in Eastern Europe. That is Putin's aim.⁵⁵

What Do We Do About It All?

Crafting American policy responses to the interwoven strands of Russian revisionisms is difficult. Some parts of that task are easy to articulate if difficult to execute. Others are hard even to conceive. Any sound strategy for securing the interests of the U.S. and its allies, as well as the survival of international law and any semblance of the current international order, requires cutting through narratives to realities. Russia has no right to use or threaten the use of force against its neighbors to coerce them to revise the terms of agreements made as the Soviet Union collapsed. The U.S. and NATO have solemn and vital obligations to defend all member states of the alliance against such attacks and threats. Our common strategy must focus on these truths and obligations. We will otherwise allow Putin to rewrite the rules of international affairs to suit the interests of expansionists, revisionists, and dictators around the world.

The Baltic States

The US and NATO must unequivocally and unambiguously defend the Baltic States against Russian threats and provocations. The forward-stationing of small numbers of forces in those states is a start. Recent NATO exercises in Eastern Europe were another good signal. Gradual escalation is unlikely to deter Putin, however. It is more likely, rather, to draw him on to an escalation path he might hope to control. NATO would be wiser to increase the defenses of the Baltic States rapidly and dramatically, sending additional ground forces, air defense systems, and coastal defense capabilities. It need not—and probably should not—base advanced attack aircraft in the Baltics in large numbers. Putin does not likely doubt NATO's ability to project air power over its allies, and putting the planes at the Russian border is, indeed, more aggressive than any of the other actions recommended here. Putin will decry them all as acts of aggression and even war, but the West must act on the basis of reality rather than his rhetoric.

The reality, which Western leaders and populations must internalize, is that the deployment of Western ground forces and air defense systems to the Baltic States poses no meaningful threat to Russia. NATO has no plans or intent to invade Russia. But what would such an invasion look like even if it did? It is insane to imagine that a NATO army should drive on Moscow, repeating the experience of Napoleon and the Wehrmacht. NATO armored forces might well encircle St. Petersburg from bases in Estonia, but what then? Turn south and drive on Moscow from a different direction? The notion of a ground invasion of Russia is more absurd than it has been in many decades—and it was always absurd. The deployment of NATO ground forces to the Baltic States, therefore, can only ever be defensive.

Stating the requirement for increased deterrence forces in the Baltics and its justification is straightforward. Making it happen in the face of Putin's counter-thrusts would be more difficult. But the largest problem will arise from the basis of another of Russia's revisionisms—the treatment of ethnic Russians in former Soviet states.

There is no need to rule on the validity of the complaints of those minorities, or of Putin on their behalf, to recognize the problem they pose. Russia has worked to stoke those complaints and the sense of marginalization of these minorities for many years, starting under Yeltsin's rule. The leaders of the Baltic states, particularly Latvia, have failed to woo them back or drive them away. The prospect of a manufactured "rebellion" among Russians against the Latvian (or Estonian or even Lithuanian) government is real, and the promised deployment of more NATO troops to the Baltic States could well trigger it.

NATO would then face a conundrum, since the mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty (Article 5) appears to address external attacks (although it does not say so explicitly).⁵⁶ Some NATO members will likely hesitate to confront Russia over what is presented as a domestic insurrection in a member state. NATO was not meant, after all, to provide the tools for its members to maintain domestic order, but rather to defend them against the Soviet Union and its allies. The distinction will be of great moment to a Europe riven by the refugee crisis, Brexit, and other internal concerns.

Success in defending the Baltic States militarily thus rests first and foremost on the execution of a political strategy to persuade NATO members that an armed insurrection of Russian separatists supported by Moscow must be regarded as an act of aggression by Russia requiring an Article 5 response. The development and prosecution of such a strategy should be one of the most urgent undertakings of the new American administration and of all European leaders who recognize their obligations to their own peoples and the alliance of which they are a part.

