

STEPHEN F. COHEN

WAR WITH RUSSIA?

FROM PUTIN & UKRAINE TO
TRUMP & RUSSIAGATE



“The most controversial Russia expert in America.”

—THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Review Essay of Stephen F. Cohen's

War with Russia? From Putin & Ukraine to Trump & Russiagate

Robert F. Baumann, PhD

Stephen Cohen has long played the role of contrarian regarding conventional wisdom about Russian behavior. His latest work, titled *War with Russia? From Putin and Ukraine to Trump and Russiagate*, carries on the author's signature line of argument, blending edited versions of past commentaries from *The Nation*—a progressive blog associated with the journal of the same name—with additional reflections compiled since 2014. As Cohen explains in his “Note to Readers” at the opening of the book, events of 2014 both intensified public dialog in the United States about Russian conduct and vaulted him to a heightened level of notoriety. At that time, Russia's seizure of the Crimea at the expense of Ukrainian territorial sovereignty stirred outrage among Western democracies and incited a torrent of criticism leveled at Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russia's subsequent role in instigating a civil war in eastern Ukraine appeared to confirm a pattern of aggression and a wanton disregard for international norms. Some American observers suggested comparisons with Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939.

Against this background, Cohen's cautionary remarks that confrontation with Russia is fraught with risks attracted only slight notice. However, he also contended that the West had disregarded Russia's interests for years and that Putin's actions were fully understandable. This claim energized many mainstream commentators in academia and the news media to direct sharp criticism at Cohen. Indeed, so

stinging were some of the verbal assaults that Cohen felt obliged to assert that he has no hidden agendas and considers himself a patriot. Because responses to Cohen's arguments about Russia are so closely associated with critiques of his motives and objectivity, this review will first pause to relate this reader's perspective on Cohen's scholarship and contributions to the field of Russian history and affairs.

Cohen's first major work was a biography of Nikolai Bukharin, one of the original leaders of the Bolsheviks and a close associate of Vladimir Lenin before and after the October Revolution of 1917. Later a victim of Joseph Stalin's purges in 1938, Bukharin was occasionally a moderate voice in Soviet politics, at least when compared with the gang of cutthroats who rode Stalin's coattails to the pinnacle of power in the Soviet Union. For instance, Bukharin diverged from Stalin's position on the aggressive

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collectivization of agriculture, a policy that yielded a human catastrophe across much of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere. The likeness of Bukharin drawn by Cohen was that of a communist intellectual trying to build a Soviet future. In a 1985 work titled *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917*, Cohen vigorously advanced the proposition that Bukharin—and, in fact, Bukharinism—constituted a realistic alternative path for Soviet development in the 1930s, one that would have been far less brutal than the actual course of events with Stalin at the helm. Thus, boiled down to its essence, Cohen made the philosophical argument for the role of contingency in history. This scholarly position, incidentally, is one that this reviewer vehemently endorses.

Although Cohen's case might have been slightly optimistic concerning both Bukharin's prospects and the likely outcomes had he, not Stalin, ascended to power, the argument was well worth making. I assigned *Rethinking the Soviet Experience* to many of my students over the next decade or two. The book also attracted the notice of reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who in the late 1980s was searching for a historical narrative that highlighted the roles of Bukharin and Nikita Khrushchev over those of Stalin, Leonid Brezhnev, and Yuri Andropov. Gorbachev understood that in order to salvage the legitimacy of the communist party that he hoped to reform, he needed to carve out an ideological detour around the worst dogmas and deeds attributable to the regime he now headed. Of course, in this endeavor, Gorbachev failed. Bracketed by two sharply divergent political trends, an angry conservative reaction to his right and accelerating liberalization to his left, he lost control of events; the Soviet Union fractured. With the blessing of Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Federation, the fifteen ethnically based constituent Soviet republics exercised their theoretical right to secede.

