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Book Review: Rule of the Siloviki

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It was almost a rule, during the 1930s, for the most significant books on major current developments to emanate from the pens of journalists, rather than academicians. One has to recall only names like G.E.R. Gedye (Fallen Bastions), William Shirer (his various titles concerning the Third Reich), and, to some extent, even John Gunther (Inside almost anywhere). One might add another writer, Rebecca West (Black Lamb and Grey Falcon), although she was primarily a novelist.

Since World War II, this phenomenon has become far less prevalent. In part, this is the result of the emergence of two academic fields that were barely visible during the 1930s: International Relations and Contemporary History (Zeitgeschichte, which, for decades, was recognized as an independent discipline only in German-speaking countries). Consequently, academic works began to dominate current affairs.

To be sure, some journalists, like Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser, did produce useful works, but other foreign correspondents flitted from one place to another, so that their publications, at best, tended to be superficial, if not simply partisan. Moreover, when assigned to authoritarian polities, many a journalist became concerned more to avoid being expelled as persona non grata (not to mention being assassinated) than to present a truthful picture. (This phenomenon was not unknown in the 1930s, of course, to mention only the notorious case of Walter Duranty.) The Middle East provides a textbook example of this tendency.
Consequently, it is all the more noteworthy that two journalists, working in tandem, have been able now to produce a work that may be deemed definitive. It is truly scholarly, even absent the source notes that adorn academic publications; in-depth interviews, based upon meticulous research, compensate for the material that the archives won’t disgorge for decades. Peter Baker’s and Susan Glasser’s Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the End of Revolution in eighteen chapters confronts almost every possible aspect of the deplorable retrogression (other than in terms of purely economic criteria) that the Russian polity and people are experiencing under the rule of the siloviki.

Yet the book does so without indulging in excessively harsh epithets. The authors are devoid of the “Russophobia” that certain circles unfailingly accuse Vladimir Putin’s critics of harboring. Indeed, Baker and Glasser reveal their deep empathy for the talented Russian people whose history has been overshadowed by “appallingly bad luck” (to use Robert Conquest’s words) and by the regimes that have resulted. The authors include a noteworthy reference that demonstrates how Putin’s “power vertical” is approaching a “cult of personality.” In referring to his United Russia party, the book says that “the Kremlin figured any concrete positions the party took would just lose them support. Talking about Putin was the only safe course. ‘The rest interfered,’ [said one of the President’s henchmen]. ‘Only Putin unites.’”

Given a work of such excellence, it may seem pedantic to quibble about shortcomings that concern almost entirely Russia’s external affairs. (Alas, one has to remind the American reader repeatedly that Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan concern Moscow’s international – not its domestic – relations.) Correctly, the book says that “Putin demonstrated a neo-imperial streak, throwing his weight around in former Soviet republics.” However, it proceeds to state that he “typically used economic rather than military pressure to keep neighbors in line, such as cutting off natural gas to Georgia or Belars when their leadership irritated him.”
Unfortunately that is far from the whole story: Russian military “garrisons” in Georgia that were supposed to be evacuated years ago, under repeated international agreements, are being abandoned only now in a classical example of foot dragging. Moreover, Russian “peace-keepers” that were inserted unilaterally between Georgia and its breakaway province of Abkhazia continue with their real task, namely to prevent the return of 250,000 ethnic Georgian refugees who were expelled by 90,000 Abkhaz mountaineers. The latter were able to achieve this unlikely success after receiving a (Russian) navy and air force in the greatest miracle since the loaves and the fishes.

The Russian 14th Army, whose sole purpose appears to be the prevention of the reunion between Moldova and its separatist province of Transdniestr, continues in place despite repeated promises. The Russian Black Sea Fleet, that was supposed to receive limited pier space in the Ukrainian harbor of Sevastopol, ended up by taking the whole harbor (indeed, Moscow’s Mayor Luzkhov now claims the whole city for Russia).

These actions have major legal implications since they deal with the sovereignty and territorial integrity of new members of the international community whose independence was recognized first by Russia itself. After Russia unilaterally extended Russian citizenship to most of the inhabitants of the rebel provinces, a bill was tabled at the Duma providing for the admission to the Russian Federation of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestr. Moreover, members of both houses of Russia’s legislature now claim that this would be the natural culmination of the process of extending Russian citizenship. Of course, such moves invoke sinister memories of the 1930s when sovereign states, or portions thereof, were annexed by an expansionistic power under the pretext of ethnic affinity or “self-determination.”

It would have been helpful if Kremlin Rising had spelled out these implications of Putin’s “neo-imperial streak.” However, there is another problem. The book states that “Putin believed that the key to restoring Russia as a great power was economic” and “Russia was flirting again with Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Thanks to oil and nuclear contracts, Iran and Iraq represented important trading partners. Money was at stake....” This
approach reflects a joke of the 1980s, which asserted that “democratic America believes that all problems are really economic, whereas Marxist-Leninist Russia knows that they’re actually issues of political power.”

As indicated by the examples mentioned, Russia does not confine the flexing of its muscles to economic measures. Moreover, this is indicated by another aspect of Russian external relations that Kremlin Rising might have spelled out. Russia’s foreign currency income, it is true, rests heavily upon the sale of energy and of weapons. A closer look at the latter, however, demonstrates that economic considerations may not be uppermost. In at least two major instances, Russia has offered sizeable packages of state-of-the-art weaponry to countries already heavily in debt to Moscow. In the Syrian case, some $10 billion was owed for earlier arms deals with the USSR; the new Russian proposal entailed forgiving two thirds of that debt and adding another $2 billion! “Throwing good money after bad” may be a fair description and it shows, surely, that the main incentive was not economic. Syria is no more capable of repaying such a debt now than it was before.

President Putin has just signed into law a measure erasing a debt of over $4.7 billion owed by Algeria. This is part of a new deal, whereby Algeria will receive at least $7.5 billion worth of new Russian weapons. Yet, Algeria has made no payments since 2000. It would be reasonable to view such arrangements as intended to build leverage, but, surely, at least as much political and geo-strategic as economic pull.

These points are not meant to detract from the judgment that Kremlin Rising is an excellent work and that the omissions referred to reflect the understandable preoccupation of the authors with the Russian domestic scene. Yet Russia’s neo-imperial actions vis-à-vis the other sovereign post-Soviet republics, that are full members of the international community, have sinister implications that require extensive analysis.