Ukraine and Georgia

The situation in Ukraine has already deteriorated far beyond the reach of such defense measures. Putin has occupied and annexed Crimea and is steadily enhancing its land, sea, and air defenses. His proxies, supported by thousands of Russian troops, control eastern Ukraine and continually press on loyalist forces to their west. The government in Kyiv is weak, riven by internal rivalries, corrupt, and ineffective. Populist parties and angry militias threaten its political and physical survival. Russian military forces are being built up all along its frontiers. Putin has managed to establish himself as a mediator in a conflict in which he is also a belligerent, moreover, through the nature of his participation in the Minsk process.⁵⁷

Identifying the military requirements to meet this threat is, once again, relatively straightforward. The Ukrainian loyalist forces require advanced anti-tank and anti-aircraft munitions, which the U.S. and NATO could supply. Such munitions, along with accelerated and expanded training, could allow Kyiv to secure its current truncated borders and possibly push the separatists in the east back somewhat. They would not be sufficient to defend Ukraine against a conventional Russian attack,

however. Only the credible promise that NATO would come to the defense of Ukraine in the face of such an attack, thereby going to war with Russia, could be relied upon to deter Putin.⁵⁸

Any attempt to extract such a credible guarantee from NATO will run afoul of the same problems considered above with regard to the Baltics, only on a much greater scale. In Ukraine's case, however, that political challenge is not the biggest problem. The instability and fragility of the current Ukrainian government, on the contrary, gives Putin the real possibility of causing it to collapse, leaving either chaos or a pro-Russian populist movement in its place. NATO will not come to the defense of chaos, and a pro-Russian government will reject and oppose NATO intervention.

The development and execution of a strategy to create a relatively strong government in Kyiv that can withstand such pressures is the sine qua non of a serious approach to stopping Putin's depredations where they stand. The US government has indeed focused much of its efforts in Ukraine on this task, but, unfortunately, to limited effect. This undertaking must nevertheless be the main priority for U.S. policy in the new administration, supplemented by careful efforts to enable Ukrainian forces to defend their current positions through the provision of some advanced defensive weapons and training.

There is little hope of regaining Crimea for Ukraine any time soon. That task would require war or the serious threat of war against Russia. It is hard to imagine how the West could persuade Putin of its willingness to fight another Crimean War other than by starting it, moreover, given the weakness of Western policy on Crimea hitherto and the logistical difficulties of preparing for such an undertaking.

The best course for the West in this regard is to refuse ever to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea no matter how permanent it seems to have become. The U.S. never recognized the Soviet Union's seizure of the Baltic States in 1939, after all. Official government maps throughout the Cold War showed those states as part of the USSR with an asterisk explaining the refusal to recognize their re-conquest. That asterisk no doubt seemed a silly affectation to many. It helped facilitate the alacrity with which the Baltic States regained their independence as the Soviet system collapsed, however. It is a good model for the right approach to Crimea.

The West should adopt a similar approach to Georgia, particularly the areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which Russian forces helped detach from Georgia in 2008 and which Putin then annexed. The defense of the independence of the rump Georgian state should be a priority to which NATO should be prepared to devote military and political resources, however, as it is bound up not only with the survival of other former Soviet states, but also with fundamental principles of international law.

The Larger Problem

Outlining strategies for halting the Russian reconquest of Ukraine and Georgia is relatively easy, although implementing those strategies may well encounter insurmountable obstacles. Dealing with the larger aims of Russian revisionism is a much more complex and daunting task.

The most important element of that task has little initially to do with Russia, however. Putin's international revisionism and his hopes of restoring Russia to a nearly co-equal status with the U.S. rest on and feed upon the West's fear of decline and failure. As long as the West doubts itself or, worse still, believes itself to be the author of the world's woes and its own suffering, confronting Putin's efforts to redraft the global order is a hopeless undertaking. The U.S. in particular and its allies as well must recommit themselves to bearing the burden of global leadership, recognizing that failure and responsibility for mistakes is a core part of that burden. Only then can they contest with Putin for the leadership role.

