Praise for *Return to Moscow*

Russia remains an enigma to many outside observers. This delightfully easy-to-read book helps lift the veil of mystery by covering the highlights of Russian history, culture, music, literature, and politics. Further insights are provided by the author's memories of his life in Moscow during the height of the Cold War and by his observations during his return visit to Russia in 2016. His critique of current western policy towards Russia challenges key assumptions underlying U.S. and European views, making this book especially worthy of attention by thoughtful readers.

J Stapleton Roy, Director, Asia Program, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington, and former U.S. ambassador to Singapore, China, and Indonesia.

Return to Moscow is a candid, perceptive and sometimes sentimental testimony of a foreigner who is attached to Russia and who is truly concerned about its present and its future. Tony Kevin has a unique opportunity to compare the Soviet Union's heyday of the late 1960s – early 1970s with the accomplishments and problems of Putin's Russia today. Readers should decide whether the precarious and painful transition can be regarded as a success story or a failure, but the author is definitely more optimistic about the country than many Russians themselves tend to be these days. The book is a must-read for those who are interested in a deeper understanding of the country, its values and Russian foreign policy motivations, than Western Kremlinology usually offers.

Dr Andrey Kortunov, Director-General, Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow.

A moving personal testimony about the Russian people and society, which reflects on developments from the late Soviet years to the transformed Russia of today. Written with insight and sympathy, this book provides a unique window into how Russia has changed. At the same time, it reveals the profound continuities of a people buffeted endlessly by history

yet characterised by an enduring resilience and humanity. This book will be read with pleasure and profit by anyone interested in how people lived in the Brezhnev years, and how Russians live today and what they think of the world about them.

Richard Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics, University of Kent, UK, and Associate Fellow of Chatham House, London.

Part history, part political, part personal but never dull, Tony Kevin vividly illustrates many of the facets of the kaleidoscope that is Russia today. Every chapter is a self-sufficient essay. Together this easily-read account provides a host of telling insights, anecdotes and personal opinions that illuminate the enigma of Russia's place in a fast-changing world. Tony Kevin, a former diplomat, has lost none of his analytical skills at dissecting and reviewing this, the most complex of the major powers. He often provides opinions that challenge conventional wisdom in a persuasive manner.

Julian Oliver, Founding Secretary General, EurActiv, Brussels.

Return to Moscow offers some fascinating insights of life in the Soviet Union around its collapse in 1991. The author then returns 25 years later to find a very different country but one which still offers a mix of despair and optimism. Writing from the other end of the world can provide a different and sometimes refreshing perspective on Putin's Russia. But the author tends to turn a blind eye to the dark side of contemporary Russia – the kleptocracy of the elite, the omnipresent security services and the continuing human rights abuses. He can also be faulted by asserting that Russia's 'patient propaganda war' on the West is only a response to Western attacks on Putin. But leaving aside his political views there is much interesting information in this very readable book.

Fraser Cameron, Director of the EU-Russia Centre

RETURN TO MOSCOW

TONY KEVIN

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This book is dedicated to the unique resilience and courage of the Russian people, who have triumphed over unimaginable cruelties at the hands of both invaders and their own past rulers, to create a society that is today worthy of admiration; to the beauties of Russia's landscape, history and culture; and to the grace of Russia's women, who continue to inspire me, in life as in art.

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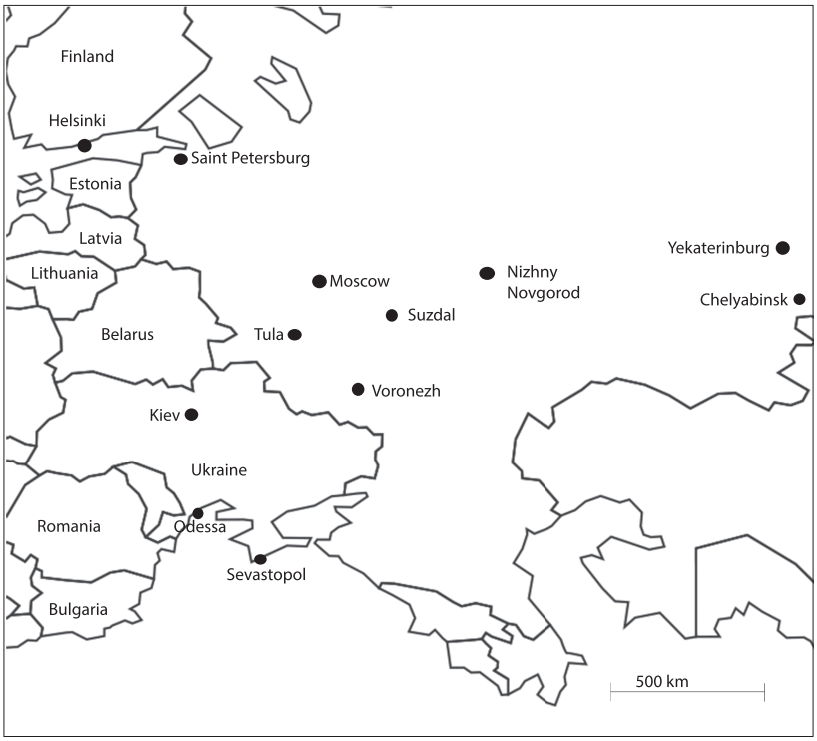
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Prologue

On 25 December 1991 the Soviet Union ceased to exist.[1] The Red flag above the Kremlin was lowered for the last time, and the Russian tricolour, the flag of the former Tsarist Empire, raised in its place.[2] The last President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, surrendered his presidential office suite in the Kremlin to Boris Yeltsin as the first president of the new nation-state of the Russian Federation.

