

May 14, 2014

Humorist P. J. O'Rourke, normally in Weekly Standard, penned a Russian history lesson of sorts for the Daily Beast.

Now that we've failed to use Russia's corrupt and degenerating economy, subservience to the international banking system, and vulnerability to falling energy prices to pop Vladimir Putin like a zit, we're going to have sit on our NATO, E.U., and OSCE duffs and take the long view of Russian imperialism.

Fortunately the long view, while a desolate prospect, is also comforting in its way, if you aren't a Russian.

In the sixth century A.D. Russia was the middle of nowhere in the great Eurasian flat spot bounded by fuck-all on the north and east, barbarian hordes and the remains of the Byzantine Empire on the south, and the Dark Ages on the west.

Wandering around in here, up and down the watershed of the Dnieper River from Novgorod (which hadn't been built yet) to Kiev (ditto) were disorganized tribes of Slavic pastoral herdsmen herding whatever was available, pastorally. They were harried by Goths, Huns, Khazars, and other people who had the name and nature of outlaw motorcycle gangs long before the motorcycle was invented.

The original Russian state, "Old Russia," was established at Novgorod in A.D. 862 by marauding Vikings. They'd set off to discover Iceland, Greenland, and America, took a wrong turn, and wound up with their dragon boat stuck on a mud bar in the Dnieper. (Historians have their own theories, involving trade and colonization, but this sounds more likely.)

The first ruler of Old Russia was the Viking Prince Rurik. Imagine being so disorganized that you need marauding Vikings to found your nation—them with their battle axes, crazed pillaging, riotous Meade Hall feasts, and horns on their helmets. (Actually, Vikings didn't wear horns on their helmets—but they would have if they'd thought of it, just like they would have worn meade helmets if they'd thought of it.) Some government it must have been.

Viking Prince Rurik: "Yah, let's build Novgorod!"

Viking Chieftain Sven: "Yah, so we can burn it down and loot!" ...

... In 1613 the Romanov dynasty was installed, providing Russia with a range of talents from "Great" (Peter I, Catherine II) to "Late" (Ivan VI, Peter III, and Paul I killed in palace intrigues; Alexander II blown to bits by a terrorist bomb, and Nicholas II murdered with his family by the Bolsheviks).

The Romanovs adhered to what Harvard historian Richard Pipes calls a "patrimonial" doctrine, meaning they owned Russia the way we own our house (except to hell with the mortgage). They owned everything. And everybody. The Romanov tsars imposed rigid serfdom just as that woeful institution was fading almost everywhere else.

Russia never had a Renaissance, a Protestant Reformation, an Enlightenment, or much of an Industrial Revolution until the Soviet Union. Soviet industrialization produced such benefits to humanity as concrete worker housing built without level or plumb bob, the AK-47, MiG fighter jets, and proliferating nukes. (Although the only people the Soviets ever killed with a nuclear device was themselves at Chernobyl, located, perhaps not coincidentally, in what's now Ukraine, for the time being at least.)

Russia was out in the sticks of civilization, in a trailer park without knowledge of how to build a trailer. But Russia kept getting bigger, mostly by killing, oppressing, and annoying Russians. ...

... In 1861 Tsar Alexander II freed 50 million serfs. If "freed" is the word that's wanted. The serfs had no place to go except the land they were already farming, and if they wanted any of that, they had to buy it with the nothing they made as serfs. Later, as mentioned twice already, Alexander got blown to bits.

Russia lost the Jews. Being robbed, beaten, and killed in pogroms was not a sufficient incentive to stay. More than a million Jews emigrated, taking what common sense the country had with them. ...

... Russia lost World War I, not an easy thing to do when you're on the winning side. After the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Russia was too much of a mess to keep fighting Germany. The Soviet government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk surrendering Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Russian Poland, and Ukraine—containing in total a quarter of the population of Imperial Russia—to the Central Powers just eight months before the Central Powers had to surrender to everybody.

Russia lost both sides of the 1917-22 Russian Civil War. The White Russians were losers. The Reds were total losers. We know how their revolution turned out.

Russia might as well have lost World War II. Between 18 million and 24 million Russians died. That's three times as many military and civilian casualties as Germany suffered. There must have been a better way to kill a bunch of Nazis running low on food and ammunition and stuck in frozen mud. ...

The cult of Russia's Great Patriotic War is explained by [Craig Pirrong](#).