The challenges posed by the requirements to redefine Russia and Russians and to address the failings of the post-1991 settlements will remain important even after Putin's internationalist revisionism is defeated (assuming that it is), however. Solving those problems is not a lesser-included task in getting Putin to back down. It is much harder.

It will depend, however, on the nature of the resolution of the current crisis in Ukraine. If Putin's efforts to regain control of the Soviet lands leads to war, then the peace ending that war will become the new basis for dealing with these problems. The drafters of that peace would do well to keep that fact well in mind.

Such a war is both unlikely and undesirable, however, and so the most difficult challenge of all remains: how to persuade a people to accept a redefinition of many centuries of identity, much to their detriment, as well as to adjust peacefully and only partially agreements they increasingly find intolerable.

The answer lies in the nature of the Russian regime itself. Putin has acted on Russia's revisionisms as he has consolidated power and moved Russia away from the liberal democratic order it had had in the 1990s. The events of the last decade and a half do indeed appear to validate the argument that Aron and others made during the Yeltsin period—that Russia could have freedom or empire but not both. Economic calamity and post-revolutionary disappointment discredited freedom for many Russians. But they are now seeing that they can also be unfree and poor and disappointed as well. The best strategy that the West can pursue toward Russia now is to continue to force Russians to confront that choice.

Notes

¹ This essay was written for an ongoing AEI project. A version of it will be published in an upcoming volume, tentatively titled *The Rise of the Revisionists* and edited by my colleagues Dan Blumenthal and Gary Schmitt. This essay owes much to the superb work of Leon Aron, particularly *Roads to the Temple*, which demonstrates with marvelous clarity that the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted from a revolution launched unintentionally by Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*. Leon Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, Yale University Press, June 2012.

² Putin's address to Russia's Federation Council on the "reunification" of Crimea with Russia offers one of the clearest statements of this view. "Address by President of the Russian Federation," 18 March 2014, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

³ President George H.W. Bush made clear his determination to follow the Soviet recognition of Baltic independence rather than leading it in his joint memoir with Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, Alfred A Knopf, 1998, chapter 22: "But we were striving for a permanent resolution of the issue. That could best be achieved only through voluntary Soviet recognition of Baltic independence. Otherwise, should the nationalist right ever come to power, they could more easily reverse the situation, claiming the USSR acted only under duress in a weakened condition. In other words, they could allege that the independence was not valid. By being patient for a few days until Moscow acted on its own volition, we prevented the possibility of anyone successfully asserting this claim."

⁴ Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, 24.

⁵ See Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*, Harvard University Press, 1954, pp. 7-12, for a concise discussion of the origins and early developments of nationalist movements in Ukraine and Belarus.

⁶ See the various excellent works of Edward A. Allworth and Martha Brill Olcott, as well as Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*.

⁷ The defection of Ukraine was particularly shocking, even to Yeltsin. Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, 475.

⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," Speech, The Kremlin, Moscow, April 25, 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

⁹ See Putin's address on Crimea Annexation, Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," Speech, The Kremlin, Moscow, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

¹⁰ Perhaps the most important and controversial document was the Agreement for the Formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, signed on December 12, 1991 by the leaders of the Russian Federation, the Belarussian Republic, and Ukraine. Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, 477; Document available at <https://rg.ru/1991/12/19/sng-site-dok.html>, accessed 28 SEP 2016.

¹¹ Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea*, Yale University Press, 2016, 152-153.

¹² Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*. This statement is likely to offend nationalists in these countries, who fiercely defend the unique nation-hood of their peoples and may regard any questioning of it as a threat to the integrity of their states. It is important to separate these two issues. The peoples of Ukraine, Belarus, and the other former republics have full rights to their independent states that are not dependent on proving anything about the history of their nationalisms. One can and should recognize the obligation to defend them as constituent members of the community of states without accepting nationalist narratives that exaggerate their distinctness from their neighbors—as nationalist narratives almost always do.

