
The Return of the Russian Leviathan

By Sergei Medvedev

Translated by Stephen Dalziel

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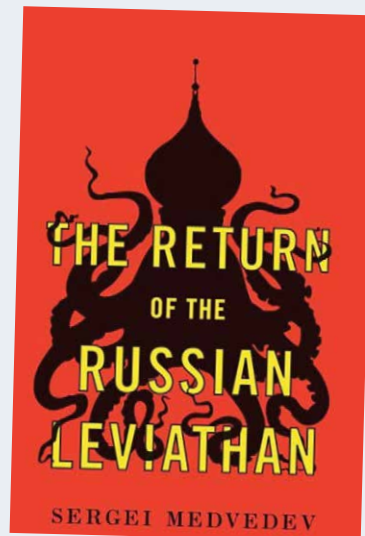
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Reviewed by John Herbst

Sergei Medvedev, Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, is a fox; a thoroughly modern, or perhaps I should say, post-modern fox. Isaiah Berlin would understand. The British historian of ideas wrote a paradigmatic essay on Russian literature, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in which he contrasted Tolstoy the fox, with Dostoevsky the hedgehog. As Berlin explained, the hedgehog knows one big thing, but the fox knows many things.

At first glance, Medvedev's recent book, "The Return of the Russian Leviathan" might seem to be the work of a hedgehog, because it addresses one very large topic, Russia and the reemergence after a brief interlude of its traditional authoritarian style of rule. But while he holds tightly and correctly to that large theme, his sensibility is foxy. And the book is no systematic study of authoritarianism in Russia, its similarities with Soviet totalitarianism and Czarist despotism, and its unique Putin flourishes.

Instead, it is an illuminating and at times brilliant series of short essays on different aspects on Russian life. The book is grouped loosely into four parts; the war for space, the war for symbols, the war for the body, and the war for memory. These categories are somewhat abstract and Medvedev's writings diffuse, so that some key themes appear throughout the book.



And what are those key themes? Medvedev believes that for Russia to thrive, it must accommodate itself to the modern, global order and economy. He sees that Russia under Putin has moved in the opposite direction. In the early 2000s, while pursuing increasingly repressive policies at home, Putin did not misbehave internationally; but that all changed with his 2014 seizure and annexation of Crimea, which ended "a 25-year project of normalization and adaptation to the global world." Medvedev's analysis is on target, although I would pre-date Putin's challenge to the global order back to his Munich Security speech in February 2007, the cyber-attack on Estonia that summer, and his August 2008 war on Georgia.

Medvedev sees Kremlin economic policies determined by the preferences of its leadership and their cronies, not national interests nor the interests of the Russian people. This is particularly evident in the oil and gas sector, responsible for 60 percent of Russian export earnings, which has enriched Putin and his inner circle and which provides resources for the Kremlin's patronage system. In Medvedev's eyes, the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policies have led

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to stagnation and repression at home, and isolation abroad. Medvedev's big picture thoughts are sound, and well understood by the real opposition in Russia, and sober analysts in the West.

But the great added value of this book is his look at the cultural factors that helped produce these policies and the way that these factors influence many different aspects of Russian life. He provides clear guidance up front in his fourth essay, "Crimea as a Territory of the Subconscious." He writes that to understand why Putin decided to turn away from world order and seize Crimea, one need not consult American statesmen/scholars Kissinger or Brzezinski, but rather Fyodor Dostoevsky, or 19th century pan-Slavist Nikolay Danilevsky, both of whom saw Russia as essentially different from the West.

Medvedev, however, is no historical determinist. This choice was not inevitable, even if it restored an established pattern in Russian culture and tradition. Instead it was simply the decision of an "Orthodox (i.e. Russian Orthodox) Chekhist" Putin, who was also influenced by the monarchist emigre thinker Ivan Ilyin, who advocated a Christian fascist Russia.

Looking at the first years of Putin's presidency, Medvedev observes that Russia seemed to be on a very different trajectory. During that period the Russian economy grew quickly thanks to rising hydrocarbon prices, sound macroeconomic policies and cooperation with the West. But even then there was grumbling about the "geopolitical defeat" Russia suffered with the end of the Cold War, and the "plundering" of Russia by global liberalism and its Russian accomplices. These themes became ever more prominent that decade and came to dominate Russian media as tensions with the West flared after the Kremlin began its war against Ukraine.

