



A Geography Lesson: Vladimir Putin's Russia and its Geopolitical Landscape

The woeful state of American education is common knowledge. Geography is one subject where even some of the brightest students expose a vast reservoir of ignorance. Part of the problem stems from the constant flux of state names that has beset the geopolitical world map since World War I.

A COMMUNIST RECIPE

Over the last 90 years, no country has undergone a greater shift in its geopolitical configuration than the Soviet Union. Since the fall of the Romanov dynasty in 1917, Russia has seen its vast territory transform into a soviet system of republics with revolving satellites. After three-quarters of a century of brutal Communist rule a brief ray of hope appeared in the form of Mikhail Gorbachev, who prided himself as being a new kind of Soviet leader. Gone was the steely brutality of Stalin and the bumbling crudity of Khrushchev. Gorbachev's reforms naively attempted to copy the capitalist world without sacrificing the USSR's Communist identity.

According to British historian, Philip Longworth's 2005 book, *Russia, the Once and Future Empire, a remarkable series of unforeseeable, uncontrollable and damaging events* rendered any reform impossible. The Soviet Union collapsed around the beleaguered leader into a watershed of historic proportions. The Soviet collapse had many fathers; there was the election of a Polish Pope who inspired his people to solidarity and real labor reform; a popular American president talked of *Star Wars* and an expensive arms race; in 1985 a nuclear reactor accident at Chernobyl in the Ukraine killed or maimed thousands; a costly war in Afghanistan had gone badly; Islam had reared its violent head in areas such as Chechnya. Gorbachev's *democratic reforms*, namely *glasnost* or *openness* and *perestroika* or *modernization* led to political unrest. His violent repression of Lithuanian nationalism was the last ingredient in the Communist recipe for self-destruction. Gorbachev was driven out of office in 1992.

Boris Yeltsin's presidency just acerbated the Russian plight. The former Communist apparatchik was now *its scourge*. Yeltsin was eager to destroy any lingering vestiges of Communism, which made him popular in the West. But with the circumstances of post-Soviet Russia, democracy was an infant adrift in a sea of chaos and uncertainty. Currency devaluation, loan defaults and bank failures

sent the Russian economy into a tailspin. A *Red Mafia* filled much of the void left by the party apparatus. With the economy plummeting, mortality rates soared as alcoholism, abortion, murder and suicide took their fatal toll on the population. The social and moral anarchy that resulted under Yeltsin's disoriented rule led to a loud clamor for a return of Communist security. He resigned in December of 1999, naming Vladimir Putin as *acting president*.

THE GREY CARDINAL

Vladimir Putin was born on October 7, 1952 in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. After graduation from the International Branch of the Law department of Leningrad State University in 1975 the KGB recruited him. His career was mainly in the Foreign Service, including a stint in East Germany. His meteoric rise began in 1996 when he joined Yeltsin's administration. In 1998 he was appointed to head the Federal Security Service, (FSB) the successor to the KGB where he deftly enhanced his reputation as the *Grey Cardinal*, a man of mystery who quietly rules behind the scene with an iron fist.

According to G. G. Diligensky, a professor at the [Russian Academy of Science](#), writing in 2001, Putin's political philosophy rests on two pillars. The first emanates from Soviet history, which prized a strong state capable of assuring Russia's status as a world superpower. The second pillar rested on Putin's belief that a strong state was impossible without an efficient market economy. Putin wisely understood that the implementation of his goals required close Russian ties with the West. He realized Russia must establish a democratic façade without any apparent inclination of reviving its Soviet past.

Putin's steely smile betrays his deep nostalgia for the Soviet past. There are loud echoes of the old Soviet era in Putin's brand of Communist heterodoxy. In all dictators there is a common thread of Machiavelli's *the ends justify the means*. Putin does not need the Communist Party to accomplish his goals. His new vehicle is the FSB.

THE RETURN OF IRON FELIX

Even though brutal torture and bloody terror marked its history, Putin is most proud of his service in the KGB. According to a survey that was printed in the German magazine [Der Spiegel](#), an

incredible 78% of Russian government leaders and business leaders have a KGB or FSB background. Since his political ascendance, Putin has been steadily reconstituting the concentrated power structures of Soviet control and building his own *cult of personality*.

As part of his nostalgia for the Soviet past, Putin has resurrected the rusty image of Felix Dzerzhinsky who served as the first head of the dreaded *Chekka*, the forerunner of the KGB. In 1918 he proclaimed *We stand for organized terror*. Putin has always been an unabashed admirer of the vicious tyrant. He made Dzerzhinsky's birthday, December 20th, a day of national celebration as Security Organization Day. This is analogous to Germany celebrating the birthday of Heinrich Himmler, the head of the Nazi *Gestapo*.