¹³ Grigas discusses the evolution of the term co-nationalists at length in *Beyond Crimea*, Chapter 3.

¹⁴ See Grigas, *Beyond Crimea*, Table 1, pp. 67-68 for a list of pre-Putin-era documents relating to this issue.

¹⁵ William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, Yale University Press, 2000, 297-301.

¹⁶ Ukraine's agreement to hand over the nuclear weapons on its territory to Russia was cemented by the Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurances of December 5, 1994 (See Council on Foreign Relations excerpt, <http://www.cfr.org/nonproliferation-arms-control-and-disarmament/budapest-memorandums-security-assurances-1994/p32484>, last accessed 28 September 2016). The agreement committed Russia, the UK, and the U.S. "to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine."

¹⁷ Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life*, St. Martin's Press, 2000, 668-669.

¹⁸ The formal treaty governing the division of the Black Sea Fleet was signed on 28 May 1997: "Soglashenie mezhdru Rossisskoi Federatsiei i Ukrainioi o Statuse I Usloviakh Prebyvaniia Chernomorskogo Flota Rossiiskoi Federatsii na Territorii Ukrainy, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20140321072522/http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/spd_md.nsf/0/BBC88CF0F9DF3F9F44257C9800383F4D (it appears to have been removed from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Site).

¹⁹ Address on Crimean Annexation.

²⁰ The Russian Duma approved a proposal by Putin to renounce this treaty unilaterally on 31 March 2014. See “State Duma approves denunciation of Russian-Ukrainian agreements on Black Sea Fleet,” *TASS*, available at tass.com/Russia/725964. The official documents posted on the Kremlin website offer no explanation or justification for the renunciation of Russia’s international obligations.

²¹ Again it is vital not to be deceived by superficial similarities. German nationalists and Hitler claimed that “historically” German territories such as the corridor separating the enclave of Danzig (now Gdansk) from Germany or the Sudetenland area of the new Czechoslovak state had been unjustly stripped from post-war Germany. These arguments seem parallel with Putin’s complaints about Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and other such territories. But the Weimar and Hitlerite complaint was against a treaty imposed on Germany by victorious powers after a military defeat, whereas Russia never suffered such a defeat and entered voluntarily into the agreements that gave away parts of its territory. The distinction is very important—Hitler could claim that he was simply righting a historical wrong done to Germany by outside powers. Putin can argue only that he is unilaterally renegotiating the terms of deals Yeltsin should not have made.

²² Aron, *Yeltsin*. Yeltsin himself recognized and lamented the limitations of his accomplishments in the odd speech he delivered on New Year’s Eve 1999-2000 in which he announced his resignation and the transfer of power to Putin. “I want to ask your forgiveness,” he said to his people. “For the fact that many of our common dreams did not become reality. And what seemed easy to us turned out to be tortuously difficult. I ask forgiveness for the fact that I did not justify some of the hopes of those people who believed that we could in one tug, one stroke leap from the gray, stagnant, totalitarian past into a bright, rich, civilized future. I myself believed that we could. It seemed that it needed only one tug and we would overcome all. But we did not have one tug. To some extent I was too naïve. Some of the problems turned out to be too difficult. We waded forward through mistakes, through failures. Many people experienced upheavals in this difficult time. But I want you to know.”

²³ See Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, for a superb and detailed narrative of Stalin’s calculations and miscalculations in this period.

²⁴ This section draws heavily on Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, part II: “Who are we?”

²⁵ Vicki L. Hesli and William M. Reisinger, *The 1999-2000 Elections in Russia, Their Impact and Legacy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, Chapter I; Aron, *Yeltsin*.

²⁶ Dmitrii Medvedev reportedly said in 2012 that Yeltsin had stolen the 1996 election, fueling claims that Yeltsin’s victory was fraudulent. See, e.g., Simon Shuster, “Rewriting Russian History: Did Boris Yeltsin Steal the 1996 Presidential Election?” *Time*, 24 February 2012, available at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2107565,00.html>.

