

The Washington Post
January 28, 2018

Book Review

The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past
by Shaun Walker, Oxford, \$29.95, 278 pp.

Uses and abuses of history in Putin's Russia



Russian servicemen partake in a procession commemorating the first anniversary of the Crimean treaty signing. (Maxim Shemetov/Reuters)

by Svetlana Savranskaya

This book reads like a war travelogue — the author travels through Russia’s wars current and past, through memories of wars and propaganda of wars, and finds that politically enhanced narratives of the past Great Patriotic War echo in today’s fratricidal conflict in eastern Ukraine. The subject of “The Long Hangover,” as author Shaun Walker defines it to a public school teacher in Irkutsk, is “the elevation of the war victory to a national idea in Russia.” More generally, historical memory in post-imperial Russia, a country that is trying to build a post-Soviet identity, is the main theme that links 12 chapters covering a geographic expanse from Magadan in the far northeast to Crimea in the southwest.

“The Long Hangover” is also about the long and painful recovery from the dissolution of the Soviet Union — an event that shocked even those who were not true believers in the Soviet system. This subject comes up in many recent books and memoirs as people try to explain Russia’s recent global resurgence after its annexation of Crimea. Walker believes that “the particular way in which the Soviet Union disintegrated, and the vacuum of ideas and purpose it left in its wake, is undervalued when it comes to our understanding of Russia and the whole post-Soviet world.”

Svetlana Alexievich, who was born in the Soviet Union and won a Nobel Prize in literature, seems to be making the same point in her eloquent polyphonic writing based on interviews with people who had to make the transition from the hypocritical and stagnant but predictable socialism of the 1980s to the no less hypocritical robber-baron capitalism of the 1990s. The country and the individuals populating it suddenly lost something more than stability; they lost the sense of belonging to something greater than daily life, their sense of orientation.

Walker is a reporter for the Guardian (and previously for the Independent) who covered Russia and lived in Moscow for many years, and is fluent in Russian. On assignment and researching for this book, he traveled to the faraway corners of the former Soviet Union and interviewed people whose voices are heard very rarely, especially in the West: a former gulag prisoner still living in Magadan, a Chechen who fought against the Russians in the First Chechen War and who now fights alongside them in Eastern Ukraine, an amateur historian who organized a gulag museum in his apartment, a high-level rebel leader in Donetsk. The author must be a great listener and a careful interviewer to win the trust and confidence of all these individuals. In fact, the most striking feature of his reporting is how empathetic he is to his subjects. Even when he points to a large dose of Russian patriotic TV propaganda as the source of some of their views, he always finds real grounds and genuine grievances that made them susceptible to that propaganda in the first place. He takes their stories seriously without dismissing their experiences. Most of them express support for the direction in which President Vladimir Putin is taking Russia.

Walker is right on point in showing that when Putin came to power in 2000, he himself was a product of that traumatic dissolution of his motherland and the grueling 1990s. He personally made out well, but those years taught him how not to do things. He was handed the highest office in a country that was demoralized, fearing dissolution and already becoming angry with the West. Putin listened to what was already there in society and used it skillfully to strengthen his political power and popular support. He promised to bring Russia back to greatness and great-

power status. Smart macroeconomic policies and the rising price of oil helped, but he nonetheless confronted a fragmented, disillusioned society with a troubled sense of its history.

So history again became a battlefield, as it was during the years of perestroika — only then the battle was led by the Gorbachev reformers who wanted to fill in history's "blank spots," such as the Katyn executions, when the Soviet secret police killed more than 20,000 Poles in 1940 and blamed it on the Nazis, and the Stalinist purges. This time, in the 2000s, a usable history was needed to help build a strong state, a great Russia. Starting in 2009, when the Kremlin set up the Commission to Prevent the Falsification of History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests, writing the national history became a national priority. In 2013, Putin called for creation of unified high school history textbooks.

In a society that could not seem to agree on anything, the memory of the Great Patriotic War, as World War II is called in the former Soviet Union, was the only unifying narrative. When Russia confronted its bloody and turbulent history in the 20th century, the war was universally regarded as an experience of common heroism and suffering, which liberals and conservatives, internationalists and nationalists could relate to and agree on. It was chosen by the Kremlin as ground zero from which to build Russian greatness. In the process of celebrating victory over fascism, the memory of the gulag was gradually pushed aside — not banned from public discourse but hushed. Walker shows how the historical memory of the war was used to cover up and even justify Stalinist crimes — a former prisoner tells him that the camps contributed to the victory, produced gold for the defense effort and developed the cold, inhospitable regions.

In an amazing twist, the memory of the war has been used by the current leadership of Chechnya to erase the memory of the deportation of the entire Chechen population in February 1944 and the memory of the cruel First Chechen War. In place of memorials to the deportation, one finds memorials to the victory, and the need to develop the Chechen nation is now subsumed in glorifying the effort to build a proud, powerful and multiethnic Russian state.

As Walker writes about the uses and abuses of historical memory, touching on the war, the gulag, wartime deportations, the Chechen wars, the Sochi Olympics and the annexation of Crimea, his most original accounts come from the current war in Ukraine. Here, the memories of the great war are integral and often skillfully used to contribute to today's conflict — to present it as another struggle against fascism. In fact, even symbols on both sides (red and black for the Ukrainian nationalists; the orange and black Saint George's ribbon for the Russian patriots) come from experiences in World War II.

And yet, Walker's interview-based analysis deftly avoids the customary black-and-white portrayal of the war in the Donbass region, home to Donetsk. He acknowledges the ultra-nationalist and fascist elements in Ukraine's Maidan movement that deposed President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, and the genuine disgust they inspired in the eastern parts of the country. He shows that not all supporters of Ukrainian independence shared the Maidan program, especially its more radical elements, such as pushing against the Russian language and decommunization laws. He shows Russia's legitimate security concerns about its Black Sea fleet and the possibility of Ukraine's membership in NATO. It is not that Ukraine simply fell victim to Russian aggression, but rather that the Ukrainian oligarchs who had ruled the country for the

past 25 years were not able to unify the country and deliver decent living standards or the sense of a new identity to its citizens.

A large part of the bitterness in eastern Ukraine can be understood through the dynamics of winners and losers in post-Soviet Ukraine. All that created fertile conditions for Putin's quick move to bloodlessly annex Crimea and inflame the existing tensions in the east when Ukraine plunged into another political crisis. What seems to be missing from the description of the conflict in Ukraine is the role of the West, because it certainly was not a bystander. At a minimum, Russia's perception of the West's policies in Ukraine played a great role in its sense of threat and urgency and, I would argue, even in the current ideology of patriotism.

In recent years in Russia, there has been a resurgence of interest in history — not just the history of the war but also the history of the gulag and family histories. Beginning in 1999, the Memorial Society in Moscow has organized an annual essay competition for high school students titled "People in History: 20th Century Russia." The essays, dealing with family histories, are based on interviews with relatives and research in local archives. Recently this competition came under threat from nationalists and patriots who accused the organizers of trying to rewrite Russian history with foreign money. (The essay contest is supported by Russian and foreign funding; in 2016, the international branch of the Memorial Society was named a foreign agent by the Russian authorities.) In December, Russia lost its most prominent advocate of honest history, Arseny Borisovich Roginsky, one of the founders of the Memorial Society and the essay contest.

The struggle for historical memory in Russia is here to stay.

Svetlana Savranskaya is the director of the Russia programs of the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

Copyright 2018 The Washington Post