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HOW RUSSIA WENT FROM ALLY TO ADVERSARY

The Cold War ended. The United States declared victory. Then things took a turn.

By Keith Gessen

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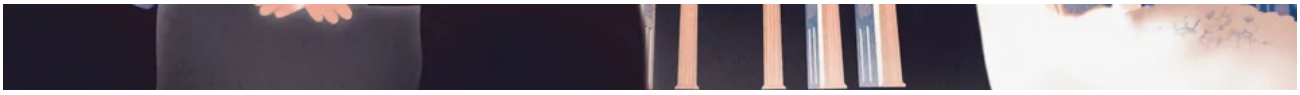

Some of America's actions, after the Soviet Union dissolved, were selfish and malevolent. Others were well-meaning but ineffectual. And sometimes policymakers were simply faced with impossible choices. Illustration by Eduardo Morciano; Source photograph from Getty

In early December of 1989, a few weeks after the Berlin Wall fell, Mikhail Gorbachev attended his first summit with President George H. W. Bush. They met off the coast of Malta, aboard the Soviet cruise ship Maxim Gorky. Gorbachev was very much looking forward to the summit, as he looked forward to all his summits; things at home were spiralling out of control, but his international standing was undimmed. He was in the process of ending the decades-long Cold War that had threatened the world with nuclear holocaust. When he appeared in foreign capitals, crowds went wild.

Bush was less eager. His predecessor, Ronald Reagan, had blown a huge hole in the budget by cutting taxes and increasing defense spending; then he had somewhat rashly decided to go along with Gorbachev's project to rearrange the world system. Bush's national-security team, which included the realist defense intellectual Brent Scowcroft, had taken a pause to review the nation's Soviet policy. The big debate within the U.S. government was whether Gorbachev was in earnest; once it

was concluded that he was, the debate was about whether he'd survive.

On the summit's first day, Gorbachev lamented the sad state of his economy and praised Bush's restraint and thoughtfulness with regard to the revolutionary events in the Eastern Bloc—he did not, as Bush himself put it, jump "up and down on the Berlin Wall." Bush responded by praising Gorbachev's boldness and stressing that he had economic problems of his own. Then Gorbachev unveiled what he considered a great surprise. It was a heartfelt statement about his hope for new relations between the two superpowers. "I want to say to you and the United States that the Soviet Union will under no circumstances start a war," Gorbachev said. "The Soviet Union is no longer prepared to regard the United States as an adversary."

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As the historian Vladislav Zubok explains in his recent book "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union" (Yale), "This was a fundamental statement, a foundation for all future negotiations." But, as two members of Gorbachev's team who were present for the conversations noted, Bush did not react. Perhaps it was because he was recovering from seasickness. Perhaps it was because he was not one for grand statements and elevated rhetoric. Or perhaps it was because to him, as a practical matter, the declaration of peace and partnership was meaningless. As he put it, a couple of months later, to the German

Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, "We prevailed and they didn't." Gorbachev thought he was discussing the creation of a new world, in which the Soviet Union and the United States worked together, two old foes reconciled. Bush thought he was merely negotiating the terms for the Soviets' surrender.

The most pressing practical question after the Berlin Wall came down was what would happen to the two Germanys. It was not just the Wall that had been keeping them apart. In 1989, even after four years of Gorbachev's perestroika, there were still nearly four hundred thousand Soviet troops in the German Democratic Republic. On the other side of the East-West border were several hundred thousand NATO troops, and most of the alliance's ground-based nuclear forces. The legal footing for these troop deployments was the postwar settlement at Potsdam. The Cold War, at least in Europe, was a frozen conflict between the winners of the Second World War. Germany, four and a half decades later, remained the loser.

West German politicians dreamed of reunification; the hard-line Communist leaders of East Germany were less enthusiastic. East Germans, pouring through the dismantled Wall to bask in the glow of Western consumer goods, were voting with their feet. What would Gorbachev do? Throughout the months that followed, he held a series of meetings with foreign leaders. His advisers urged him to extract as many concessions as possible. They wanted security guarantees: the non-extension of NATO, or at least the removal of nuclear forces from German territory. One bit of leverage was that NATO's nuclear presence was deeply unpopular among the West German public, and Gorbachev's hardest-line adviser on Germany urged him, more than a

little hypocritically, to demand a German popular vote on nukes.

