

CHAPTER 1

Crimea: From Catherine the Great to Vladimir the Gambler

He is creating his own reality . . . his own sort of world.

JOHN KERRY

Putin is, in many ways, I think, delusional about this.

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT, history is back, in a dizzying mix of Byzantine deception and Cossack adventurism. Some, with playful wit, have called it the “Soviet spring.”

In late February 2014, shortly after the Sochi Winter Olympics, which succeeded in projecting the image of a sleek modern Russia, President Vladimir Putin suddenly sent his army, masked and minus insignia, into the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, which sits in the blue waters of the Black Sea. Save in the Kremlin, everyone, everywhere, seemed surprised, even shocked. In Western chanceries, protests were drafted and sanctions threatened. Within days, Crimea was occupied, and within weeks it was the Potemkin-like backdrop for a faux referendum, providing the legal pretext for its swift annexation by Russia. Barely a shot had been fired. For the first time in decades, a European border had been crossed, a nation’s sovereignty violated, and diplomats and political leaders began to wonder whether they were witnessing the rebirth of the cold war.

This takeover immediately raised questions about Russian policy and intentions. Among the most pressing:

—Is Crimea just the beginning of a new expansionist policy for Russia?

—Will Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine be next, or will it be the odd sliver of Moldova called Transnistria?

—Or, worst of all, is it possible that Russia will test the cohesion of NATO by invading Latvia or Estonia on the Baltic?

It all came down to the decisions of one man: Putin, a one-time KGB lieutenant colonel—cunning, manipulative, and ultranationalistic—who was president of a severely vulnerable Russia and determined to right the wrongs he saw in post-cold war Europe. Another question quickly arose: Was Putin representative of Russia's rising political elite, or was he someone special? Put another way, had there been no Putin, would Russia still have annexed Crimea and triggered the subsequent crisis in eastern Ukraine? We shall never know for certain. Russian history does march to its own libretto, orchestrated in the Kremlin, where one person generally calls the tune. Crimea was juicy, available, low-hanging fruit. If it were not Putin, then another Russian leader might very well have swooped in and snapped it up, when he needed an easy victory. To make sense of the current Ukrainian crisis, one must first make sense of Putin and Russia's long and often troubled history.

Putin on a Couch

Searching for explanations, experts—Russian and non-Russian alike—have put Putin on the kind of couch often found in a psychiatrist's office. A number thought his adventure in Crimea proved he had lost his diplomatic marbles. German chancellor Angela Merkel confided to President Barack Obama that in her judgment, Putin was “in another world.” Or, as Secretary of State John Kerry observed: “He's creating his own reality . . . his own sort of world.” “It doesn't make any sense,” former secretary of state Madeleine Albright confessed. “Putin is, in many ways, I think, delusional about this.” And, if Putin was not “in another world,” or “creating his own reality,” or “delusional,” he was, according to Brent Scowcroft, who served as national security adviser under President George H. W. Bush, “a person full of venom,” suggesting he could not think rationally about Ukraine.¹

Putin's seizure of Crimea was so startling, so disruptive of Western expectations, that many leaders seemed to forget that he had been the leader of Russia for the last decade and a half. He was not a new kid on the block. When stumped, unable to divine his next move, they would whisper behind a cupped hand that the newly assertive Russian leader was “nutty,” “strange,” and “unpredictable.” Chess master Garry Kasparov described him as “evil, pure evil.” Actually, as Henry Kissinger noted more accurately, “the demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one.”² But why “the absence of one?” One Putinologist (the modern-day equivalent of a

Soviet-era Kremlinologist) explained that “our ability to understand just what is driving him or what he actually wants to achieve is far weaker than it should be.” So why this failure of insight and intelligence?

One possible explanation is the current shortage of Russia and Putin specialists. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian studies faded from academic curricula in the West, displaced by an emphasis on China, high technology, and the rise of radical Islam. The widespread feeling was that young scholars should be encouraged to go where the foundations distributed money and where universities cultivated job opportunities. Russia was considered passé, a legacy of an earlier era of East-West confrontation. Indeed, for a time after the cold war, Harvard, of all places, did not offer a course in Russian history. For several years, the university could not find a senior professor up to the task, and it seemed in no rush to find one. Likewise with the American media, which were in no rush to send reporters back to Russia after closing many of their Moscow bureaus.

Look further east, young scholar, to China, to Islam, to high tech, for that is where the promise of tenure and treasure burns most brightly.

