



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Putin: What Happened?

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Putin: What Happened?

August 10, 2014

What happened? In 2001, President Bush spoke of his relationship with Vladimir Putin: *He looked the man in the eye and found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. He said he got a sense of his soul.* After the dissolution of the USSR, talk abounded about the likelihood of Russia becoming part of the Western world. Yet, here we are. In 2014, the Cold War seems to have been revived.

Was this present state of affairs inevitable? My take is that the degree of mutual hostility that currently exists could have been moderated. But given the political and social dispositions of Americans and Russians, some mutual antipathy was pre-ordained.

Taking on the latter thought first, after the breakup of the Soviet Union (1991), the United States went about its pre-ordained mission of making every nation on earth, including Russia, a democracy. It almost worked for a while, but then Vladimir Putin came along. Mr. Putin is no democrat.

In his first two terms in office, from 2000 to 2008, Vladimir Putin made his priority the reestablishment of a strong state. He disempowered disloyal governors, crushed the oligarchs who did not heed his insistence they stay out of politics, and obliterated the leadership of the separatist uprising in Chechnya. He took control of the main television channels and neutered any opposition political parties. He established postmodern state symbols and an anthem that combined features of the imperial and Communist past. But he was not, foremost, an ideologue [Not yet, and explained later].¹

What's new? Some of America's treasured allies and/or trading partners have taken the same path. But America needs Saudi Arabia's oil to run its cars and China's money to fund its debt. Then why is there so much animosity toward Russia, and vice-versa? It did not start off this way.

Nor was Putin aggressively anti-American in his first years in power. He craved membership in the world economy and its institutions. He was the first foreign leader to telephone George W. Bush on 9/11 and offer assistance in Afghanistan. ...He even talked about Russia joining NATO. "Russia is part of the European culture," he told the BBC in 2000. "And I cannot imagine my own country in isolation from Europe and what we often called the civilized world. So it is hard for me to visualize NATO as an enemy."²

In a previous piece in this series, I noted that the Western world, instead of looking for ways to bring Russia closer into the Western circle, went about encircling Russia with nations bound by a common war alliance. The West admitted Russia's former Warsaw Pact partners into NATO. This action destroyed any chance of a Western world-Russia conciliation. To grasp

¹ David Remnick, "Watching the Eclipse," *The New Yorker*, August 11 and 18, 57.

² *Ibid*, 58.

the extent and significance of these actions, we go back a few years to the time Gorbachev was in power.

Time-and-again, Gorbachev has stated that in exchange for his acquiescence toward East Germany becoming part of West Germany, and essentially bringing down the Iron Curtain, the West would not expand NATO toward Russia. But that is what the West did---in spades. Take a look at Figure 1.³ The map on the left shows the Cold War alignment (up to 1991), with NATO countries depicted in blue and the Soviet-sponsored Warsaw Pact countries depicted in red. The map on the right shows the present arrangement. I have noted with white circles the former Warsaw Pact countries that are now NATO members.

