

Putin's dangerous reading!

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Anatoly Sobchak, the reformist mayor of Saint Petersburg with whom Vladimir Putin worked after he left the KGB in 1990, once suggested that Putin might be Russia's Napoleon Bonaparte. And, in a sense Sobchak was right, and much of what I wrote in March 2000 in this article has occurred:

<http://www.jeffschubert.com/index.php?id=20>

Now, in order to justify his impending return to the presidency, Putin has invoked the cases of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles De Gaulle and Helmut Kohl as men who held power for a long time and who have been treated quite well by history - in contrast to Russia's own Leonid Brezhnev.

Dmitry Peskov, his press secretary has said: "Putin reads all the time, mostly about the history of Russia. He reads memoirs, the memoirs of Russian historical state figures."

This is dangerous reading!

Contrary to what Peskov and Putin undoubtedly think, such reading - concentrated on Russian historical state figures - adds to the evidence that Putin will increasingly become a negative influence on the development of Russia.

The reading selection is very narrow and unbalanced, particularly for someone who has little experience of a more liberal democracy, and will work to reinforce - rather than moderate - Putin's natural psychological instincts. Putin will increasingly see Russia in terms of his own desires and needs, rather than the real desires and needs of Russia. He will unconsciously distort his views of the latter so that they fit in with the former.

Josef Stalin said to Sergo Beria: "If you want to know the people around you, find out what they read." But we can also get a sense of Stalin from his own reading: he wrote in the margin of a biography of Ivan the Terrible: "teacher teacher".

Mao Zedong, like Stalin, read a lot of pre-communist history for guidance. Li Zhisui, Mao's doctor, wrote that Mao "turned to the past for instruction on how to rule": "Immersed as he was in Chinese history, and thus in the power struggles and political intrigues that were part of every court, Mao expected political intrigue within his own imperial court, and he played the same games himself. Even if aspirants to power told Mao the objective truth, he could not accept it because he saw conspiracies everywhere."

The reading of Stalin and Mao distorted their thinking. While I am not equating Putin with Stalin or Mao, Putin's concentrated reading about Russian historical state figures suggests that he is beginning to see himself as such an "historical" figure.

Napoleon, Stalin and Mao - during their times in power - increasingly saw themselves as indispensable to their countries. And, in all cases the consequences of this were negative; although the negatives were greater in some cases than in others.

In 1812 Napoleon told General Caulaincourt that he was "the only man alive who knows the French thoroughly, as well as the needs of the peoples and of European society". "France needs me for another ten years. If I were to die there would be general chaos." Caulaincourt noted, that as far as any opposition in France to his policies was concerned, Napoleon "paid little attention to it and attributed it in general to narrow views, and to the fact that few people were capable of grasping his great projects in their entirety".

In 1952, Stalin expressed his self-belief to the Communist Party's Central Committee when ordering further investigations of Soviet citizens: "Here, look at you - blind men, kittens, you

don't see the enemy; what will you do without me? - the country will perish because you are not able to recognise the enemy."

Mao was no different. His long-time chief body-guard, Wang Dongxing, noted that "Mao considers no one in the whole of the Communist party indispensable to the party except himself". Dr Li wrote that "Mao had an almost mystical faith in the role of the leader. He never doubted that his leadership, and only his leadership, would save and transform China."

The attitudes of Napoleon, Stalin and Mao were influenced by their success. In the words of Louis de Bourreinne who was Napoleon's friend and first secretary: "Intoxication which is occasioned by success ... produces in the heads of the ambitious a sort of cerebral congestion".

Of course, Napoleon, Stalin and Mao are not the only dictatorial personalities in history, and some have left a more positive long-term legacy.

One example of the latter is Kemal Ataturk of Turkey. In 1938, with tensions rising in Europe, the dying Ataturk said: "If this second world war catches me when I'm still in bed, who knows what will become of the nation. It is I who must return to be in a position to take charge of government affairs."

Like Napoleon, Stalin and Mao, Ataturk saw himself as indispensable – and in a very positive light. In 1937, Ataturk explained his position in these terms: "Man, as an individual, is condemned to death. To work, not for oneself but for those who will come after, is the first condition of happiness that any individual can reach in life. Each person has his own preferences. Some people like gardening and growing flowers. Others prefer to train men. Does the man who grows flowers expect anything from them? He who trains men ought to work like a man who grows flowers."

So, why did Ataturk have a more long-lived positive influence than the others? There are a number of reasons related to the circumstances of the time and their own personalities, but Ataturk was not obsessed - as Mao and Stalin – with reading about the influence of individual historical figures, and he was not obsessed – as Napoleon – in boosting the international power of his own country. Rather, he looked at Turkey with a much greater eye on the future than on the past. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew – who is also reportedly admired by Putin - was similar.

According to a 1 November Reuters article, "Peskov said Putin had a keen interest in Tsarist Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin and Russian Orthodox philosopher Ivan Ilyin, who said Russia should plot an independent course between dictatorship and democracy. Putin has made no secret of his respect for Stolypin, who crushed dissent but also introduced land reform as prime minister from 1906 to 1911 under Czar Nicholas II. Putin said in July that a statue of Stolypin should be placed outside the Russian government's headquarters in Moscow."