I was forty-eight then. For two-thirds of my life, and three-quarters of my working life as an Australian diplomat from 1968–98, the Cold War had been the dominant geopolitical reality of my world. The Soviet Union was a determining, seemingly permanent feature in a bipolar world balance of power. It was the solid, grim, strategically powerful and nuclear-armed counter-pole, the competing social and economic value system, to its global rival the United States.

When I was born in 1943, the Soviet Union had already existed as a formidable world power for twenty-six years. It had fought off two massive German-led European invasions, and in between those wars endured the terrible dislocations of a brutal Red–White civil war, followed by Stalin's ruthless collectivisation, purges and mass Gulag (prison labour camp) system. Millions of lives had been lost or irreparably scarred. Yet the Soviet Union emerged from World War II (during which I was born in 1943) as a defiant and proud superpower, hardened by its people's incredible sufferings, and ready to assume the mantle of co-leadership of the world with the United States, as the two dominant veto-wielding Permanent Members of the newly created United Nations Security Council.

Hard on the heels of World War II came the Cold War. Scholars dispute who or what really started the bitter rivalry between these recent wartime allies against Hitler, exactly when it began, and whether it could have been avoided.[3] But its defining characteristics were already clear by 1947, and remained so for the next four decades:

- a seemingly endless competition between the capitalist market economy and the communist planned economy, and between their very different proselytising visions of the good society;
- a US–Soviet nuclear standoff under the strategic straitjacket of Mutual Assured Destruction; notwithstanding this enforced stalemate, the ever-present fear of nuclear war triggered by accident or rash decisions by careless leaders;
- a constant jockeying for tactical and propaganda advantage in brutal but carefully contained proxy wars in the Third World;
- a stable central frontline in Europe between the two systems that remained safely delineated by the Warsaw Pact's concrete walls, watchtowers and barbed-wire coils; and
- periodic eruptions of civil protest in the captive East European nations chafing at Soviet restrictions on their freedoms and national aspirations, quickly suppressed by overwhelming Soviet military power and iron resolve to crush them, and with the West each time reluctantly acquiescing in the *status quo ante*.

This was the Cold War world in which I grew up and worked as an Australian diplomat. It seemed permanent. And starting in the early 1970s, this bizarre system seemed to become gradually safer, anchored by prudent US–Soviet strategic arms-limitation agreements and fail-safe nuclear-launch safeguards negotiated by US President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, and by steadily growing East–West trade and cultural exchanges. The central European theatre of the (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) NATO/Warsaw Pact confrontation was stabilised under the shared vision of the Helsinki Final Act, negotiated over several years in the CSCE, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe.[4]

Prestigious academic careers were built in the 1980s around the proposition that the Cold War had become a permanent feature of world

politics. Because it was there, fixed and immovable, it was accepted as a fact of life by many reasonable people. In the conventional wisdom, nobody from either side was really trying anymore to end – much less to 'win' – the now familiar nuclear stalemate. We had learned to accommodate its reciprocal restraints indefinitely. The task was to live with the Cold War in the hope that with the passage of time the Soviet system might slowly heal its internal wounds and become more liberal – more like our system. The phrases 'convergence' and 'peaceful coexistence' were the reassuring mental props on both sides of the divide.

Only a few wild-eyed zealots and armchair strategists in the West – some with particular axes to grind – defied the consensus, arguing passionately that the Cold War still mattered, that it still had to be fought resolutely and could be won by the West.

We know now that the apparent East–West stability was a temporary illusion. The initial post–World War II Soviet military advantage, held by a disciplined fully mobilised nuclear-armed nation under Josef Stalin, whose iron will and cruelty had equalled that of Adolf Hitler, began to ebb away soon after Stalin's death in 1953. The Soviet Union slowly and in fits and starts began to liberalise and to improve living standards. Meanwhile, the West began steadily to outperform the Soviet Union by every economic and social indicator, except in the central nuclear balance of terror. This included science and technology, as well as information technology and conventional war-fighting technologies, in the growth of sophisticated consumption-based economies, and in the magnetic attractiveness of its liberal consumer values and lifestyles to young people living in the Soviet-ruled world. Each successive Soviet leader after Stalin was less ruthless than the one before, and Soviet society slowly became more humane. In their own ways, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov and Gorbachev were all reforming communists, all trying to save a ship that they must have known in their hearts was not keeping up with the West. With Stalin's Terror gone, the only parts of the collectivist production and distribution system that still worked reliably and loyally were the nuclear-deterrent system and the state security system, the KGB. Everything else was breaking down, only kept working by the spread of corruption and side deals that oiled the wheels of a seizing-up command economy.

We also know in retrospect, when the Kremlin files were opened to independent scholars after 1991, how serious were the mass challenges to Soviet communist hegemony from inside the Warsaw Pact: in East Germany (1953), in Hungary (1956), in Czechoslovakia (1968), and repeatedly in fervently patriotic and Catholic Poland (1970, 1976, 1980–81). We know that the mobilising power of civil society resistance organisations Solidarity in Poland (founded in 1980) and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia (1976) in the end demoralised and overwhelmed the 'Brezhnev Doctrine', which had insisted that no Warsaw Pact member country could ever leave the pact or disturb local communist parties' monopoly on power. Sclerotic, increasingly cynical and corrupt Communist Party local elites in East European countries, that had been propped up for so long by the military power and iron will of Moscow, in the end simply lost faith in themselves and abandoned government. When Gorbachev took away the Warsaw Pact props in 1989, with the ironically labelled 'Sinatra Doctrine',[5] these regimes collapsed like shaky ninepins one after the other, East Germany being the toughest and last to fall. Vladimir Putin watched all this happen as a young KGB officer in East Germany.

