

Boundary Issues

David Remnick

August 15, 2008



Illustration by Tom Bachtell

On a bright September day in 1993, not long before he ended his two decades in exile, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn delivered a rare public address in Vaduz, the capital of Liechtenstein. Although Solzhenitsyn was energetic at the lectern, he was all but

finished with his epic work as the chronicler of Soviet cruelty. With “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,” “Cancer Ward,” “The First Circle,” and, above all, “The Gulag Archipelago,” Solzhenitsyn had not only exposed the secrets of Soviet oppression and ruin; he had also presaged the collapse of Communist ideology and Moscow’s empire.

But, in Vaduz, Solzhenitsyn, a principled conservative, could not join in the West’s euphoria. He was deeply aware that the costs of ideology, violence, and empire had not been paid in full. While American triumphalists were still indulging in clichés of how Ronald Reagan had won the Cold War, Solzhenitsyn anticipated the persistence of the old and unrepentant élites, the former Communist Party chiefs and K.G.B. officials who so easily transformed themselves into “democrats” and “businessmen”:

We were recently entertained by a naïve fable of the happy arrival at the “end of history,” of the overflowing triumph of an all-democratic bliss; the ultimate global arrangement had supposedly been attained. But we all see and sense that something very different is coming, something new, and perhaps quite stern. No, tranquility does not promise to descend on our planet, and will not be granted us so easily.

Solzhenitsyn died on August 3rd, and he was buried in the graveyard of the Donskoi Monastery.⁽¹⁾ Vladimir Putin, the former K.G.B. operative and Russia’s de-facto President, unabashed by irony, paid tribute to Solzhenitsyn’s service to “the ideals of freedom, justice, and humanism.” Later that week, while attending the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Putin discussed with his seatmates and fellow heads of state a non-sporting matter: he had ordered his tanks and troop trucks into South Ossetia, in the Caucasus. His Army also attacked Georgia proper, most forcefully the city of Gori, the birthplace of Iosef Dzhughashvili—better known as Stalin, who in his day helped redraw the volatile mosaic of the Caucasus.

Part of the “naïve fable” was that the collapse of the Soviet Union would peaceably defy historical precedent. Empires, blinded by hauteur and ambition, don’t often stoop to understand the complexities of their human and territorial acquisitions, and care even less about the disfigurements and time bombs they eventually leave behind. The record is long: after the Ottoman decline came the slaughter of Armenians and the drawing of senseless boundaries in the Middle East; imperial Britain left in its wake the wars in Ireland, Palestine, Nigeria, and the Indian subcontinent; the French provided a legacy of imminent violence from Algeria to Indochina.

Nor was the Soviet breakup the result of precision engineering; its dangers, similarly, were only briefly concealed. In December, 1991, at a vodka-soaked confab in a hunting lodge near the Polish border, the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine dissolved the union formed by the Bolsheviks and their tsarist predecessors, instantly depriving Mikhail Gorbachev of employment. “I well remember how a sensation of freedom and lightness suddenly came over me,” Yeltsin wrote of

⁽¹⁾ Correction, December 12, 2008: Turgenev was not buried in the graveyard of the Donskoi Monastery, as previously stated.

the event. Putin, Yeltsin's successor, who spent the perestroika years seething with resentment as an intelligence officer in East Germany, saw it differently. Burning secret documents as the Berlin Wall fell, Putin felt abandoned by the Party and by the empire he had been brought up to protect; he later called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century."

Promises of a voluntary and effective commonwealth of liberated nations soon became a rueful memory. With the lonely exception of the Baltic states (particularly Estonia), democratic development came slowly and fitfully to the former republics, when it came at all. The Central Asian republics—the "stans"—ranged in political shape from a North Korean model in Turkmenistan to an oil autocracy in Kazakhstan run by a dynast from the Communist era. Belarus is run by a petty dictator, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who informed a German newspaper that "not everything connected with that well-known figure, Adolf Hitler, was bad." In Azerbaijan, the patriarch Heydar Aliyev, a K.G.B. general in his salad days, bequeathed the nation's throne to his son, Ilham. And so on. The levels of autocracy, criminality, tin-pot cronyism, and resurgent nationalisms emerged on such a heroic and ruinous scale that the historian Stephen Kotkin has referred to the less fortunate republics of the former Soviet Union as "Trashcanistans."