²⁷ Putin won by more than 20 percentage points, capturing 52.57 percent of the vote. See Michael Wines, “Election in Russia: The Overview; Putin wins Russia vote in first round, but his majority is less than expected,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/27/world/election-russia-overview-putin-wins-russia-vote-first-round-but-his-majority.html>.

²⁸ Aron, *Yeltsin*, Chapter 13.

²⁹ Putin, “Open Letter to Voters.”

³⁰ C.T. Evans, “Russian Primary Chronicle (Excerpts), May 7, 2012, <http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/his101/documents/chronicle.html>.

³¹ Putin’s speeches are filled with references to Russia’s “thousand-year” history and culture: “In order to revive national consciousness, we need to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917 or even in 1991, but rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development.” Vladimir Putin, “Address to the Federal Assembly,” Speech, The Kremlin, Moscow, December 12, 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>.

³² Address on Crimean annexation.

³³ A. S. Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman*, 1837

³⁴ Annual Address, April 2005. This statement deftly addresses two perennial arguments in Russian ideology and history. Slavophiles, like Leo Tolstoy and other less gifted 19th Century writers, argue that Russia has always been distinct from Europe and must avoid borrowing too deeply from European traditions. Westernizers, of which Peter the Great was the first and most important, argue that Russia is rightfully a European power. They, however, generally faced the problem that Western Europe has historically regarded Russia as backward and Asiatic. Hence Putin’s simultaneous declaration of Russia’s European-ness and claim that Russia was never particularly more backward than any other European state. But Putin will also embrace parts of the Slavophile argument in defense of Russia’s uniqueness, as we shall see below.

³⁵ Putin, Annual Address, 2005.

³⁶ And Putin has steadily expanded the list of Russian Navy ships named for these heroes. See Frederick W. Kagan, “What’s in a Name? Putin’s Ominous Vision for Russia,” FoxNews.com, July 13, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2016/07/13/whats-in-name-putins-ominous-vision-for-russia.html>.

³⁷ “The Russias” include Great Russia, the heartland of the Russian Federation; “White Russia,” or Belarus; and “Little Russia,” or Ukraine. (The Romanovs styled themselves Emperors of all the Russias, императоры всероссийские, and the word “all-Russian” or всероссийский remains in use as a synonym for “Russian” with an archaic flavor). Russians are not really distinguishable from the lands they inhabit, which are rightfully Russian lands in this traditional view.

³⁸ Address on Crimean Annexation.

³⁹ Aron, *Roads to the Temple*.

⁴⁰ It is impossible to overstate the degree to which the current Russian state-narrative rests on identifying Russia as “free” and “democratic.” Yeltsin established that narrative in the 1990s as the predominant achievement of his reign and of Russia’s painful post-Cold War tribulations. Putin often modifies it by noting that Russia’s history of representative government is distinctive and should not blindly follow Western models. But he would have to develop an entirely new identity and ideology for the current regime, were he openly to abandon democratic and representative principles. A sample from his 2012 Address to the Federal Assembly is typical: “Democracy is the only political choice for Russia. I would like to stress that we share the universal democratic principles adopted worldwide. However, Russia’s democracy means the power of the Russian people with their own traditions of self-rule and not the fulfillment of standards imposed on us from the outside.”

⁴¹ Henry Meyer, Ilya Arkhipov, and Stepan Kravchenko, “Putin’s party gains crushing win in Parliamentary elections,” Bloomberg, September 18, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-18/putin-s-united-russia-gets-45-in-duma-election-exit-poll-shows>.