We know better now from the released files how terrifyingly close the East–West systemic competition had come to nuclear war in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, a turning point in the Cold War. Nikita Khrushchev – a rash and impetuous risk-taker – had secretly sent four nuclear-armed submarines to Cuban waters, where he planned to station them as a permanent direct nuclear-deterrent threat to major US cities – 'Now, let us see how you Americans like having your cities put under the same nuclear threat that you are putting our cities under'. The Soviet submarines' discovery, containment and tactical depth-charge bombardment by surrounding US naval forces precipitated the nearest approach to World War III – which would have meant the final destruction of Western civilisation – in the history of the Cold War. The missiles were very nearly launched under pressure of days of sustained close-range depth charging from US naval surface vessels. Just one Soviet senior officer, Vasily Arkhipov, stopped the Soviet missile launch that would have started the war.[6]

His two despairing colleagues were ready to fire: our world today exists only because the Soviet Navy nuclear-launch protocol required three, not two, individual key entries. The heroic Arkhipov's naval career ended in disgrace.

I was nineteen at the time, still at university. We had no idea then how serious was the risk of nuclear war that Khrushchev's and Kennedy's brinksmanship had provoked. But out of those few days of sheer kick-in-the-guts terror in both capitals came a better understanding at the top of the need to build more safety and predictability into the Cold War, if the world was going to survive its risks. There followed years of genuine mutual efforts by Brezhnev, Nixon and Kissinger to stabilise the Cold War: the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) beginning in 1969 and culminating in the achievement of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the first SALT agreement in 1972. These were my years as Third and later Second Secretary in the Australian Embassy in Moscow as the Cold War began to stabilise.

In 1973, pressed by West European peace activists and by Soviet counterparts like dissident nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov, all in different ways striving for a safer world, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) began in Helsinki. The outcome three years later was the Helsinki Final Act, an agreed framework of Accords in three 'baskets': political-military; economic and environmental; and mutual human rights observance and monitoring.[7]

Henceforth, under détente (literally, 'relaxation') the competition between the rival systems in Europe was guaranteed by treaty to be more peaceful. Although this doctrine of peaceful coexistence was scorned at the outset by some American cold warriors as soft-headed, we see in retrospect that these Helsinki Accords – especially their human rights third basket – opened the way to the eventual demise of the Soviet communist system. The Accords exposed, both in the East European Warsaw Pact nations and in the Soviet Union itself, morale-destroying fact-based comparisons with Western economic and social performance and respect for human rights. As truth and quality consumer goods trickled in under the high ramparts of the Soviet system, the system progressively lost faith in itself and in its will to maintain the exhausting eternal military and social competition with

the West. By 1985, the year of Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power, Soviet communism was already moribund. Gorbachev kept the ship's momentum going, using his great willpower and political magnetism, for another five years. But finally it was too much even for him, and in 1991 Soviet communism staggered to an exhausted end.[8]

Gorbachev had tried vainly to rejuvenate a communist society that had already come to mistrust and despise itself. He looked idealistically for a return to what he believed to be communism's worthy central organising principle for society: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. He called for *glasnost* and *perestroika* (i.e., 'clear thinking', and 'rebuilding' of communist society). He encouraged pluralist decentralisation of power: the growth of autonomous regional democratic parliaments (councils) freed from the iron hand of single-party Communist Party control. He encouraged the East European Communist Party regimes to look for their own national solutions according to their citizens' wishes.

He expected, in return, honesty and decency from the communist managerial elites, for he still believed in an ideal communist society. But the more freedom and flexibility he encouraged, the more corruption and xenophobic revanchism he unleashed. His lofty communist-based ideals were consistently rejected, or abused to advance lesser individuals' personal ambitions and local or ethnic nationalist agendas. The lid was off, and the pot was boiling over.

It all came to a head in 1991. In August, after a botched attempted coup by hardline communist ministers against an exhausted and discredited Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, a strong, charismatic man from Yekaterinburg in Western Siberia who had lost faith in communism and was fiercely ambitious to lead a Russian national state free from energy-sapping entanglements with the Soviet Union and Communist Party, seized his opportunity as Chairman of the Russian Parliament, one of the pluralist bodies Gorbachev had set up, to take full political control of Russia. Gorbachev, still the president and leader of the Communist Party, was left sidelined as an impotent bystander. Yeltsin honoured his pledge to American President George H. W. Bush to protect Gorbachev – still greatly admired in the West – from physical harm. But by mid-1991, nobody in Russian Government or society took any more notice of Gorbachev: real power had passed to Yeltsin.

The outlying Soviet governments quickly scrambled to break free of Moscow's faltering control. The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) were the first to secede from the Soviet Union in August 1991. Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Caucasian and Asian republics followed, in a messy piecemeal process over the ensuing four months.[9]

During an at times sombre, at times drunkenly exuberant, secret meeting on 8 December 1991 at a state hunting lodge deep in the Belavezha Forest in Western Byelorussia, Yeltsin and his Ukrainian and Byelorussian counterparts agreed on an audacious endgame plan, the Belavezha Accords, to terminate the Soviet Union and replace it by a face-saving fig leaf – a 'Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS). Control over the CIS nuclear deterrent was to remain under Russian authority and all nuclear weapons withdrawn to Russian territory. Over the next two weeks, Yeltsin secured the agreement of all the other Soviet republican political leaders to this plan. On 21 December, at a meeting in Alma Ata, the plan was formally agreed by all.