Russia's "Victory Day" celebration is exceptional in virtually every way. Sixty-nine years after its end, no other nation commemorates WWII like Russia. Indeed, whereas the events in Russia involve the entire nation, if there were official ceremonies in the US and the UK and Continental Europe recognizing VE Day, they were unnoticeable.

Of course Russia's gargantuan losses in the conflict had an emotional impact far beyond that experienced in any other allied nation. But that does not explain the form, content, or tone of the

Russian commemoration. It is not focused first and foremost on remembering the dead. Instead, it is focused first and foremost on venerating the Russian state. On using the Russian (and non-Russian Soviet) deaths to stake a moral and political claim for the state.

To modify the anti-war aphorism, remembrance of war is the health of the Russian state. The Great Patriotic War is used to legitimize the Russian state, to immunize it from criticism, and to attack those who oppose the state. Note as two examples the attack on opposition channel TV Rain for even questioning whether the sacrifice of the Siege of Leningrad was worthwhile, and the just signed law criminalizing “distorting” the USSR’s role in WWII.

And it has been so from 3 July, 1941. On that day, 11 days after the launch of Barbarossa, a shaken Stalin emerged from hiding and declared a Great Patriotic War. Stalin in particular needed to protect himself against charges of criminal incompetence that cost millions of lives. The narrative of a wise and brave Soviet state uniting with the people to vanquish the Nazi hordes proved amazingly powerful. It united the people emotionally with the state. It was-and is-a reliable way to silence criticism of the state.

It is also grotesquely cynical, exploiting the deaths and suffering of millions to serve the interests of the state and the autocrats that rule over it. In Stalin’s case in particular, it is particularly cynical and grotesque, because he was directly responsible for millions of those deaths and maimings through his operational incompetence and callous indifference to death and suffering. This makes it all the more revealing-and tragic-to see many pictures of Stalin carried reverently at Friday’s Victory Day celebrations. ...

... The sobering fact is that although he was a true believer in the Cult of the Great Patriotic War then (and before), Putin is using it even more today to strengthen his authority and to silence dissent internally, and to justify aggressive expansion externally. (Note that the St. George colors flaunted by the separatists in Ukraine are the same as those used to commemorate WWII.) There is a direct connection between the prominence of the Cult and Putin’s authoritarian actions at home and imperialism abroad. It is his way of yoking the Russian people to the ambitions of the state—and Putin.

The fact that this year’s Victory Day celebration was as elaborate and passionately intense and overtly politicized (by Putin’s Crimea appearance) as any since the fall of the USSR means that it is a harbinger of greater oppression at home and greater aggression abroad. Never forget that when Russians make a point of remembering the war, that bad things follow.

Daily Beast

Russian History Is on Our Side: Putin Will Surely Screw Himself

So the international sanctions aren't working—don't worry! If 1,000 years of Russian screw-ups are anything to go by, it won't be long before Vladimir Putin brings himself down.

by P. J. O'Rourke

Now that we've [failed to use](#) Russia's [corrupt and degenerating economy](#), subservience to the international banking system, and vulnerability to falling energy prices to pop Vladimir Putin like a zit, we're going to have sit on our NATO, E.U., and OSCE duffs and take the long view of Russian imperialism.

Fortunately the long view, while a desolate prospect, is also comforting in its way, if you aren't a Russian.

In the sixth century A.D. Russia was the middle of nowhere in the great Eurasian flat spot bounded by fuck-all on the north and east, barbarian hordes and the remains of the Byzantine Empire on the south, and the Dark Ages on the west.

Wandering around in here, up and down the watershed of the Dnieper River from Novgorod (which hadn't been built yet) to Kiev (ditto) were disorganized tribes of Slavic pastoral herdsmen herding whatever was available, pastorally. They were harried by Goths, Huns, Khazars, and other people who had the name and nature of outlaw motorcycle gangs long before the motorcycle was invented.

The original Russian state, "Old Russia," was established at Novgorod in A.D. 862 by marauding Vikings. They'd set off to discover Iceland, Greenland, and America, took a wrong turn, and wound up with their dragon boat stuck on a mud bar in the Dnieper. (Historians have their own theories, involving trade and colonization, but this sounds more likely.)

The first ruler of Old Russia was the Viking Prince Rurik. Imagine being so disorganized that you need marauding Vikings to found your nation—they with their battle axes, crazed pillaging, riotous Meade Hall feasts, and horns on their helmets. (Actually, Vikings didn't wear horns on their helmets—but they would have if they'd thought of it, just like they would have worn meade helmets if they'd thought of it.) Some government it must have been.

