

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Using cues of the past

By Arnaud de Borchgrave

Published May 10, 2005

From bleeding heart liberals to coldhearted conservative realists, everyone professed shock and awe when Russia's President Vladimir Putin called the breakup of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. Yet it was a statement of the obvious. Because that's precisely what it was.

No empire in history had collapsed so suddenly and so completely. Millions of Russian citizens found themselves stranded in both the inner empire (the Baltic States and other former Soviet republics) and outer dominion (East Europe, Angola, Cuba, Vietnam), not to mention client states (Libya, Syria, North Korea). The world balance of power, maintained by MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), was dispelled with the fall of the Berlin Wall. A defeated Soviet army was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, and later that year from East Germany and the other former East European satellites. For the satraps in the Kremlin, it was an unmitigated disaster.

Millions more at home were out of work and on the dole -- but there was no dole. Armaments plants ground to a halt and nuclear engineers and scientists struggled to survive on \$200 a month or less. Russia's nuclear storage depots guarded by security personnel that had not been paid in months.

Anything and everything was for sale -- or plunder. Organized crime gangs teamed up with former KGB operatives who used their knowledge of financial conduits abroad to literally plunder the country. Some \$220 billion in gold, diamonds, precious metals and other assets moved abroad between 1990 and 1995. A multiplicity of Russian-based rackets spanned the globe, earning the sobriquet of bandit capitalism. Russian crime lords acquired choice properties in the leading watering holes of the Western world.

The disoriented Russian leadership eagerly accepted the advice of well-meaning American economists who advocated cold-turkey market economics and democratic politics. Enormous chaos ensued, as well as revolving door politics.

Boris Yeltsin followed a path well trodden by France's Fourth Republic after World War II: a new government every six months. Until Mr. Putin came along, that is. His model was France's Fifth Republic, which Charles de Gaulle began crafting when the army brought him back to power.

This could only be done by throttling back on the excesses of democracy, which had followed four years of Nazi occupation. A democratic free-for-all in Russia followed 70 years of communist repression. A strong presidential system at the center, structured by Putin, put an end to chaos in Russia, just as de Gaulle had done in France.

Mr. Putin rescinded elections for governors in Russia's 89 regions in favor of Kremlin appointments, again emulating France's system of some 90 prefects appointed by the president and reporting to the interior minister.

The pro-Kremlin United Russia Party, which holds two-thirds of the seats, dominates the Russian Duma, much the way the Gaullist party dominated the French National Assembly.

Again, state control of large parts of the Russian media is no different than what de Gaulle controlled by manipulating state advertising contracts that then dominated the entire industry.

Another Putin role model was Chile's Augusto Pinochet who had overthrown the Marxist-leaning Salvador Allende and ruthlessly liquidated the far left before restoring market economics and eventually democratic politics.

When this reporter wrote Mr. Putin's two geopolitical mentors were de Gaulle and Gen. Pinochet in a forward to a 2000 study on Russian Organized Crime for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the new Russian president messaged back: "Thank you for the homework -- and for understanding what we are attempting to do."

Some profess to be appalled Russia is still in deep denial about Stalin's horrors, from the Siberian Gulag Archipelago to torture chambers and the summary executions in the basement of Moscow's KGB headquarters. Or the palpably fraudulent nonsense Soviet troops were invited in by the Baltic States. The Soviet Union, in a deal with Nazi Germany, occupied the three Baltic States and immediately began deporting Balt civilians to make room for Russian colonizers.

Nikita Khrushchev exposed Josef Stalin's crimes at the 20th party congress. But for most Russians, he is still the legendary hero who defeated Adolf Hitler's legions in such epic battles as the long sieges of Leningrad and Stalingrad. At Stalin's funeral in March 1953, this reporter saw acquaintances who lost relatives to Stalin's cruelty, weep unashamedly in the street.

As a proud nation celebrated the 60th anniversary of VE-Day (May 8 for Europe and the United States, May 9 for Russians), it was not prudent to remind Russia it was also part of the twin evils of the 20th century -- Nazism and communism. Nor was it wise to keep up a steady drumbeat of epithets about the lack of democracy as Russia looked back with pride at the sacrifice of 27 million men and women (more than 10 percent of its population) in the Great Patriotic War that defeated Nazi Germany. That was more blood spilled than all the other allied nations put together. The World War II casualties of the United States on all fronts were a shade less than half a million.

Russia and America need each other today on several critical fronts, from transnational terrorism to the security of Russia's 8,000 nuclear weapons and thousands of tons of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium. A small amount of these nuclear materials would be sufficient to make a radiological ("dirty") bomb that would render Wall Street or downtown Washington around the White House uninhabitable for years.

President Bush and Secretary of State Condi Rice have ramped up their criticism of what they see as Mr. Putin's backsliding on democracy. Engaging Russia, as Mr. Bush says he wishes to do, means dropping gratuitous insults about its lack of democratic virtues. Such advice is best rendered in private. Russia is at a crossroads. One direction points to Germany after World War I, or the collapse of democracy and the totalitarian temptation. The other is Germany after World War II, the birth of a strong democracy nurtured by the United States.

Russia has only known authoritarian rule for 1,000 years. Democracy, as practiced in America, is ill suited for Russia or Continental Europe. Gaullism is Mr. Putin's roadmap.

A new global security order is Bush's roadmap. They are not mutually exclusive. And squawking isn't helpful.

Arnaud de Borchgrave is editor at large of The Washington Times and of United Press International.