On 25 December 1991, as I celebrated my first Christmas as Australian Ambassador to Poland in Warsaw, Gorbachev finally ceded to the inevitable, resigning as president of the now defunct Soviet Union. Gorbachev went into reluctant retirement, with the parting gift of a well-funded research foundation. The 74-year project of Soviet communism had ended not with a bang but a whimper.

Yeltsin, brimming with charisma and self-confidence, was now president of a new sovereign state, the Russian Federation, with boundaries identical to the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). This Federation inherited the lion's share of the former Soviet Union – 75 per cent of its territory, 51 per cent of its population and 90 per cent of its estimated petrochemical reserves.[10] It was a more cohesive state, of more predominantly Russian ethnicity (80 per cent) and with a stronger Russophone linguistic unity. It had cast away the fourteen less prosperous smaller neighbouring former Soviet republics (six in the west – Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, and the three already seceded Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and eight in the south (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). It also lost 26 million Russians who had made new lives as settlers in adjoining Soviet republics – mostly Ukraine, Kazakhstan and the Baltic States – and who were now left to take their chances in these newly independent neighbouring national states. Yeltsin assumed these states would remain friendly, given their intensely shared Soviet history and multiple ties.

Importantly, Crimea, which Khrushchev in 1954 had arranged to be transferred from the Russian into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, as a gesture of his special affection for Ukraine on the 300th anniversary of the Ukrainian Cossacks' first request in 1654 to join the Muscovy state (Ukrainian Cossack autonomy ended finally in 1775), stayed within the now independent Ukraine under the Belavezha Accords principle of no border adjustments. The hope was that these two former Soviet republics, so closely bound together by Slav blood and language and three centuries of common history, would continue to be particularly good neighbours. '*Eternally Together*', the 1954 commemorative poster proclaimed.[11]

Though relatively smaller Muslim and Asian minority nationalities and national autonomous regions remained within the borders of the new Russian nation, Yeltsin saw Russians as back in charge of this now democratic Russia. This still huge and resource-rich nation could now begin building a glorious national future as a market economy based on Russian values. To Yeltsin and his supporters, Russia's future seemed full of promise.

Yet it was a broken, bankrupt state. Factories were closing down, their assets being commandeered in corrupt privatisation deals by ruthless former communist managers. The only growth industry was the thriving Russian mafia. As the old state-owned production and distribution system collapsed during Russia's terrifying transition to capitalism, there was less food in the shops, less money for schools and hospitals, fewer secure jobs. A new and prolonged 'time of troubles' (*smutnoe vremya*) began for Russia and the other post-Soviet republics. Russia went through a demoralising decade from 1991–2000 of continued economic and social decline, degradation of military morale and battle readiness, and theft of public assets on a grand scale under 'paper-coupon' privatisation.

This painful 'period of transition' was seen as unavoidable by Western free-market economic advisers, who in the Yeltsin period had great influence in Moscow. There was huge capital flight abroad (mainly to London) by the most nimble privatisation profiteers. The strong took what they wanted, and the weak suffered the neglect and abuse of a disintegrating social welfare system. Malnutrition, depression and runaway alcoholism took their toll on Russian society. The population fell into sharp decline as women stopped having babies. It seemed that fewer and fewer Russians believed their country had any future. It seemed a spent force in the world.

Did the Soviet Union 'lose' the Cold War against the United States? Many Russians did not and still do not see it that way – they had made their own social choice to abandon Soviet communism – but some triumphalist Americans certainly believed so, and were keen to press their moment of strategic global dominance. Wiser voices in both West and East – people like Kissinger, Gorbachev, former West German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, scholars like George Kennan, Stephen Cohen and John Mearsheimer, and former US ambassador Jack Matlock – urged the United States and NATO to hold back, to leave Russia time and psychological space in which to rebuild a new sense of national cohesion and purpose under its own emerging system of governance.

Sadly, they were not heeded. Western entrepreneurs, idealistic social engineers and rent-seekers moved in large numbers into Moscow and Saint Petersburg (formerly Leningrad). Western banks, media corporations and prestigious non-governmental organisations set about the great project to Westernise Russian society, starting in these two metropolitan centres of power and culture. Their unspoken goal was a docile Russia – a 'regional power' rather than ever again a rival superpower, that accepted Western hegemony and tutelage, with NATO expanded to the borders of Russia as strategic insurance. The best of them saw themselves as trying to help achieve a 'Moscow spring', a completion of the unfinished democratic revolution begun under Gorbachev and Yeltsin in 1989–91. For the worst of them, it was a time to make lots of money out of Russian

resources, to carve out vast new consumer markets for Western products and services, to milk Russia of its best young scientists and technologists, and to neutralise any possible future Russian military threat to the West.

In Moscow and Saint Petersburg, for elites with some financial security, the 1990s were a time of excitement, of democratic debate and cultural ferment. But for the unprotected poor and middle-income state-employed classes across the nation, these were terrifying years of struggle in a society cast adrift, in a ship with no motor and with the feckless alcoholic Yeltsin at the helm.