Viking Prince Rurik: "Yah, let's build Novgorod!"

Viking Chieftain Sven: "Yah, so we can burn it down and loot!"

The Russians weren't converted to Christianity until A.D. 988—a thousand years late to "Peace be unto you" party, the basic principles of which still haven't sunk in. (And maybe never had a chance to. Russia's conversion came at the hands of St. Vladimir, Grand Prince of Kiev, who was reputed to maintain a harem of 800 concubines.)

The death of St. Vladimir, and every other ruler of Old Russia, was followed by assassinations, mayhem, civil strife, and the other hallmarks of change in Russian leadership evident to the present day. Oxford historian Ronald Hingley notes that "the first and only Russian ruler to fashion an effective law of succession" was Tsar Paul I (1796-1801). Tsar Paul was assassinated.

Anyway, things went along pretty well for almost 400 years. (Pretty well by Russian standards—a free peasant was known as a *smerd*, meaning “stinker.”) Then, in 1237, when the rest of the West was having a High Middle Ages and getting fecund for cultural rebirth, a Tatar horde invaded Russia.

The Tatars were part of the Mongol Empire founded by Genghis Khan. They had a two-pronged invasion strategy: Kill everybody and steal everything.

Kiev, Moscow, and most of Russia’s towns were obliterated. Tatar control—part occupation and part suzerainty over impotent, tribute-paying Russian principalities—lasted more than 200 years.

The Russians have heroic stories about fighting off the Tatars, but in fact it seems like the Tatars gradually lost interest in the place and went off in a horde back to where they came from.

Professor Hingley says the “Tatar Yoke” left Russia with “a model of extreme authoritarian rule combined with control through terror.” It also left Russia with a model of leadership best summarized by a passage from John Keegan’s *A History of Warfare*:

“Genghis Khan, questioning his Mongol comrades-in-arms about life’s sweetest pleasure and being told it lay in falconry, replied, ‘You are mistaken. Man’s greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding [and] use the bodies of his women as a nightshirt and support.’”

Why Putin wants Angela Merkel for a nightshirt is beyond me. But that’s a Russian dictator for you.

Around the time Europe was getting a New World, Russia was getting tsars. Several were named Ivan, one more terrible than the next until we arrive at Ivan the Terrible in 1533.

Ivan created a private force of five or six thousand thugs, the *oprichnina*, who wore black, rode black horses, and carried, as emblems of authority, a dog’s head and a broom. (The hammer and sickle of the day, presumably.)

Oprichniks were entitled to rob and kill anyone, and did so with a will. Ivan suspected Novgorod of disloyalty, and the *oprichnina* spent five weeks in the city slaughtering thousands and driving thousands more into exile.

Ivan presided over and sometimes personally performed the roasting, dismembering, and boiling alive of enemies and people who, left unboiled, might possibly become enemies.

He killed his own son and heir by whacking him over the head with the monarchical staff in a tsar-ish fit of temper.

He conducted a 24-year-long war against Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, and the Teutonic Knights, and lost.

Russia’s economy was destroyed. Drought, famine, and plague beset the country.

But Ivan put Russia on the map as an international player. He defeated what was left of the Tatars, mostly by conniving with leaders of what was left of the Tatars. He expanded Russian

rule into Siberia, his success due to almost nobody being there. And, draw what parallels you will, Ivan the Terrible's popularity rating was very high among the *smerds*.

After his reign, Russia, if you can believe it, got worse. "The Time of Troubles" featured more drought, more famine, more plague, foreign invasions, massacres, the occupation and sacking of Moscow, and tsars with names like False Dmitry I and False Dmitry II. The population of Russia may have been reduced by as much as one-third.

The remaining two-thirds reacted to increasing anarchy in traditional Russian fashion, by increasing autocracy. The Russians aren't stupid. We're talking about a country where chess is a spectator sport. Autocracy is just a Russian bad habit, like smoking three packs of cigarettes a day and drinking a liter of vodka.

In 1613 the Romanov dynasty was installed, providing Russia with a range of talents from "Great" (Peter I, Catherine II) to "Late" (Ivan VI, Peter III, and Paul I killed in palace intrigues; Alexander II blown to bits by a terrorist bomb, and Nicholas II murdered with his family by the Bolsheviks).