In February, 1990, two months after the summit with Bush on the Maxim Gorky, Gorbachev hosted James Baker, the U.S. Secretary of State, in Moscow. This was one of Gorbachev's last opportunities to get something from the West before Germany reunified. But, as Mary Elise Sarotte relates in "Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate" (Yale), her recent book on the complex history of NATO expansion, he was not up to the task. Baker posed to Gorbachev a hypothetical question. "Would you prefer to see a unified Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no U.S. forces," Baker asked, "or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?" This last part would launch decades of debate. Did it constitute a promise—later, obviously, broken? Or was it just idle talk? In the event, Gorbachev answered lamely that of course NATO could not expand. Baker's offer, if that's what it was, would not be repeated. In fact, as soon as people in the White House got wind of the conversation, they had a fit. Two weeks later, at Camp David, Bush told Kohl what he thought of Soviet demands around German reunification. "The Soviets are not in a position to dictate Germany's relationship with NATO," he said. "To hell with that."

The U.S. pressed its advantage; Gorbachev, overwhelmed by mounting problems at home, settled for a substantial financial inducement from Kohl and some vague security assurances. Soon, the Soviet Union was no more, and the overriding priority for U.S. policymakers became nuclear deproliferation. Ukraine, newly independent, had suddenly become the world's No. 3 nuclear power, and Western countries set

about persuading it to give up its arsenal. Meanwhile, events in the former Eastern Bloc were moving rapidly.

In 1990, Franjo Tudjman was elected President of Croatia and began pushing for independence from Yugoslavia; the long and violent dissolution of that country was under way. Then, in February of 1991, the leaders of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, as it was then, met in Visegrád, a pretty castle town just north of Budapest, and promised one another to coördinate their pursuit of economic and military ties with European institutions. These countries became known as the Visegrád Group, and they exerted pressure on successive U.S. Administrations to let them join NATO. They were worried about the events in Yugoslavia, but even more worried about Russia. If the Russians broke bad, they argued, they would need NATO's protection; if the Russians stayed put, the alliance could mellow out and just enjoy its annual meetings. Either way, there would be no harm done.

The counter-argument, from some in both the Bush and the Clinton Administrations, was that the priority was the emergence of a peaceable and democratic Russia. Admitting the former Warsaw Pact countries

into the alliance might strengthen the hand of the hard-liners inside Russia, and become, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

After the Soviet collapse, Western advisers, investment bankers, democracy promoters, and just plain con men flooded the region. The advice on offer was, in retrospect, contradictory. On the one hand, Western officials urged the former Communist states to build democracy; on the other, they made many kinds of aid contingent on the implementation of free-market reforms, known at the time as "shock therapy." But the reason the reforms had to be administered brutally and all at once—why they had to be a shock—was that they were by their nature unpopular. They involved putting people out of work, devaluing their savings, and selling key industries to foreigners. The political systems that emerged in Eastern Europe bore the scars of this initial contradiction.

In almost every former Communist state, the story of reform played out in the same way: collapse, shock therapy, the emergence of criminal entrepreneurs, violence, widespread social disruption, and then, sometimes, a kind of rebuilding. Many of the countries are now doing comparatively well. Poland has a per-capita G.D.P. approaching Portugal's; the Czech Republic exports its Škoda sedans all over the world; tiny Estonia is a world leader in e-governance. But the gains were distributed unequally, and serious political damage was done.

In no country did the reforms play out more dramatically, and more consequentially, than in Russia. Boris Yeltsin's first post-Soviet Cabinet was led by a young radical economist named Yegor Gaidar. In a matter of months, he transformed the enormous Russian economy, liberalizing

prices, ending tariffs on foreign goods, and launching a voucher program aimed at distributing the ownership of state enterprises among the citizenry. The result was the pauperization of much of the population and the privatization of the country's industrial base by a small group of well-connected men, soon to be known as the oligarchs. When the parliament, still called the Supreme Soviet and structured according to the old Soviet constitution, tried to put a brake on the reforms, Yeltsin ordered it disbanded. When it refused to go, Yeltsin ordered that it be shelled. Many of the features that we associate with Putinism—immense inequality, a lack of legal protections for ordinary citizens, and super-Presidential powers—were put in place in the early nineteen-nineties, in the era of "reform."