More than many observers at the time, Cohen harbored deep skepticism about Yeltsin. Cohen bought into Gorbachev's earnest effort to transform Soviet society and believed he might have succeeded given better luck and more time. In turn, Cohen evinced doubts about Yeltsin's credentials both as a democrat and transformational figure. While many in the West admired Yeltsin's dramatic defiance of the attempted putsch against the Soviet Union's reformist government in 1991, Cohen was not sold that Yeltsin was much more than a savvy opportunist politician.¹ As Cohen notes in his prologue of

War with Russia?, it was Yeltsin, not Putin, who began the de-democratization of Russia by initiating curbs on the powers of parliament and allying himself with so-called oligarchs who bought out key media outlets. While not denying that Putin has tightened the reigns of central authority considerably more since 1999, Cohen correctly rejects assertions that Putin is some kind of autocrat. As he remarks, "If he is really a 'cold-blooded, ruthless' autocrat—'the worst dictator on the planet'—tens of thousands of protesters would not have repeatedly appeared in Moscow streets [in 2011]."² Indeed, the regime did tolerate massive protests. However, two qualifications are in order. First, this was during the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev, and second, Putin would go on to curb the right to public assembly once back in office. Still, Cohen also notes that Putin does not wield authority exclusively. That is true, strictly speaking, but the main reasons are not particularly pleasing. It is not the duma, the Russian parliament, or the courts that exercise a meaningful check on presidential authority. Rather, so-called *siloviki*, prominent (usually outrageously wealthy) figures with connections to the Federal Security Service (a successor security agency of the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* [KGB]) or the military, enjoy considerable sway as do the agencies themselves. Public opinion sometimes exerts influence but not usually through democratic institutions intended for that purpose.

Putin's Regime

Disagreement over Putin's regime stands out as one of four intersecting axes of opinion, each reflecting a continuum of opposing positions, taken up in this article. Because Cohen's commentaries are so wide-ranging, it is practical to address only a few major issues that distinguish his views from those of the great majority of his Western contemporaries in the field of Russian affairs. Thus, the first question revolves around the nature of Putin and his presidency. Has he been the victim of demonization by Western commentators, as Cohen claims, or does the common critique largely capture the true spirit of his regime?

Cohen contends that Putin's bad press in the United States stems from his determination to resist the creation of a U.S.-dominated world order.³ In truth, quite a few of America's allies have been uncomfortable with U.S. unilateralism, but they have come to see Russia as an active threat to liberal values. It does not escape



notice that Putin has found partners in China, Syria, North Korea, Sudan, and Venezuela to name a few. If you detect a pattern here, you are not alone. Defining traits of Putin's circle of trust apparently include a disregard for niceties such as the rule of law, contested elections, civil liberties, press freedoms, protection of intellectual property, economic transparency, and so on. In contrast, American support for democratic opportunities of the Arab Spring, wise or not, was anathema to the league of strongman regimes Russia favors. As a 2019 *Time* article summarized, "Today, while some in the West still offer sermons about democracy and human rights, the value that Russia champions on the world stage is sovereignty—which holds that each regime has the right to rule its territory without fear of foreign interference."⁴ In fairness, the United States itself has a checkered past when it comes to lending selective support to undesirable regimes. Thus, Cohen is not straying far from the facts when he argues that anti-Putin rhetoric has at times become a bit overheated.

Nikolai Bukharin (center, wearing hat) at a meeting of the workers and peasants news reporters 15 June 1926 in Moscow. (Photo by Samsonov via Wikimedia Commons)

Cohen concurs with political scientists who describe Putin as a "soft authoritarian" based on the inheritance and retention of some democratic as well as authoritarian elements.⁵ He vehemently rejects characterizations of Putin as a one-dimensional creation of the old Soviet KGB in which he served well over a decade as a young man.⁶ Indeed, Cohen suggests that years of service in East Germany probably gave Putin an appreciation of European culture and perhaps even helped him to think about the West more realistically than many other Russian political figures. Putin's subsequent career has exhibited a measure of pragmatism as well as the strategic resolve to advance Russia's position in global affairs. The key inference here might be that Putin, though problematic, is not a worst-case scenario for the West.

As noted above, Cohen absolves Putin of much of the blame for Russia's steady drift away from legal and democratic norms. Boris Yeltsin centralized authority extensively in the Russian presidency from 1996 on. Yet, during Putin's presidential terms, Russia has tilted increasingly toward authoritarian methods reminiscent of the Soviet period. Recent legislation restricting the criticism of public figures, progressive limitations on opposition political activities, curbs on the activities of foreign religious and nongovernmental organizations (NGO), plans to circle the cultural wagons and seal Russia's internet off from the outside world, and increasingly strident anti-Western rhetoric all seem like harbingers of a return to some version of the past.