It was, in fact, another social revolution as far-reaching as the communist one in 1917–21, though for the most part a bloodless one. Communist elements trying to turn back the clock took to the gun twice, in 1991 and in 1993, but both times were defeated by Yeltsin and his allies – in 1993, with state-ordered army shelling of poorly armed civilian rebels in Moscow. There followed a new Constitution in December 1993, and a new presidential election in 1996. With the advantages of incumbency, patronage and money, Yeltsin won again, though not without real opposition from the Russian Communist Party with its impressive leader, Gennady Zyuganov. Privatisation continued. Yeltsin's popularity continued to slide.

NATO was determined to extend its security *glacis* eastwards. In 1999, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO. In a decisive second wave in 2004, four years into the Putin presidency, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined NATO. Starting in 2003, an 'intensified dialogue' with a view to eventual NATO membership began with Ukraine and Georgia.

What did NATO strategists think they were doing here? Especially after 2004, Russians saw a NATO noose tightening around their own historic strategic *glacis* that had given the Russian heartland safe strategic depth against Napoleon's invasion in 1812, against the World War I invasion by Imperial Germany, and against the Nazi surprise attack in World War II, a *glacis* that no fewer than 23 million Soviet citizens had died trying first to defend and then to recapture during the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45. In just two disastrous years, 1989–91, Gorbachev and Yeltsin had fecklessly given it all away. Now, the Western adversary military alliance was at Russia's gates again,

exercising NATO forces on Latvia's borders less than 700 kilometres west of Moscow.

There is good eyewitness evidence (see *NATO Expansion: Was there a Promise?* posted 3 April 2014 in www.jackmatlock.com) that at the December 1989 Bush–Gorbachev Summit in Malta, which marked the symbolic end of the Cold War, the two presidents agreed verbally that the USSR would not oppose German reunification as a full NATO member, in return for which the United States would not take advantage of political changes in Eastern Europe to expand NATO further eastwards. Gorbachev and former Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze also attest to this. Former US Ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock comments:

> The Malta understanding was between President Bush and President Gorbachev. I am sure that if Bush had been re-elected and Gorbachev had remained as President of the USSR, there would have been no NATO expansion during their terms in office. There was no way either could commit successors, and when Gorbachev was deposed and the USSR broke up, their understandings became moot.

In Bill Clinton's second US presidential campaign in 1996, he committed to support NATO expansion to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, thereby openly abandoning the unwritten 1989 understanding at Malta. Why wasn't it written down? Because, it has been surmised, neither Bush nor Gorbachev, both under political pressures at home, were willing at the time to publicly reveal such politically embarrassing concessions to the former enemy.

Now in 2003–04, seven more former Warsaw Pact members had joined NATO, and Ukraine and Georgia were keen to go the same way. The strategically vital Russia–Ukraine border was just 600 kilometres south of Moscow. What had all the sacrifices been for, many Russians now asked themselves?

So it must have seemed to the vigorous young nationalist new president, Vladimir Putin, with his harsh and deprived childhood in struggling postwar Leningrad and his subsequent successful KGB career, to whom a declining Yeltsin had bequeathed the keys of state power in 2000. Over the next few years, Putin pursued a strong

vision and will to rebuild and reassert the power, wealth and national pride of the Russian state. He brought under control the Second Chechen War (1999–2009), a bitter Muslim nationalist insurgency in Chechnya in the Caucasus, and in 2007 did a deal with a local Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov to govern the war-devastated republic in collaboration with Moscow thereafter. He firmly enlisted the Russian Orthodox Church as a key partner in rebuilding Russian patriotism and conservative social values (a process begun by Yeltsin). Emphatically no communist, but a man who openly mourned the breakup of the Soviet Union as a state,[12] Putin soon showed that he was ready to manipulate and use the young institutions of Russian parliamentary democracy to advance the Russian national project as he saw it.

Initially an admirer of American capitalism and American 'can-do' market values, Putin became increasingly mistrustful of what he saw as hostile American political agendas against his nation, their eastwards expansion of NATO, and their use of 'democracy-building' NGOs to advance Western influence over the internal affairs of Russia's near neighbours, in particular the Baltic States and Ukraine. He came to suspect similar American subversive ambitions in Russia itself. While accepting the logic of economic globalised capitalism, and ready for Russia to compete in that world, he rejected American claims to exceptionalism and political hegemony within the global system. He was not prepared to accept America as the global leader and rules-setter, with Russia as a respectful acolyte grateful for any crumbs from the NATO table. He mistrusted American presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. In particular he mistrusted Obama's Vice-President Joe Biden and Obama's first Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, for their liberal-hawk American triumphalist views of the world and their coldness towards Russia. In a Russian newspaper interview in 2010, commenting on the failed Obama attempt in 2008 to 'reset' relations with Russia, Putin admitted to having been slow to understand what he now saw as a constant pattern of US duplicity towards Russia:

> I was simply unable to comprehend its depth…But in reality it is all very simple…They told us one thing, and they do something completely different. They duped us, in the full sense of the word.[13]

The more Putin consolidated his own power as president after 2000, advancing his nation-rebuilding agenda, and strengthening a top-down economy of state-guided capitalism, the more disliked and feared he became in Washington and NATO European capitals, even as he was becoming more popular at home in Russia for his defence of Russian interests.