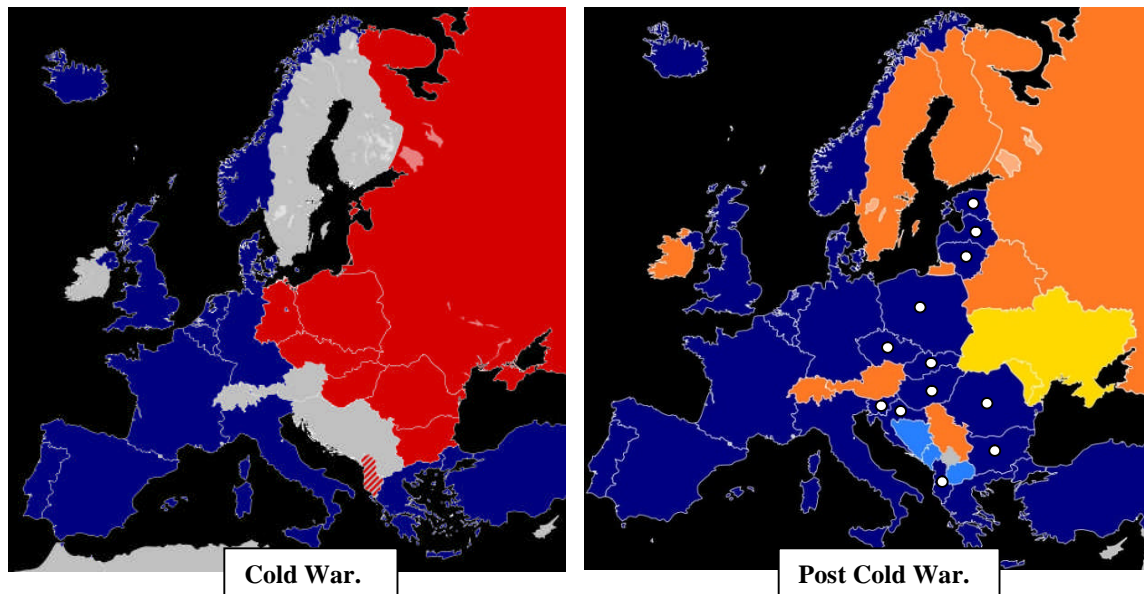


Figure 1. Cold War and post Cold War alignments.
Blue: NATO countries
Red: Warsaw Pact (USSR aligned) countries
Gray, yellow, light blue: Non aligned to NATO
Orange: Non aligned to NATO, but not part of Russia “sphere,” with the exception of Russia itself.

As noted in earlier pieces to this series (and I thank you for re-reading) let’s put our feet into the shoes of the Russians. NATO is a military alliance. On paper, its members act in mutual defense if a member is attacked by a non-member party. In reality, it has become an alliance that acts offensively. I applaud these actions, but they are secondary to this essay.

NATO routinely enters into “peace-keeping” operations around the world that have nothing to do with a member being attacked. Perhaps a former colony, a “protectorate,” of the member is attacked, but not the home turf of the former colonizer itself. NATO also intervenes for humanitarian purposes into other areas. (As of this writing, I am hoping NATO will protect the Kurds from Islamic militants as well as help Iraq save Iraq from itself.)

The military charter---the principle mission---of NATO did not go un-noticed by Putin and other Russians. The white dots in Figure 2 do not represent a Monopoly game real estate

³ Google maps.

acquisition. NATO is an alliance set up for actions against an enemy. Look at the white dots again. Who are they surrounding? If I were Russia, I would be rushing to place my own white dots into what few non-aligned states that still remain. The Ukraine, for example.

Putin is not to be trifled with. He is focused on state control of institutions and citizens. He will do what he thinks is needed to insure that Russia's oligarchy and state persevere and thrive. The Ukraine has been considered an extension of Russia (and vice versa) for centuries. The actions taken several months ago of possibly bringing the Ukraine into the EU (and inevitably, NATO), was the straw that broke Putin's back.

He has come to believe the West is out to get him and to emasculate Russia. He has done an about face about his admiration of the West and considers the United States as two-faced and dangerous to Russia. Unlike his first years in office, Putin has become more of an ideologue. He's a born-again Tea Party Russophile.

I make light about a heavy subject. The loss of parts of western Russia in the Cold War aftermath had a profound effect on Russia. As just mentioned, for centuries, the Ukraine and Russia were one in the same. While doing some study for this essay, I came across maps of the Ukraine/Russia regions. Even after WWI, this region was part of Russia; the same for post-WWII. Delving further, I discovered the Ukraine region was the most powerful state in Europe during the 10th and 11th centuries. It became the foundation for a national identity of modern-day Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Kiev, the current capital of Ukraine, was the most important city in the region of the world.⁴ This Slavic culture, referred to as *Rus* in the old times, has been ignored by the Western world.

That's life in the lane of world affairs. Countries come and go. So do tribes. So do cultures. But their legacies do not completely "go." If they did, the world would have far fewer conflicts. The Slavic part of Europe is saddled with past centuries of cultures, languages, religions and their associated legacies. To ignore them is to ignore the mentality that drives Putin's actions.

One can say, "Putin and his Russia lost the Cold War. Get over it and move on." That is what I think the Western world has done. I believe it is foolish and naïve to take this attitude.