Journalist Anna Aratunyan views Putin as a mainstream Russian historical figure, though not necessarily in a flattering way. Generalizing about the nature of Russian politics, she states, "Power, in the Russian tradition, legitimizes itself."⁷ In her opinion, if Putin has authoritarian inclinations, this is not what most contributed to his declining reputation in the West. The turning point, Aratunyan said, was the shooting down of a passenger jet over Ukraine in 2014.⁸ Notwithstanding extensive evidence implicating Russian-supported separatists, Russia denied everything and did its utmost to obfuscate the facts with a bevy of alternative theories. Russia's propaganda campaign was effective domestically but tended to enrage Westerners.

Previously, the darkest shadow hanging over the Putin administration involved the murders of domestic critics such as journalist Anna Politkovskaya or ex-KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko. To be sure, no one has produced evidence linking Putin directly to these events, but unconvincing official investigations inevitably placed the regime in a suspicious light. Journalist Masha Gessen described the circumstances in *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*. Both victims were involved in multiple unofficial investigations of incidents such as the conduct of security forces during the tragic 2002 siege of the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow and the series of apartment bombings in Moscow and other cities in 1999. Official investigations left many loose ends. Politkovskaya and Litvinenko were among those who suspected an official cover-up. They also took an interest in matters such as reports of war crimes in Chechnya.⁹ Subsequent to Politkovskaya's murder in October 2006 and just weeks before his own, Litvinenko took up an exploration of the

facts of that case as well. Meanwhile, more recent cases involving regime opponents such as the 2015 assassination of presidential contender Boris Nemtsov in Moscow or the 2018 Sergei Skripal poisoning case in Britain have done nothing to enhance the image of the Russian government.

During the past two years, Putin has also drawn angry rebuke from the West for his encouragement of far-right authoritarian movements in Europe. The emergence of strong nationalist, anti-immigrant political parties in much of Europe has created a new opening for Putin to cultivate influence across the continent. Ironically, the Russian president is now in a position to reciprocate what he believes has been hostile Western outreach to his domestic opponents. Posturing as a defender of Christian civilization, Putin throws multicultural theory back in the faces of condescending Westerners. In turn, Western critics have engaged in rhetorical escalation based on guilt by association with some suggesting, for example, that Putin is a white supremacist. A simple online search of "Putin and white supremacy" will turn up abundant examples.¹⁰

This article is not the place to engage in a serious discussion of the Russian Federation's complicated, and often problematic, ethnic policies. However, in this writer's experience across the former Soviet Union, most non-Russians do not regard Putin as a racist. (This is not to say that they broadly like his cultural policies or his systematic reduction of regional prerogatives.) In fact, the entire conversation about race and nationality in Russia (and other parts of the former Soviet Union) has its own distinctive set of reference points more grounded in peoples' everyday lives than in the constantly shifting currents of theory prevalent among the American professoriate. In the domain of interethnic relations, the Soviet legacy is not entirely negative given extended efforts to build popular identification

Next page: Russian President Vladimir Putin has simultaneously become among the most revered as well as most reviled current world leaders. He is extremely popular among governments that tend toward authoritarianism, while at the same time he is despised by many liberal, democratic states. Western antipathy for Putin reached a zenith with the forcible Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and intervention on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2015. One manifestation of this antipathy has been unrelenting personal vilification of Putin in much of the Western press as reflected in the depictions of Putin on popular magazine covers. Media contempt for Putin has stoked Russian popular animus toward the West, to the point where many Russians view war with the United States and Western states as inevitable, if not already underway. (Images of covers courtesy of each magazine publisher)



with a multinational state. While there remains considerable ethnic and religious prejudice, *Rossiiiane*—Russians in a civic and cultural rather than ethnic sense—have discovered their own organically grown means of confronting differences. Remarkably, it is probably easier to find a frank discussion about race in Russia than in the United States because the “rules of engagement” are simpler and more forgiving. Then again, overt expressions of racism in Russia seem to be more common.

The Idea of Fascism and Putin’s Political Outlook

The designation of Putin as a fascist by some prominent Western scholars and journalists has drawn Cohen into yet another debate. As already noted, observers have devoted years of analysis to figure out how best to describe Putin’s approach to politics. Suggestions of fascism appear to stem from three kinds of observations. The first pertains to Putin’s progressive departure from Western-style democratic norms, the second relates to his outreach to right-wing movements in Europe, and the third relies on historical analysis.