The West soon tested Russia's strength and will militarily, first in a proxy war in 2008 in Abkhazia, a Russian-protected minority separatist region within the (now firmly pro-Western) Georgian republic; and then in continuing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine since early 2014. In these proxy wars, both started by Western-supported anti-Russian centralising post-Soviet regimes against pro-Russian separatist regions, Putin's local Russophile allies defended their vital political and territorial interests, with essential but initially covert Russian military support. The Crimean peninsula, with its largely Russian population and its historic Russian naval base of Sevastopol, chose by popular referendum to reunite with the Russian motherland in March 2014, in response to what Crimeans saw as a hostile anti-Russian coup d'état in Kiev.[14]

The breakaway Eastern Ukrainian Russian-speaking region, with its key industrial cities of Donetsk and Luhansk tragically destroyed and depopulated by ruthless heavy Ukrainian Army shelling, became a region of frozen conflict under the de facto protection of Russia. Up to a million Ukrainian civilian refugees fled this ethnic Russian area, more than half into adjoining Russia. There remain coldly determined pro-Russian local forces and undeclared Russian support forces.

As the Russian economy and national morale recovered, and as Putin re-drew Russia's strategic red lines in Abkhazia and Eastern Ukraine, Putin and those politically close to him became more and more the personalised objects of Western disdain and economic sanctions. Putin, both feared and mocked by the West, came to be seen as the ugly face of a new aggressive Russia. At the same time, his popularity grew within Russia to steady levels, around 80 per cent.

With communism gone, the West now needed to define a new credible Russian enemy. It obviously could not be the Russian people. A plausible new enemy was identified in Putin and his allegedly

brutal and greedy 'cronies', the rich and said-to-be-corrupt oligarchs of Putin's Russia. Starting in around 2008, a broad media campaign took shape in the Anglophone countries of the West, and now has a vigorous life of its own. Its proponents asked, what were the keys to Putin's success in Russia? How could he be countered and stopped? Not since Britain's concentrated personal loathing of their great strategic enemy Napoleon in the Napoleonic Wars was so much animosity brought to bear on one leader. Propaganda and demeaning language against Putin became more systemic, sustained and near universal in Western foreign policy and media communities than had ever been directed against any Soviet communist leader at the height of the Cold War.

This hostile campaign evoked an effective defensive global media strategy by Russia. Russia's state-supported international English-speaking media became increasingly sophisticated and internet adept. A new kind of information Cold War took shape, with – paradoxically – Western media voices more and more speaking with one disciplined Soviet-style voice, and Russian counter voices fresher, more diverse and more agile.

My professional interest in Russia had diminished after I completed my post–Cold War ambassadorial posting in Warsaw in 1994. With the end of the Cold War, the world had quickly become a different kind of diplomatic space. The Third World was now the only real game in town. Humanitarian idealists like UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Australia's Foreign Minister Gareth Evans believed there was now a responsibility to use the West's unchallenged military and economic power to protect and promote human rights in troubled countries like the republics of the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Southern Africa, the Middle East, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Burma. There seemed no limits to this new American-led liberal interventionism, to its passionate desire to remove from power those whom it defined as bad leaders and to remake the world into a better place. Humanitarian activism under 'the duty to protect' doctrine was all the fashion. A generation of Cold War–trained foreign policy planners was shunted aside as old

hat, replaced by a new generation of 'liberal hawks' – benevolent interventionists ready to use the West's armed muscle to advance their global agenda of good intentions.

National sovereignty, and the international security system based on the UN Charter and UN Security Council system of collective security decision-making under the restraining safeguard of Permanent Member veto rights, had also become outmoded concepts, to be set aside and shrugged off whenever they conflicted with the interests and views of the new global superpower and its readily marshalled 'coalitions of the willing'. In vain did a now much-weakened Moscow protest in the name of the UN Charter.

US exceptionalism and triumphalism were the sustaining beliefs of these new liberal hegemonists of the Western Alliance: in America, in Europe (especially Britain), and in their loyal outliers Canada and Australia. These Western liberal hawks were actually more threatening to world peace than their prudent and cautious late Cold War predecessors. In those early pre-Islamist fundamentalism years, all seemed possible. Democratic 'springs' and 'colour revolutions' were popping up everywhere. The do-gooders moved restlessly from country to country, from crisis to crisis, sowing the wind. I saw the heyday of this as Australian Ambassador to Poland (1991–94) and then to Cambodia (1994–97).

First, there was the Bill Clinton–Tony Blair axis of good intentions in 1993–2001, then the George Bush–Tony Blair axis to eliminate the evil of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2001–07. It all had tragic consequences. Afghanistan and the entire Middle East region are still paying the terrible human price for the Western alliance's blunders and lies in the service of good intentions.

Until I retired from Australia's diplomatic service in 1998, and even thereafter when I became an independent commentator, I spent little time thinking about the politics or foreign policy of Russia. It seemed sidelined: a shrunken, irrelevant part of the world, left behind by history. Russia looked on helplessly as its former Slav protégé Yugoslavia was dismembered by successive Western-supported partitions in the 1990s – a dismemberment precipitated by Yugoslav

leader Slobodan Milosevic's own cruelty and incompetence. Moscow watched glumly as the whole Balkan region, with its large South Slav populations, slid out of its historic close sphere of affinity and influence into the orbit of its former Cold War adversaries. Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova – all gone.