"A true patriot and a wise politician, he understood that both radicalism of all sorts as well as stagnation, a lack of reforms, were equally dangerous for the country," Putin said of Stolypin.

In justifying rejection of "radicalism" Putin has the personal experience of the 1990s, but this - along with his own personality - has made him too fearful of change. Reading history is an excellent way of understanding the nature of people and their actions and reactions, but that understanding then has to be applied in a contemporary context with an eye to the future - and not used to justify existing notions.

Putin would be well advised to read more widely; he has already read enough Russian history!

The full Reuters article is below:

Putin invokes history's lions for return to Kremlin

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Vladimir Putin has an answer for Russians worried that his return to the presidency next year will usher in an era of stagnation: study the careers of Franklin D. Roosevelt or Charles de Gaulle. Putin could be president until 2024 if he wins the maximum

two successive terms and by then would have ruled for almost a quarter of a century. His decision to reclaim the presidency has brought frequent comparisons with Communist leader Leonid Brezhnev, whose 18-year rule of the Soviet Union until his death in 1982 is widely seen as an era of political and economic stagnation. But Putin, who has remained Russia's paramount leader even as prime minister since 2008, prefers to hold up the examples of long-serving Western leaders to justify his return to the Kremlin, which is all but certain in next March's election. The former KGB spy's history lessons also give a sense of how he views himself and could provide clues about what his next presidency will hold.

Asked about his decision to return to the post he held for eight years until 2008, Putin corrected an interviewer who referred to Roosevelt, the longest-serving U.S. president.

"Yes, Roosevelt was elected three times," said Konstantin Ernst, the head of the Pervyi Kanal (First Channel).

"No," Putin, 59, snapped back, wagging his finger at Ernst. "Four times."

Roosevelt won elections in 1932, 1936, 1940 and 1944, and died in office in 1945, months after the Yalta Conference where he, Soviet leader Josef Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill carved up Europe at the end of World War Two.

"He ruled the country in the toughest years of economic depression and in World War Two and was elected four times because he was effective," said Putin, who won presidential elections in 2000 and 2004.

After praising Roosevelt, Putin went on to list other long-serving leaders including Helmut Kohl, who was German chancellor for 16 years. He also said he liked de Gaulle, France's president from 1959 to 1969. Like Putin, Roosevelt, De Gaulle and Kohl rose to power in tumultuous times but used iron will and considerable popularity to gain almost complete dominance. Styled by his ruling party as Russia's "national leader", Putin says his biggest achievement is to have saved Russia from collapse after the chaos and humiliation that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Putin, and some of the people who own chunks of the world's biggest energy producer, believe he is a ruler who can ensure stability, at least for now. "He thinks of himself as a national leader," said Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Heroes of their time to supporters, Roosevelt, De Gaulle and Kohl forged fiercely independent foreign policies but, like Putin, were criticized for accruing too much power. Opponents say Russia's stability is a mirage because Putin's decision to stay in power makes a brittle and atrophied political system too dependent on one man. By focusing on Western leaders, Putin is also underscoring to Russian voters his own image as the stout defender of the country's interests in the face of what is often portrayed as Western hypocrisy.

"By invoking de Gaulle and Roosevelt, Putin hints that foreign criticism of him is based on double standards, and presents himself as the country's defender, willing to stand up to hypocritical foreigners who are unfair to Russians," said David Woodruff, senior lecturer in comparative politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

For the leaders of the United States, China and Europe, the message is clear: Putin will accept no lecturing but he also wants to be accepted at the top table of world politics. Even at face value, there may be other parallels. De Gaulle put down dissent in Syria, Lebanon and Algeria. Under Putin, Russia has been accused of human rights abuses in Chechnya and other republics of the rebellious North Caucasus.

Kohl was criticized for turning a blind eye to party corruption. Putin's ruling United Russia party has been branded "a party of swindlers and thieves" by opponents. Roosevelt's record stay in the White House prompted Congress to pass the 22nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which prevents presidents from serving more than two terms.

Putin also admires Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore. Such is his regard that some of his closest allies have taken up reading Lee's books. Lee led Singapore for more

than 31 years until 1990 but remained senior minister and then minister mentor until May this year.

“The analogy with Brezhnev is being made... all such analogies are lame and senseless because we live in a different country, a different world,” said President Dmitry Medvedev, who was swept into the Kremlin in 2008 to get round a constitutional ban on his mentor Putin serving a third successive term.

Putin has remained the more powerful of the two men in their power-sharing arrangement known as the ruling tandem. For such an overtly patriotic Russian leader, Putin has made few references to tsars and Communist Party general secretaries, all of whom ruled large empires. Among the tsars, Putin has preferred comparisons with Peter the Great, a ruthless leader who built Putin’s home town of St Petersburg and laid the foundations of the Russian empire.

“Putin reads all the time, mostly about the history of Russia,” his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said. “He reads memoirs, the memoirs of Russian historical state figures.”

But Peskov said Putin had a keen interest in Tsarist Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin and Russian Orthodox philosopher Ivan Ilyin, who said Russia should plot an independent course between dictatorship and democracy. Putin has made no secret of his respect for Stolypin, who crushed dissent but also introduced land reform as prime minister from 1906 to 1911 under Czar Nicholas II. Putin said in July that a statue of Stolypin should be placed outside the Russian government’s headquarters in Moscow.

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