Along with Lenin and Stalin, Dzerzhinsky was one of the most feared and hated symbols of Communist rule in its early days. For decades his cold visage stared through a giant 16-ton statue, dubbed *Iron Felix*, that stood in Moscow's Lubyanka Square outside KGB headquarters. In 1991, Muscovites and freedom lovers all over the world cheered as the statue was toppled like all other symbols of the oppressive Communist regime.

Putin has also restored other Soviet symbols, such as the Red Star as Russia's official military emblem, the Red Banner as its military flag and the music of the old Soviet anthem, albeit with new words. His epitaph should read someday, *Once a KGB man, always a KGB man*.

AN ENERGY EMPIRE

While Putin is aware that the Russian people will not approve an overt return to the old totalitarian order, he knows that legitimate democratic reforms pose a real threat to his rule. The secret to solving his dilemma is the strategic use of Russian gas and oil supplies. Putin realizes that Russia's economic strength lay in its extensive natural reserves of strategic commodities that range from diamonds, oil, natural gas, and aluminum to uranium. According to Steve Myers of the New York Times, Putin is *creating in place of the Soviet Empire of ideology, a new empire based on energy reserves and pipelines...*

Russia has unveiled new energy power centers, which include *Gazprom*, its state-controlled gas company, its pipeline monopoly *Transneft* and the state-owned oil giant *Rosneft*. According to Myers they will press ahead, *buying more and more assets at home and abroad, expanding the country's energy network as long as their reserves last*.

A NATO economic study speculates that Russia is planning a gas cartel that would include Algeria, Qatar, Libya, the countries of central Asia and perhaps Iran. This idea has serious geopolitical ramifications for the West, especially for American interests in the Middle East. Russia oil and gas reserves have become a *weapon of geopolitics* to be used as swiftly and mercilessly as Putin's predecessors used their tanks. His use of Russia's *energy security* resembles Hitler's plea for *Lebensraum* or *living space* as a

justification for Hitler's invasion of Germany's neighbors.

For three days in December of 2006, Putin turned off the gas pipelines to Germany, the Ukraine, and Belarus. It was an economic show of force that sent a shiver through the European spine. The 2500-mile Belarusian pipeline, called *Druzhba* or *Friendship*, was built in the 1960s. It pumps 1.8 million barrels of oil each day. Russia is intent on *parlaying huge oil and gas reserves into a growing international assertiveness*, according to New York Times's Alan Cowell, perhaps regaining its lost influence from the height of the Cold War. This invasion has to worry the European countries, as much as the Muslim cultural invasion that is vastly altering their Western way of life. Ukrainians interpreted the shutdown as Putin's direct response to their democratic *Orange Revolution* in November of 2004.

It is just a matter of time until Putin applies his gas card to the United States through LUKoil which runs over 2000 gas and service stations in the Northeastern United States, most of which they acquired with their purchase of Getty Petroleum Marketing in 2000. These stations generate over two billion gallons of gasoline sales. LUKoil has not been nationalized yet but that seems to be just a matter of time, according to the January 22, 2007 issue of The New American.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME KOPECK

What the pundits were once calling Putin's confidence in *Russian evolution* has now turned its back on the future, as it eyes its brutal past. A close reading of Putin's 1999 *Millennium Manifesto* would have discovered that as part of his Neo-Sovietism, *the new Russian government began working to bring privatized companies back under government control* as part of its overall plan.

In recent years, Putin has started gathering oil and gas production under Kremlin control. For Yukos, once Russia's top oil firm, the crime was unpaid taxes. Once the richest man in Russia, Yukos' owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky was imprisoned for fraud and tax evasion. As a result Yukos fell under state control in 2004.

With the giant oil and gas project financed by Royal Dutch Shell and Japanese firms, Mitsui and Mitsubishi, on Sakhalin Island off the Japanese coast, it was environmental violations. Putin's campaign against Shell, what is called *Sakhalin II*, was so determined that he just ignored the widespread criticism that came from world leaders, including the United States. A recent issue of The Economist, dressed Putin like a Chicago gangster, holding a gasoline nozzle like a Tommy gun. His policy of natural resource nationalization is a direct threat to the interests of the West and of its multinational oil companies and big Western financial institutions.

The other side of the kopeck on the home front was to quell any overt criticism of the Putin presidency. Russia has become the third-deadliest country for journalists, ranking only behind Iraq and Algeria. Since 1999, thirteen Russian journalists critical of the Putin government have been murdered as well as many dissident government officials.

Photos of the decaying features of Ukraine president Victor Yushchenko, who ingested poison before his 2004 election, are emblazoned on the world consciousness. With the 2002 publication of his book, *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within*, exiled author Alexander Litvinenko became a large thorn in Putin's side. Before his death from Polonium-210, Litvinenko blamed Putin and the FSB for the poisoning.

In the book, he accused Putin and his associates of orchestrating the mysterious bombings that killed 300 apartment dwellers in Moscow 1999. Litvinenko also blamed Putin for his mishandling of the Beslan school siege in 2004 in which over 365 people perished, including 186 children. Several policemen who investigated the bombing have gone to prison or met with unexpected deaths.