Georgetown’s accomplished Angela Stent summed up the problem. “Instead of embracing a deep understanding of the culture and history of Russia and its neighbors,” she wrote, “political science has been taken over by number-crunching and abstract models that bear little relationship to real-world politics and foreign policy. Only a very brave or dedicated doctoral student would today become a Russia expert if he or she wants to find academic employment.”³

Yet another explanation lies in the disillusionment felt by a string of American presidents, from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama, over their dealings with postcommunist Russian presidents—first Boris Yeltsin, who seemed unsteady in his gait and uncertain in his policies, and then Vladimir Putin, who seemed too frozen in old-fashioned grievances to appreciate the value of a number of opportunities that had been laid before him. In their exchanges, best described as minutes of optimism usually trailed by hours of gloom, these presidents hoped that Putin might flower into a pragmatic, pro-Western politician, sharing their vision of the post-cold war world. After all, it made sense, at least from Washington’s perspective. And, for a brief time in late 2001, they thought they had found such a politician in Putin. He was, they noted, the first of major world leaders to express sympathy to President George W. Bush and the American people after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Putin also allowed American warplanes to fly military supplies through Russian airspace to Afghanistan, a generous gesture few in

Washington had expected. The fight against terrorism was as high on Putin's list of worries as it was on Bush's, and for a time this common concern put the two leaders on the same path toward mutual cooperation and understanding.

But on two fundamental issues, namely, building democracy in Russia and encouraging independence in the former Soviet satellites, it soon became clear that the American presidents and Putin did not see eye to eye. Indeed, their relations suffered badly. And after the Crimean annexation, which violated the American sense of fair play and proper protocol in the twenty-first century, they began to see Putin as a resurgent, revanchist, old-school Russian bear. Reluctantly, wrote columnist Anne Applebaum, they concluded that Putin's Russia "is not a flawed western power," but an "anti-western power with a different, darker vision of global politics."⁴

Peter Baker, a reporter who covered the White House after completing an assignment in Moscow, wrote that the Russian leader did not speak the language of American presidents. Dupliciously, he "argued with them, lectured them, misled them, accused them, kept them waiting, kept them guessing, betrayed them and felt betrayed by them."⁵ Putin was an exasperating adversary. What was he up to? For a time, when Russia after the cold war was seen as nothing more than a defeated, defanged, debilitated shadow of a country, no one seemed to know, and, moreover, no one seemed to care.

The Death of the Cold War

Much of this presidential disillusionment stemmed from an American failure to understand not only Putin, the KGB colonel who was now president, but also Russia, a once-proud nation that found itself in a deep pit of decay and disorientation. Imagine for a moment the earth-shattering changes that confronted a Russian leader—really that confronted any leader—at the end of the last century and the beginning of the new one:

—Demise of the cold war, which had framed decades of East-West confrontation from the late 1940s to the early 1990s;

—Unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union, which led quickly to proclamations of independence by former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe and, more significantly, by former Soviet republics from the Baltics to central Asia;

—Collapse of communism as a governing philosophy—everywhere, it seemed, except Cuba; and

—Smashing of the Berlin Wall and the amazingly peaceful reunification of Germany in the heart of Europe.

No state could be more concerned by these changes than the old Soviet Union, which was swiftly reduced to a shadow of its old self called Russia. But what was this Russia? Yesterday it was a nuclear-armed superpower; today is it a nuclear-armed wimp? How was Russia to deal with its reduced stature? How would its leading politicians explain this change to a puzzled populace, assuming they were willing to acknowledge the change? Would Russia need another Yeltsin, or another Stalin?

Perhaps it was inevitable that in this whirlwind of diplomatic uncertainty, a myth emerged, principally in the West, that undercut the chance for a better Russian-American relationship. The myth, at once understandable but still dangerously misleading, was that the United States had “won” the cold war. Much closer to the truth was that the United States had “survived” the cold war, while the Soviet Union had slumped into an embarrassing heap. It seemed as if Ronald Reagan had got it right when he wrote in his memoirs that it was the victory of one system of government over another—in other words, of capitalism over communism or, put another way, individual freedom over collective diktat.⁶

By suggesting that the United States had defeated the Soviet Union, like one nation over another in a hot war, the myth put Washington in the diplomatic catbird seat, thinking of itself as the capital of a victorious nation able to dictate terms to the vanquished—or, if not always to dictate, then surely get its way on just about anything it fancied. To be sure, it should have been expected that Russia, in this shriveled state, would angrily object and even come up with obstructionist alternatives. It could, much like Germany after World War I, wait for a charismatic hero to rise from the ashes of defeat to lead the nation to a new mountaintop of resurrection and—why not?—revanchism. Hitler was that leader for Germany. Would Putin be that leader for Russia?

A haughty arrogance defined Western and American attitudes toward Russia in the immediate post-cold war period. Questionable and controversial policies blossomed, like roses in springtime, none more important and consequential than the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which the Russians, during the cold war and afterwards, always regarded as a direct threat to their basic national security interests. NATO expansion meant extending a Western military alliance, created originally as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism, to Russia’s very borders. If you were a Russian president or strategist, how would you have reacted? Would you have seen it as a “provocation” or would you have accepted it as an essentially meaningless gesture?