Prominent Yale historian Timothy Snyder, among others, leaped into the fray to note parallels between the ideas and actions of influential figures around Putin and those of fascists and Nazis in the late 1930s.¹¹ No doubt unintentionally, Putin himself helped facilitate this comparison by defending the necessity of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. That agreement stunned the world by declaring a state of nonaggression between former enemies the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The pact’s secret clauses, finally acknowledged by Soviet historians in the late 1980s, set the stage for the joint invasion of Poland as well as Soviet annexation of the Baltic States. In any case, in this context, Snyder took strong issue with Cohen’s justification of Putin’s decision to protect Russians in eastern Ukraine.¹² In his 2010 work, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, Snyder describes the human catastrophe that befell much of Eastern Europe during World War II and successive occupation regimes. Thus, his more recent suggestion of modern-day echoes and criticism of Russian involvement in stirring up fascistic political groups in Europe drew a response from Cohen and some others.

In September 2018, another scholar, Marlène Laruelle of George Washington University, challenged the validity of applying the fascist label to Putin’s Russia. Making a methodological point, she asserted, “Labeling Vladimir

Putin’s Russia a fascist regime is a serious accusation with policy and potentially legal implications.” She continued, “Unfortunately, the most vocal of Russia’s academic accusers seem to have little interest in testing the ‘fascism’ hypothesis using scholarly tools.”¹³ Without defending Russia’s conduct in Ukraine, Laruelle made two essential assertions. First, Snyder and others did not accurately contextualize statements by Putin and those around him.¹⁴ Second, there is no official ideology in Russia today; even if there are influential figures in Russia whose arguments bear some resemblance to those employed by fascists, these do not constitute a guide for Russian actions.¹⁵ She concludes that “the Kremlin does not live in an ideological world inspired by Nazi Germany.”¹⁶

How, then, does Russia see itself? Kirill, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, offered as cogent of an explanation as anyone in November 2017 when he assured his countrymen that Russia’s history does not move in a circle. In other words, Russia was not working its way toward a seismic event such as the Revolution of 1917. “On the contrary,” he argued, “today we are again learning to exult in national unification and reconciliation We are learning from our own mistakes. We have acquired immunity with regard to those forms of radicalism, and for us as never before consensus and common values are important.”¹⁷ Implicit in this statement is that the Putin government has brought stability, even at the expense of civil liberties, and Russia is capable of weathering a crisis. Russia is not deceived by the Western façade of juridical norms that conceal double standards and justify interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Ideological arguments aside, to many Russians who endured the turmoil and economic insecurity of the 1990s, the Putin years seem like a change for the better.

Some outside observers wonder whether Russia views itself through the lens of Eurasianism, a vaguely defined outlook framing Russia as a civilization between the East and the West. The idea of Eurasianism has had many proponents over the past century, but they tend to diverge as soon as they get into the details. Curiously, the idea first gained a strong ideological foothold among Russian intellectuals living in exile after the revolution. Alexander Dugin, a professor at Moscow University, is probably the best-known advocate of Eurasianism in Russia today, and he epitomizes the sources of its attraction as well as the reasons it is unlikely to take hold as an official point of view. Boiled down to a bumper sticker about a distinctive

Russian civilization, Eurasianism resonates. Therefore, the proximity of Eurasianists to Putin's government lends a veneer of intellectual substance to the regime. However, as an ideological foundation for national policy Eurasianism, whether as elaborated by Dugin or someone else, is hopelessly complex and even convoluted. By comparison, the works of Karl Marx and Lenin were models of clarity. Scholar Walter Laqueur notes the confusion caused by Dugin's "ideological peregrinations" over the years and observes that he has become a leading conspiracy theorist and opponent of Western liberalism.¹⁸

Russia's Foreign Policy

For over a decade, the nature of Putin's quarrel with the West has been the subject of debate among scholars and policy analysts. Former national security adviser and secretary of state to President George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, observed in her memoirs that Putin succinctly spelled out his concerns with the West in 2008. In particular, she cited NATO expansion and the circumstances of ethnic Russians in Ukraine as deeply troubling to Russia. What is most remarkable in that recollection is the consistency of Putin's vision regarding Russia's strategic prerogatives.¹⁹ Those statements effectively foreshadowed Putin's actions during his second stint in the presidency starting in 2012. In reality, as Harvard's Dmitry Gorenburg points out, Russia's general approach to foreign policy has been remarkably consistent since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.²⁰ From this perspective, Russia is not just another country but rather a multinational state with legitimate great power aspirations that demand Europe's respect.