The Romanovs adhered to what Harvard historian Richard Pipes calls a "patrimonial" doctrine, meaning they owned Russia the way we own our house (except to hell with the mortgage). They owned everything. And everybody. The Romanov tsars imposed rigid serfdom just as that woeful institution was fading almost everywhere else.

Russia never had a Renaissance, a Protestant Reformation, an Enlightenment, or much of an Industrial Revolution until the Soviet Union. Soviet industrialization produced such benefits to humanity as concrete worker housing built without level or plumb bob, the AK-47, MiG fighter jets, and proliferating nukes. (Although the only people the Soviets ever killed with a nuclear device was themselves at Chernobyl, located, perhaps not coincidentally, in what's now Ukraine, for the time being at least.)

Russia was out in the sticks of civilization, in a trailer park without knowledge of how to build a trailer. But Russia kept getting bigger, mostly by killing, oppressing, and annoying Russians.

Peter the Great (1682-1725) led a military expedition against the Turkish fort of Azov that was a disaster. But Peter came right back and, getting more Russians killed, overwhelmed the Turks. The same thing happened in the Northern War against Sweden. Although it took 21 years after Peter ran away at the battle of Narva, Russia finally got a Baltic coastline. Which Peter didn't know what to do with, so he built St. Petersburg in a swamp with conscripted serf labor. The number of Russian serfs who died building things in the swamp equaled the number Russian soldiers who died in the Northern War.

Peter the Great raised taxes, made the Russian nobles shave their beards, and caused the death of his recalcitrant son and heir, like Ivan the Terrible did, but on purpose.

Catherine the Great (1762-1796) doubled taxes on the Jews and declared they weren't Russians, as if anyone would want to be. She was the first but not last leader of Russia to annex Crimea. NATO member alert, code red—she won two wars against Turkey and partitioned Poland. (Like Peter the Great on the Baltic, she got the swampy part.)

Under Catherine, Russian settlements pushed all the way east into Alaska, the most valuable land Russia has occupied. (Annual GDP per capita, Alaska: \$61,156. Annual GDP per capita, Russia: \$14,037.) But—E.U. shame alert—when Russia was facing financial difficulties and geopolitical conflict, Tsar Alexander II was forced to sell Alaska to the United States in 1867 for 2 cents an acre. Later, as mentioned, Alexander got blown to bits.

And that's pretty much it for Russia's Golden Age. After the 18th century, Russia devoted itself mostly to being big fat loserland, losing pace with the modern world, wars, Alaska, a communist utopia, a million victims of Stalin's purges, 6 million victims of the famine of 1921, 8 million victims of the famine of 1932-33, a "Kitchen Debate" between Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon, ICBMs in Cuba, the space race, the arms race, the Cold War, and finally, 14 independent countries that were once in the USSR.

Napoleon actually won the war part of his war with Russia. If "General Winter" and the general tendency of Moscow to be periodically destroyed hadn't, for once, sided with the Russian people, you'd be able to get a good bottle of Côte de Volga and a baguette in Smolensk today.

Russia began a series of wars in the Caucasus that it has yet to win.

In 1825, the Decembrists, a reform-minded group of military officers, staged a demonstration in favor of constitutional monarchy and were hanged for taking the trouble.

Political oppression, censorship, spying, and secret police activity reached such a level of crime and punishment that Dostoyevsky himself was sentenced to death for belonging to a discussion group. He was standing in front of the firing squad when his sentence was commuted to exile in Siberia. (Whether to thank Tsar Nicolas I depends upon how weighty a summer reading list you've been given.)

"Exiled to Siberia" says everything about Russian economic and social development in that land of mountains, lakes, and forests with a climate, in its lower latitudes, no worse than the rest of Russia's. I've been across it on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. If this were America, the route from Irkutsk to Vladivostok would be lined with vacation homes and trendy shops, and "exiled to Siberia" would be translated as "exiled to Aspen."

Russia lost the 1853-56 Crimean War. NATO member alert, code green—Russia lost to Britain, France, and Turkey.

In 1861 Tsar Alexander II freed 50 million serfs. If "freed" is the word that's wanted. The serfs had no place to go except the land they were already farming, and if they wanted any of that, they had to buy it with the nothing they made as serfs. Later, as mentioned twice already, Alexander got blown to bits.