When it came to those reforms, did we give the Russians bad advice, or was it good advice that they implemented badly? And, if it was bad advice, did we dole it out maliciously, to destroy their country, or because we didn't know what we were doing? Many Russians still believe that Western advice was calculated to harm them, but history points at least partly in the other direction: hollowing out the government, privatizing public services, and letting the free market run rampant were policies that we also implemented in our own country. The German historian Philipp Ther argues that the post-Soviet reform process would have looked very different if it had taken place even a decade earlier, before the so-called Washington Consensus about the benevolent power of markets had congealed in the minds of the world's leading economists. One could add that it would also have been different two decades later, after the 2008 financial crisis had caused people to question again the idea that capitalism could be trusted to run itself.

Back during the last months of Gorbachev's tenure, there was briefly talk of another Marshall Plan for the defeated superpower. A joint Soviet-American group led by the economist Grigory Yavlinsky and the Harvard political scientist Graham Allison proposed something they called a Grand Bargain, which would involve a huge amount of aid to the U.S.S.R., contingent on various reforms and nonproliferation efforts. In "Collapse," Zubok describes a National Security Council meeting in June, 1991, at which the Grand Bargain was discussed. Nicholas Brady, then the Secretary of the Treasury, spoke out forcefully against extensive aid to the Soviet Union. He was candid about America's priorities, saying, "What is involved is changing Soviet society so that it can't afford a defense system. If the Soviets go to a market system, then they can't afford a large defense establishment. A real reform program would turn them into a third-rate power, which is what we want."

But, if our advice and actions did damage to Russia, they also did damage to us. In a forthcoming book, "How the West Lost the Peace" (Polity), translated by Jessica Spengler, Ther writes on the concept of "co-transformation." Change and reform moved in both directions. Borders softened. We sent Russia Snickers bars and personal computers; they sent us hockey players and Tetris. But there were less positive outcomes, too. It was one thing to impose "structural adjustment" on the states of the former Eastern Bloc, quite another when their desperate unemployed showed up at our borders. Ther uses the example of Poland—a large country that underwent a jarring and painful reform period yet emerged successfully, at least from an economic perspective, on the other side. But in the process many people were put out of work; rural and formerly industrialized sections of the

country did not keep up with the big cities. This generated a political reaction that was eventually expressed in support for the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice Party, which in 2020 all but banned abortions in Poland. At the same time, a great many Poles emigrated to the West, including to the United Kingdom, where their presence engendered a xenophobic reaction that was one of the proximate causes, in 2016, of Brexit.

The reforms did not merely cause financial pain. They led to a loss in social status, to a loss of hope. These experiences were not well captured by economic statistics. The worst years for Russians were the ones between 1988 and 1998; after that, the ruble was devalued, exports began to rise, oil prices went up, and, despite enormous theft at the top, the dividends trickled down to the rest of society. But the aftereffects of that decade of pain were considerable. Life expectancy had dropped by five years; there was severe social dislocation. At the end of it, many people were prepared to support, and some people even to love, a colorless but energetic former K.G.B. agent named Vladimir Putin.

There have always been two views of Putin: in one, he is a pragmatic statesman, doing what he can for Russia under difficult circumstances; in the other, he is an ideologue, bent on restoring something like the Soviet empire to its 1945 borders. Would a different Russian leader have behaved differently, under the circumstances? It's an unanswerable question, though one worth asking.

Philip Short's "Putin" (Holt), published last summer, is one place to start. It is the most comprehensive English-language biography to date of the Russian leader. It is also, in its attempt to understand the

perspective of its subject, the most sympathetic. Short dismisses for lack of evidence many of the conspiracy theories that have attached to Putin over the years: he depicts him as a fairly impressive but also typical product of a patriotic working-class Soviet family of the nineteen-fifties. Young Putin was an indifferent student and an enthusiastic street brawler rescued from a wayward life by a passion for judo and, eventually, a fascination with the secret services; he was recruited by the K.G.B. in his last year of college after attempting to join while still a teen-ager. Short does not exaggerate Putin's standing within the K.G.B. He was a middling officer with a short fuse and was dispatched in 1985 to East Germany, by spy standards a backwater. But from there he got a clear view of how it looked when Soviet power collapsed, and he did not like what he saw.