My main windows into Russia now were books and movies, particularly John Le Carré's perceptive oeuvre of late Cold War spy novels, and Martin Cruz Smith's political thrillers built around the corruption and perils of late Soviet communism and the Yeltsin years. I could barely recognise, let alone understand, this strange damaged country I was reading about. I came to think of Russia as a dark Hollywood disaster movie, with social disintegration, a hopeless corrupt drunk at the helm, ruthless mafia thugs, murderous Chechen terrorists, ultra-nationalists of neo-fascist ideology, renegade arms dealers, desperate women trying to get out, and caches of decaying, out-of-control nuclear weapons.

Two terrible incidents summed up the tragic incompetence of this new Russia for me. On 12 August 2000, just eight months into Putin's presidency, the *Kursk* nuclear submarine sank due to technical failures during exercises off the north coast of Russia, with loss of all 118 crew on board. The rescue response was late, inept and ineffective. Then in September 2004, the three-day siege of a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, occupied by Chechen terrorists ended in security forces losing patience and violently storming the building, resulting in the deaths of at least 330 hostages, including 186 children.

Nor did I recognise or understand at the time the subtle pressures inflicted by the West on Russia in these aimlessly drifting 'years of transition' first under Yeltsin, and then during the first years of Putin's presidency. I should have, because I actually had had first-hand working experience in the 1990s, as Australian ambassador both in Poland and then in Cambodia, of just how powerful and interventionist American liberal imperialism on the march could be. I somehow did not connect those dots with what was happening in Russia.

In Poland in 1991–94, the charming and personable American ambassador, my colleague Tom Simons, inherited the political vacuum left by the collapse of the Russian colonial satrapy there. He

handled his power courteously, and the Poles welcomed the new American-led order intelligently and with their eyes wide open. For them, it was a relief after four crushing decades of Soviet hegemony, and their best strategic opportunity in centuries to advance Polish national interests. The economic transition from state to private ownership was traumatic enough in Poland, but the Solidarity trade union and the Catholic Church's strong social justice values protected Polish workers' interests from the worst excesses of free-enterprise privatisation. Poland came out of the transition an enthusiastic and increasingly dynamic new NATO and European Union (EU) member, ready to claw back strategic advantage from its former Russian overlord – especially in the renascent Baltic States and in the pluralistic, weakly governed key borderland nation of Ukraine, which had for many centuries been contested territory between Poland and Russia, and which now presented Poland with new opportunities for expanded influence.

In Cambodia in 1994–97, I took part in a quite different national trajectory. The Cambodian People's Party, the post-communist party shrewdly led by Hun Sen, declined to be shunted out of power by local protégés of US-funded human rights and democracy-building NGOs and the foreign policy arms of the Democratic and Republican parties. Hun Sen became a hated man in Western human rights circles. But he had the backing of a still strong neighbouring Vietnam and the tacit sympathy of China. Unusually, I found common ground with my realist-minded colleagues, the American, French and ASEAN ambassadors. We argued that Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, for all its faults of corruption and authoritarianism, would provide more security and stability for Cambodia's people after thirty years of dreadful genocidal Khmer Rouge rule and civil war than the offered leadership alternatives at that time. Our views prevailed. The liberal hawks were neutralised, and their hoped-for regime change in Cambodia did not happen. But for a few years it was a close-run thing. I did not think then that there might be any relevance from my experiences in the nineties in Poland and Cambodia to what was happening in Russia. In retrospect, however, I now see that there was.

My interest in Russia revived in the late 2000s as it gradually became an international player again under its tough and energetic new president, and as relations between the West and 'Putin's Russia' went into decline. I began once more to read media and journal articles, and to observe critically how Russia – still a nuclear-weapons state and major conventional military power – was increasingly now stereotyped by the West as the irresponsible rough beast of world politics. I saw how disdain for Russia had become habitual in Western foreign policy communities. Especially as Ukraine boiled over into lethal civil war after the Maidan Square uprising in Kiev in February 2014, which Russia condemned as an illegal coup d'état, I saw that important things were happening in this part of the world, changes that I needed to follow. Russia was back, and so was NATO's enmity to it. I began to think critically about what misperceptions and contradictions might be embedded in prevailing Western narratives about Putin and Putin's Russia.

And my curiosity about what was really happening in Russia began to grow. I had last visited the country when it was a broken-backed state in September 1990, fifteen months before Yeltsin's final self-inflicted dissolution of the Soviet Union – what had been happening since then?

What kind of a country is Russia now, twenty-five years – a full generation – after the demise of Soviet communism? Is Putin trying to bring back a new authoritarian state, under the cloak of Russia's revived Tsarist tricolour flag? Or is he simply the biggest crook of them all, protecting and presiding over a bunch of equally corrupt mafia 'cronies'? Or could he perhaps be a farsighted and resolute national statesman, a sort of modern Russian Bismarck, trying to hold Russia's ground in the ruthless new international power game, while at home steering a careful course between extremes of fascist-leaning ultra-nationalism and reckless naive liberalism?[15]

The 100th anniversary this year of the two 1917 Russian revolutions will inevitably be a time for serious stocktaking in Russia and abroad. How do Russians now see themselves and their national destiny in the world, after their past hundred years of systemic turmoil and misery, and their successful Soviet-led reindustrialisation after 1920 and victory in World War II? How do Russians envisage the

future possibilities of their state and their national destiny, after four generations of war and trauma inflicted on the Russian people; after the international diaspora over many decades of some of their best and brightest people as refugees from communism and anti-Semitism; after all the personal tragedies of international political sympathisers who broke their hearts and sacrificed their lives and families in the cause of advancing Soviet communism – 'the God that failed'?[16] So many widows, orphans and traumatised families. So many lives lost or scarred around the world, in this tragic extended history of many years of worldwide military and ideological competition.