Another Putin thorn, Anna Politkovskaya, was murdered in October of 2006. In her books *The Dirty War: A Small Corner of Hell*, and *Putin's Russia*, she severely assailed Putin and his regime. She compared him to the fictional *Akaky Akakievich*, a legendary figure in Russian literature, whose new coat masked his spiritual emptiness.

FINAL VICTORY

How should the West react to Putin's Russia? According to Bret Stephens, in the November 28, 2006 edition of the Wall Street Journal *it is time we start thinking of Vladimir Putin's Russia as an enemy of the United States*. This would not be difficult for those who accept the thesis of KGB defector, Anatoly Golitsyn. In his 1995 book *The Perestroika Deception*, Golitsyn charged Gorbachev and his cohorts with remaining deeply committed to Communism. He saw them as a *smoother generation of revolutionaries who are using 'democratic' reforms as the new method based on Leninist principles of achieving final victory*. The West should take heed of his ideas, given the accuracy of his 1984 book, *New Lies for Old* which correctly predicted the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Warsaw Pact, as well as the reunification of Germany.

According to another theory, Golitsyn believed that Russian market reforms *were supposed to privatize the majority of the old Soviet state-run operations, with all Russians having the opportunity to buy in*. This inevitably resulted in a concentration of ownership in the hands of a few wealthy, scheming, and well-connected insiders who, according to Dennis Behreandt in The New American, *were conveniently placed to hold Soviet-era*

enterprises intact until they could be brought under central control.

Ordinary citizens, such as oil giant Sibneft's Roman Abramovich, the world's 11th richest man, and Oneximbank billionaire, Vladimir Potanin, wrested control of many of these lucrative companies. Freed from the stifling restrictions of state control, the newly privatized entities adopted Western business practices and attracted a great deal of venture capital. Once these businesses became lucrative, the Kremlin was only too eager to renationalize them. If Golitsyn is correct, then instead of winning the Cold War, the West, in a redux of the *Trojan Horse*, has been lulled into a dangerous Homeric sleep.

Both Gorbachev and Putin's policies seem to confirm Golitsyn's dire warnings. Since leaving office Gorbachev joined the Green Cross, an organization dedicated to environmental improvement and world governance. He still works with top Russian Communist Party and FSB leadership. On many occasions he has declared that he is and always was *a Communist*. He enthusiastically defends and supports Putin's policies.

According to the New American Putin has installed a two-prong plan to undermine the West. Due to a policy introduced by President Clinton and continued by President George W. Bush, the United States is becoming more dependent on oil from central Asia, a region still run by Stalin-era Communists. The key to Western access to the Caspian Sea oil reserves is Azerbaijan, a small country near northern Turkey. Putin's strategic geopolitical policies also involve a simultaneous effort to radicalize the OPEC nations of the Middle East, coalescing them into an anti-American front, orchestrated by Iran, Russia's new partner in the region.

The \$64 Question remains if Putin will step down in 2008 after the March 9th elections, as required by the Russian Constitution. Or will he extend his rule by imposing a constitutional amendment? Or will he handpick his successor so he can become the *Grey Cardinal* again? Whatever the case the world has not seen the last of Vladimir Putin.



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Bl Sara Salkahazi, SSS

Sara Salkahazi was one of three children born to Leopold and Klotild Salkahazi, in Hungary, now Klovakia. A tomboy as a child, Sara began writing plays as a teenager, and at the same time developed a deep prayer life. As a young adult, she taught elementary school briefly, but soon began writing again. She was active in the Hungarian literary world and became editor of the newspaper of the *National Christian Socialist Party of Czechoslovakia*.



Sara was engaged to be married, but broke it off when she realized a call to a different life and joined the *Sisters of Social Service* in 1929. Sara worked at the *Catholic Charities Office*, taught religion, lectured, continued to write, and organized groups of lay women to help with the Church's social work, the national *Catholic Women's Association*.

In 1941 she was assigned to be national director of the *Hungarian Catholic Working Women's Movement*, and edited its magazine. As she continued her social work with the poor and the displaced, she wrote against Nazism and started hostels to provide housing for working single women, and as a refuge to Jews. She founded vocational schools and retreat centers.

On December 27, 1944 Sr. Sara was betrayed for harbouring Jews. Nazis surrounded the *Women's Home* in Budapest, and when Sara arrived, she and five others she was hiding, were taken by the Nazis to the Danube River, ripped of their clothing and shot to death. Sister's last act was to make the Sign of the Cross. Their bodies were never recovered.

Sara was proclaimed a martyr by Pope Benedict XVI in April of 2006. The Cardinal of Budapest and President of the Bishops Conferences in Europe, Cardinal Peter Erdo, presided in The Basilica of St. Stephen for the Eucharistic celebration of Sr. Sara's Beatification on September 17, 2006, just 62 years after her death.

ST. MATTHEW 7:7-8

"Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened to him."