Putin returned to Leningrad in 1990. As Russia, under the rule of the Mongol khans, missed the European Renaissance, so, too, had Putin missed the romantic period of perestroika. By the time he came back, all was in ruins. Short is almost certain that Putin was assigned by the K.G.B. to infiltrate the "democratic" movement; if that's true, he did so with great success, becoming in a few years the deputy mayor to Anatoly Sobchak, one of the heroes of the perestroika era. Short depicts St. Petersburg Putin as a serious, hardworking official, and only moderately corrupt. He sees Putin's well-documented ties to criminal organizations in the city as the cost of doing business. And he notes that, although most foreign diplomats who interacted with Putin during this time (among other things, he was in charge of foreign economic ties at the Mayor's office) got a sense of his competence and sobriety, they did notice that he had a weak spot: when it came to the relinquished empire—which meant, for St. Petersburg, complicated

travel and trade arrangements with nearby Estonia—Putin would lose his temper and start speechifying. He considered it "ridiculous," the German consul recalled, that Estonia had established an independent state.

His rise to the Presidency was in many ways accidental—in four years he went from unemployed former official (after Sobchak lost his reëlection campaign, in 1996) to the country's highest office—but it was not without its logic. Putin found himself in the right place at the right time over and over, and he impressed the right people with his diligence and his loyalty. If some of his supporters, such as the oligarch Boris Berezovsky, whom Putin hounded into exile and eventually into an early grave, were disappointed by their man, others got exactly what they wanted, and much more.

For many Russians, Boris Yeltsin's abdication in favor of a former K.G.B. lieutenant colonel represented the end of their experiment in democracy and tentative rapprochement with the West. For others, it had ended sooner, in the shelling of the Supreme Soviet and among the mountains of Chechnya. Yet others believed that, even a decade into the Putin regime, democracy could still be revived. Two things can be true simultaneously: one, that Putin was well within the mainstream of Russian politics—that any Russian leader would have been faced with his country's unenviable geopolitical position between a dynamic Europe and a rising China and recognized that state capacity did have to be rebuilt after the collapse of the previous decade and a half. But, also, two, that Putin was always quick to solve problems through the deployment of violence, and that as time went on he became bolder and more aggressive, and took steps that others in his circle would likely

have shied away from.

Short argues convincingly that Putin came into the office ready to work with the West. He had a tense first meeting with Bill Clinton ("We're going to miss ol' Boris," Clinton remarked to Strobe Talbott, his Deputy Secretary of State), but then a much warmer summit with George W. Bush in which Bush claimed to look into Putin's eyes and see his soul. A few months later, Putin was the first world leader to call Bush in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. He actively supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and didn't complain too much, at first, about NATO expansion: most of the Visegrád states had joined in 1999, under Clinton, and the Baltic states were up next. But from the high-water mark of 2001 the relationship with Putin continuously declined. The Russian leader did not enjoy the Bush Administration's "Freedom Agenda," whether it took the form of the full-scale invasion of Iraq or the much milder cheerleading for the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine. (In this case, the U.S. did, symbolically, jump up and down on the Berlin Wall.) Putin was deeply disappointed by Western criticisms of his continuing war against Chechen separatism. To Putin, it looked like the same war on terror that the West was waging, "gloves off"; to the West, it looked like human-rights violations and war crimes. Having supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Putin was furious when the U.S. and the U.K. refused to extradite Chechen leaders.

Is there a counter-history in which Putin's Russia and the U.S. merrily prosecuted the war on terror together—threw bags over people's heads, knocked down doors in the middle of the night, and zapped people from the skies, together? Certainly there would have been plenty of room for C.I.A. black sites in Russia. It's not exactly a cheering

prospect, and in any case there was no room for an equal partner in George W. Bush and Dick Cheney's global crusade. By 2004, Putin was darkly accusing the West of collaborating with Chechen terrorists. He started talking more and more about the threat posed by NATO expansion. In 2007, during a speech at the Munich Security Conference, he all but declared his secession from the West.

Putin was lucky. Oil prices rose and Russia grew richer. Moscow, in its restaurants and cafés, increasingly came to resemble a European capital. But looks were deceiving. In fact, Russia was rearming, and growing ever more resentful, and plotting vengeance: it was sliding into the abyss.