Russia lost the Jews. Being robbed, beaten, and killed in pogroms was not a sufficient incentive to stay. More than a million Jews emigrated, taking what common sense the country had with them.

Russia lost the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War in the best Russian loser fashion at the naval battle of Tsushima.

Japanese Admiral Togo Heihachiro “crossed the T” of the Russian fleet, a rare execution of a tactic where you get your ships in a horizontal line so that your guns can be aimed at the enemy, whose ships are in a vertical line so that their guns can’t be aimed at you.

The Russian fleet was demolished. Eight battleships and most of the smaller ships were sunk. More than 5,000 Russian sailors died. Just three of 38 Russian vessels escaped to Vladivostok.

Russia lost World War I, not an easy thing to do when you’re on the winning side. After the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Russia was too much of a mess to keep fighting Germany. The Soviet government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk surrendering Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Russian Poland, and Ukraine—containing in total a quarter of the population of Imperial Russia—to the Central Powers just eight months before the Central Powers had to surrender to everybody.

Russia lost both sides of the 1917-22 Russian Civil War. The White Russians were losers. The Reds were total losers. We know how their revolution turned out.

Russia might as well have lost World War II. Between 18 million and 24 million Russians died. That’s three times as many military and civilian casualties as Germany suffered. There must have been a better way to kill a bunch of Nazis running low on food and ammunition and stuck in frozen mud.

Now, because of what he’s doing in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has a higher *smerd* popularity rating than Ivan the Terrible or even Stalin. We certainly should have screwed him over. But Russian history is on our side. He’ll certainly screw himself.

Streetwise Professor

Remembrance of War is the Health of the Russian State

by Craig Pirrong

Russia’s “Victory Day” celebration is exceptional in virtually every way. Sixty-nine years after its end, no other nation commemorates WWII like Russia. Indeed, whereas the events in Russia involve the entire nation, if there were official ceremonies in the US and the UK and Continental Europe recognizing VE Day, they were unnoticeable.

Of course Russia’s gargantuan losses in the conflict had an emotional impact far beyond that experienced in any other allied nation. But that does not explain the form, content, or tone of the Russian commemoration. It is not focused first and foremost on remembering the dead. Instead, it is focused first and foremost on venerating the Russian state. On using the Russian (and non-Russian Soviet) deaths to stake a moral and political claim for the state.

To modify the anti-war aphorism, remembrance of war is the health of the Russian state. The Great Patriotic War is used to legitimize the Russian state, to immunize it from criticism, and to attack those who oppose the state. Note as two examples the attack on opposition channel TV Rain for even questioning whether the sacrifice of the Siege of Leningrad was worthwhile, [and the just signed law criminalizing “distorting” the USSR’s role in WWII](#).

And it has been so from 3 July, 1941. On that day, 11 days after the launch of Barbarossa, a shaken Stalin emerged from hiding and declared a Great Patriotic War. Stalin in particular needed to protect himself against charges of criminal incompetence that cost millions of lives. The narrative of a wise and brave Soviet state uniting with the people to vanquish the Nazi hordes proved amazingly powerful. It united the people emotionally with the state. It was-and is-a reliable way to silence criticism of the state.

It is also grotesquely cynical, exploiting the deaths and suffering of millions to serve the interests of the state and the autocrats that rule over it. In Stalin's case in particular, it is particularly cynical and grotesque, because he was directly responsible for millions of those deaths and maimings through his operational incompetence and callous indifference to death and suffering. This makes it all the more revealing-and tragic-to see many pictures of Stalin carried reverently at Friday's Victory Day celebrations.

This is not to gainsay that the Soviet war effort was necessary to defeat Hitler. But so was the Anglo-American effort. No, the British and the Americans did not bleed anywhere near as much as the Soviets. But this is more of a reproach than a compliment to Stalin and the Soviet state. As the movie Patton said, "I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor, dumb bastard die for his country."

Not only is WWII remembrance deployed for domestic political purposes. Russian suffering is presented as a moral claim on the world to justify first Soviet, and now Russian, expansionism and imperialism. Just witness how the defense of Sevastopol and the Crimea in WWII is being used to legitimize Putin's recent Anschluss.

This claim is defective for two reasons, at least.

First, it ignores completely Soviet complicity in and responsibility for the war. Stalin provided massive material support for Hitler that made possible Germany's victories in the west in 1940: indeed, trains loaded with fuel and grain destined for Nazi Germany continue to roll west out of the USSR even as the Wehrmacht was rolling east on 22 June, 1941. The Molotov-Von Ribbentrop pact was also a necessary precondition for the war.