Andrei Tsygankov, a political scientist at San Francisco State University, argued in 2012 that the key to understanding Russian behavior in the international arena is to understand that honor is a central motivating force. Simply put, Russia and the West tend to get along better when Russia feels its interests have been respected.²¹ John Mearsheimer, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, sees the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit as a watershed moment because of the evident interest in adding Georgia and Ukraine as members.²² Since that time, if not earlier, Russia believed its strategic interests had been ignored, if not actually undermined by the West.

Cohen has largely echoed Russia's point of view. Broadly speaking, Cohen believes that the West, not Russia, has been unable or unwilling to set aside Cold

War-era predispositions. As he puts it, "There is the ramifying demonization allegation that, as a foreign policy leader, Putin has been extremely 'aggressive' abroad and his behavior has been the sole cause of the new cold war. At best, this is an 'in the eye of the beholder' assertion, and half-blind."²³ Here Cohen sympathizes with the Russian perspective that the expansion of NATO triggered Russia's responses in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere. He also supports Russia's stance to back the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria on the grounds that it is the lesser of two evils—the other being the Islamic State. He does not lend any serious credence to the former Obama administration policy backing a third force in Syria.²⁴

The most intractable obstacle to a return to normalcy between the West and Russia is the conflict in Ukraine. Here, in particular, Cohen diverges sharply from mainstream Western opinion. Cohen asserts flatly that the yearning of Ukrainians for an independent statehood is a fallacy. On the contrary, he affirms the Russian nationalist line that Ukraine has always been divided and has no past as a unified nation. Proceeding from this observation, he argues that the European Union's attempt to draw Ukraine into a closer relationship constituted a "reckless provocation."²⁵

In fairness to Russia, the historical status of the Crimea has been particularly complex. Russia subjugated the Crimea under Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century and formally annexed it in 1783. During the Crimean War (1853–56), and again during World War II, Russian soldiers died defending the peninsula and the Port of Sevastopol. Russian emotional attachment owes much to this history as well as the fact that the majority of the population there has long been ethnically Russian. (Then again, the Crimean Tatars who did not leave after the initial Russian conquest were subject to Stalin's purges and subsequent deportations.) Anyhow, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev orchestrated the administrative transfer to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954, an action that Russians sought to reverse with a referendum in January 1991 even before the Soviet Union's demise.²⁶ In short, the Crimean question was on the table between Russia and Ukraine even before it entered the international spotlight.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Cohen's take on Putin's foreign policy is that he is almost alone among Russian experts in his utter dismissal of the Ukrainian perspective. Western journalists, including a significant



number of Russian émigrés, take serious exception and are quick to note how much Cohen's narrative parallels those of major Russian media outlets owned by Putin cronies that unfailingly support official state positions. Indeed, some critics contend that the American and Western approach to Russia has been entirely too soft. For example, former World Chess Champion-turned-opposition spokesman Gary Kasparov notes, "Obviously Russia violated the agreement [the Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukraine's frontiers in exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons] when it invaded and then annexed Crimea in March 2014." He adds bitterly, "It tells the world that American security promises are worthless."²⁷ All four recent American presidents (Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama) were far too anxious to work with Russia and placed far too much faith in their personal relationships with Russian leaders (Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, Dmitri Medvedev, and Vladimir Putin).²⁸

Similarly, émigré journalist Masha Gessen offers a scathing appraisal of the generous treatment Putin received in major American newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los*

Soldiers, believed to be Russian, ride in armored personnel carriers 10 March 2014 on a road near the Crimean port city of Sevastopol. The annexation of Crimea continues to be the most hotly contested impediment to normalization of relations between Russia, the United States, and other Western nations. (Photo by Baz Ratner, Reuters)

Angeles Times, and the *Washington Post*, which glossed over Russia's failures to meet its own promises and its gradual abandonment of democratic principles.²⁹ Gessen asserts that during Putin's first term as president, few periodicals (*The Economist* being a notable exception), took Russian misbehavior seriously, having moved on to the war on terror or more interesting developments in American and European politics. Gessen adds, "Having told their audiences and themselves that Russia was safely entering a period of political and economic stability, American media effectively declared the Russian story dead, cut the resources available to cover it, and thereby killed their ability to report the story."³⁰ Russia's rising revenues from oil and gas eclipsed interest in the war in Chechnya or pervasive corruption.