Sergei Karaganov, a respected foreign policy analyst at Moscow’s Higher

School of Economics, explained the current crisis in Russian-American relations by going back to this pivotal issue of NATO expansion. “The rupture is due to the West’s refusal to end the Cold War *de facto* or *de jure* in the quarter century since the collapse of the Soviet Union,” he has written. “In that time, the West has consistently sought to expand its zone of military, economic and political influence through NATO and the E.U. Russian interests and objections were flatly ignored. Russia was treated like a defeated power, though we did not see ourselves as defeated. A softer version of the Treaty of Versailles was imposed on the country. There was no outright annexation of territory or formal reparations like Germany faced after World War I, but Russia was told in no uncertain terms that it would play a modest role in the world. This policy was bound to engender a form of Weimar syndrome in a great nation whose dignity and interests had been trampled.”⁷

Karaganov’s argument, which seems to closely reflect Putin’s own thinking, deserves a rebuttal. First, Russia’s interests were recognized, though clearly not in the way Karaganov would have preferred. A NATO-Russia council was formed, specifically to ease Russian concerns about NATO’s eastward expansion. Russia was invited to join a “Partnership for Peace” program, and Russia was recognized as one of the world’s leading industrial powers, a bow more to its bruised ego than to its industrial might, for many did not really believe Russia deserved membership. Russia’s formal admission to this elite society expanded the Group of Seven into the Group of Eight, and Russia remained a member until it annexed Crimea in March 2014. Then, as punishment, its membership was suspended.

Second, after the collapse of both communism and the Soviet Union, Russia was, in fact, “defeated.” Only in a world of dreams, where nostalgia trumped reality, could Russia seriously be regarded as a “great power.” Still, even though the cold war had ended, a number of key policymakers in Washington, who were fiercely anticommunist, remained distrustful even of a “defeated” Russia. For them, NATO expansion served as an insurance policy against the possibility of a resurgent Russia.

In 1949 NATO was a defense-oriented collection of twelve Western nations bound by an Article Five pledge that an attack on one would be regarded as an attack on all. For the next three decades, during the height of the cold war, NATO added only four new members—West Germany, Greece, Turkey, and Spain. But when the Soviet Union began to crumble and come apart in 1991, NATO looked covetously to the east. Taking advantage of Russia’s relative weakness, it added twelve new members to its alliance, most of them former Warsaw Pact allies of the former Soviet Union, all seeking NATO protection

against the prospect of a resurgent belligerent Russia. They are Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Only a handful of Western analysts questioned the presumed wisdom of this military expansion. Realistically, Russia was no longer in a position to attack the West. It was too weak, and it was no longer the driving engine of an expansionist communist ideology. Indeed, the original *raison d'être* of NATO—a military alliance against the Soviet Union—could well have been challenged; but it was not challenged, and the expansion continued. Western leaders looked further east, even southeast. Georgia was considered for NATO membership. Russian strategists wondered why NATO needed an outpost in the Caucasus. Even Ukraine, until 2008, was considered for membership. The Kremlin bristled. Putin strongly objected to such a prospect. Everyone knew—or should have known—that, for the Kremlin, Ukraine was special. After all, it had been part of the Russian empire for hundreds of years. In Moscow's view, so it would remain! Putin told President George W. Bush in 2008: "You have to understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a country. Part of its territory is in Eastern Europe and the greater part was given to them by us."⁸ The Kremlin's thinking seemed to be that if Ukraine wanted to play around with this Western notion of independence, fine, but Moscow made it clear that, independent or not, Ukraine would remain under Russia's firm influence and control. No Western leaders chose either to listen or to comprehend what Putin was signaling.

Even though the Russians complained bitterly, NATO's policy held, always on the assumption in Western capitals that the Kremlin was in no position to do anything more than bellow at the winds of expansion. The Russians had lost and we had won, American strategists argued. President George H. W. Bush bluntly told German chancellor Helmut Kohl, "We prevailed, and they didn't. We can't let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat."⁹ One day, William Safire, the *New York Times's* sharp-tongued columnist, giddily praised NATO's continuing expansion. Afterward, over dinner, I told Safire I thought he might have gone too far. "No," he replied, always the happy warrior, "when your enemy is down, kick him." George Kennan, the American diplomat who penned the famous "X" article in 1947 spelling out the policy that came to be known as "containment" and that defined American policy throughout the cold war, disagreed with Safire; he denounced NATO expansion. "The Russians will react quite adversely," he told Thomas L. Friedman, another *Times* columnist. "I think it is a tragic mistake. . . . It shows so little understanding of Russian history and Soviet history." Friedman, inspired by