Another major theme for Medvedev is the Kremlin's reliance on "trolling" or disinformation as a governing tool. This topic, of course, has received substantial attention in the West, which has focused

on Putin's use of it as a weapon, for instance, to hide Moscow's role in Donbas, or to promote BREXIT, or to interfere in western elections. But Medvedev offers a different optic. He sees it as essential to Putin's success in governing Russia in the wake of his failed policies: "With the absence of political will and strategic thinking, and with a shrinking resource base, trolling represents the thoughts and main method of state policy." Indeed, he writes, for some years now, the whole of Russia, including President Putin, has tended to live in a TV serial, "a parallel reality."

An important part of this is Putin's revival of the Soviet practice of orchestrating public outrage. While Putin took control of the major television stations early in his tenure as President, the small station Dozhd (Rain) remains independent. To contain the possible impact of its reporting, the Kremlin organizes "Veterans of Novgorod Offended by the Programmes of the Dozhd television channel."

As one of the books section headings make clear—"The War for Symbols"—the Kremlin places great emphasis on symbols. They are part of the effort to control the narrative about what is happening in Russia and elsewhere. The ongoing, largely fact-free effort to tar the Ukrainian government and society as fascist is one key battleground. But perhaps even more fundamental is the refusal to come to grips with the horrors of Soviet rule. Putin famously decried the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century; and he remains proud of his service in the KGB, one of the most repressive organizations in human history.

Medvedev notes that a modern, liberal Germany could never have emerged without a reckoning with its Nazi past and rues the failure of Putin's Russia to do the same. There is no officially recognized historical memory of enormous evils the Soviet regime inflicted on its population. Medvedev mentions the unrealized hope of literary critic Marietta Chudakova that the writings of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vassiliy Grossman, and

Varela Shalamov would serve as a substitute for the Nuremberg Trials in teaching the Russian people about the horrors of the Soviet past; but concludes that to stick such a lesson needs “concrete” memorials—museums and exhibitions as in Germany. And such memorials are not on the agenda of a regime devoted to the memory of the achievements of its Soviet and Czarist predecessors.

Medvedev reminds us that 19th century philosopher Piotr Chadaev was right when he said Russia has no history, but “lives only in the present.” In other words, the past is endlessly malleable to serve the interests of current rulers. But Medvedev also explains that it is perhaps natural for the Russian people to avoid looking at the horrors of the forced collectivization and purges. He sees a “pain taboo” in Russia. “Suffering is something internalized which people try to deal with inside themselves....It is not normal to talk about pain in Russia.” Kremlin preferences and the avoidance of a public discussion of pain explains the strong criticism in Russia of Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian writer who won a Nobel Prize in 2015 for her grainy and unsparing portrayals of the horrors of the Soviet period.

Medvedev the fox throws out many more insights in this volume. To mention just two more,

he explains the prosaic ways that the Kremlin’s militaristic foreign policy and its patronage system reinforce each other. Putin returned intercontinental ballistic missiles to the Kremlin’s victory parades in 2008; and the appearance of these missiles causes \$25-50 million in damage to Moscow’s roads each year, which means more profits for Putin’s cronies, who repair the streets.

Medvedev also notes that while political thought in Russia is closely monitored and restricted, there is one exception; the study of geopolitics. Classic Western geopolitical thinkers like Halford Mackinder and Alfred Mahan are not just readily available in Russia, but receive substantial attention, especially from Russia’s foremost geopolitician, the extremist thinker Aleksandr Dugin. And this suits the President of Russia, who has included Dugin in at least one of his trips abroad, because the geopoliticians talk of the natural competition between the landpowers of Eurasia (Russia) and seapowers (the UK before and now the United States).

There is a lot more in this book—such as Medvedev’s commentary on Russian films—that offers valuable clues into Russian life for even seasoned Russia-hands. Highly recommended, but watch out for the author’s detours into magical realism.