Members of the scholarly community have weighed in forcefully as well. Prominent Yale historian Timothy Snyder, in *The Road to Unfreedom*, describes at length the progress of events in Ukraine from the Maidan protest movement in 2013 through the takeover of the Crimea by Russia and the incitement of war in eastern Ukraine. He disassembles official and unofficial claims from Russian sources point by point. He characterizes the purpose of RT (Russian Television), the state-funded television channel, as “the suppression of knowledge that might inspire action, and the coaxing of emotion into inaction.”³¹ Snyder finds a Russian pattern of misdirection, half-truth, and falsehood aimed as much to paralyze critical analysis as to persuade anyone of Russia’s position. For Snyder, there is no mistaking Russia’s role in subverting Ukrainian statehood.

On a theoretical plane, Snyder attributes Russian strategic behavior to “strategic relativism.” The point, simply put, is that if Russia has no prospect of catching up with the West economically or technologically, it could still take the United States and Europe down a notch by means of information warfare.³² He summarizes, “In strategic relativism, the point is to transform international politics into a negative-sum game, where a skillful player will lose less than everyone else.” Surveying Russia’s result in Ukraine to date, Snyder notes that Ukraine has to date withstood outside aggression and even carried out “free and fair elections.”³³ Meanwhile, Russian action provoked a proportionate reaction from the West, chiefly in the form of sanctions.

Another thoughtful observer, Nina Khrushcheva, granddaughter of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, likens the annexation of the Crimea to Putin’s version of the Monroe Doctrine. This does not mean she approves, however. She merely asserts that Putin chooses to view the action as within the norms of great power behavior. In assessing Putin’s motives, Khrushcheva highlights Russia’s sense of historic grievance that might successfully fuel Putin’s drive to rally Russian patriotism but “offers no future” in terms of building a better life for the Russian people.³⁴ Addressing comparative assessments of Russia and the West as a now self-identified Westerner, she concludes, “Yet for all the West’s inconsistency and even hypocrisy, since the 1991 Soviet collapse we have (for the most part) lived in the world of comfort and civility, not ideological fervor and militant rejection of legal and economic institutions.

On a larger scale, this has benefited all. Putin’s Russia will never be able to make the same claim.”³⁵

Has the West Become Russophobic?

Cohen sees himself as a balancer, getting readers to see the other side. He laments what he terms “Russophobia” among much of the American political class as well as high-profile journalists and academics. Has Cohen “stayed the course” on this topic since the publication of *War against Russia*? In a recent interview, Cohen disputed the widespread characterization of Russian meddling in the 2016 elections as an “attack” on the United States. Cohen asserts accurately that attempts to exert influence on the politics of another state are not unusual and that the United States has not abstained in the past from doing so where its own vital interests are concerned.³⁶ Official American expressions of encouragement to Putin’s democratic opposition prior to Russia’s 2012 election serve as an illustration. Thus, Cohen has a point, and it is fair to add that Putin probably took American involvement quite personally.

Then again, there are two sides to this story as well. The United States’ counterargument essentially boils down to one of intent and techniques. The United States was trying to encourage democracy in Russia, not subvert it. In addition, the United States was overt and transparent in reaching out to Russia’s opposition, which labored under severe legal and structural disadvantages during the campaign. Angela Stent, a professor of government at Georgetown University, wrote that much of Russia’s educated middle class was offended at Putin’s cavalier dismissal of the democratic process in setting himself up for another run at the presidency. Furthermore, independent investigation of the Duma elections of December 2012 indicated “widespread fraud.”³⁷

Meanwhile, the U.S. perception that Russia’s meddling in the 2016 election constituted an “attack” has gone mainstream in the American political class. As noted above, Cohen cried “foul” and issued a precisely framed rebuttal.³⁸ Quite simply, meddling of this kind is not that new. In the current overheated context, Cohen’s take needs a bit more airing in the general American discourse about the election. This reviewer, having watched the campaign unfold from Uzbekistan while on sabbatical, suggested to an audience in 2017 that Russia’s election interference was possible in large measure because of existing dysfunction in the American domestic political debate. Moreover,

Russia barely scratched the surface in terms of what might have been attempted. Cohen is, alas, mostly correct in contending that public dialog about Russia, swept up in powerful cross-currents of our current rage-driven politics, lacks nuance and a rounded understanding of Russia's viewpoint. This is not to say that the United States should condone malicious disruption by Russia or anyone else. On the contrary, 2016 should be seen as a timely warning that democratic countries must take election security far more seriously and that democratic electorates need to be a lot more cognizant of the power of social media as a vehicle for sowing information chaos.