Still, even now, as the full-scale war in Ukraine continues into its second year, one can point to moments when things might have turned out differently. The years when the longtime Putin associate Dmitry Medvedev served as President showed a less combative Russia to the world. Despite continuing many of Putin's policies—among other things, it was Medvedev who prosecuted the war with Georgia in August of 2008—Medvedev created a more liberal atmosphere in

public life; with prodding from the Obama Administration, coöperation on the U.S. war in Afghanistan started again. Another Russia was possible, maybe, and Putin, as Prime Minister, seemed content to remain in the background. But he was never far away. There is some evidence that his decision to return to the Presidency was spurred less by anything Medvedev did on the domestic front than by his behavior during the early stages of the Libyan civil war, in 2011. The U.S. co-sponsored a U.N. resolution to help protect rebel forces from Muammar Qaddafi's Army; ordinarily, this was the sort of thing Russia vetoed. But Medvedev ordered his foreign ministry to abstain. When Putin disagreed publicly, Medvedev reprimanded him. According to Short, this was "political suicide." In the wake of the NATO-led intervention, Qaddafi—who had previously acceded to America's security requests and had provided assistance for its global war on terror—was captured and then murdered by rebel forces, who filmed the killing and posted the video online. Putin supposedly watched it multiple times. In any case, a few months after NATO bombed Tripoli, he announced that he would be returning to the Presidency.

Five years ago, the longtime American diplomat and Russia expert William Hill published a book about the decline of the U.S.-Russia relationship in the post-Cold War period: he called it "No Place for Russia." There was no place for Russia in the E.U., because it was too big; there was no place for Russia in NATO, because NATO was an anti-Russian alliance. Meanwhile, the organizations in which Russia had an equal voice—most notably, the U.N. and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—were increasingly sidelined. The stronger and more active NATO became, the weaker Russia was. There was no getting around this.

American power during this period was so great, and Russian power so diminished, that to the Russians everything the U.S. did seemed like a provocation. Some of our actions were evidently selfish and malevolent; others were well-meaning but ineffectual. And sometimes American policymakers were simply faced with impossible choices. These tended to arise on the periphery of Russian's old empire, in the countries that formed the new fault line between Russia and the West: what the political scientists Timothy Colton and Samuel Charap have called the "in-betweens"—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and, especially, Ukraine.

In the winter of 2004-05, Putin watched helplessly as thousands of protesters in Kyiv demanded and won a new vote after large-scale fraud had seemed to give Viktor Yanukovych the Presidential victory in Ukraine. Yanukovych managed to mount a successful Presidential bid in the next election cycle, but in 2014 vast protests over his refusal to sign an association agreement with the E.U. once again chased him from power. That same week, Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms appeared in Crimea. The invasion of Ukraine had begun.

By the logic of co-transformation, we urged brutal free-market policies on Eastern Europe, and then imposed them on ourselves. Having participated in the creation of the Russian monster, we are now forced to become monsters to battle it, to manufacture and sell more weapons, to cheer the death of Russian soldiers, to spend more and more on defense, both here and in Europe, and to create the atmosphere and conditions of a second Cold War, because we failed to figure out how to secure the peace after the last one.

The development of Russia in the post-Cold War period was not the result of a Western plot or Western actions. Russian officials chose, within a narrow range of options, how to behave, and they could have chosen differently. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February, 2022, was no more inevitable or foreordained than the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in 2003. Still, it's worth asking what other course we might have followed.

Sarotte, in her book on NATO, argues that a slower pace of expansion might have caused less damage to Russian internal politics; in time, with less pressure from an expanding West, Russia might have come around. Ther suggests that, in place of Western triumphalism and complacency, a more serious reckoning with the revolutionary ideals of 1989—a striving for democracy and freedom of the sort that was utopian even by Western standards—could have led to a different result. In Zubok's book on the demise of the Soviet Union, the top American officials—Scowcroft, Baker, and Bush—are depicted as thoughtful and sympathetic but also, in the end, keeping their cards, and their cash, too close to their vests. Everyone in the former Soviet bloc looked to America for guidance and inspiration. Never had the prestige of the United States been higher in that part of the world. We had an astonishing amount of moral capital. What did we do with it?

Ultimately, the West chose the West. We extended our writ where we could, and dug in where we had to. This meant, among other things, keeping the structures we already had in place and expanding them, as opposed to inventing new ones. Back in 1990, three months after the "not one inch" meeting, Gorbachev had waxed lyrical to Baker about a new pan-European security arrangement. The American Secretary of

State's response was polite, but firm: "It is an excellent dream, but only a dream." ♦

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