⁴² This narrative is obvious from the exaggerations Putin regularly makes about the Western military threat to Russia. He has falsely accused NATO of ignoring its obligations under the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, for example. He described the planned deployment of a highly-limited anti-ballistic missile system in Europe that could not shoot down Russian missiles aimed at the U.S. but could only interdict Iranian missiles aimed at Europe as “elements of U.S. Strategic weapons systems.” (Putin, Annual Address 2007). Nor is Putin the only Russian leader to do so. Dmitrii Medvedev used his first address as president in 2008 to say, “I would add something about what we have had to face in recent years...the construction of a global missile defence system, the installation of military bases around Russia, the unbridled expansion of NATO and other similar ‘presents’ for Russia—we therefore have every reason to believe that they are simply testing our strength.”

⁴³ Vladimir Putin with Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, trans. By Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin*, New York: Public Affairs, 2000.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Weinberger, “Putin’s Gambit in Ukraine: Strategic Implications,” Institute for the Study of War, September 3, 2016, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/09/putins-gambit-in-ukraine-strategic.html>. It is also possible that Putin attempted to influence the U.S. presidential election in favor of Donald Trump, who has taking a strong pro-Putin stance, but this paper will not explore that controversy.

⁴⁵ Leon Aron, “Drivers of Putin’s Foreign Policy,” Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, June 14, 2016. <https://www.aei.org/publication/drivers-of-putins-foreign-policy/>.

⁴⁶ President Bill Clinton referred to the U.S. as an indispensable nation. Clinton advisor Sid Blumenthal is said to have coined the phrase. See James Mann, “On Realism, Old and New,” *The American Prospect*, October 29, 2014, <http://prospect.org/article/realism-old-and-new-0>.

⁴⁷ The issue of promises made to Russia regarding NATO expansion is complex. A NATO document addresses them in a relatively balanced fashion (“NATO Enlargement and Russia: Myths and Realities”, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Russia-Ukraine-Nato-crisis/Nato-enlargement-Russia/EN/index.htm>), and Bush and Scowcroft discuss their negotiations over the reunification of Germany in detail in *A World Transformed*, Chapter 10. The NATO-Russia Founding Act is available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm. It states that NATO members do not intend to deploy nuclear forces on the territory of new member states and suggests (but does not promise) that NATO will seek to avoid stationing significant additional conventional forces as well.

⁴⁸ See Address by President of the Russian Federation, 18 March 2014 (available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>) for Putin’s use of the Kosovo precedent.

⁴⁹ Jill Dougherty, “Putin warns on Iraq war,” CNN, March 28, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/03/28/sprj.irq.putin/>.

⁵⁰ Ellen Barry, “Putin Criticizes West for Libya Incursion,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/world/europe/27putin.html>.

⁵¹ Tom Parfitt, “Vladimir Putin vows that United States ‘will never subjugate Russia,’” Telegraph, November 8, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/11239052/Vladimir-Putin-vows-that-United-States-will-never-subjugate-Russia.html>

⁵² Putin has outlined these complaints most aggressively at two speeches to the Valdai Club, one in 2014 (available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>) and the other this year (27 October 2016, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>).

⁵³ Dennie Lynch, “Russian Security Council Warns US Seeks ‘Color Revolution’ Against Kremlin,” International Business Times, March 25, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/russian-security-council-warns-us-seeks-color-revolution-against-kremlin-1859808>.

⁵⁴ Paul R. Gregory, “Putin’s new world order,” Politico, September 29, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/putin-new-world-order-syria-ukraine-united-nations-new-york/>.

⁵⁵ Kathleen Weinberger, “Putin Sets the Stage for the Incoming U.S. Administration,” Institute for the Study of War, November 30, 2016, <http://post.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/putin-sets-stage-incoming-us-administration>.

⁵⁶ The North Atlantic Treaty, April 4, 1949, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm, last accessed 28 September 2016.

⁵⁷ Hugo Spaulding, “Putin’s Next Objectives in the Ukraine Crisis,” Institute for the Study of War, February 3, 2015. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine%20backgrounder_V6.pdf.

⁵⁸ Franklin Holcomb, “The order of battle of the Ukrainian armed forces,” Institute for the Study of War, December 9, 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukrainian%20ORBAT%20Holcomb%202016_0.pdf.