In a recent interview, Cohen raises a specific instance that he regards as symptomatic of the charged atmosphere concerning Russia. He characterizes the 2018 arrest of Russian citizen Maria Butina as mirroring a Cold War approach. Cohen questions, "What did she plead guilty to? Coming here and advocating Russian perspectives without registering as a foreign agent." He adds, "One of the things that worries me is that Russiagate [the election investigation] has generated too many Soviet-style practices by American authorities."³⁹ Mike Eckel, a senior correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, referred to the charges against Butina as "espionage light."⁴⁰ To be sure, she evidently did pass what she learned over to someone with official connections. Yet, her activities, including cultivating contacts in organizations such as the National Rifle Association, were out in the open, whatever her intentions. Indeed, the Butina case is not a classic instance of spying, and Cohen reasonably calls on Americans to reflect on its import.

The line Butina crossed was rather fuzzy. The U.S. judge at the sentencing acknowledged that had Butina registered as a foreign agent her conduct might have been legal. Then the judge added, "But it's because she did not register that her conduct was so dangerous and a threat to our country's democratic institutions." The timing of the case seems to have been consequential, thus adding some weight to Cohen's assertions about dangerous atmospherics. The judge explicitly noted that this occurred while Russia was interfering in the American political process.⁴¹ In the meantime, the plot thickened further still when it came to light that the founder of an antiglobalization NGO in Russia was taking care of Butina's legal fees.⁴²

Cohen is concerned about the very idea that contacts can be considered criminal, citing by way of comparison his own extensive dealings with Russians over the course

of half a century. Contacts are the life blood of international academic research, business dealings, journalistic practice, and much more. Consequently, we could be dealing with a precarious precedent. Does Russia tighten its rules enforcement a little bit more for Americans traveling and researching there? Russia already subjects American travelers, journalists, NGOs, and religious organizations to registration rules. Do we want individual Americans in Russia for perfectly legitimate purposes subject to the kind of tough scrutiny based on vague criteria to which Butina might have been subjected? As standard bearers for civil liberties, would Americans be comfortable with this as a new international standard? As Cohen summarizes, "There was a time when contacts were supposed to be good because it was a way of understanding and avoiding conflict."⁴³

Although he mostly disparages journalists and politicians, Cohen attributes a lot of American antagonism toward Russia to a supposed "war party" based in the Department of Defense and U.S. intelligence agencies.⁴⁴ Where the Department of Defense is concerned, this reviewer's experience as a faculty member for thirty-five years at the Command and General Staff College suggests otherwise, although I do not pretend to know what transpires in conversations in the Pentagon where I have rarely ventured. Certainly within the U.S. Army officer corps, or among representatives of sister services, as seen from an academic perch at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, I simply have not sensed reflexive hostility toward Russia since the Cold War. Concern, perhaps, but that is an occupational requirement, especially in light of recent Russian cyber intrusions. Still, hardly anyone views Russia as a natural or permanent enemy of the United States, and many cut Russia some slack over its reaction to NATO expansion.

Conclusion

Overall, it is most useful to understand Cohen's opinions as the product of a lengthy career of scholarship and analysis concerning Russian affairs. His criticism of Russia has always been muted, and he has positioned himself as the author of a counternarrative that focuses on U.S. shortcomings. His long association with *The Nation*, a left-leaning periodical where his wife Katrina vanden Heuvel is the publisher and former editor, aligns well with his critique of American policy. He is thoughtful and enjoys a wide range of Russian contacts. When it comes to assembling the truth, he "connects the dots"

differently than most of his peers. His takes on the Crimea or Maidan, or seeming lack of interest in human rights violations by the Assad government in Syria, puzzle this reviewer and outrage others. Yes, the West should not have been surprised that NATO expansion offended Russia. Yet, sovereign states that feel threatened by Russia do enjoy the right to seek their own affiliations. Russian actions in Ukraine validate those fears.

At times, Cohen is a provocateur, but if he compels us to sharpen our analysis by examining a contrarian position, this is not such a bad thing. He often brings to light questions that others have neglected. He is especially adept at taking sometimes unfocused or ideologically eccentric views emanating from Russia and turning them into succinct, declarative statements. This alone is helpful. In our current volatile climate, dissenting voices are necessary to the conversation. ■

Notes

1. Stephen F. Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives from Stalinism to the New Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 128–29, 141–42.
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