What is there of value in this new Russia, if so much past sacrifice is to have any meaning? What was it all for, if Putin's Russia is now to be cast again as the world's greatest villain and threat to peace? If the Western world is to be persuaded to fall back again into a new Cold War against Russia: no longer communist, but somehow again, or still, the eternal arch-enemy of Western democracy?

Is the Putin dispensation strong, or is it fragile? If it is fragile, how to explain his 80 per cent public approval ratings across Russia in reputable polling? His assured command over a talented and loyal corps of senior state administrators and advisers? His political longevity – seventeen years and still going strong?

So many huge questions about this country. And for me, one large personal question: why am I unable to get Russia out of my system, this strange country I have not set foot in since 1990? Why does this lovely and wounded land, its culture and language, its people, its music, art and literature, continue to draw me back and enthral me, to tug at my emotions and bring tears to my eyes?

So I decided to go back and have a look, while I am still physically mobile enough: not with any academic, professional, political or socio-economic research agenda, but as an intelligent observer with some relevant former diplomatic experience of living and working there forty-five years ago, and now on a private holiday adventure of my own.

When I applied in 2015 for my tourist visa to visit Russia for a month in 2016 (the maximum time allowed), the application form at

the Russian Consulate in Canberra asked me: Have you ever been issued a Russian visa? I was about to answer yes, and look up the dates of my sojourn in 1969–71 and brief visits in 1985 and 1990, when I realised this was not the question. This was a new country now, going by the name of 'Russia', which I had never visited. I answered accordingly 'No', wondering if my literal truthfulness would be challenged. Two weeks later I got my visa – it must have been the right answer.

Russia has inherited so much from the Soviet Union – in territory, assets, state language, history, mixed cultures and ethnicities. Yet forty-five years is almost half a century, in any country let alone Russia. As L. P. Hartley observed in 1953, 'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there'.[17]

All the more so in the case of Russia, risen phoenix-like from the ashes of the dying Soviet Union in 1991, which had itself risen phoenix-like from the ashes of the dying Tsarist Empire of all the Russias in 1917. More than any other nation, Russians have to ask themselves big existential questions about their recent history, not only about the two revolutions in 1917 that their great-grandparents lived through, and the Stalinist horrors their grandparents experienced, but now also about their parents' and their own struggles, privations and disappointments during late communism and the 1985–2000 de-communisation *smutnoye vremya* as well:

> Why did all this suffering keep happening in our Russian nation? Was it inevitable? *Why did we do all this to ourselves?* Weren't we making progress enough, the way we were before all these disruptive changes began in 1917? Weren't we happy enough as a people, the way we were? Why did we have to pull it all down and start again from zero, when other countries with comparable social and political problems did not undergo revolutions, but instead gradually introduced democracy? Who is to blame? Do we Russians suffer from a fatal tendency to reach out for reckless extreme solutions?[18]

Some luckier countries don't need to ask themselves such existential questions. Britain and most of its inheritor Anglophone dominions have enjoyed comfortable constitutional stability since the seventeenth

century. The degree of peace and continuity in our political histories allows us to view them more lightly.

Russians cannot. There are huge shadows over recent generations of Russian lives. These are not only to be measured by the death tolls of wars and Stalinism. Russians must also confront a past marked by the forceful imposition, and later the rejection, of entirely new national value systems in the space of just four generations: from Tsarism to White Revolution to Leninism to Stalinism to Khrushchev-Brezhnevism to Gorbachevism to Yeltsinism to Putinism.

No wonder the Russians are world leaders in inventing political jokes. It may be the only way they can cope with all this disruptive political change.

I was lucky enough to experience a long moment of apparent stability in the Soviet Union, living in Moscow in 1969–71 as a young Australian diplomatic guest, at what seemed a plateau of Soviet power and self-confidence.

These were years when Russian dissidents like Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov (and a few years earlier, Boris Pasternak) had begun to look back reflectively at their cruel tumultuous past, to ask what could be salvaged from it, and even to take some comfort from the first signs of humanisation of social values taking place around them, despite the continuation of a stratified anti-democratic communist power structure and close KGB harassment. These great Russian dissidents were idealists who never gave up their faith in Russia's essential decency and honesty.

I went back again briefly in 1985 as part of an Australian delegation led by Minister John Button for the funeral of a forgettable leader, Konstantin Chernenko. At the funeral I saw signs of incipient social decay: a shabby capital, a proliferation of ageing bemedalled generals in greatcoats and grotesquely huge military caps, and the absence of anybody young or fresh-looking.

But the next leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was a truly impressive new-generation Communist Party politician. He proceeded over the next five years to turn on its head the Cold War–dominated world that we had grown used to over the previous forty-odd years.

On my third visit for a three-day foreign policy conference in Vladivostok in 1990, I found a confused, demoralised, dysfunctional state in ruins. The Soviet Pacific Fleet was rusting away at moorings in the harbour. Children's playgrounds were deserted, haunted by homeless alcoholics and drug addicts. Broken glass and potholes were everywhere. Young, sad-eyed prostitutes desperately sought hard-currency clients, to help them build an emigration nest egg, or maybe even to love them and take them away. There was no aviation fuel at the airport to fly us foreign delegates back to Moscow: we were stranded for two days, waiting for new supplies to be commandeered from somewhere else and flown in, to enable us all to get home. It was such a sad and humiliating moment.

Now I am returning again twenty-six years later. What will I find this time?