NATO, a military alliance, was augmented in the political and economic spheres by the European Union (EU), as seen in Figure 2.⁵ Similar to the expansion of NATO, Russia (and Putin) perceived these actions as threatening to Russia's security. To Putin, these expansions are not ones of Trivial Pursuit. Not only are they perceived as insulting to Russia and Russia's legacy over parts of this earth, they are perceived as aggressive actions to weaken Russia.

⁴ Plokhy, Serhii, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10–15.

⁵ Google maps.



Figure 2. Members of the EU.

These perceptions, some true, some not, were exacerbated by two factors. First, Putin spent 16 years in the KGB and was familiar with intelligence and counter-intelligence operations. Second, because of the first assertion, he came to believe the CIA was out to get him. Was this second factor accurate? Who can know except the CIA and it's a secret organization. But as the rift between any country (Russia in this case) and the United States widens, it is assumed that the CIA will place its hands into the pot... which it often does.

As for Putin, with his background, he has assumed the worst. And herein lies an ironic aspect of this situation. In spite of his fear of political dissent and an anal fixation on control, he was open to a dialogue with the West. He had not yet formed a firm Russophile-political philosophy. The Western world helped him along. For this part of the narrative, I focus on Obama's appointment of Michael McFaul as ambassador to Russia.⁶

McFaul was a tenured professor of political science from Stanford, so he knew a lot of theory, but apparently little about reality. For this specific event, a similar reality vacuum surrounded the academically-oriented president. The *next day* after he presented his credentials to the Russian government, he met with "some of the best-known figures in the human-rights circles and leaders of the opposition [to Putin]" I can only say, fantastic. One of McFaul's first major acts as the United States Ambassador to Russia was to endorse factions that sought to overthrow the Russian government.

His actions reinforced the concern that America's presence in any country that did not practice Uncle Sam's version of democracy became a "Trojan Horse." Inside the horse were regime-change fanatics waiting to charge out into the populace with copies of the Constitution and Bible.⁷

He claims he was nervous about these meetings. Nervous? The man was in charge of the entire U.S. embassy and associated meetings. He could have cancelled or at least not attended

⁶ Again, based on the reporting of David Remnick, including the quotes in the following two paragraphs.

⁷ "Rekindling Old Friendships," *The Economist*, August 9, 2014, 30.

them. He was a teacher from academia and had no idea about how to run an organization, especially one of such consequence as the American embassy for Russia.

Someone set up a meeting to which he was invited. His response to this event is going likely to depress every reader of this report: "I was the democracy guy, so we went forward."

But what was his role as the ambassador? McFaul saw it as one of transforming Russia into becoming a true democracy. Again, fantastic. It was akin to the Russian ambassador to the United States, after receiving his/her diplomatic credentials from the State Department, meeting with the modern-day Weathermen from North Idaho.

McFaul took offence. He said, "I was made out to be the guy who came to Moscow to foment revolution."⁸ I respond to his assertion with my narrative above and accompanying footnotes.⁹

It Happened, Now What?

Now what? Putin is a despot. That is nothing new about the leaders of Russia. They are hard-wired for absolutism. What is more challenging to NATO and the EU is that Putin has become an ideological despot. His despotism is likely part of his DNA, but it has been reinforced by the hubris and ineptitude of the West.

Putin is formulating his version of America's Monroe Doctrine. He is late coming out of the starting blocks, but I cannot see his backing down from maintaining a hold in southeast Ukraine.

Could the Russian takeover of the Crimea have been averted by placing someone other than McFaul into the ambassadorship? No, McFaul's naiveté added fuel to a fire already ignited. His actions added insult to injury to the Russians and to Putin.

Let's grant Putin some slack. His frustration with the West has been building-up for years. Some of his discontent is justified. In some instances, he was deceived and blind-sided.

All those missed opportunities of placing Russia's white dots on the map. Small wonder he is seething. But let us not overlook that many of those countries identified with a white dot in Figure 1 had quite enough of Russia's heavy hand for decades, if not centuries. They took-on NATO and the EU as a shield against the Soviet bear coming back.

There are always two sides to the coin.

⁸Ibid, 54.

⁹ His credentials---one who was dedicated to make Russia a democracy---goes back to the early 1980s. I emphasize that I favor democracies over what Putin has done to Russia. But it was sheer folly to place a revolutionary, regime-change professor into the position as the United States ambassador to Russia.