Kennan, wrote disparagingly of American policymakers, citing specifically President Bill Clinton and his top advisers. “We are in the age of midgets,” he noted with barely disguised contempt. NATO expansion showed their “utter poverty of imagination.”¹⁰

Enter Fukuyama

But interestingly it was not the likes of a Kennan or a Friedman who accurately reflected the mood of Washington’s policymakers and pundits at that time. They were exiled to a narrow shelf in a corner of the room. It was rather the writings of Francis Fukuyama, a relatively unknown State Department official. The then 36-year-old scholar with a Harvard PhD was serving as deputy director of policy planning. More than anyone else, he best framed the argument of American triumphalism after the end of the cold war. In so doing, he became an overnight literary and political sensation as author of an article, “The End of History?” in 1989 and then a book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*.

When the cold war finally sputtered to a close, many questions arose over the ideological conflict between East and West:

- Was the conflict really over?
- If it was, had the United States won? Yes, but . . .
- Would a successor ideology rise to replace communism? Possibly, but . . .
- Most important, what happens now?

Everyone wanted to know the answers to these questions. Fukuyama, with perfect timing, entered the klieg-lighted arena of Washington policy and punditry with the answers—or so it appeared to quite a few decisionmakers and pundits at the time. If Kennan, years before, had written the definitive “X” paper on America’s cold war policy toward the Soviet Union, then Fukuyama now seemed to have drafted its legitimate, post-cold war successor thesis. In fact, newspaper commentators immediately speculated that Fukuyama’s end-of-history would emerge as the intellectual backbone for President George H. W. Bush’s policy toward postcommunist Russia.

So what precisely was the Fukuyama thesis? The soft-spoken scholar/bureaucrat borrowed extensively from the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who held that history reflected a protracted struggle between freedom and oppression; one day freedom would win the struggle and become the dominant political philosophy in global affairs. In the twentieth century, Fukuyama wrote, the forces of freedom, marshaled by the United States, had decisively defeated the forces of totalitarianism, controlled from Moscow. He

saw this as the ultimate triumph of freedom—the long-awaited “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy.” That meant, in his view, that America’s unique brand of “liberal democracy” would now be able to spread throughout the world, no longer facing any significant ideological competition. Thus, “history” would “end.” Fukuyama sounded serious, awesomely so. But his thesis was, in fact, a shallow description of what was, in reality, a complex turn in history.¹¹

Still, here at last was a story with a seemingly happy ending, and it quickly zoomed to the top of the best-seller lists. Its author was befuddled by his swift leap from policy planner to intellectual rock star. “I don’t understand it myself,” he modestly told a *New York Times* reporter. “I didn’t write the article with any relevance to policy. It was just something I’d been thinking about.”¹²

Everyone in and around government read Fukuyama, although, to be sure, not everyone bought into his thesis. Irving Kristol, a seminal neo-conservative writer, said, “I don’t believe a word of it.” The late Christopher Hitchens sneered, “At last, self-congratulations raised to the status of philosophy.” Strobe Talbott, then *Time* magazine’s principal correspondent on Soviet-American relations and now president of the Brookings Institution, brushed it away. “The End of History?” he asked; “more like ‘The Beginning of Nonsense,’” he answered.

Political scientist Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at Brookings, also joined this dissident jury of Fukuyama critics. In an erudite essay in 2008, replete with historical analogies, entitled “The End of the End of History,” Kagan acknowledged that if only one political philosophy had survived the cold war, and it was “liberal democracy,” as Fukuyama asserted, then that would indeed be a most gratifying outcome. But unfortunately that was not the case. For centuries, ever since the Enlightenment, argued Kagan, liberalism had contended with autocracy for ideological supremacy. Even though the end of the cold war did introduce a “new era” in global relations, liberalism had failed to emerge as the unchallenged victor. In different guises, autocracy continued to wage a relentless war against liberalism. Kagan forecast “growing tensions and sometimes confrontation between the forces of democracy and the forces of autocracy” for decades to come. The twenty-first century, he wrote, far from it becoming an oasis of democratic values, would more likely resemble the struggles, wars, and conflicts of the nineteenth century.¹³ Beijing’s attempts to project its power into the East and South China Seas and Russia’s irredentist threats against its “near abroad” neighbors, principally Ukraine, in addition to the upheavals rocking the Arab world, testify to the accuracy of Kagan’s forecast and the fragility of Fukuyama’s.

But still, even if Fukuyama thought that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the demise of communism ended history (in fairness, he did put a question mark after the word “history” in his original 1989 essay), Putin put an end to this theoretical prattle when he boldly annexed Crimea on March 21, 2014. Suddenly, history was back—it had never left!—and political figures on both sides of the crisis in Ukraine sought to make their points through historical allusions. From each perspective, “history” added a patina of legitimacy to their policy pronouncements.