Moscow did not engage in large-scale violence in the post-Soviet realm until 1994, but, not surprisingly, when it did it centered on the Caucasus—for centuries a cauldron of ethnic emotion and battle. By levelling the Chechen capital, Grozny, Yeltsin reenacted the tragedy of Lyndon Johnson, a politician whose early liberal intentions were overwhelmed by his commitment to a senseless and unwinnable war. Vladimir Putin has none of Yeltsin's democratic pretensions. His focus is Russian power and its reestablishment. And, even as the world rightly condemns his ruthless invasion of Georgia, imagining the world as he sees it is a worthwhile exercise.

Taken individually, the West's actions since the collapse of the Soviet Union—from the inclusion of the Baltic and the Central European states in *NATO* to the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state—can be rationalized on strategic and moral grounds. But taken together these actions were bound to engender deep-seated feelings of national resentment among Russians, especially as, through the nineteen-nineties, they suffered an unprecedentedly rapid downward spiral. Even ordinary Russians find it mightily trying to be lectured on questions of sovereignty and moral diplomacy by the West, particularly the United States, which, even before Iraq, had a long history of foreign intervention, overt and covert—politics by other means. After the exposure of the Bush Administration's behavior prior to the invasion of Iraq and its unapologetic use of torture, why would any leader, much less Putin, respond to moral suasion from Washington? That is America's tragedy, and the world's.

There is little doubt that the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, provided Putin with his long-awaited *casus belli* when he ordered the shelling of South Ossetia,

on August 7th. But Putin's war, of course, is not about the splendors of South Ossetia, a duchy run by the Russian secret service and criminal gangs. It is a war of demonstration. Putin is demonstrating that he is willing to use force; that he is unwilling to let Georgia and Ukraine enter *NATO* without exacting a severe price; and that he views the United States as hypocritical, overextended, distracted, and reluctant to make good on its protective assurances to the likes of Georgia.

Inevitably, a number of neoconservative commentators, along with John McCain, have rushed in to analyze this conflict using familiar analogies: the Nazi threat in the late nineteen-thirties; the Soviet invasions of Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. But while Putin's actions this past week have inspired genuine alarm in Kiev and beyond, such analogies can lead to heedless policy. As the English theologian Bishop Joseph Butler wrote, "Every thing is what it is, and not another thing." Cartoonish rhetoric only contributes to the dangerous return of what some conservatives seem to crave—the other, the enemy, the us versus them of the Cold War.

Only one with a heart of stone could fail to be moved by the spectacle of the leaders of Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states standing by Saakashvili last week at a rally in Tbilisi. But Putin is not Hitler or Stalin; he is not even Leonid Brezhnev. He is what he is, and that is bad enough. In the 2008 election, he made a joke of democratic procedure and, in effect, engineered for himself an anti-constitutional third term. The press, the parliament, the judiciary, the business élite are all in his pocket—and there is no opposition. But Putin also knows that Russia cannot bear the cost of reconstituting empire or the gulag. It depends on the West as a market. One lesson of the Soviet experience is that isolation ends in poverty. Putin's is a new and subtler game: he is the autocrat who calls on the widow of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. To deal with him will require statecraft of a kind that has proved well beyond the capacities of our current practitioners.

David Remnick has been the editor of *The New Yorker* since 1998 and a staff writer since 1992. He is the author of seven books; the most recent is "Holding the Note," a collection of his profiles of musicians.

The Ted K Archive

David Remnick
Boundary Issues
August 15, 2008

Published in the print edition of the New Yorker Magazine on August 25, 2008.
<newyorker.com/magazine/2008/08/25/boundary-issues>

www.thetedkarchive.com