Second, Soviet behavior after the war gives the lie to the Soviet and Russian claim that the Red Army liberated anything. Yes, they defeated the Germans, but replaced Nazi tyranny in conquered lands with Soviet. To say that the Soviets were not as bad as the Germans is to succeed by the very lowest of possible standards, and very cold (war) comfort to those who endured the Soviet yoke for nigh onto 50 years.

The supposedly liberated, especially in the Baltics and Poland, do not buy into the Soviet-Russian narrative, and this drives modern Russians to paroxysms of hysteria. [Recall the thuggish Russian reaction-both official and popular-to the Estonian decision to move a memorial to the Red Army in Tallinn](#). The Estonians saw the monument as a daily reminder of their imprisonment at Soviet/Russian hands. The Russians saw the Estonian reaction as an act of extreme ingratitude.

The twisted Russian syllogism is this. The Glorious Red Army defeated fascism. If you criticize what the Red Army did in eastern Europe, or the Soviet rule of eastern Europe enforced by the Red Army, you are a fascist. To say that the Russians are blind to how they are perceived in the lands they conquered is to miss the point: they see things in a totally different way, and cannot even comprehend that anyone would see it differently, except if they are Nazis at heart.

This is not a new phenomenon, with Russians generally or Putin in particular. [I wrote about Putin's 2007 Victory Day speech, and what I said then rings true today:](#)

As outrageous as these remarks are, his paean to the “unity” of the former USSR is even more offensive:

Victory Day not only unites the people of Russia but also unites our neighbors in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. We are deeply grateful to the generation of people whose difficult fate it was to face this war. They have passed on to us their traditions of fraternity and solidarity and their truly hard-won experience of unity and mutual aid. We will preserve this sacred memory and historical legacy. Those who attempt today to belittle this invaluable experience and defile the monuments to the heroes of this war are insulting their own people and spreading enmity and new distrust between countries and peoples.

Hate to break this to you Vlad, but your “neighbors” didn’t exactly view the USSR as a fraternal organization, hence their haste to depart it at the first opportunity. They viewed the Soviet system of “mutual aid” in the same way the web caught fly perceives a spider. The Estonians (the clear referent in Putin’s paragraph just quoted) are not “defiling” a monument to heroes of WWII, insulting themselves, or spreading enmity. To them, the monument to which Putin refers is a painful reminder of their subjugation by a regime that showed utter disdain for human life and dignity, and which imposed “comradeship” at the barrel of a gun.

If Putin had any interest in allaying distrust between countries and peoples, he would acknowledge the gaping physical and psychic wounds inflicted by the regime he so clearly misses, and express understanding at how monuments to that regime just might be painful reminders of those wounds. Instead, by refusing to concede the USSR’s awful legacy, it is Putin who exacerbates historical distrust. The Estonian move seems a reasonable compromise; the monument will stand and the dead will be buried in a place where those who wish to mourn and honor the fallen may do so, but where the statue does not serve as a daily reminder of Estonia’s subjugation and the USSR’s crime. A crime, by the way, that grew out of a conspiracy between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany to divide eastern Europe between them. Yes, no state suffered more than USSR from the depredations of the Nazis—but no state did more to make those depredations possible.

But that’s just the problem, methinks—Putin (and the ultranationalist Nashiniks who are his most vocal constituency) want that daily reminder. And they really want to return to those days when the uppity Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Georgians, and myriad others knew their place.

The sobering fact is that although he was a true believer in the Cult of the Great Patriotic War then (and before), Putin is using it even more today to strengthen his authority and to silence dissent internally, and to justify aggressive expansion externally. (Note that the St. George colors flaunted by the separatists in Ukraine are the same as those used to commemorate WWII.) There is a direct connection between the prominence of the Cult and Putin’s authoritarian actions at home and imperialism abroad. It is his way of yoking the Russian people to the ambitions of the state—and Putin.

The fact that this year’s Victory Day celebration was as elaborate and passionately intense and overtly politicized (by Putin’s Crimea appearance) as any since the fall of the USSR means that it is a harbinger of greater oppression at home and greater aggression abroad. Never forget that when Russians make a point of remembering the war, that bad things follow.

©2014 CREEDERS.COM
GORRELLART.COM
GORRELL



©2014
HRC.org/CHI
Dist. by King Features

